

Rise magazine is written by and for parents involved in the child welfare system. Its mission is to help parents advocate for themselves and their children.

Rise

ISSUE NUMBER 13, SUMMER 2009

BY AND FOR
PARENTS IN THE
CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

Building Relationships With Foster Parents

Positive relationships between parents and foster parents help children feel more secure while in foster care and adjust more easily after returning home.

In this issue, parents and foster parents explore the obstacles to positive relationships and the actions and attitudes that helped them connect.



ILLUSTRATION BY YC

IN THIS ISSUE

3 BUILDING A BRIDGE
Strengthening parent-foster parent connections.

4 WAITING MY TURN
I had to let my grandmother be the parent.

5 FOSTERING CONNECTIONS
How foster parents can affect your case.

6 'I DIDN'T TAKE YOUR GIRLS'
I lost my sister when I adopted her daughters.

7 FIRST IMPRESSIONS
Using "icebreaker" meetings.

8 SHORT TAKES
How foster parents affect our relationships with our children.

10 TRYING MY BEST
Keeping kids connected to family.

11 A SECOND CHANCE
Reconnecting with my mom.

Her Love Kept Me Going

My sister helped us all when my kids went into care.

BY YOUSHELL WILLIAMS

When New York City's Children's Services (ACS) came into my life, I was going through a very bad time. I had just gotten out of an abusive marriage, my kids were having trouble in school and I was depressed.

I usually turned to my sister for guidance. My big sister, Gina Williams-White, is a gift from God. I am so blessed to be related to such an angel. My sister goes out of her way to show how much she loves my children and me.

A Mother to Me

Gina and I have been close ever since we were kids. When I was only 14, we had to watch our mom die of cancer.

Once my mom left this earth, I went to live at my aunt's house and I gave up on life. Life was hell and I wanted no part of it.

Gina was like a mother to me during those years. My aunt didn't care what I was going through. She got rid of her problem by sending me away to live with my demon father in Detroit. My sister came through as usual by sending me care packages. Her love kept me going.

When I was 18, my sister sent for me to come back to New York. Even though she had just graduated from college and could barely make ends meet, she gave me another chance.

At age 19, I married a man twice my age though my sister begged me not to. My sister stuck by me all through my brief, horrible marriage. She glued me back together, talked to me, loved me and helped me through my heartbreak and pain.

'What Was I Thinking?'

But when I gave up my job and started getting depressed once again,

I was ashamed. I did not know how to talk to her. What could I say? How could I let her know that I needed even more help? She'd already done so much.

Finally, instead of telling my sister what I needed in a direct way, I called the ACS worker who kept showing up on my doorstep and asked her to take my two children to my sister in Staten Island. Instead, she put them in a foster home in the Bronx.

Looking back, I think, "Why didn't I just call my sister first?" I was just so ashamed of feeling weak.

'It Ain't Over!'

When my sister found out what that worker did to me, she was furious. She rushed over and we cried and planned together. We went to court the next month and my sister got custody of my children. The judge asked the worker, "Why did you put

the children in foster care when there was family willing to take them?" Of course, she had nothing to say.

My children blossomed while living with my sister, her husband and their son. My sister also tried to include me in everything. My visits started off very unsatisfyingly at the agency office, but soon my sister and I were taking the kids to movies and out to eat together.

We loved taking the kids to Funstation or Fun Bubble because we got to play games along with them. We played videogames, or put the kids on rides, or let them bowl. My sister and I would compete against each other on a Flintstones game that gave out a lot of tickets and prizes. I hated when the day was over and I had to go back to my cold, lonely apartment by myself.

My Children Prospered...

As happy as I was with the way my sister cared for my children, we also had disagreements. Sometimes I felt upset and frustrated that I could not make the decisions I was used to making for my children. At times, I felt like my sister believed she knew more about my kids than I did. I felt embarrassed and angry when I felt like my sister also believed I was an incapable parent.

For instance, I had told my sister that my son got sick every two months with a sore throat. She didn't believe me until she had to take him to the doctor every two months and saw for herself.

Once, while we were standing by the doctor's office, I said, "You see, Gina. I told you he gets sick like a clock-work. Why didn't you believe me? Like I don't know my own son. You have a son. Do you think I would not believe you if you told me something about him?"

"You misunderstood me. I didn't mean it like that," Gina said. "You are always taking things the wrong way. I just meant he shouldn't be getting sick all the time. But I admit I was wrong."

It definitely was not easy for either of

us to handle these stressful situations but our love brought us through all the difficulties and misunderstandings. We worked together to make sure things went right for our children.

...I Felt Lost

My children lived with my sister for three years. For a while, I felt like I would never get them back. I was doing what I was supposed to do but the case seemed to drag on. I felt depressed and lost. I half believed my kids were better off with my sister.

One time I briefly turned to booze

Despite difficulties and misunderstandings, my sister and I worked together to make sure things went right for our children.

to try to drown my sorrows. My sister and her husband did not tolerate that kind of nonsense.

"You better get yourself together quick, girl. These children need you!" my sister said.

"They don't seem to need me. It looks like you got everything covered!" I said in a sarcastic tone of voice.

My sister gave me such a look that I immediately felt ashamed of myself. I knew better.

Where Are my Angels?

Finally an agency worker told me what to do to get my children back and my children were returned to me nine years ago. I waited so long to get my angels back but the transition was far from easy.

After three years, my children were too used to living with my sister and her husband. Once they came home, they acted like little monsters.

For months, my kids couldn't wait to escape from me on the weekends and go back to Aunt Gina, where they felt more comfortable. I couldn't blame them, but that didn't stop my tears of frustration and pain.

'Keep Going'

My sister was a big support. She told me, "I know it's not easy but they love you. Don't give up, girl."

"You don't have to worry about me ever giving up again. The price is too high. I love my babies," I told her. "But they are not the same, Gina. All they talk about is you —Aunt Gina this, and Aunt Gina that. Aunt Gina, Gina, Gina! Ahhhh! What the hell did you do to my children? Just kidding, but I don't think they remember that I love them too!"

"When they were here with me, they always said they missed you and couldn't wait to go home," Gina reassured me. "They just need a lot of attention. Keep going, Youshell!"

I realized that they were afraid I would lose them again and that they resented that I'd lost them to foster care in the first place. With help from family therapy, my children calmed

down over time and were happy to be home once again.

Looking to Give Back

Now my sister and I are still close and so are our children, especially my older daughter, who truly adores her Aunt Genie. I think she calls her that because she thinks my sister is magical. She makes so many of our dreams come true.

I hope one day to show my sister in a huge way how much I appreciate the sacrifices she has made for me and all the love, care and joy she has given my children and me. I show my sister a lot of love and buy her small things—gold jewelry, purses—but there's no way I can repay her for all she's done.

