

Founded in 2005, Rise trains parents to write about their experiences with the child welfare system. Visit Rise online at: www.risemagazine.org

Rise

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WRITTEN BY
PARENTS IN THE
CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

What It Takes

All parents need places where they feel safe and supported. Parents who grew up in foster care often want help but fear opening up about their struggles and don't know where to safely find support.

In this second issue in a series, mothers who grew up in foster care write about the supports that have helped them feel safe, heal, bond with their children, grow as young women and mothers—and keep their children out of foster care.



T.N. and her son.

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Mentors and peers helped me find my way back to hope.

BY T.N.

"Girl, you better stop crying," my grandmother said. I was young. Holding tears back was hard. My throat closed up and my head began to spin.

My grandmother was a warrior. She was my soldier. When I was little, everything she did was right in my eyes. I just couldn't understand why I wasn't supposed to cry.

In my grandma's world there was no time for emotions. She raised four children and four grandchildren, and she worked too. My grandma also grew up in an era when colored women had no rights and no voice. Why speak about your feelings if there's no one to hear you?

My grandma carried the hard stone of not showing her feelings on her back for years. Before I was born she used alcohol to keep the feelings down, and later she just kept all her

feelings locked away without alcohol. My grandma explained: "Emotions just give others a chance to take advantage."

My grandmother didn't baby me. She didn't take my hand and walk with me. She sent me the message: "The world isn't nice, but you can handle it. The world is a jungle. This is only the start."

Life Isn't Kind

But as I grew older, my emotions didn't want to stay locked away.

As a teenager, I was angry at my grandmother because I didn't look like the other girls (tall and skinny). I was angry at her because my mother died when I was 2 and my father put me through so many disappointments and she was the only one I could take it out on.

I was angry, too, because sometimes

I wanted to be shown some kind of affection, but when I was hurting, all I got was tough love.

Then, when I was 15, I met my son's father. Nine months later here comes my love child. I was so angry at myself when I realized he wasn't going to be there for my son. Hadn't my grandma taught me that life doesn't give you kindness?

I was strong enough to walk away from him. But I didn't know how to be strong when my warrior left a few years after my son was born.

Alone With My Feelings

I entered foster care on November 22, 2010, at 7 p.m. when I was 17 because my grandma had grown too sick to care for me. She passed away two years later, on December 7, 2012 at 12 noon.

After she got sick, we grew close

again. I'd tell her I loved her, and she'd do her best to say it back. She wanted me to show her my high school diploma before she died and promise to get a college degree. She told me: "Keep a smile on that boy's face and never allow anyone to take him from you. He is yours."

But the pain of being alone in foster care also made me even wilder. Soon I got myself into the fast life, dancing in the clubs. Hour after hour. Guy after guy. Dollar after dollar. After my grandma died, I felt numb. I felt cold and dry. She left me here just to be all in my emotions. I wanted to apologize for all the fights and hug her one more time. How could she leave and expect me to hold back my tears?

My grandma always said, "No one got me like I got me." But my grandma had actually always had me. Now she didn't.

Too Sad to Parent

After that I just drank away my problems.

At the bar, I'd listen to other people's problems, give them a few minutes of fantasy. I'd drink Hennessy and Red Bull and soon I'd feel less and less there. I went to work around noon and came home at 8 or 9 p.m., sometimes later.

My son was 2, just come into the world, spending all that time with my foster mother. By the time I got home, he was usually asleep and I was drunk. It might have seemed that I wasn't thinking about him when I left him there like that. But I left him because I was thinking about him. Kids can feel your sadness. I didn't want to scare him with mine.

Protected Again

I was probably heading toward death or a very bad place. But a few months after my grandmother died, my cousin started to call me. She is 10 years older than me and was also raised by my grandma. She'd say, "Let's get out and clear our minds." We'd get our nails done, or have Sunday dinner at her house.

She was very emotional, and that

touched my heart and woke me up. She'd tell me that we had each other. I began to share my feelings with her, and I saw that it was OK.

I felt protected again, like I had when I was younger living in my grandma's big house. I felt like finally someone really knew me. I was her little flower that was blossoming.

I Found a Team

Soon I started going to a support group for young moms at Lawyers for Children, the agency where I had my lawyer. Mary Ellen, the social worker who ran the group, would call or text me after hours or on the weekend just to make sure I was OK.

It was good to know that the thoughts running through my mind were also running through other moms' minds.

Talking with the moms in the group made me feel normal. I used to think that something wasn't right with my thoughts. It was good to know the thoughts running through my mind were also running through other moms' minds. The group even helped me believe that those of us who have been in foster care could become an elite team of leaders.

There for My Son

By the time I aged out of foster care almost a year ago, I finally felt like I was on the right path but I worried about my son. I tried to give him all the attention I couldn't give him right after my grandmother died. I'd take him to karate class and read to him. I'd tell him I loved him and he'd repay me with random hugs and kisses.

My biggest challenge was figuring out how to respond when I saw him hurt, sad or scared, because those emotions still scared me. Often it seemed like emotions just brought more emotions. I also feared that as a male he'd be a target if he was too

emotional.

So I taught him some of the tough love my grandmother taught me. If he fell, I'd speak to him in an aggressive voice. I'd tell him, "You're a boy. Boys are going to fall." I thought that emotions are the only thing you can control, and that I was teaching him self-control.

'That Hurt My Feelings'

But at 3, my son could also be very aggressive. He was always in defensive mode, ready for a fight. One day my cousin went to hug him and he punched her. He reacted as if she were coming to attack him.

That's when I asked for help. I went to the Department of Education and had my son evaluated. When he entered pre-K, they got him a teacher just to work on helping him express his emotions. After a while, he started coming home saying, "You made me upset, Mommy," or "That hurt my feelings," or "Leave me alone please. I need to think." My son also began to allow himself to cry from time to time.

