Rise is a magazine 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 5, FALL 2006

BY AND FOR PARENTS IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

Raising Our Voices

Across the country, birth parents are working to improve how the child welfare system treats parents and to educate other parents to advocate for themselves. Parents are playing many roles: meeting with child welfare staff, training caseworkers, speaking at conferences, running support groups, and working at foster care agencies as parent advocates. In this issue, parents—and foster care staff who work with parents—explain how parents' expertise and input are changing the system.

ILLUSTRATION BY RUDA TILLETT

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True Stories by Teens

'I Am Your Voice'

Working from inside the system to support parents.

BY ROSITA PAGAN

When I applied to become a parent advocate at a foster agency in New York City, I feared I wasn't ready. I was on public assistance and had never held a 9-to-5 job. But I knew that parents dealing with the foster care system needed support and tough love from people like me—parents who were once in their shoes.

My own two girls had gone into foster care because I was drinking. For about three years after they came home, I thought of nothing else but being that sober mother they lacked for so long. But when I was cooking or cleaning while the girls were at school, I felt empty. I wanted to do something to fill that void.

On February 15, 2004 I started a six-month parent leadership training program at the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP), learning how the system works and what parents can do when they get that first knock on the door.

I Am Your Voice

Our training prepared us to become parent advocates at foster care agencies in New York. The director, Mike Arsham, recommended that I apply for a position. Mike had confidence for the both of us. Ready to face rejection, I applied.

I was hired! When I found out, I was numb. I couldn't believe it! I thanked the CWOP staff for giving me the knowledge I needed to get my first professional job.

I've been a parent advocate at Children's Village for more than a year now. At times it's very stressful. Sometimes the parents and caseworkers are not as cooperative as I would like them to be. On the flip side, some parents do just what they need to and get their children home. Parents come to me because they need to know their rights, they want help understanding the system, or they feel that the worker does not listen to them or help them. Parents are often intimidated by caseworkers. It's easier for them to talk to me.

I tell them, "I am your parent advocate, and you could say that I am your voice."

Straight Talk

Two young parents I've been working with seem like they are really going to make it.

Sam is a young man with two children. In March 2006, when the foster care system came into Sam's life things did not look good. Sam had been violent with his girlfriend, they'd separated, and the kids were placed in foster care with family members.

When I met Sam, he was a very

angry young man. Sam was rude and loud, always using profanity.

One day he came into the agency yelling and the caseworker said to me, "Speak to him." The caseworkers know I can talk straight with parents because when my kids came into care I also felt angry and unjustly treated.

I tell my story to the parents, explaining how I also thought I didn't have a problem and wouldn't comply with the services. I tell them how hard I worked and how wonderful I felt when I got my kids back.

'I Ain't No Thug'

I explained to Sam that acting out was not going to bring his children back home. "If you really feel angry at the system, get back at them by proving you are a good father and that your main concern is your children," I said.

I also mentioned that the way he was talking so loud and wanting to be the center of attention gave me the impression that he is nothing but a street thug. "I ain't no thug, you're buggin." he said.

After that discussion, Sam started changing little by little. First he stopped being so loud and using so much profanity. Then he began speaking in a kind and polite manner. He took himself out of the spotlight and actually started listening instead of debating every suggestion.

He now attends classes to learn parenting skills and infant development and visits with his son often.

In Need of Help

Dawn is another young parent who is on her way to reuniting with her child. Dawn was 18 when she was charged with neglecting her son. She smoked weed, her room was dirty and the baby was very dirty. When I visited Dawn's home, I found it unsuitable. There was garbage all over the place, empty beer cans in the kitchen sink and no food.

When I first met Dawn, she seemed confused, as if she didn't realize what was going on. As I spoke to her, it occurred to me that she was a child herself. I thought she should have been placed in care along with her son, because they both needed supervision.

Dawn tried a program that she didn't think helped her. Eventually, she asked me to refer her to an inpatient program in upstate New York.

"Why do you want to go upstate?" I asked her.

"If I go to an outpatient program I will be distracted and won't go to school. I want to go back to school and do my parenting skills classes so that when I'm finished with everything I am ready for my child to come back to me."

The caseworkers know I can talk straight with parents because when my kids came into care I also felt angry and unjustly treated.

"I wish all my parents would think like you," I told her. Since then, she's been drug free. I'm very happy with the seriousness Dawn has shown.