My sister even makes Christmas magical for us. She buys the biggest Christmas tree she can find—one time she bought a tree so big it couldn't fit in the house and had to saw off the top—and gives my children so many things they can barely carry them home.

This Christmas, Gina gave me a wonderful gold bracelet. It's not wonderful because it's gold but because she had all of our names engraved on it: my children's, her name and mine.

Rise

ISSUE #13 // SUMMER 2009
www.risemagazine.org

80 E. 110th St. #1E
New York, NY 10029
718-260-8818

EDITOR/DIRECTOR

NORA MCCARTHY

PRODUCTION

EFRAIN REYES
JEFF FAERBER

ART INSTRUCTOR

JOANNE PENDOLA

EDITORIAL BOARD

TERESA BACHILLER
CARMEN CABAN
TRACEY CARTER
BEVANJAE KELLEY
LYNNE MILLER
JEANETTE VEGA
ROBIN WILEY
YOUSHELL WILLIAMS

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

LOUIS ANGEL
RUBY AWTRY
LATONYA BASKERVILLE
PATRICIA BENNETT
CARLOS BOYET
QUEENIE BUTLER
CARMEN CABAN
WANDA CHAMBERS
SONIA DIAZ
SHATEMA DOCKERY
BLISS EDWARDS
SANDRA EVANS
ERICA HARRIGAN
TONI HOY
PAMELA HUGHES
SABRA JACKSON
ROBIN LARIMORE

JACQUELYN MATTHEWS-
SMALLWOOD
HERBERT MORALES
DESIREE NAVARRO
MAYA NOY
DAISY NUNEZ
CARMEN ORTIZ
DENISE OUTLAW
ILKA PEREZ
SYLVIA PEREZ
FRANCISCO RAMIREZ
CHRYSTAL REDDICK
WANDA RODRIGUEZ
EVELYN SALAZAR
ALBERT SHEPHERD
KAREN TUCKER

Building a Bridge

Strengthening connections between parents and foster parents.

Denise Goodman, a consultant to the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Family to Family initiative, works with public and private child welfare agencies nationwide to support parents and foster parents in working collaboratively.

Q: What are the benefits of positive connections between parents and foster parents?

A: I've seen that when parents and foster parents work together, kids go home more quickly and stay home. Kids in foster care also get better care when the parent and foster parent exchange information about the child and work together to make visits positive. Kids also feel less worried about their families. Many kids are worried about loyalty—if they like the foster parent, does that mean they can't like their parent anymore? They feel better if they see the foster parent and parent getting along.

Reunification is also easier for the child if the relationship with the foster parent doesn't end, even if contact with the foster parent is just a birthday or Christmas card, a phone call, or occasional stopping by. The foster parent can become an ongoing support to the parent after reunification, someone who is an expert about their child. When things are tough and the kid is acting goofy, the parent can call and say, "What do I do?" Foster parent is able to say, "This worked for me." That can help prevent the child from re-entering foster care.

For the social worker, it can make a case easier if the parents and foster parents click. Being a social worker can be a grueling, difficult job, with everybody making demands and neither parent wanting you in their lives. Good relationships are booster shots that keep you going.

Q: What are the challenges of building positive connections?

A: Lot of times when you say to families and staff, "We want the

foster parents to work with the parents," they freak out. They have a lot of fears.

The caregiving family may be concerned that they won't be able to keep the child safe. They worry that the parent will show up uninvited, or will be jealous or upset that their

concerns and fears. But the reality is that many caregivers and parents are already doing this behind the agency's back. They live in the same neighborhood and run into each other at Wal-Mart or at court and work through the awkwardness on their own.



ILLUSTRATION BY EMILY DINAN

child is not at home. They worry that they won't get along because they don't have the same parenting style.

Parents have their own fears and stereotypes. They are worried that the foster parent will look down on them or that their child will like the foster parent better than them. Sometimes

Q: How can parents and foster parents build connections?

A: I talk about a concept I call "the bridge"—you can agree together about where you need to be on that bridge and move forward in baby steps to cross it. You don't have to start with face-to-face meet-

begin meeting in neutral territory. Once you get past the awkwardness and everyone feels comfortable, the foster parent can take the child to the parent's home for visits, or let the parent come to her home. These steps are case-by-case, moment-to-moment decisions made in partnership with the social worker, parent and foster parent.

Q: How can the child welfare agency help?

A: The system has to value the relationship. Staff and caregivers have to be trained to understand, "This is our practice and expectation." It helps if foster parent recruitment makes the expectation clear. If you have a recruitment campaign that basically says, "Rescue children from their abusive parents," you're going to have a harder time than if it says, "Help children and their families."

It also helps if you have strong parent advocacy and parent advocates, so that parents are supported in being active participants in their lives and cases, not just told, "Here's your case plan, just do it."

You need structures in place, like an "icebreaker" meeting soon after placement where the parent and foster parent meet and talk about what the foster parent needs to know to take good care of the child. The foster parent can ask about the child's favorite foods or activities. The foster parent may say, "Johnny keeps asking me why he's in foster care. How can we handle that?"

Parents and foster parents can talk about how to have good visits. Would the parent like to bring the child a snack? Would the parent like to do the child's hair? Can they talk before the visit so that the parent can ask about the child's activities, like, "I heard you went to the zoo. Tell me about that." They can discuss how to end visits in a positive way. The more you can talk and agree up front, the smoother things will go.

When parents and foster parents work together, kids go home more quickly.

it's even harder to get along when it's a kinship placement, because of family politics.

I find it's a harder sell for staff than for families, though. Staff are concerned that they'll have more problems to deal with. It's true that it's not always perfect dealing with real people's

ings. There are a lot of ways to have contact: exchanging notes about the child, talking on the phone, or attending school meetings or doctor visits where the parent can provide useful information about the child.

When you both naturally feel ready to move to the next level, you can

Waiting My Turn

I had to let my grandmother be the parent until my kids returned home.

BY LATONYA BASKERVILLE

My children were placed in kinship care with my grandmother in August 1998. At first I thought this was a wonderful arrangement. My grandmother raised my brother and me. We were removed from my mother's care when I was 8 and he was 6 because of my mother's mental health.

Getting Frustrated

But after a few months, the kinship arrangement began to frustrate me. I didn't like some of the ways my grandmother had treated me as a child. She was now treating my kids the same way. My grandmother belittles to encourage, meaning that if a child doesn't clean, you call her nasty; if a person is overweight, you call her a pig; if she doesn't have a job, you call her lazy or a bum; if a teen has sex, you call her a whore.