Over time the hitting stopped. I felt proud that my son could express his feelings. I saw that it helped, not hurt him. It gave me hope that he'd have the skills to make his way in society.

I still feel afraid that the world will

eat him alive if he shows weakness. But I am trying to accept that he is a child, and that it's OK for children to sometimes be weak. Crying is a way for my son to tell me, "Mommy, I need you."

Seeking and Thriving

Getting help for my son made me want more help. Recently another mother at Rise described a parent-child therapy program where the therapist videotaped her playing with her son, and they watched it as part of the therapy. It sounded great because it was really about her and her son, not about parenting rules. After that, I hardly slept until I found a similar program. I'm hoping it can help me address my own painful emotions and help my son and me feel like a team.

Today I am proud of myself and I am proud of my son. I am Phi Theta Kappa in college, a Youth Ambassador for Lawyers for Children, and a writer for Rise. It makes me happy to hear my son's outspoken voice and to see his commitment to whatever he is doing.

Writing this story has helped me see how far we've come. So many things happened to me overnight that I didn't know how to manage. But my cousin found me and helped me. After that, I took it upon myself to use the resources around me.



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Out of consideration for parents with open cases or for parents sharing private information that could affect future job searches, Rise is not publishing names or full names of contributing writers in some cases.

Making It Safe to Ask for Help

How can child welfare support more and investigate less?

INTERVIEWS BY LINDSAY WRIGHT AND PIAZADORA FOOTMAN

Over the past three years, Rise has worked with and interviewed more than 40 mothers who grew up in foster care. A common theme is our fear that if we reach out for assistance, our families will be hurt rather than helped.

Here, we asked three professionals—including a program director whose own children grew up in foster care—about approaches that have been proven to help families. Suzanne Barnard is the director of the Evidence-Based Practice Group at the Annie E. Casey Foundation; Lashaunda Harris is clinical director of the Parent-Child Assistance Program (P-CAP) in Yakima County, Washington; and Rebecca Dombcik is a lawyer for parents in Yakima County.

Investing in Prevention

Barnard: We believe the place to start is by investing in preventive programs in our communities that are available to all families, so that parents don't have to have a problem before they get help. Programs that visit parents at home, like Nurse-Family Partnership, are very effective because they start by supporting mothers when they are pregnant, they stay with moms up until babies are 2 years old, and they have been proven to work.

Parenting programs that work with parents and children together also help parents learn how to help their children if they are behaving in ways that are hard to manage, especially if the children have also experienced trauma. Programs like Triple P (Promoting Positive Parenting), Incredible Years, Family Unidas, Strong African American Families Program, Parent Child Interaction Therapy and Family Systems Therapy help parents learn positive parenting skills even when they may not have had a lot of good parenting themselves.

Someone to Trust

Harris: I run a home visiting program for mothers who abused alcohol or drugs during pregnancy. The vast majority of mothers in our program were in foster care as children. Some of our staff members, including myself, are also parents who have a history of substance abuse and/or child welfare involvement.



What we find is that it's not enough to have services available in our communities. A lot of moms who grew up in care need someone they can trust, because without that trust they won't go to services.

I'm working with a mom right now whose son fell off the bed. She was terrified that if she took him to the hospital someone would be suspicious and involve child protective services in her life. When moms really have problems, sometimes they run. Often they hide. We help them know that it's OK to deal with their problems face forward, and that we will support them.

We stay with moms for three years and at a minimum we're in their homes twice a month. Sometimes we're there every day. We connect them to services, but we also help them see that it can be OK to rely on someone. Our own stories are our ticket in and give them hope when they're feeling hopeless. Then we provide them with that consistency that a lot of parents who grew up in the system never had.

Clear Rules Around Reporting

Dombcik: When parents feel safe asking for help, they're generally less likely to end up getting investigated. The problem is that the laws around mandated reporting are so vague that parents never know what might get them reported if they do ask for help. Parents who have grown up in foster care have even more reason to be afraid, because when they share their own histories, especially if they've had mental health problems, substance abuse or domestic violence in their pasts, that often increases the chances that they'll get reported.

After children are placed in foster care, parents are even more afraid to be open because they don't know how their information will be shared

parents find supports they can trust. But child welfare systems also need to get smarter about not punishing parents when they reach out for help and become more transparent about what will and will not lead to a child protective investigation.

Harris: The child welfare system is not a system that naturally helps parents build trust. One of the best things our local child welfare office has done is make clear that a parent's drug use alone doesn't warrant opening a child protective case. If a mother has a drug or alcohol problem but has not been neglectful, we have the opportunity to help that mother get connected to treatment and services without losing her children.

Practical Help

Barnard: Parents who grew up in foster care also need support just for themselves. They need help to deal with the stress in their lives. They need ways to build community and connections. And they need ways to connect to education and work opportunities so that they can gain economic stability and feel good about themselves. They also need programs that treat the specific traumas that come from child welfare involvement.

In the past, child welfare systems put financial resources into services that hadn't been proven to work. Many still do. But in the last 3-5 years we have seen a growing awareness

It's not enough to have services. Moms who grew up in care need someone they can trust.

in court. One thing parents can do is speak with their lawyers to help them understand what is and isn't safe to share. Because of attorney-client privilege, parents can share anything with their lawyer without it being shared with others, and lawyers can help

of the difference for families when systems invest in effective programs. Now we just need to make sure that parents have access to those programs, because too many do not.

Dreaming Again

Parenting Journey, therapy and writing are helping me believe in myself.

BY LATOYA FITZGERALD

Being raised in foster care and my daughters ending up there used to seem like an unbreakable cycle. I had feelings of being stuck in the past. The abuse I encountered at home and in foster care left scars so deep. I suffer from them as I write this story.

Triggered

Going into adulthood I prayed and promised myself that I wouldn't continue the cycle. But the problems I wanted to run from consumed me. My first daughter went into foster care at 3 months and is now adopted.