'Do You Love Your Children?'

Not every parent is so easy to work with. I first met Juanita in 2005. Her four children had been removed six years before because of her drug addiction. For years she denied having a drug problem and refused to get help.

The day we met I asked her, "Do you love your children?"

"I love my children dearly," she told me.

"If that's true, why do you choose drugs over your children?"

I myself had been asked the same question. When a counselor said that to me in rehab, I was stunned. It helped motivate me to get sober and get my kids home.

Juanita was very eager to get started in her recovery. The very next day Juanita went to a 5-day detox. Then she went to a rehab program for one month, a crisis center for 14 days, and finally a halfway house for six months.

Disappointed and Betrayed

When she went to court, the judge told her that she had to complete an outpatient program, too. Juanita she thought that she'd done all that she had to do. After that, she stopped trying to get her kids back.

I felt sorry for Juanita, but I was disappointed. It wasn't fair for her to think that after six years she could simply stay clean for six months and get her kids home.

A few months passed. Finally, Juanita called me and told me that she was ready to do what she had to do. I called my ex-drug counselor at the program I had attended and spoke to Ms. Torres about Juanita.

"Juanita needs a reality check," I said. "Show her a taste of tough love."

Juanita went to the program for a week, but then she stopped. She called me two weeks later and lied about it.

I felt let down, even betrayed.

"If only she was as strong and determined as I was to get my children back," I thought. "She's not going to make it."

Juanita hasn't kept in touch since.

I Give Parents Hope

Not every case ends well. But in the everyday of confusion of foster care, I am glad that these parents whose children are in care can come to me for assistance in finding services, comfort, and reasonable answers to their questions. This is a time in their lives when they feel nothing is working out and they have lost everything. They count on me to give them hope.

Having the foster care system in your life is not easy, and neither is watching the hard times that parents and their kids go through. But I give these parents my all, and it's worth it. My biggest reward as a parent advocate is accompanying a parent to court to hear the judge say that she can take her child home on a trial discharge. The parent often comes running to me to say thanks.

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ISSUE #5

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'You Can Do This'

Creating a booklet to help Massachusetts parents in crisis.

About 10 years ago, I was going through a bad time in my marriage and it came to the point that I just couldn't take it anymore. One night when my husband abused me I called the police and they took my children and me to the hospital for an examination.

Because of everything going on with my husband, I'd been drinking, and when the Department of Social Services did a quick assessment, they decided to take my three children. They never let me take my kids home from the hospital or even say goodbye.

I Was Lost

I had no relatives in Boston and was totally freaked out so I called my friend Ellen Remmer. I'd been a nanny to her children for seven years, and we were both new mothers at the same time so we bonded and remained good friends.

Ellen came to the hospital, took me home, and went to court with me the next morning. The court placed my children in foster care. I was basically lost.

If it wasn't for Ellen I don't know what I would've done. She wrote letters and called lawyers while I worried about and advocated for my kids. I asked for visits and started bugging the department for counseling for my kids and for myself.

Luckily I had a very green, very sweet social worker, a great advocate in Ellen, and a great relationship with the school, which allowed me to see my kids at school every day.

My kids were returned in 45 days, but the episode had a lasting effect. My whole family went to counseling for years, and I still go. It was traumatic for all of us.

'That Was Not Right'

Ellen is very political, and when we talked about it over the years, she would always say, "That was not right." She was really bothered about it, and we were both concerned about what would've happened to my family if I hadn't been lucky to know someone who advocated for me.

Ellen, who works for a foundation, started talking with me about ways to support parents. She had visited the Child Welfare Organizing Project in New York City, which runs a support group and parents' rights training project, and has a handbook explaining parents' rights in the system.

In Massachusetts we decided to start out on a smaller scale—we're working on a booklet of information to hand out to parents at the time of their child's removal. It will be a list of resources they can call and some parents' stories. We plan to hand out the booklet in court.

The thing is, DSS' intention is to reunite the family if possible, but the department tends to forget that parents need information and support right away. Sometimes it takes weeks between when the department takes your kids and you make contact with your worker. If a parent doesn't have support or a sense of control during that time, she looks for what she needs in the bottom of a bottle or whatever vice she knows.

ILLUSTRATION BY KAROLINA ZANIESIENKO

> Many parents have no one to pull them up. They just need someone—even a booklet—to say, 'Don't freak out, don't lose it. Now is the time when you need to get it together.'