My grandmother also doesn't believe in negotiating with a child or adjusting her expectations for any reason. My children loved summer nights when it was cool and light outside and other kids were still out playing on our block. If there's no school in the morning, I think it's OK to stay up later. No, not OK with grandma. Bedtime was 8pm year-round.

Through the foster care agency, I took parenting skills training and I wanted to stop using my grandmother's parenting model. I believed that a parent can make the rules clear but also listen to children and negotiate. I also believed that children can be spoken to with respect, and that children have the right to respectfully speak their minds and be acknowledged as decision-makers in a household.

'I Got Custody, Not You'

One day, I decided to try a parenting technique I had learned. That afternoon I was outside with my kids and all the other families on the block.



ILLUSTRATION BY (EDWIN) YANG, YIFAN

My 16-month-old got in a tugging match over a bike with another child. Instead of yelling, I said to my baby, "That bike is not yours. You must give it back."

Then my grandmother yelled out in front of everyone, "You don't say nothing to him. I got custody of him, not you." I was devastated. I could not believe that she would say that to me in front of all these people.

Another time, I told my 10-year-old son that he was not getting a video-game because of his behavior in school. My grandmother bought the game for him anyway. When I saw him with it, I asked him, "Didn't I say you couldn't have the game?"

"Grandma bought it," he said. "I told her you said no because of my school behavior."

Confused and Upset

I was upset about how my grandmother was treating my children and me. I saw that my children were so confused when my grandmother and I were both in the room. They didn't understand who had the authority.

Still, I knew I couldn't just blame my grandmother. I was the one not taking care of my responsibilities. My grandmother probably lashed out because she was tired and fed up. She had taken care of my siblings and me because our mother was mentally ill, but I was not.

The shame and guilt I felt were hard to bear. I was not getting high anymore so I felt every feeling, and the reality that my children were not

I didn't talk with her about how I felt. I figured it would be a wasted discussion. Instead, I reminded myself, "She is a loving and caring grandmother who is extending herself because of my mistakes and bad decisions. At 65, she's getting up all night with an infant while taking care of two older children." I knew that raising my children was not easy for her, and I decided to let her maintain the authority role until my kids were returned to my care.

'They're Yours'

At our final discharge meeting, I felt good because I saw that my grandmother was anxious to give me back my parental role. She said, "Here they are. They're yours." We laughed and went out together to a restaurant to celebrate. My grandmother told me then, "I knew that you would get your children back."

Now, almost 10 years later, we are all much older and doing fine. My children and I continue to have a close relationship with my grandmother. My 20-year-old son lives in one of my grandmother's buildings, my daughter just moved back into my house after being with my grand-

My children were confused when my grandmother and I were both in the room. They didn't understand who had the authority.

mine to parent was too painful to ignore.

Focusing on the Future

During the 18 months that my children were in my grandmother's care, I forced myself to look past her negative comments. Even though she did some things that did not please me, I forgave her because her love for my children and me was obvious.

mother for two years, and my baby is home. We all visit my grandmother as much as possible. She is over 75 now. In the summer, we sit outside with her and barbecue.

I am glad that our relationship was not destroyed by the conflicts we faced while my children were in her care.

Fostering Connections

Parents' relationships with foster parents affect their cases.

Recent research suggests that children in foster care who are placed with relatives do better than those placed with foster families. According to a study published in the journal *Families in Society*, children in kinship care endure fewer moves from home to home, are less likely to remain in care long-term (but also less likely to be reunified with their parents), and are less likely to end up in the juvenile justice system. A 2005 study of former foster youth also found that youth are at risk of abuse while in foster care; nearly one-third of former foster youth in the study reported that they had been abused by a foster parent or another adult in a foster home.

Hannah Roman, a lawyer at the Brooklyn Family Defense Project, explains how parents' relationships with their children's foster parents can affect their case and how parents can get their children placed with relatives.

Q: What impact does the relationship between the parent and foster parent have on a case?

A: The impact is huge, it really is, because the foster parent's attitude toward you has an impact on the quality of your visits and your relationship with your child.

If your child is upset after visits or expresses reluctance to visit you, a supportive foster parent might encourage your child and communicate with you about your child's needs. An unsupportive foster parent might say, "She doesn't want to go," and that can affect your case.

Many times relatives are approved to supervise visits and allow parents to visit their children at the home. (Non-kin also can choose to supervise visits at their homes, but that's rare.) At the caregiver's home, you get to spend much more time with

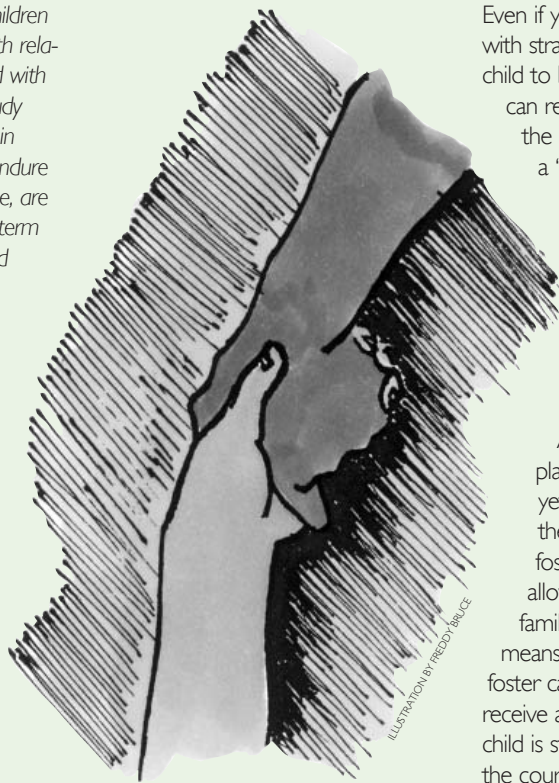


ILLUSTRATION BY FREDDY BRUCE

your children and you can visit at the park or go to the movies—it's more like normal life. But you have to remember that this person is reporting to the agency on the quality of your visits. So if you have a bad relationship, and they report that the visits are not going well, that gets talked about in court.

'When your child goes into care, you should let your lawyer know about anyone who might be able to care for your child.'

Q: How can parents get a child placed with a relative?

A: In New York City, the judge will almost always place your child with a relative or with someone the child already knows, if that's possible. When your child goes into care, you should let your lawyer know about anyone who might be able to care for your child.

Even if your child was initially placed with strangers, you can ask for your child to be moved to family. You also can request that the judge make the placement with a relative a "restrictive remand," which means that the agency must come back to court if it wants to move the child from that particular foster parent. Otherwise, an agency can just move the child.