With my second daughter, Julisa, I didn't want to let her down too. I made it through an incredibly tough mother-child treatment program and I also separated from Julisa's father, who was abusive. We had five good years together:

But when Julisa turned 5, our life together changed. I became unstable with worry. I know now from going to therapy that her turning 5 was a huge trigger for me that I was not aware of. My own life had fallen apart when I was 5—that's when I was raped for the first time, and when I entered foster care.

Dropping Julisa off at school opened up doors of fear in my heart, thoughts of Julisa getting molested or hurt, and fears that I had no control anymore. As time passed I became overprotective to the max. I overdressed her because I didn't want her body to show. I started calling her school or popping up there. I reacted with panic and passion because I

thought if someone harmed her, I could never forgive myself.

A Destructive Path

In June 2014, Julisa was removed from my care. After Julisa was taken, I felt like I could not go on. I was terrified of what might happen to Julisa in

twice every week.

Sharing Light

In Parenting Journey, a 12-week group that focuses on helping parents heal from painful childhoods, I learned that how I was raised affected my parenting deeply. I saw that I might

not have harmed my daughter physically but I was raising my child in fear. I learned, too, that I need to take care of myself. I had believed that pushing my own needs to the side couldn't harm my daughter but it did.

My instructors were compassionate, and by the fifth week the parents in the group became each other's support. We opened up, cried and laughed with each other. At the Parenting Journey graduation, I said: "I share this light with my seven peers, my Parenting Journey

surrogate mothers, who are blessings. I thank all of you for standing by me and helping me finally see what was already there."

foster care. At the same time, I didn't want to visit her. I was too ashamed.

For two months, I totally shut down. I refused to cooperate with CPS or

any caseworker. I became distant from family and friends. I didn't go to therapy or take my meds. I was on a very destructive path.

A week with a friend and her children down South helped me see that I could not give up on Julisa. Since then, I've been learning new ways to cope, and I've seen Julisa

stories. I've achieved something.

Through Rise I've also made presentations about parents' experiences in the system. That made me feel more like an asset than a liability. That's a major change for me.

A Place to Vent and Breathe

Lastly, I started going to therapy and taking my meds. My therapist listens to me and doesn't judge me. My therapist allows me to vent, sometimes even to scream, and still looks at me as a person. She also taught me how to breathe when I feel like I'm under pressure.

Most important, my therapist has been teaching me that the past and present are separate—and that I have control over my future.

Here for My Daughter

Making all of these positive changes sober has not been easy. I'm proud that I've made these choices and taken these steps. I can tell that Julisa and I have a stronger relationship. On our visits I bring arts and crafts and mostly home-cooked meals. We talk about the day when she will come home and how she wants her room to be decorated. We are dreaming again. To me, that means we're living and not just existing.

As I think about the day Julisa was taken away from me, I ask myself, "What is different now? Am I better or worse than before she left home?" I'm trying to believe that my family curse is losing. I'm trying to stay hopeful.

It will take a lot of self-finding and patience, and a lot of therapy and support groups. Already, though, things are slightly different because I am aware of my old habits and I've realized and learned that I'm not alone. It's OK to seek help when you need it.



Latoya and her daughter.

I had believed that pushing my own needs to the side couldn't harm my daughter but it did.

An Asset, Not a Liability

Writing for Rise has also been a tremendous experience at a painful time. So often I've asked myself, "Why do I have so many setbacks and downfalls?" Writing a story about my childhood and reading it over; I truly realized how much pain I've been carrying. I'm proud that I've faced my bad memories and completed two

‘We Want to Be Heard, Not Fixed’

Child welfare needs to focus on supporting people, not fixing problems.

When we grow up in care, we're mandated to services. When we come back into the system as parents, it still feels like no one's listening to what we think we need. Here, five foster care alum and parents—whose names have been changed because they have open cases—explain the approaches that have worked for them.

1. To support parents, listen to what we say we need.

Sienna: When you're involved in the system, as a child or a parent, it seems like people are so ready to diagnosis you. They say you're mentally unstable, even though sometimes you're just in a lot of pain. When the system and the courts slap you with a diagnosis without even understanding the situation you're in or listening to what you think you need, you feel stereotyped and discriminated against.

Mitchell: For a number of years after I left foster care, I struggled with my emotions. Finally I found a program called The Bridge New York. The Bridge offers lots of different services but they don't tell you what services you need. They ask you how you want to move forward with your life. If you say you need support with housing or employment, they have that. If you say you need therapy, they have that too.

2. We want to feel good about our lives and families.

Mitchell: The Bridge also has a strong art program, and that is one of the things that kept me going there. Art has always been an important part of my life. When I started going to The Bridge, I'd been told that I wasn't good enough to get into any school, but doing art at The Bridge allowed me to feel really successful. I've been going there for eight years and we even have shows at the Museum of Modern Art. Art also helps me get out the pain even when I don't want to talk. Art erases all the drama in



ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL BLAYO

my head.

Andrea: When I was younger and running the streets, I joined a group called GEMS, which taught me how to be an advocate and change conditions for sexually trafficked youth. More recently, I've been writing for Rise and making presentations to staff about what the system feels like to parents. It feels great to have a voice

Sienna: With my youngest child, I've gotten support from a home-visiting program called Healthy Families New York. It gave me information before my baby was born and continued connecting me to resources afterward.

The woman who visits me is a mandated reporter. Still, I don't feel like she's there to report me. She doesn't

If the system gave us more information and we could hear from other parents, we could feel like we had choices.

in improving other people's lives. Advocating for others also helps me get clear about how to advocate for my own family. Now when I go into meetings at my agency or with ACS, I'm able to think more logically and ask for what my family needs.

ask: 'What did you do wrong?' When I'm struggling, she says, 'That could happen to anyone.' She's also done nice things for me, like thrown me a baby shower. I didn't have that with my other children.

3. Help us build community.

Tiffany: When I was growing up, I was used to not being understood. So when I started having problems with my daughter's father, I was just stuck in my own miserable self. I never would have gone to a support group if the court didn't mandate me.