Information and Support

To understand what parents have gone through and what they need, we've been working with two organizations in Boston to hold focus groups with parents who have had kids taken away. Parents Helping Parents is a statewide group of parent support groups, and the Family Nurturing Center provides family supports.

The biggest thing we hear is that parents don't know what to do or who to turn to, and their lawyers don't take the time to sit with them. Parents don't know if they have a right to visit their kids, or to fight having them moved from their schools.

Parents tell us, "The social workers want you to sign a service plan, and you don't understand it but you don't want to anger them, and you're not sure what your rights are so you sign."

The department can be very intimidating, and some parents will sign over their lives because they don't know what they're doing. We want to be able to hand them a booklet that explains in plain English what their rights and responsibilities are.

'You Can Do This'

Right now, parents think there's nowhere they can call for help. The booklet will let them know about things like the Parental Stress Line—a 24 hour phone line that a parent can call in a crisis—or the organization Parents Helping Parents, which runs support groups for parents all over Massachusetts.

Many parents have no one to pull them up and say, "You can do this. Don't feel totally lost and withdraw into yourself, waiting for everyone else to take control." They just need someone—even a booklet—to say, "Don't freak out, don't lose it. Now is the time when you need to get it together."

For me, it's been very therapeutic. When I hear other parents' stories, I'm glad to know there's something I can contribute, no matter how small, so that the next time this happens to a parent, she knows what to do.

—Sandra Sanchez-Cochran

Parents as Partners

Workers and families learn from each other in 15 cities nationwide.

For the past 18 months, social worker Randy Jenkins and parent advocate Sandra Jimenez have been training birth parents to become advocates and supports for parents at child welfare agencies in 15 cities nationwide. Here, Jenkins explains how their work begins with conversations to help agency staff and birth parents learn from each other.

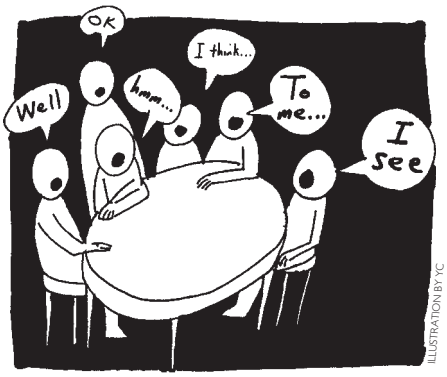

ILLUSTRATION BY YC

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is interested in changing the way the child welfare system engages with parents. When the federal government reviewed foster care systems, 49 of 50 states failed to show they were engaging parents. We've got to do a better job of learning from birth parents about their experiences in our systems in order to make them better.

Our first step is to work with agency directors to help them understand that collaborating with parents means paying for their time and making staff available to work with parents. The agency director has to say, "Yes, this is something I want to do."

Then we have trainings with parents and with agency staff from frontline workers to senior managers. The training is humanizing for the parents and workers.

Tough Conversations

The most powerful conversations are tough conversations. In one training session, the workers were on one side of the room and parents were grouped together on the other. We were talking about loss and grief and we kept hearing "you parents" or "you people." Finally, the parents had had enough and challenged the child welfare practitioners. They said, "What about y'all? Did you come from perfect families?" That opened up conversation.

Workers and supervisors were able to share that they too had suffered abuse, domestic violence, alcoholism but were taught in social work school not to share that kind of information with families. Of course, as a social worker you want to be careful that you don't start to talk about your issues and forget about the families you serve. But sometimes workers forget that their own families needed help, too.

When the parents heard that, they were absolutely shocked. They thought these workers just got into child welfare for the 9-5. They didn't realize that many workers are trying to give the help their own families needed.

What Each Side Thinks

Then we help parents and workers explain to each other the behavior that often results from the very intense feelings child welfare brings up. These group trainings help both sides realize what the other person thinks. From there, parents and agency workers can work together without as many misunderstandings.

For parents, they're afraid and embarrassed and feel powerless. Their behavior might be motivated by anxiety, especially at first. A parent once told the group, "Let's say the social worker asked me to come to the agency at 10 a.m. for a team decision meeting. I get up at 7 worried about this meeting, and I get high because I'm scared. Now I'm too high so I need to take a drink. Now I'm too embarrassed to go so I crawl back into bed. The worker sees me as

From the Outside In

Parents need an independent voice.