A child can be temporarily placed with kin who are not yet licensed as foster parents. If the family can't be certified as a foster home, the judge can still allow the child to stay with the family on "parole status." That means the child is not technically in foster care (and the family does not receive a foster care subsidy) but the child is still removed from you and the court must authorize reunification.

However, if you are able to choose a relative to care for your children, you should think through: "Do I really have a good relationship with this person? Will this person help me get my child back?" Sometimes, kin are not supportive. So be cautious about who you trust to care for your chil-

dren and talk to your lawyer about your concerns.

Q: What steps can a parent take if she's worried about how the foster parent is treating her child?

A: Parents should bring up their concerns with the agency worker. It can be hard to do that. Many parents and agency workers don't have great

relationships and workers can be dismissive. But you can ask the worker to talk to the foster parent about your concerns.

If you feel comfortable, you can ask for a conference with the worker and foster parent. In New York City, many lawyers work on a team with social workers and parent advocates who could attend the conference. As a lawyer, I'd prefer if someone from my office was with the parent at a conference.

If something serious happens to your child in care, and the agency doesn't act on it, tell your lawyer. Your lawyer can ask for the child to be moved. You also want to make sure that the child's lawyer knows that your child was harmed. Have your lawyer call the child's lawyer.

Q: How can parents whose rights may be terminated help to find a safe home for their children?

A: If it looks like your rights may be terminated, you should talk to your lawyer about your options. If you have a relative who can care for your child without relying financially on an adoption subsidy, you can see if the relative might take custody or become the legal guardian of your child. This is a much better option because your rights are not terminated.

You may also want to consider a "conditional surrender," which means that you agree to surrender your parental rights only under certain conditions. For example, you could surrender your rights only if a child is adopted by a certain person, and you could agree to contact with your child after the adoption. Under a conditional surrender, the termination can be undone if the conditions are not met. This is a good option if you believe your child is in a safe home and the adoptive parent will allow you and your child to stay connected.

'I Didn't Take Your Girls'

I lost my sister when I adopted her daughters.

BY QUEENIE BUTLER

Eight years ago I became a foster mother to my two nieces, ages 10 and 5. My sister was on drugs and lost her daughters to foster care.

When my nieces came to live with me, it was hard. They were behind in school because they had missed a lot of days. The little one didn't adjust easily. All she did was cry and act out. She missed her mother and she didn't understand what had happened in her family. My older niece understood a little more, but she had begun to go into her own world.

Once I realized how much caretaking they needed, I started giving the girls all my time and got them into all kinds of programs in their school. Soon I saw them catching up and thriving.

High Hopes

At the time, my expectation was that the girls would only stay with me for a few months until my sister completed the service plan. I also hoped that my sister would come over for dinner, go out with us and go to the girls' schools with me. But it wasn't like that at all.

My sister didn't do what the courts said. She would do what she wanted to do, go to her program when she wanted to go. The judge and their lawyer gave her so many chances but she just did things her way.

Feeling Blamed

As time passed, my sister started to lie and say bad things about me to other people and to my face. One day I came on a visit with my nieces and my sister came out on me. She said, "You're only in it for the money."

"What money?" I said. "They don't give you any money you can do anything with. Everything my nieces get is from me."

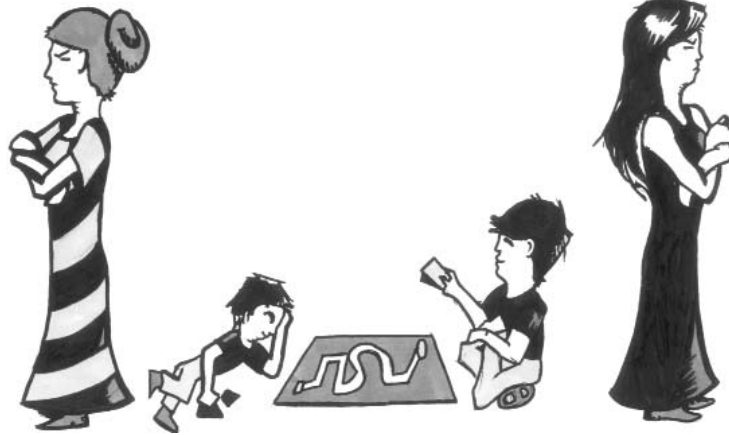


ILLUSTRATION BY TERENCE TAYLOR

I was furious. I spend hundreds of dollars on my nieces every Christmas, and they don't want for anything. I was upset that my sister didn't want to believe that their uncle and I gave to my nieces with an open heart.

Talking Mess

Sometimes my sister would call me just to talk mess. She would say that I was a liar, that I take people's children, that I should have my own daughter. She'd say, "The girls don't belong to you. My girls belong home with me. You will never be their

After my sister's phone calls, I'd lie in my bed and say, "Why should I take this?" I felt angry at my sister and at the system.

mother. You can't take my place."

Then she'd ask if the girls could come to her house, knowing that the girls couldn't go without permission from the worker. "Ask the worker at the agency," I'd say. "I don't make the calls. If I don't follow the rules, I can lose the children. I don't want your girls to live without family."

After my sister's phone calls I'd lie in my bed and say, "Why should I take this?" I felt angry at my sister and at the system, because following the rules was ruining my relationship with my sister.

I had to remind myself: I am doing this for my nieces, and I have to put my hurt feelings to the side. After a while, I began to think about my sister's point of view. I'd ask myself, "How would you feel if someone took your kids?" My sister was hurting and missing her kids.

Still, I wished my sister would stop and think about how I felt, and especially how the girls felt, caught between two people who cared about them.

Ready to Give Up

One day, I went to the agency and I was told the goal for my nieces was being changed from "reunification" to "adoption." I was upset because I

didn't think it was going to come to that. I knew my nieces would be very disappointed. But I felt I should adopt them so they didn't end up being removed from me.

Soon after, my sister heard that the girls weren't going home. She came to the agency and she went off on me. My nieces were there and saw how their mother turned to me and said, "You took my girls, and because of you, they are not coming home."

"What the hell do you mean?" I said. "I didn't take your girls, the system took them."

I was overwhelmed. I said to the agency worker, "I am going to give up. I can't take it anymore. If she doesn't want me to have the girls, that's all right."

The workers didn't agree. They were able to help me see that my nieces needed a stable home, and that home was with me.

A Sad Conversation

For years, my sister refused to believe the adoption. Through all of those years, my sister kept telling the girls they were going home. She told them that every week and it was a lie.

Just a year or two ago, my eldest niece told me, "My mom is always saying things and has never kept her word. I am tired of my mother's lies. I don't believe anything my mother tells me. What is the use of believing in my mother if it is always a lie?"