But the parent support group I go to at the Lower East Side Family Union has been good for me. We do meditation, and they encourage us to find time in our week just for ourselves. We have fun too, like when we role play what it's like being a mother in different situations. More than anything, just hearing other women's experiences has helped.

Sienna: When we come back into the system as parents, it seems like there's nothing just for parents. I've had caseworkers tell me, 'I'm not here for you. I'm here for your children.' Some agencies have parent advocates, but lots of times you only see them at conferences. If agencies had groups just for parents, it would feel a lot more like the system was willing to support us.

4. Offer information and choices.

Wendy: When we come out of foster care, a lot of us don't have family support, and we don't know about any services. Besides, we're stubborn and we're used to doing everything and learning everything on our own.

But it would help if the system gave us more information so that parents—especially those leaving foster care—knew more about the good things out there. If there were billboards in our neighborhoods and commercials on TV, we could feel like we had choices. It would be great, too, if we could hear from other parents about which services made them feel safe and which made them feel like they were going to get reported just for walking through the door.

Awakening to Magic

In addition to services, times of joy, connection and wonder keep me going.

BY SARA WERNER

Magic really does exist. Magic is when you hear music that makes you laugh or cry; you feel it deep within your soul. Magic is also when you read a book that makes you feel like you can go anywhere and do anything while you stay safe and secure.

Magic is how you view the world. It's walking in a garden and observing the beautiful flowers and magnificent trees, and seeing how soft and alive the grass feels under your feet.

Magical is how it felt recently when I went to a camp for adults who are part of a mental health program. Swimming I felt young and free. I also loved walking around and finding places where I could be quiet and meditate. I sat near the lake on a bench, or lay on a hammock connected to two trees, reading a book or staring up at the trees and sky. I felt more relaxed than I've ever felt.

Worries and Stress

My daily life is often worries and stress. My son Aaron is in foster care, and I am working to get him home. I spend a lot of time seeing doctors and therapists, filling out paperwork and going to court. I fear that I have to do everything perfectly or I won't get my son back. I worry about whether I'll get to my appointments on time. I worry about gathering letters for court and what they will say.

Everything I've done to get my son home has required me to talk to people and advocate for myself, and that's been hard. I have schizoaffective disorder and I'm terribly afraid of being judged. In the mental health and child welfare systems, people do tend to use what you say against you. I'm learning to speak up, though. I need to prove that, if any danger or difficulty comes up, I can speak up for my son and me.

Now I'm getting close to reunification because I refuse to give up. I have

completed a 26-week parent-child therapy program, DV therapy and visit coaching. I go to therapy every week. The only obstacle to getting my son home is housing.

The Magic of Mothering

Sharing magical moments with my son keeps me going. I have visits with Aaron from 11-5 on Mondays. Aaron has brown curly hair to match his brown eyes. He loves music and building blocks. He learns new words every day. I like hearing that he can say: "Mommy, Mommy!" "Yes, Aaron?" "I want apple juice."

The more time I spend with my son, the better I am able to care for him. I learn what he likes and what he doesn't. I know his favorite foods. I know that he loves Elmo and playing ball.

Aaron also likes his pacifier. He likes when I take his pacifier and run it under some water. He even reminds me to wash bobo. Sometimes I pick him up by the sink and I let him wash it himself, which he likes, too.

Devastated

Aaron was removed two days after he was born because I'd already had a daughter and had voluntarily placed her in foster care at 3 months old. Their father was abusive, and I thought she would be safer. Now she is adopted.

When I was five months pregnant with Aaron, their father threatened me, and at that moment I just stopped feeling afraid of death. I

started screaming, ran out the door and signed myself into the nearest hospital.

For two days after Aaron was born, I held, fed, burped and changed him. It was one of the happiest times of my life. Then I was told that I couldn't take my baby home. I was devastated.

Changing My Mind

When I started visiting Aaron, I felt that I might not be doing the right

ored playmat and shelves of toys and books.

I picked out the toys when Aaron was small. When he could stand on his own, it was fun watching him take every toy and book off the shelf. Then I had to get him to help me clean up. Hazel showed me how to play the clean up song to get Aaron in the mood.

When Aaron got upset because he couldn't take the toys home with him, I learned to tell him, "Don't worry, you can play with the toys next time you come here." Hazel also taught me how to calm him and distract him when he was getting changed.

Facing Down Perfection

I always thought that I had to be perfect. I grew up in an Orthodox Jewish home, wearing long skirts and long sleeves, being sheltered. In my

teens, I rebelled. I smoked, drank and ran away a few times. I was also seriously depressed. Then, after my father died, my brother kicked me out of the house, and I bounced between hospitals, shelters and the streets.

I thought that in life you are either at the top or at the bottom, right or wrong, with no in between. Hazel taught me that it's OK to not be perfect. When Aaron accidentally tripped and fell, Hazel taught me not to blame and be mad at myself. Life has very much improved since I realized that there is a middle ground and there's no shame in being there. Hazel said she was so proud of me



Sara and her son.

thing by trying to get my son back. I thought Aaron might be safer if I let the foster mom adopt him, and he was thought to have medical problems that might be complicated to handle.

Spending time with Aaron in parent-child therapy at the Albert Einstein Infant-Parent Court Project helped me change my mind. I realized that I love being with my son and caring for him and I'm capable of it.

One-on-One Support

Aaron and I spent time each week with a psychologist named Hazel. Hazel's office was small with a col-

because I had learned that I could let Aaron be more independent while also being there to catch him if he falls. I could let him go over to the toy shelf, pick out his own toys, and even play on his own. I saw that, after playing a bit, he would come over to me for a hug and reassurance before going back to his toys again.