BY VIOLET RITTENHOUR

In October, I traveled to a conference called the Systems of Care Summit in Wichita, Kansas, and met many parent advocates from around the country. It was good to see so many states developing staff roles for parents in their child welfare systems. But I came away with some pretty mixed feelings.

At the conference, I saw parent after parent get up and describe themselves in negative terms. Most had been in recovery and worked mainly with other parents in recovery. Their stories were often about being neglectful, irresponsible parents who had changed their ways thanks to the child welfare agency. They spoke about helping other parents cooperate with the system.

Almost no one spoke of any need for the child welfare agencies to change or improve their practices. No child welfare professionals said, "We have made mistakes, too. We don't have all the answers."

That was disappointing. Substance abuse is not the only thing that brings families into contact with the system, and public child welfare workers are not always helpful or respectful to families. A good parent organizer knows when to work in cooperation with the system, and when to confront and challenge agency workers and policies.

Plus, in order to become a parent advocate in some states, parents had to submit to an interview held in the parent's home with whole family present. If they changed or left out details of their case, they were not allowed to be a parent advocate.

When it was my time to speak I couldn't wait to say that that is the wrong approach. I am a parent organizer at the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP), an advocacy organization for birth parents.

At CWOP, parents come in looking for support at first, and they change

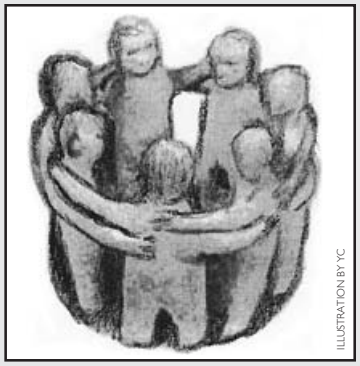
ILLUSTRATION BY YC

the details or don't tell all the details of their cases all the time. That's OK. We're not here to investigate parents but to help them. As time goes on and they see this is safe place they open up.

being noncompliant. But it's not that I didn't love or care about my child, it's just that it's so tough for me to handle these feelings."

Then a worker might explain her perspective. The worker sees the parent hasn't showed and the worker feels betrayed. She thinks, "I really tried to get her some help, but she didn't care." As a result of feeling betrayed, the worker's behavior changes. She may not listen, may label the parent as noncompliant, just turn off.

Parents as Partners

After this process, we put together a program to train parent advocates. There are three different roles parents play. They can be mentors working one-on-one with other parents to get their kids home. They can be trainers, facilitating orientations for foster parents, new workers, and community partners. Or they can learn about child welfare policy and become parent leaders who might sit on planning teams or committees, helping to shape child welfare practice.

We've only been working on this for 18 months, so it's all new and we're still learning, but in most of our sites, we have parents doing all of those things.

Parents leave here knowing how to advocate for themselves. That doesn't mean helping other parents follow every rule the foster care system lays down. It means making sure parents know their rights and know how to communicate to get what they need to get their children home. It means working with the system sometimes and fighting against it others.

By seeing how parent advocates are treated—and how they work—in some other states, I saw that in New York City we are light years ahead. By no means are we where we need to be as a system, but at least CWOP is an independent voice for parents. At least our foster care system engages families in policy making in a meaningful way.

Through CWOP, parents here have a true voice, a place outside the system to find support, collect their thoughts and set their own agenda for system change.

Families' Counsel

New Jersey parents to advise the commish.

ILLUSTRATION BY NATANAEL AQUILAR

In New Jersey, the Statewide Parent Advocacy Network (SPAN) and Parents Anonymous are working together to create the state's first Family Council—a group of parents with experience with the state's child welfare system who will give feedback and recommendations to the state's commissioner of the Department of Children and Families and other senior staff. Diana Autin, co-executive director of SPAN, explains how the Family Council will shape the system.

Q: How did the Family Council get started?

A: SPAN and Parents Anonymouse are both concerned about preventing child abuse and improving the child welfare system. At SPAN, we give information and support to families who are having any kind of trouble with any government agency—health, juvenile justice, education. We get calls from lots of families involved in the child welfare system. Our big focus is on leadership development, so once families are through their crisis, we tell the parents about trainings they can attend to get involved in public policy advocacy or become resource parents. Our Parent to Parent program hooks up any parent experiencing a crisis with a resource parent who was in the same situation.

Parents Anonymous runs parent-led support groups and a 24-hour hotline staffed by trained volunteers. Parents who are stressed can call anytime and talk to someone so they don't abuse their child, and can attend support groups to strengthen their parenting.