It was difficult to explain to my nieces what was going on with their mother. I told them, "Your mother made mistakes in her life, and because of those mistakes your mother lost you to foster care. Your mother did not do what the court ordered her to do. I don't know why."

First Impressions

An “icebreaker” meeting helps parents and foster parents connect.

“But no matter what happens, your mother loves you with all her heart. Her mistakes don’t mean that she doesn’t love you, and they don’t mean she doesn’t miss you. She loves you and misses you so much. That is something you can be proud of and no one can take that from you.

“In time, things will work themselves out. You will still be able to spend weekends with your mother and do things together.”

Keeping the Connection

Despite adopting my nieces, I still try my hardest to let my nieces and my sister have a relationship. I let my nieces talk to their mother on the phone about three to four times a week. Maybe once a week, on a weekend, she comes over. I go to my room and leave them alone.

On holidays, when the family gets together, I let the girls see their mother and stay as long as they want to stay.

One positive moment was when my nieces were in an afterschool program at JHS 263 and were in the Christmas show. I told my nieces, “Call your mother and ask if she wants to come see you perform.” My sister said yes, and she was happy that they wanted her to come to the show. She was even happier when the girls told her, “Aunt Queenie told us to invite you.”

The day of the show, my sister came and said to me, “Thank you for letting the girls call me, and for letting me see the show.” The show was very good, with singing and dancing. We took a lot of pictures and had fun. That night of the show was the best night I’ve had with my sister.

Another nice moment was when my sister held a little get together for my youngest niece’s birthday. She was turning 9 years old. They had balloons, candy, ice cream, chips and sodas, and they played games with their mother. But above all, my nieces said they had a nice time because their mother didn’t lie to them or let them down. Everything was about the get together, and she didn’t tell them they’d be coming home.

Still Hopeful

I still have hope that my sister and I will become close again. I’ve noticed that in the last six months, our relationship has been smoother. My sister has been taking an anger management class that is definitely having an impact. Writing this story has also helped me reflect on our situation and think about it from my sister’s point of view. I can put up with her a little better than before.

It’s been a while since my sister came at me over the phone or made false promises to the girls. I truly believe that my nieces will one day see us getting along, sisters once again.

Fayette Bennett, director of family permanency and conferencing at New York City Children’s Services, explains how agencies are using “Parent to Parent” meetings to help parents and foster parents connect soon after placement:

Parents and foster parents have been kept apart. But child welfare practitioners across the country are realizing that children in foster care do better when parents and foster parents develop a partnership focused on the well-being of the child.

Sharing Information

We’re asking agencies to begin holding Parent to Parent meetings within three to five days of a child’s placement in foster care. At these meetings, the parent, foster parent and child, if that seems appropriate, can talk together.

The parent can share information like, “My child likes a special story before bed,” or, “This is a toy that helps my child sleep easier at night.” Parents can tell the foster parent what kind of discipline the child is used to and what special foods the child likes.

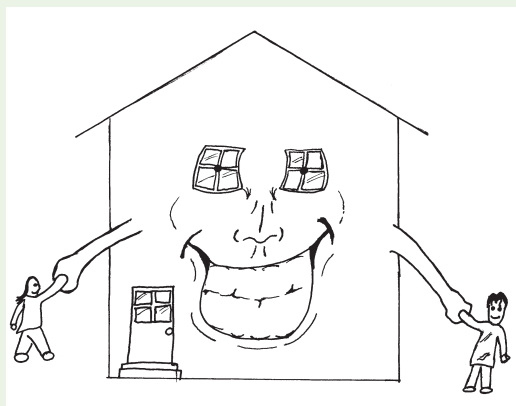


ILLUSTRATION BY ANGELUS VLADYTES

We are hoping that parents will feel respected and empowered. Parenting does not end when the child comes into care, and the child will do better if we can have more shared parenting while the child is in foster care.

Positive Impact

Some private agencies in New York City have been using this approach for many years. Others are just beginning. So

far, we are getting positive feedback. In a recent meeting, a foster parent described feeling overwhelmed. The child was acting out because she thought the foster parent might send her back home. The father offered to call weekly to reassure the child.

In another case, a little girl was African-American and the foster parent did not know how to care for her hair. The mother offered to braid the child’s hair during visits, and it turned out to be a nice way for the mother to care for her child.

Taking Steps

As you can imagine, this is a big cultural shift. Some foster parents are asking, “Why do I have to meet the parent? I don’t feel comfortable.” Some parents also feel unsure. They are saying, “I’m angry and upset that my child was taken away. I don’t want to meet that person right now.”

We’re telling them, “Look, I know you may not want to meet right now, but what do you want the foster parent to know about your child? Can you write a letter to the foster parent?” These steps can get us to the end goal of meeting and establishing a connection.

'Your Mother Doesn't Want You'

Negative comments left my children confused and scared.

BY PAMELA HUGHES

One day when I was visiting my two youngest children, they asked me, "Mommy, where do you live?"

"Mommy lives in a hospital for now until she gets stronger," I said. In fact, I was in a drug treatment facility, but I didn't want my children to know. They were only 6 and 7. I thought they were too young to understand.

Called a 'Crackhead'

Then, during an overnight visit, my daughter said to me, "You're a crackhead!"

I asked my baby, "Who told you that I was a crackhead?"

She said, "Auntie Dana (her foster mother) told me that you were on drugs."

I was devastated. I was not ready to explain. I just said, "Well, Princess, do not always believe what everyone tells you about Mommy." That was the best that I could do.

How Do I Explain?

Over time, I found out that my children had heard many negative things about me from their foster parents. I had placed my children with family friends, but these people were gossiping about me and scaring my children. They would say, "Your mother is a crackhead," or, "She doesn't want you."

My kids seemed confused and overwhelmed. I knew I needed to find a way to explain the truth to my children. I was very confused about how I would explain my addiction. I didn't want to overwhelm my kids with too much information, but I also didn't want them to feel that

there were secrets between us.

I Wished I Knew

I understood what my kids were going through. When I was younger, my parents did not care for my siblings and me. We went back and forth between homes, seeing our mother here and there. I always wondered why. My family never explained her addiction and I was afraid to ask.

I wanted to be with my mom. I ran away to look for her and I found her

meetings for the rest of my life."

I also told them, "I could not take care of you because I was on drugs but it will never happen again. I put you with other people because I love you and foster care was the best option at the time."

They said, "Why, Mommy? Why were you sick?"

I told them, "Addiction is an illness. It's just like when you get sick and Mommy gives you medicine to make you better. You can be happy that Mommy got herself better. Soon we will be back together as a family."

Still Confused

Now my children are home. I take one day at a time. I try to stay calm and not get too emotional. My kids and I are bonding. I give them hugs and kisses. If I give my son two kisses, my daughter wants two more.