Getting to Know My Son

Now I find so much magic in the time I spend with Aaron. Recently we took the 41 bus to hang out at Fordham University, which has a spacious campus near the foster care agency. We walked around and then sat down in Starbucks to read his Elmo book. He told me the colors—red, blue, green and his favorite, yellow, which he pronounces “lellow.”

As we walked, I held his soft, little hand. I picked him up so we could cross the street. He didn't like that because he wants to walk, so as soon as we crossed I put him back down.

When he got tired, I picked him up and he lay on my shoulder, making sucking sounds with his pacifier:

A Magical Zoo Trip

Our most magical day was at the Bronx Zoo. It was a really nice day with a comforting cool breeze blowing. Aaron was a little nervous on the bus. He was holding me really tight and closing his eyes on my shoulder:

At the zoo, everything was expensive. But it was worth every penny. I was thinking of the zoo trip as a gift for Aaron, but I found myself having a lot of fun, too.

We looked at the zebras, the giraffes, hyenas and flamingo. I felt as if I had jumped into one of my fantasy books. The hyenas were really scary and the flamingos were fascinating.

After lunch we went on the bug carousel. Instead of horses, the kids ride bugs. Aaron loved this so much

that we went on two times! Leaving the zoo, then Aaron took a short nap while cuddling with my Spiderman sweater as if he were holding a teddy bear.

Fighting Against Sadness

Back at the foster care agency, I felt like crying. It's really hard to be without my son.

In between visits, I keep myself busy preparing for his return. I buy toys, books, games, movies, diapers, wipes and anything else he might need. I also put money to the side for him a little at a time.

This year, the holidays were especially sad and lonely. I was alone a lot. Being alone without much to do is really depressing. A cold also kept me in bed for a few days and I had to cancel one of my visits because I thought Aaron might get sick. I felt as if some of the magic I'd been building up might be leaving me.

Like Someone Let Down a Ladder

Forcing myself out of bed to go see the Christmas tree in Manhattan with a group from my supportive housing program turned out to be just what I needed to start to climb out of my hole.

The magic of the trip wasn't just the beautiful sights and decorations, it was also the friendship and my courage in trying new things. Heading home, I felt as if someone let down a ladder for me to start climbing back up.

With my renewed passion and excitement, my cold getting better, and the encouragement from some good friends, I started to feel the magic again. I told myself, “I know I will be OK and I can look forward to my next visit with my son.”

Sara's son returned home on a trial discharge in February.

‘I Want to Feel Safe but I’m Scared’

I'm searching for a therapist who can help me with PTSD.

BY SONIA DIAZ

I've been diagnosed with Chronic Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD). When I was little, my mother hit and kicked me all the time. My step-dad abused me. I've been raped multiple times. The last time was in 2005. I've dealt with all of this mostly by smoking weed and staying in my house.

I want to get treatment and live life. But going to counseling and speaking to others about what I've held in for so long is scary. In the past when I tried to get help, I sometimes shut down or I would blurt out all my traumas at once and end up confused and overwhelmed. Then I'd start to have nightmares and sweats and stay inside even more.

Taking a Chance

In December, I went to see a therapist for the first time in 10 years, just to interview her about how to find and cope with treatment. Her name is Roni Avinadav, and she is a psychologist with the Safe Mothers, Safe Children project of the NYU Child Study Center. Roni runs a therapy program for parents who have been diagnosed with PTSD.

Even speaking with Roni was very hard for me. When I explained why I wanted to interview her, I was afraid I would be judged. And when I read over the notes from the meeting after the interview, I felt scrambled up from the way I was jumping from one topic to another.

Eventually, though, I made a list of the things Roni said that stuck out to me.

She said: “You were traumatized and re-traumatized and you had no one to go through it with you.” She also said: “You deserve better. You're an adult now and you can turn yourself around. You can take certain steps to care about yourself because you deserve better.”

Roni advised me to shop for a therapist who feels right. It surprised me that she said that therapy shouldn't start with opening up wounds. When people have gone through so much trauma, the first thing should be how to manage negative emotions to calm down and feel in control.

One Step Closer

What I remember most, though, is her telling me that I am not alone.

It's important for me to know that I don't have to keep myself so isolated, but it's also scary. Mainly I'm afraid that if I go to therapy and give the world another try, I will be raped again.

After the meeting with Roni, I felt worse for a while. I shut down, stayed in my room, didn't eat, couldn't sleep. I had nightmares and sweats. If I heard police sirens or people arguing outside, it made my body shake. Still, I feel like I'm one step closer to getting help. I want to learn ways to let go of the memories of my past and draw new ones in my mind.

Laying the Past to Rest

Calming your body's sensations can help to heal trauma.

INTERVIEW BY PIAZADORA FOOTMAN

Bessel Van Der Kolk, medical director of the Justice Treatment Institute's Trauma Center in Massachusetts and renowned trauma treatment researcher and specialist, talks about ways to recover from trauma.

Q: Your recent book is called "The Body Keeps the Score." Can you explain what that means and why it's important for people who have experienced trauma to understand it?

A: Trauma lives in our bodies. Our brains try to keep our bodies from feeling that trauma. But our bodies may continue to experience agitation, rage and heartache. Those symptoms are all pieces of the past that haven't been laid to rest.

Talk therapy can be an important part of trauma recovery, because when you've experienced trauma you need to find words for what happened to you. A therapist should help you feel safe to feel what you feel and encourage you to really be curious about yourself.

But an ordinary talk therapist may not be able to help you learn how to calm your body down. It's hard to heal from trauma if your body is afraid to be touched or to take in the milk of human kindness. Feelings of abandonment or self-loathing don't go away just because you can talk about them.



ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL BIANCO

trauma often barely notice their bodies because their brains are used to cutting off their feelings. They may overeat or starve themselves. They may not notice when they're tired. A central part of healing trauma is finding a way to feel fully alive in the present without blocking out your feelings.

Childhood trauma also resets the brain and makes many things harder, like concentration and the ability to regulate your emotions.