Together we reached out to Commissioner Kevin Ryan. Our idea was to form the Family Council to meet with the commissioner and his senior staff to give them the parents' perspective of how the system needs to improve. Our larger goal is to have an advisory council in every county and to create a leadership development institute for parents involved in the child welfare system. Commissioner Ryan said he was interested in hearing from parents and provided funds to form the Family Council.

For the Family Council, we'll reach out to 15 families from around the state who have been involved with the system. They will come up with issues to speak to the commissioner about.

Q: What issues are parents in New Jersey likely to discuss with the commissioner?

A: We've heard from parents over and over again that it's a problem that the systems serving children and families in New Jersey don't know enough about each other and don't work together.

I also think the commissioner is going to hear that when you call the child welfare system for support, you don't get help. Then, two years later when you've been struggling on your own, the system wants to come take your child away.

We hear that family-serving systems are not family friendly. Too often, workers are not respectful to parents, they talk down, they focus on a family's problems exclusively and don't build on the family's strengths.

They'll probably say there aren't not enough services for kids who are at the greatest risk to prevent them from entering care. For instance, a lot of research says that kids with disabilities are more likely to be raised in single parent households, and if you're a single parent with a child with a disability, there's a lot of stress on you. So where are the supports to help keep the dads from leaving?

Finally, the parents will probably say there's discrimination. Whether your child goes into foster care often depends on your access to money and on where you live.

Q: How will the Family Council address those concerns?

A: At SPAN, our goal is to fill in the gaps between what agencies provide and what parents need. Through surveys and conversations with parents, we hear about their unmet needs. Concerns about the child welfare system have been coming up a lot over the last five years.

We hope—and the commissioner hopes—that if he and his senior team can hear from parents directly involved in child welfare, they can change practice to support families.

Using Our Experiences to Make a Difference

Organizing for system change in New York City

BY PHILNEIA TIMMONS

One night on my way home I saw a blue flyer with three questions that caught my eye. 1) Are your children in foster care? 2) Do you have a child welfare case? 3) Do you want to help change the system?

At the time, my children had just been taken into foster care. I felt angry, like the system had kidnapped my children for its financial gain. The system offered me no help before taking my kids, and my side of the story didn't seem to matter. I felt robbed, cheated and railroaded in every way.

Not being told what my rights were made me determined to learn what I needed to know to get my family back. On my own, I'd begun to learn about my rights by asking questions and going to the library to research the laws and regulations of family court and the child welfare system.

Informing and Supporting

After I saw the flyer, I called to learn how to become a Parent Leader at the Child Welfare Organizing Project, which helps parents in New York City advocate for themselves.

I found out that CWOP is like a toolbox. It provides parents with the tools to help themselves deal with the child welfare system. In the parent leadership training program, I learned about my rights and how the system is supposed to work. CWOP sends a strong message to parents: "You have rights, you can get your children back, and you are not alone."

All of us Parent Leaders gave each other support by telling our own stories of getting involved in the foster care system. Hearing some of the things other parents go through with New York's foster care system, the Administration for Children's Services (ACS), my emotions sometimes got the best of me. I often wanted to cry and sometimes did.

Training Caseworkers to Listen

When I first joined CWOP, my thinking was, "I can gain more knowledge about the system and help my case." I focused on helping my kids and myself. Then, as time went along, my commitment to making change in the system began to deepen. Hearing other parents' stories, I felt a sense of responsibility to work even harder to help change ACS policies. I felt I should be a voice for parents who cannot be heard.

Through CWOP I helped train caseworkers and supervisors to work with parents. When I first walked into a staff training, there wasn't a doubt in my mind that talking about the experiences I'd been through with the system would make a difference. I made good eye contact. I studied the group to see who was listening and who wanted to leave. Usually, I found that some caseworkers started to open up to what can happen to a family in the system.

Caseworkers make a lot of decisions, and they have to understand how important it is for them to think about the families they affect, and how hard it is for parents and kids to build a relationship after the kids have been removed. I tell them, "Keep an open mind. Offer preventive services instead of removing a child. Don't remove or keep children in care just as a way of forcing compliance."

Philneia and her daughter, Tanasia.