But I think the negative comments they heard about my addiction have had a bad effect on my children. My son even said to me: "Mommy doesn't love me."

When my kids are not listening to me, I feel like they're saying to themselves, "I do not have to listen to her because she is a crackhead and she left me to live with someone else."

My children need to be de-programmed after hearing so many negative things about me. I hope they will come to understand that I loved them even though I used drugs, and that we can move on together.

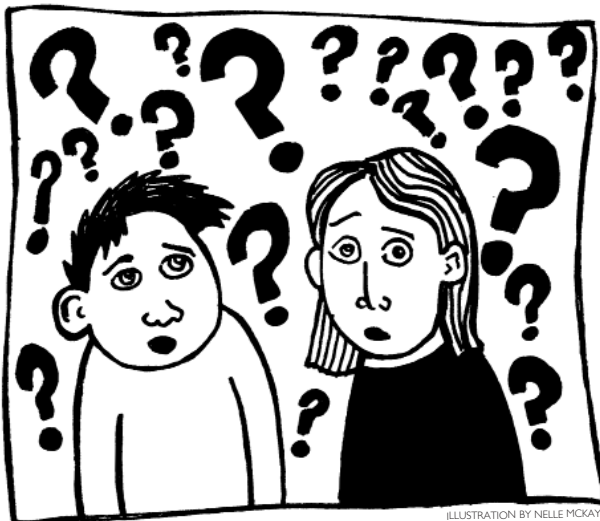


ILLUSTRATION BY NELLE MCKAY

in an abandoned building. That was when I found out she was a drug addict. I was shocked.

I wish I'd understood more about my parents' addiction. But my children's foster parents have been too open with my children and too judgmental of me.

Unanswered Questions

So a few weeks ago, during an overnight visit, I sat down with my kids to begin to repair the damage. I said, "It's true that I was on drugs. Addiction is a sickness that Mommy has. I am in recovery. That means that I will keep taking care of myself by taking medication and going to

Forever

My daughter's

BY WANDA CHAMBERS

When I began visiting my daughter, she was 3 and I had not seen her for 2 ½ years. I was locked up because of my addiction to crack cocaine.

At first, Ebony couldn't stand my living guts. She was afraid of me and was really not nice. She wouldn't talk to me, she'd scream when I got near her. She'd sit under the desk for the whole visit, or keep running out in the hall to see her foster mother. I would keep reading, "And the bear said..." and if she looked at me I'd say, "Hello, Ebony." Of course I went home and cried.

Step by Step

At first, the foster mother and I did not get along. I felt that the foster mother's presence during visits was making it harder for us to bond. My daughter kept going out in the hall to talk with her foster mother, and it made me crazy. I said, "I'm going to ask them to remove the

Home

Two foster

BY ALBERT SHEPHERD

I grew up in foster care, and I know that not all foster parents care about the children. But my daughter had two foster mothers who helped me stay connected to her.

For the first year my daughter was in care, I didn't see her because I was locked up. During my first visit with my daughter, I felt like a father again. Her eyes lit up and I felt she remembered me. I held

Family

foster mother is still part of our lives.

foster mother from the agency during the time of my visit.”

She fought me tooth and nail, one mother fighting another mother. She would say my daughter acted out after visits and she blamed me.

Still, I went step by step—I kept working on my relationship with Ebony and went from supervised to community visits to weekends. Ebony and I got closer when I was able to take her out to the park and then, when we had weekend visits, I could do little things like wipe her face and do her hair and put on her shoes.

As my daughter’s foster mother realized that my daughter was really on her way home, she began to be a friend to me.

‘We Can All Live Together’

The day my daughter came home for good, I felt like I should give Ebony back to the foster family because



they loved her so much and she loved them.

That day, the whole foster family brought her to my door. They

pulled up in a minivan with about 15 Spanish people in it, brothers and sisters, all crying—crying on the floor, crying in the street, taking all of her belongings out of the car, screaming, “My princess, my baby.” I was overwhelmed.

I was actually planning to end their relationship with my daughter. I wanted her home with me, period. But later on, when I was bathing my daughter, she said to me, “This is what we can do. We can put your house and their house together and we can all live together.” My heart went out to Ebony. I’m a woman of compassion, and I told myself,

“There is no way I’m going end this relationship. I can’t do that to them or to her.”

A Loving Connection

In the months after my daughter came home, her foster family continued to show love to us both. I called her foster mother once and said, “Why isn’t this child eating?” We realized that Ebony was used to Spanish food and I cook black people food. So her foster mom would bring pans and pans of food. She taught me to cook pastelitos and peas and rice.

Today my daughter is 10 and her former foster mother is still part of our lives. She often babysits since I’m working and going to school, and Ebony stays with her in the summers.

We don’t always agree—she thinks I’m too strict and that I don’t feed my daughter enough. I think she lets my daughter stay up too late eating anything. I’m big on boundaries because I didn’t get any when I was a child. Even so, I truly appreciate her love for my child. I’ll curse her out in a minute, but I love her, and I know she loves us both.

Visits

mothers helped my daughter and me build a bond.

her in my arms and swung her around, listening to her giggle and laugh. The visit lasted an hour but felt like five minutes.

Beautiful Visits

When I met her foster mother, Mary, I was pleased to see she was a realistic and mature woman who cared about children. Seeing the way she cared for my daughter made me feel relieved and comforted.

Mary also allowed me to visit my daughter at her house after we’d visited at the agency for some time. That was beautiful for us. Mary and I developed a relationship over time like a grandson and grandmother.

Then my daughter was moved from Mary’s home, and we had to visit at the agency again, with social workers watching my every move. I thought to myself, “My daughter and I already have a rela-

tionship. Why are they concerned about how I spend time with her in a crowded playroom, filled with screaming children and broken toys?”

Building a Bond

Once again, I requested unsupervised visits, which were granted. But the time I got to spend with my daughter was still very short. So I asked to visit my daughter in the foster home one day each weekend. The new foster mother

granted my request.

During visits, my daughter and I played with toys and I taught her numbers and letters. I loved watching her learn new things.

Now my daughter is home. I feel blessed that my daughter lived with with two foster parents who made it easier for me to stay connected to my daughter.

Trying My Best

It's not easy keeping my children connected to their birth family.

BY LOURINE HERCULES

I began to foster because I love children but my two kids are grown. I have had three children placed with me. They are siblings, a girl and two boys. I didn't think I'd adopt any children, but after these children were with me for six years, I was asked to adopt them and I did.

Their mother lost her children to foster care because of neglect—she had mental health issues and was in an abusive relationship. The father was abusive to the mother and to the children, too.