Neuro-feedback, the main focus of my own research, looks at how to teach the brain and body to focus and calm down. In neuro-feedback, we put sensors on people's heads, then project their brainwaves

Q: Can you describe some trauma treatments that focus on healing trauma in the body?

A: People who have experienced

On My Own Terms

I needed to feel safe and in control to face my past.

BY DESIREE RUIZ

For the most part, my childhood is a blur, but I remember being about 7 and my uncle feeling on my backside when I was asleep. That's when my hell began. At the time, I lived with my uncle and my mom, who was deep into an addiction. My baby sister slept in her crib. I lay on my top bunk feeling scared and confused.

I first told my story when I was 14 and spent the night at a close friend's house. I loved being around her family and we'd always speak about how great it would be if we lived together. My friend's mom was also a foster parent. I wanted to tell her what was happening to me, not so there would be an investigation, but so her

mom would quietly push for me to live with them. I wanted to leave my house. I wanted to leave my hell. But mostly I wanted to get away from my uncle's abuse without everyone knowing my secret.

than the day I had to tell CPS what was being done to me for so many painful years. I felt cornered into telling my story.

The CPS workers, doctors and

far it would go, how far I thought it could go. They wanted me to write whether I thought my grandmother knew. I even remember being asked if I had enjoyed it. I was mortified. I wanted to vomit. I felt dizzy. It was like I was outside my body, watching what was going on.

If the foster care system had asked what I needed, I would've been spared more pain.

Cornered, Not Saved

Things did not go as I'd hoped. Her mom overheard our conversation and went to the school. The school called child protective services. I've never been more scared in my life

police wanted me to write my story down in detail. It was a nightmare. They didn't just want me to write what was happening. They wanted thorough details about when, how he was touching me, where, how

In foster care, I still didn't get what I wanted—to feel safe, to have privacy, to feel that my life was under my control. I was sent to speak with counselors and therapists but I hated people knowing what I went through. It was nasty. I felt nasty. So I chose to quit therapy and not talk or think about it ever again. No one would know my pain if I didn't show

on a computer, and people get to play computer games with their own minds. They work on becoming more attentive and calming down their reactions.

The most important question to ask yourself is what will help you begin to notice the sensations in your body. Anything you do is good. Just sitting quietly and paying attention to your breathing is a step in the right direction.

Practices that come from Asia, like meditation, Tai Chi and yoga, can help. There are a lot of yoga teachers that you can find on the internet who have been trained to work with trauma. You can also just choose a gentle yoga that is primarily meant to calm you down and help you notice your body. Once you start paying attention to your body, it's easier to take steps to care for yourself. It's also easier to work with a therapist to begin to regulate your feelings instead of getting too angry, scared, or shut down.

There are also trauma treatments that focus on healing the body that

have been developed more recently. Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing, or EMDR, is an interesting and bizarre treatment that works by moving your eyes from the left to the right while you're helped to remember very specific memories. We don't know exactly why EMDR works, but it has been shown to be an amazingly effective treatment for people who are haunted by particular memories, like being molested or beaten. EMDR is something that people should ask about because it is becoming increasingly available.

Q: You also focus on arts-based therapies in your book. How can the arts help in recovering from trauma?

A: The arts in general are very important in helping people imagine alternative realities. I've met so many survivors in my career by now, and the people who do the best are people who are able to imagine realities that are different from what they've experienced.

There are theater-based therapies, for instance, that can help people discover new identities when they've gotten locked into the same frozen, angry, tough identity. One of the things that happens with trauma is that people build up a determination to never get hurt again. At the time that the trauma is occurring, that defense can be very helpful. But in the long run, if you're in a relationship and your main preoccupation is to never feel any vulnerability, it's not.

Being involved in the arts is also enormously fun. For people who have grown up in foster care who may not have had the experience of feeling like they belong, being part of a theater production, joining a church choir, a garden club, or anything that gets you involved in creating things with other people can give you that feeling of being needed and of belonging.

These kinds of programs are not usually offered by foster care systems.

Systems need to learn what it's like to not have a voice or control of even part of your life.

When you do theater, you change your voice. You change how you hold your body. You change how you react to other people, and this opens up new possibilities. Maybe you discover that you have a gentle side, or that you could be a really powerful person when you have the chance to act like a powerful person.

Systems need to learn what it's like to feel abandoned and scared, to not have life feel safe or predictable, to not have a voice or control of even part of your life. Once systems begin to focus on what it feels like to be in the system, they may begin to focus more on what it takes to heal those feelings.

I had any. If I didn't think about it, it wouldn't bother me.

Trying Again

Shortly after I went into foster care, I met a boy named Brian. When I realized that he was the same boy I'd had a crush on in elementary school, a bit of my innocence came back.

Brian's family also took me under their wing. When I got pregnant, at 16, Brian's mom never made me feel like I *had* to do anything about the baby. She simply asked what I wanted to do. When I decided to keep the baby, she became my legal guardian and I soon moved in to her home. She even let me have the upstairs apartment. For the first time since I was molested, I began to feel protected and had a sense of control over my life.

Memories Can Hide

Now, 12 years later, my oldest is 11 and I have another son who is 18 months.



out at a support group for parents whose children had been placed in foster care. Time after time I found myself listening to women who had gone through what I did, or whose children did. Hearing their stories brought me back to the top bunk each time.

Anxiety took over listening to others speak. I was surprised to realize that memories can hide for a while without disappearing. That's when I decided to write my story for *Rise*. Through writing my story, I hoped to gain some freedom from the things I lived.

Writing My Story

For me, writing my story has been easier than speaking about it. I think that if I'd gone to therapy to talk about it, it would have reminded me too much of being in court where I'd had to talk. I never felt obligated

to keep writing, and if I felt too overwhelmed, I would take a break. I felt like I was in control.