I liked training future caseworkers the most. I remember a classroom with 15-20 college students wanting to hear us. The professor asked us, "If you could leave us with any advice, what would it be?" I replied, "Well, just take time to find out what the family needs to remain together. Get to know the parent before making your decision about what kind of services they need."

> I never thought I would be on the other side—this young, black female who had her children removed would be someone to help system leaders make policies?

I continue to open up and tell my story because so many people are unaware of what happens in the system. Some people think the system always works the way it is supposed to. I am living proof that there are parents who aren't treated according to the guidelines.

A Voice for Parents

So after I got my kids back, I got even more involved in speaking up for parents' rights and needs. CWOP often meets with ACS officials to discuss strategies for providing better services to families. Especially at first, I found it weird to meet with ACS officials, mostly because I never thought I would be on the other side—a person the system would have to listen to. This young, black female who had her children removed would be someone to help ACS make policies? But of course it's parents who can help ACS write policies that respect parents and understand our needs.

A Change in the Right Direction

Several years ago, I joined the Parent Advisory Workgroup at ACS, where many players in the system come together to discuss how parents can help other parents. In the Workgroup, we talked about issues that parents were most concerned about, and we presented those issues to the Commissioner

For me, the most important issue was reducing the number of children being mistreated in the foster care system, because many parents at CWOP had shared that their children were abused in foster care. For

a while, we had been trying to get ACS to focus on the problem—without success.

But the Workgroup decided I should present that goal to the commissioner. Finally I had a chance to open minds. I was nervous, but I explained that we really need to find solutions to this problem.

When I finished my presentation, the commissioner agreed to help us hold a consortium, a big meeting where we could discuss the problem and possible solutions. That's a change in the right direction for parents, children and the system.

Hope, Faith and Courage

Unlike many parents who haven't had the opportunity to work with the system, I believe ACS will be able to improve its policies and help social workers, law guardians and judges understand what parents and families go through. It helps me to remember that "the system" is actually a huge organization, and that different people within the system have different views.

Although it sometimes feels weird to be a part of the system, I think it's worth it. Because of the work of parents at places like CWOP, ACS is starting to develop a relationship with parents and to understand our perspective. Change is slow because some people are afraid of it, but I see the very beginnings of a change here.

CWOP has helped me keep believing that change in foster care is possible if you have a positive outlook, determination, hope, faith and courage.

At the Table

Policymakers and parents come together for system change.

As the director of the Office of Advocacy for New York City's foster care system, Dana Guyet works closely with parents. She facilitates the Administration for Children's Services Parent Advisory Workgroup, whose mission is to bring together advocates for parents from across the system to give feedback to the commissioner about system change. Here Guyet describes the impact of the Workgroup on her thinking and on the system:

It's not brand new for me to work with parents. I worked closely with youth in care and their families. But it's different to work with birth parents as colleagues. That made the job sound interesting to me.

Informing the Commissioner

There's about 60 parent advocates working at different agencies in the New York City foster care system, and about 10-15 members who attend monthly meetings of the Workgroup. The Workgroup also meets with Commissioner John Mattingly for two hours every three months. They tell him about issues they're seeing in their work and how they think the system could respond.

Right now, one thing the parent advocates feel strongly about is introducing legislation that would provide financial supports for guardians. When a parent is having trouble, family members often want to step in and become the childrens' guardians but sometimes can't afford to. Many states allow guardians to get financial supports so kids don't come into the foster care system unnecessarily. Some kinship foster care placements might be avoided if we offered subsidized guardianship, but in New York, we don't offer that option. We think New York should create subsidized guardianships and we'd like to present that to the legislature, so we spoke to the commissioner about that.

ILLUSTRATION BY PATRICIA BATTLES

> The Workgroup is a reminder of the impact our policies have.

Celebrating Parents

The Workgroup also celebrates the work of parent advocates and of parents who succeed in reunifying with their children. In June we had a reception to honor all of the parent advocates. The event showed how much we value parent involvement in the system.

The Workgroup also started Family Fun Day, a yearly event to acknowledge and celebrate reunifying families. This year, our second, about 2,000 people attended. We had a main stage with music, gave out straw hats and bandannas ("country" was the theme), and held a pie-eating contest, water balloon toss, three-legged races, and other activities like that. While it was mainly about having fun, we also had a community resource area where parents could find information.

The parent advocates are very aware of what families need and what's going on at the ground level. I've always tried to take a more progressive view of how we can work with families, but the parents have more direct knowledge about their community, clients and cultures. On a regular basis they point something out new.