'This Is Your Mother'

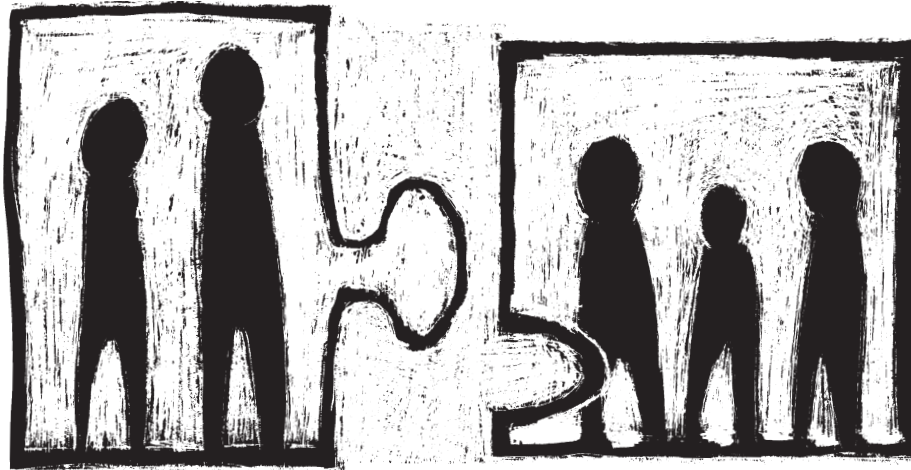
At first, their mother and I didn't hit it off. She doesn't seem to know how to be a mother to her children. We would go for visits and she would not play with her children. She would just sit there and watch. I'd say, "This is Mommy," but she would not respond to them.

At times, the father would come to the visits, too, and he was very scary. Once the mother and father were arguing and the little boy went under the table to hide. Another time, the father got so out of control that the agency had to call security, and they hurried the children and me out the back door and sent us home in a cab. We were all scared.

One Thanksgiving I invited the mom over. At one point, the little boy went to her plate and tried to take some food — you know how little kids will just eat off someone else's plate. She took her fork and stuck him. I had to tell her, "I don't think you should have done that." I asked her to leave and I reported it to the agency. I was very concerned.

Trying to Be Supportive

Despite these situations, she and I got a little closer. I would never criticize her in the presence of the kids. I would tell her to call me and I would say to her on the phone,



"If you want your kids back, you've got to work with me. I would really like you to fight hard to get yourself together. Have confidence. Gain your control back." I would talk to her like a daughter. She told me I was like a mother or grandmother to her.

But at times, I was angry that she did not protect her children. The oldest

I told the mother, 'If you want your kids back, you've got to work with me. I would really like you to fight hard to get yourself together.'

boy had a mark on his nose, and he would always say, "You see this mark on my nose? My daddy slammed my face into the table because I was crying."

I once asked her about that. "What did you say when the police came?" I asked.

"I covered for him," she said.

"Well, then you're just as wicked as he is. That can affect your child for the rest of his life. You can't put your man above your child."

Scary Moments

The children have been affected by everything they've gone through. They have ADHD and behavior problems. They can be violent. One of the boys tore the head off of a doll. He told me, "This is how Daddy hit Mommy."

The girl is very difficult. She won't

I'm working with everybody trying to help these kids. Now, with therapy, I think the kids are stabilizing a little bit.

Confusing and Sad

Four months ago, the mother called. I think she was high. She was telling me, "You know, you're like a mother to me. I would like us to go out and have dinner together and take a family portrait. I bought the children some things for Christmas."

She'd had another baby, and I told her, "I will give you baby clothes." I made a bag of clothes for her. I told the kids we would see their mother on Friday. But I haven't heard from her for four months.

The kids are confused. They say, "She promised to bring us presents for Christmas!"

"Oh, she'll bring them," says the littlest one.

"Whenever she gets the time," I tell them. What can I say? It's very sad.

A Family Connection

I keep my children connected to their family. Their aunt always keeps her word. The children look forward to going to church with her, and she invites us to the house to spend time with the rest of the family.

But I don't want their mother to come back into their lives again right now. I want their lives to become more stable for a little while. If she calls, I will tell her, "Make sure you know what you want to do. I am not going to tell them we'll see you Friday if we won't hear from you for months. If you want to be in their lives, you have to follow through."

A Second Chance

My mom's addiction hurt me, but my foster mother helped us reconnect.

BY KAREN HAYNESWORTH

When I was little I would sit in my room and wonder why my life was not like other children's. I would see kids with their parents, doing things that my mother would not do with me, like going to the park and shopping. I would feel sad. My mother would just come and go.

I often asked my grandma, "Where is Mom?" She would not answer me. Then one day my grandmother told me, "Your mother takes drugs."

I didn't know what to say.

She continued, "I'm tired of not saying nothing. You were going to find out someday."

I felt that my mother didn't want me as much as she wanted her drugs. If she did, she would not be spending more time with them than me.

My First Foster Home

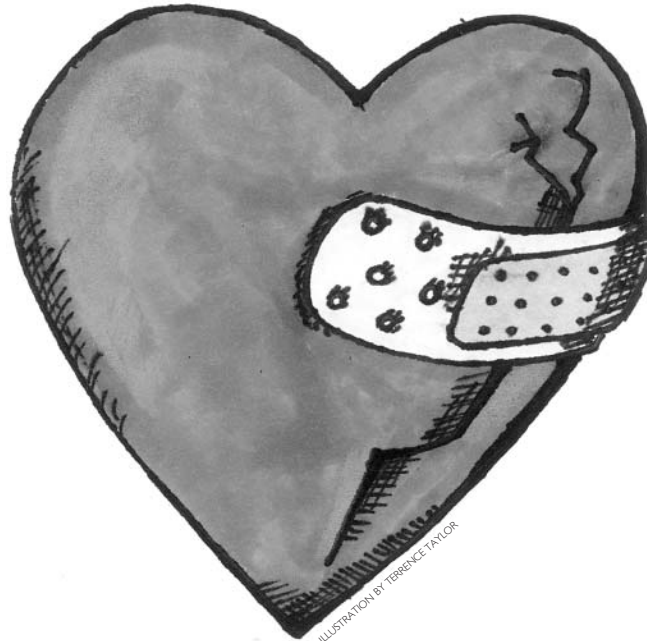
Soon my mother's addiction got worse. Every night she came home high or drunk and I could tell. She would stutter her words and be hard to understand. Then, when I was 9, my grandmother was no longer able to take care of me, so the city decided to put me in a foster home.

The foster parents treated me terribly. They hit me for no reason and their children bit and kicked me. They also said that I was going to be nothing, just like my mother, and that that's why I was in every other home but hers.