It is important to me that I am writing for others, too. I hope to help others speak up if something is wrong in their home, or to know how to respond if a child is in pain. I was a very quiet child and no one ever bothered to ask me why. Maybe if they had, it would've saved me years of being molested. And if the foster care system had asked what I needed when I spoke up instead of taking over and taking control, I would've been spared more pain.

I'm proud that even though I live with memories, they haven't consumed my life. I fear every day that someone might hurt my boys. That's natural, I guess, when you know the ugly of the world. But my boys don't know it. They laugh loud and smile big. That makes me feel proud.

Joining the System

Parent advocates who have been both child and parent of the system are a powerful resource to improve it.

BY ALISHA MAGLIO

The first time I visited my son in foster care, I walked into the same CPS office that I'd sat in as a child. I saw my son looking at me with tears running down his face the same exact way I'd looked at my mom. As I walked through the halls of the same courthouse I watched the designs on the floor just like I used to. I was livid that child welfare was back in my life. I never would have been able to get through it if my son hadn't been on the other side.

My son was 8 when child protective services took him from me. I never hated myself more than I did right then and I wanted drugs to help me escape that self-loathing. But I knew my son had to feel pain, so how dare I take that pain away from me.

I was shocked to find that this time through, though, the system actually helped me.

My Son Saved Me

The years I spent in foster care in Texas left me feeling never good enough. I switched homes and schools. Always the new kid, always alone. I never understood why I couldn't go home to my mom and siblings. It was all I wanted. It was my every prayer:

I got pregnant at 17 and my son saved me. I was determined to give my son what I never had. I also had absolutely no idea how to do that.

Lots of times I ran to the hospital because I didn't know who else could teach me to parent. When I couldn't figure out why my son's legs were blue, the hospital showed me I had the diaper too tight. When I thought he had an ear infection, they showed me how to get the wax out of his ears. Another time the hospital showed me how to clean out his nose. I laughed when they showed me the suction nozzle. I had one that



Alisha and her son, Brach.

I'd been using as a toy to blow air in his face.

The only thing I knew how to do was love my son and even that seemed unnatural because it was new to me.

The Wrong Savior

But I still had a void inside. When my son was 5, I tried not only to find a father for my son, but God, a savior, a family, a husband and anything else that would fill the void. All those things I needed but the man I chose was all the wrong person. He introduced me to a drug whose hypnotizing spell at first took away the pain and soon after took me to a depth of pain I cannot describe.

I would hide in my room getting high for days, crying because I just couldn't stop. I prayed that if I died my son wouldn't find me. Over a two-year period, I lost my job, my house and eventually my son.

When my son was placed in foster care, I didn't think the system could do anything but harm me. But my son and I were lucky to have a supportive caseworker. We were lucky, too, to be sent to therapists who understood addiction and under-

stood us. While I worked on forgiving myself and finding peace with my past, my son was able to let out the anger he'd been keeping from me, and talk about the fear that his behavior could lead me to use again.

Homecoming

When my son finally came home I begged our caseworker to keep our case open. I was just too scared of not having anyone hold me accountable.

Today I try to show other parents what I finally learned—that their future can be different from their past.

At home, I would watch him laugh and play. Later I would hide and cry and think of using because I didn't feel I deserved to enjoy him. It was painful, too, to see his fear: He would constantly check to make sure I wasn't drinking or using drugs.

The support of my son's godmother

helped me through this difficult time, and slowly my guilt and my son's fears began to recede.

Joining the System

A year after my son and I reunited, I ran into the caseworker who had originally investigated my case. She was proud of me and encouraged me to join a group of parent advocates from across Texas called the Parent Collaboration Group. After I became a parent advocate and began helping other parents while improving the system, I realized that my defective life was also an asset. Those of us who have been both child and parent of the system can be a powerful resource to improve it.

I also joined a workgroup to bring understanding of addiction and quality addiction services to the child welfare system, two things that are hugely lacking. I was lucky to get good supports and services, but too many parents do not. It's unethical to break apart families without them.

Offering Hope

Today I try to show other parents what I finally learned—that their future can be different from their past. I also try to give them the kind of support that I received from the system. If I don't use my pain to help others, I would have felt that pain for nothing.

One time, my son came to a support group for parents with children in the system. He bravely stood in front of the group and shared how my addiction affected him and what our lives are like now. Many parents thanked him and explained that they had been ready to give up before hearing him. They felt defeated and felt so much guilt. But my son gave them hope. He told them that he had to have the addicted me to get the me I am today.

Protecting Your Privacy

How to work with your lawyer to keep therapy as confidential as possible.

INTERVIEW BY DOMINIQUE ARRINGTON

When you've grown up in foster care and you return to the system as a parent, it often seems like the court knows your entire mental health history. Because your current therapist also reports to the court about your progress, therapy can wind up feeling neither private nor safe.

Sonja Jacobsen, a lawyer for parents in Washington State, explains how to make therapy safer.

Q: Why is therapy important for parents when kids are in foster care?

A: When a parent or child is struggling, seeking out counseling can often help. Your therapist can also help you cope with the experience of foster care.

Having a good relationship with your therapist is also very important because judges put so much stock in what therapists say, sometimes more than anyone else in the case. It's important to find a therapist you trust, who supports you, and who sees your strengths.

If you're not comfortable with your therapist, your lawyer can help you find a new therapist and argue in court that it's important for your progress.

Q: How do we know if it's safe to open up in therapy?

A: When family courts try to get as much information from therapists as they can, that can make parents feel like they can't share anything safely.

Then therapy's just a waste of time.

There isn't a perfect solution, but one thing you can do is work with your lawyer to limit how much the court can know. When parents begin therapy, they're asked to sign a release. Lots of parents feel like they have to sign the release even if it says that the court can know everything, because they don't want to look non-compliant. But your lawyer can argue that limiting what the court knows is important if therapy is going to work.

Your lawyer can help draft a release that allows the court to know just basic information, like diagnosis, prognosis, participation and progress. If you've already signed a release you're not comfortable with, your lawyer

can help you change that.