'Our Discussions Make Me Think'

Just recently the Workgroup was talking about how involvement with the child welfare system affects families long after they're done with the system. Children are getting mixed messages about what it means for the parents to be the authority figure.

Our discussion really made me think about how damaging it can be for children who are just learning how to manipulate their world to develop the idea that it's a natural relationship for the system to be involved in their families. It came home to me how hard that can be for the parents for them to say, "I'm the parent, you have to do this, this is your punishment," with the child saying, "I can call ACS."

We definitely want kids to be safe, and to reach out if something bad is happening, but we don't want our role to have a negative impact on a family's development, where the parents feel like they can't be in control. I wondered, "How do we translate that into the work we're doing? When a family has gone through a crisis or trauma, and a separation or investigation, how do we heal the wounds?"

The Workgroup is a reminder to me and to the people I work with of the impact our policies have. I bring their perspective to meetings I'm a part of and to my work in the Office of Advocacy.

'Love Is Not Written in a Court Order'

Helping the system remember the strength of family bonds.

BY TRACEY CARTER

In September I traveled with my 23-year-old son to speak at "Families for Life: Addressing the Needs of Older Children and Youth in Foster Care," a conference convened by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. James and I were doing a workshop together about the strength of family bonds. Even though James and I were separated by my drug addiction and his adoption, our relationship is growing now.

I hoped that seeing the way my son and I connect in spite of our long separation would show foster care system staff and policymakers that reconnection can happen. My rights were terminated but our love did not end.

Telling My Story

At the conference, I explained some of the history that led to James' placement in foster care. When James was born in 1983, I was 21 and already had one child. We lived in Queens and I worked at the grocery store owned by my children's father. I was comfortable. I was proud when James was born. But around 1986, my life started going downhill. First I found out that my kids' father sold drugs out of the store. Then the feds came and busted all the drug dealers. The cops shut down the store and destroyed our house. My kids' father ran and left us.

I didn't know what to do. I had no income. I was pregnant with my fourth child. I was depending on public assistance. I wound up going to my sister's in Brooklyn. She helped me out a lot, but I was stressed out. Being abandoned by my kids' father also reminded me of my parents' deaths when I was very young, and I was depressed. That's when I started hanging out and was introduced to what we called freebase.

> I hope policymakers who hear our story will find ways to help birth parents and kids stay connected.

I started by using drugs on the weekends. Eventually I stopped coming home. Finally my sister gave me an ultimatum: Either come home and be a mother or stay in the streets. I chose to stay out.

A couple of years later, my sister moved with my kids to Virginia Beach. She got an 800 number so I could talk to my kids anytime, but after a while I just stopped calling.

One day I got a paper from court and I gave up my rights to my children. I found out years later that my sister adopted them. My sister didn't want to do that, but the system threatened her. If she didn't adopt, they were going to put the kids in other foster homes.

New Life

By 2004 I was drug free, raising my two youngest children with my husband, and working as a parent leader at the Child Welfare Organizing Project, an advocacy group for birth parents. I'd reconnected with my family and found out James was in the Army – in Iraq. By that time, my sister had died. James was looking to reconnect with me as well.

When he came home, I finally got a chance to talk with James. He was so young, yet he had seen a lot of things: Kids being blown up, bombs exploding close to his platoon. He said he had thought about me often and had wanted to see my again before he left this earth. We hugged and cried, then we laughed. I was proud of his strength and courage.

My family had only told James that I was sick. They hoped that one day I would tell James the whole truth. When I told him my story, he said he felt better hearing it from me. He asked me a lot of questions. I was straight and honest with him. I apologized for not being there for him and told him, "I can't change the past. I'm just grateful that you still accept me." At the conference, James was honest when he spoke and so was I. I think he respected what I said to the group. He had tears in his eyes, but it felt good to be able to talk openly in front of him.

Our Strong Bonds

I think our workshop helped the system professionals remember the strength of children's bonds with their parents, and their parents' bonds with their kids. Love is permanent, not what is written in a court order. You can separate a mother and child but the love will still be there. I hope policymakers who hear our story will find ways to help birth parents and kids stay connected, even if there's a long time when the parent cannot take care of her kids.

Of course, reconnecting isn't easy. I think James has a lot more questions for me that he hasn't asked. Some things he's not ready to know yet, and I have to respect that. We just have to keep that communication going.