Eventually I was moved, but most of the places I was moved to weren't a whole lot better. For many years I suffered physical and mental abuse from foster parents, and for many years I missed my family.

Special Visits

I saw my mother, grandmother and siblings every two weeks. During visits with my family, I wouldn't tell them



what was happening. I thought I'd get in trouble if I did.

I was always excited to see my mother, especially. Whenever my mother was around, something in my heart felt complete. My mother never missed a visit and she always said she loved me no matter what. She'd get to the agency first to surprise me and bring me lots of toys and gifts. When

My foster mom thought it was important for my mother to get to know me and for me to know her.

it was my birthday, she decorated the room with balloons and I had a big cake.

But when I was 11, she stopped coming. Later I found out that she hadn't been attending her court dates and she lost her rights to see me. But at the time I did not understand what was wrong. All I knew was that my mother stopped coming. This was the hardest time for me.

My Cousin Helped Me Out

Finally, when I was a teenager, I moved in with my cousin Michelle. Living with her felt so good. My cousin let me know I was safe.

At first, I would put my arm around my plate so no one would take my food from me. At some foster homes they would take my food away before I was finished. I would

also stay long periods of time in my room by myself. I would sit alone and think mainly about my mother.

My cousin helped me overcome these problems by moving my hand from around my plate, saying, "You can eat as much as you want here." She would take me with her to the store and spend time with me so I wouldn't feel alone. I gradually became more open and more able

to trust people.

Seeing My Mom Again

Even though the agency did not allow me visits with my mother, Michelle allowed me to have a relationship with my mother. She thought it was important for my mother to get to know me and for me to know her.

When my mother first came to my cousin's apartment, I felt so happy. I gave her the biggest hug and kiss. It was like a part of my heart was still cut, but when I saw her it healed.

As we spent more time together, I started to tell my mother about what I had been through. She said, "I am sorry you had to go through this."

We also talked about her problem. I learned that what started her on drugs was that some of my brothers died in a fire before I was born. She couldn't take the pain and turned to drugs.

A Second Chance

My mother admitted that she had a problem with drugs and that she struggled to get clean. I respected her for saying that. Some people who are addicted to drugs won't admit it's a problem. Some won't own up to how their problem has hurt their children. My mother did both.

Somehow I have managed to not hold a grudge against her for not being able to raise me, maybe because she seems truly apologetic and because I understand that she was in pain.

With Michelle's support, my mother and I now have a good relationship and it's still growing. I know I am not going to live with my mother again, but I am happy to have a relationship with her. We see each other every weekend. I believe God has given our family a chance.

ABOUT **Rise**

Rise trains parents to write about their experiences with the child welfare system in order to support parents and parent advocacy and guide child welfare practitioners and policymakers in becoming more responsive to the families and communities they serve.

Our tri-annual print magazine and monthly stories on our website, www.risemagazine.org, help parents advocate for themselves and their children. We work with family support and child welfare agencies to use Rise stories in support groups and parenting education classes. We partner with parent advocacy organizations to use Rise stories in child welfare reform.

Contact Rise Director Nora

McCarthy at nora@risemagazine.org or (718) 260-8818 for information about reprinting Rise stories or using Rise in your work.

Stories in this issue were written by participants in a Rise writing workshop for parents and foster parents. Other stories were written by participants in the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP), a parent advocacy and self-help program. For more information about CWOP, call (212) 348-3000.

Rise supporters include: the Child Welfare Fund, New Yorkers for Children, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Van Ameringen Foundation, the Hite Foundation and Hedge Funds Care.

Subscribe to Rise

Order copies of Rise for yourself, or to hand out to parents, foster parents, or staff. Rise is published three times a year.

# of copies per issue	price / yr
10	\$30
25	\$60
50	\$110
100	\$195
500	\$955

Single Copy subscriptions are FREE.

To order visit www.risemagazine.org.

You can fax us a purchase order at (212) 279-8856.



BUILDING A BRIDGE

A new resource for building collaboration between parents and foster parents

132 pp. workbook \$18.95

- * 10 stories by parents
- * 5 stories by foster parents
- * 5 stories by teens
- * 2 interviews with child welfare experts
- * 14 Leader's Guides that give you step-by-step instructions for using the stories to promote openness and self-reflection in training, parent or foster parent support groups, or one-on-one discussions.

A great resource for parenting classes and support groups.

TO ORDER GO TO:

www.risemagazine.org/buildingabridge.html

My Strength

My mom and aunt helped me become a mother again.

BY JACQUELYN SMALLWOOD

In the early fall of 1993, I was walking the streets when I heard my name. I spotted my mother and my aunt. My mother looked happy and sad to see me. My aunt looked relieved. She said they were praying to find me.

'Come Home'

At the time, I was addicted to crack and pregnant. My 9-year-old daughter was living with my mother and I hadn't seen them for months. I would go by my daughter's school and church to sneak peeks at her, but I believed my daughter would have been embarrassed, hurt and confused if she saw me. She loved me and couldn't understand why I couldn't stop abandoning her for drugs.

That day on the street, my mom said, "Come back home to have the baby. I'll help you with your new child." But I refused to go with her. I was high and I had some drugs on me. I told myself, once again, "This time will be my last."

But my mom and aunt didn't give up on me. Later that day, my water broke. I walked down the block crying and praying. Once again, I heard my name. I thanked God for my family. My mom and aunt took me to the hospital.

Feeling Judged

On the delivery table, I told my whole story. I felt so ashamed. The next morning, a social worker came to tell me that my new daughter was going into foster care.

When I began my journey of recovery, I believed that the agency caseworkers, my lawyer, the judge and most of my family saw me as just another drug addict, a terrible

mother who had abandoned her responsibilities.

Even after I accepted that I needed help and began to take my treatment, parenting classes and therapy seriously, a lot of my family members didn't trust my recovery. My sister would put negativity in my head, saying, "You know you really want to use."

My Strength

But my mom and aunt always saw my strength. My aunt told me, "Only you can beat this." My mom instilled in both of my daughters that I loved them but was sick and needed help. She didn't put me down or talk about my lowest moments around my daughters.

Their encouragement helped me reunify with my daughters 26 months after my youngest was born. I had overnight and weekend visits at my mom's home. My mom also supported me in becoming a mother again, especially to my older daughter, who had been back and forth for so many times between my mother and me.

Now, 14 years later, I am still drug free and working as a parent advocate at a foster care agency. My job is to support parents whose children have been placed in care. I am their ally inside the system. I put my all into my work, trying to give the parents the same faith and encouragement that my mom and aunt gave to me.

I also try to educate foster parents about how to approach the parents without judgment and help the parents raise their children again. It feels great to share and give back what was given to me.