Parents should also ask their therapist directly what she will report to court or to child protective services. Will she report a relapse? Will she report depression? It's a therapist's job to help you know exactly what to expect. You can also ask the therapist to share with you what she plans to share in court beforehand so you're prepared. If you're not sure if you can share something with your therapist safely, ask your lawyer how to get help without getting in trouble.

Lastly, you may want to ask your therapist early on what she will tell the court if you are doing well. As much as you want to keep some things private, you also want a therapist who will speak up for you.

Safety in the Courtroom

Trauma-focused courts address the roots of foster care placement.

INTERVIEW BY SONIA DIAZ

Since 2010, the Chautauqua County Family Court in upstate New York has worked to become a "trauma-informed court." Here, Judge Judith Claire and Aimee Neri, a licensed social worker who is the New York State Child Welfare Court Improvement Project Liaison to the 8th Judicial District, describe how they've brought awareness of trauma into the court and how it's helping families:

Q: How did you decide to focus on trauma in your court?

Neri: We know that families who come to family court have had significant trauma in their pasts.

Claire: We see parents who grew up in foster care coming back into the system as parents all the time. We decided that if we didn't start looking at how trauma impacts families, we

were going to have families coming back and back and back.

Neri: In 2010, we started trainings for everyone in the court to learn how the brain is affected by trauma. It was mindboggling to see those images of the brain. We learned that people are reacting the way they've learned to cope with trauma. It may not be the best way, but it's helped them survive.

Then we started with small changes. For instance, the televisions in the waiting rooms were set to news channels playing scenes of horrific events right before families had to deal with their own crises in court. So we made a simple shift—now we



ILLUSTRATION BY ANAURI ALMONTE/ICART DBET

play videos about parenting, or lists of positive things going on in the community, to have a calming impact.

Over time, we've tried to make sure that everything in our courtroom is based on five principles—safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration and empowerment. We try to work *with* families instead of doing things *for* them.

Claire: We have cases in which, as early as the first court appearance, someone is saying, "How about everybody sitting down and making a plan together." We ask parents, "What do you think needs to happen in order for the department to support

your child returning home?"

We also learned that just sending someone to the county mental health center is not necessarily going to get them the type of counseling they need. Now if someone has been traumatized we send them to trauma counseling. If they're not bonding with their child, we send them to attachment-oriented therapy.

Everyone in the courtroom also tries to be friendly, because if our attitude is punishing, we're not going to make progress. We see that parents who used to be cowering or defensive are smiling and participating.

Neri: Now we have permanency sooner. We have more resolutions and settlements than termination proceedings.

ABOUT Rise

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

Our print and online magazine (www.risemagazine.org) helps parents advocate for themselves and their children. We work with family support and child welfare agencies to use Rise stories in parent groups and parenting education classes.

This issue developed out of Rise's "My Story, My Life" writing workshop project for young mothers who grew up in foster care. Since 2012, "My Story, My Life" has been supported by the Child Welfare Fund, Viola W. Bernard Foundation, Dammann Fund and Pinkerton Foundation. Writing workshops and focus groups have been held at the

Albert Einstein Infant-Parent Court Project, Brooklyn Family Defense Project, Inwood House, Lawyers for Children, and at Rise itself.

Stories in this issue also developed through a writing group at Graham Windham. Thank you to all of our generous partners on this project.

Contact Rise Director Nora McCarthy at nora@risemagazine.org or (646) 543-7099 for information about reprinting Rise stories or using Rise in your work. For youth perspectives on foster care, visit www.representmag.org. We regret that Rise cannot offer individual support to parents.

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Finding a Community

BY KRISTINA RODRIGUEZ

I was 4 when I went into my first foster home. My mother was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and severe PTSD from abuse she suffered from her mother, who was an alcoholic. My father was diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder. I was in and out of foster homes until I was 13, when I went back to my biological parents for good.

I had rocky times with my mother. Still, my mother worked hard to keep her children at home and she taught me one incredibly important lesson—to seek help when I was struggling.

Support in a Crisis

When I was 14, I became a teen mother like many girls who have spent time in foster care. The father and I had already broken up by the time I found out I was pregnant, and I felt very alone.

Then at 18, I met a guy who understood me like no one else had. When I told him I had been teased all my life for my large nose, he kissed it and said, "I love your nose." He also had an alcohol and drug problem, and I began to attend Al-Anon, a 12-step program for friends and families of alcoholics.

In Al-Anon, for the first time I began to understand what my mother had gone through as a child and have compassion for her. Al-Anon truly became a lifeline for me and my daughter a year later, when I was 20 and my fiancé overdosed on heroin. I was in so much pain I wanted to die. Al-Anon was my support. For years, I went to meetings and just cried.

My daughter's school was another place I found support.

Shortly after my fiancé died, my daughter started acting out so badly that her school put her in special ed, and a team of teachers and a counselor met with us weekly, individually and as a family. During one meeting,



Kristina and her daughter at her daughter's recent college graduation.

I cried so much I couldn't talk. The counselor explained to the teachers that I was crying because my mother hadn't been there for me the way I was there for my daughter. All that understanding made a huge difference to me and to my daughter, and after a few years my daughter made it out of special ed and on to the honor roll.

A Community of Alumni

Even with all that support, my memories of foster care remained the place where I felt most alone. One or two times in Al-Anon meetings, I mentioned having been in foster care, but no one "got it". My sisters and I never talked about it either. It had just been too scary and confusing.

Only in 2009, when my mother went into the hospital for another breakdown, did we talk about how scary and awful it had been going in and out of foster homes. We cried and hugged each other. After that, I began to find ways to make sense of my foster care experiences.

For a while I joined the Foster Care Alumni of America. I wrote my story for a self-published book by foster care alumni. I also started seeing a therapist from A Home Within, which offers free counseling to foster and former foster kids.

These opportunities helped me to begin to feel like part of community of alumni, rather than alone with my experiences.