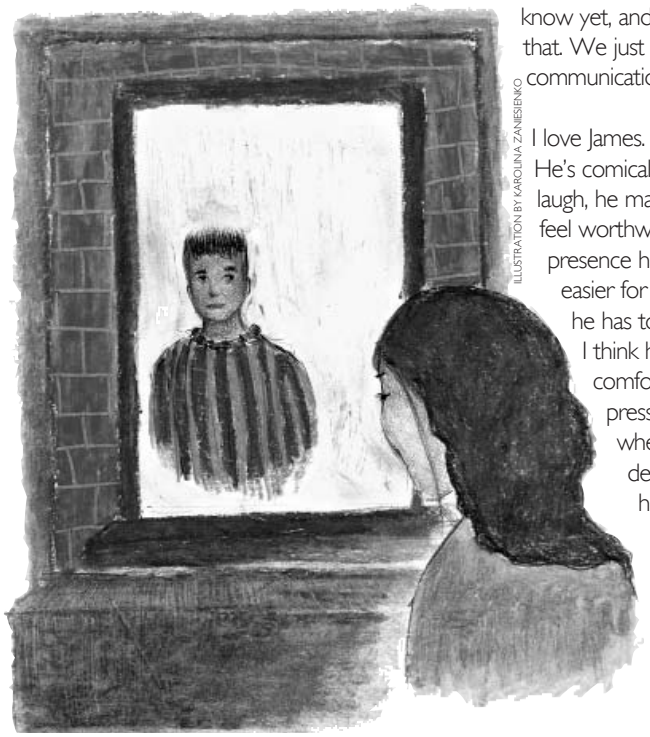

ILLUSTRATION BY KAROLINA ZANIEWENKO

I love James. I love who he is. He's comical, he makes me laugh, he makes my recovery feel worthwhile. I think my presence has made it a little easier for James to do what he has to do in his own life. I think he's a little more comfortable now. The pressure of worrying whether I'm alive or dead is off him, and he doesn't have to wonder, "Where's my mom?" He can always pick up the phone and call me.

'No One Knew My Mother's Story'

Judging parents won't help break the cycle.

BY RITA NARANJO

For nine years I was always in and out of the system because my mother was heavily addicted to drugs. She would follow the orders of the court to get my brothers and me back, but because she had so little support, she would relapse and lose us.

I wanted to go home and stay home. I loved my mother so much. I had a deep longing to be with her inside me for so long.

But each time I went into the system again, I became more confused, hurt and angry. Why was it so hard for her to stay sober and clean? Didn't my mom care? Didn't she love us and want us?

Because no one explained why my mother kept making the same mistakes, I came up with my own explanation. I figured that my mother must not care about, love or want us. I got to the point where I hated her.

Convinced I Was Worthless

I wasn't the only one who disliked and rejected my mom because of her addiction. I overheard some of my foster parents calling her a junkie and low life. My social worker and other people in my agency said that they didn't really care about what my mother had to say. They didn't want to hear any of her excuses, legitimate or not. All those people just couldn't understand how she could get her children back only to trade them again for drugs.

The way people thought about my mom took a strong toll on me. It helped convince me that my mother didn't love me, and it made me feel worthless, like I was a piece of trash. My feelings and emotions were just crumpled up, stepped on and thrown away.

ILLUSTRATION BY NATANAEL AGUILAR

No One Knew Her Story

But as I got older, little by little my feelings toward my mother began to change. I would watch my mother in court, able to do nothing but cry. No one wanted to hear her story. When she tried to explain and plead with the court they would just close their hearts and minds.

> The way people thought about my mom took a strong toll on me. It helped convince me that my mother didn't love me, and it made me feel worthless, like I was a piece of trash.

I felt for my mother. I thought the system should be kinder to her. Though I was still angry at her, I wanted the system to give her the guidance, support and resources to help her get her life in order.

You see, most people in the system didn't know my mother's story. My mom went through a lot. Growing up, she was abused both sexually and physically. She didn't have any support or encouragement and she felt worthless. That feeling was hard for her to endure, and so she started using drugs – a quick high to make the pain go away.

My mother grew up in Miami during the time when the drug culture was at its peak. I don't think she imagined that drugs would affect the life of her future children the way they eventually did. But in time, the drugs consumed her, and she had a difficult time taking care of my brothers and me.

A Terrible Cycle

Then my father was killed. My mother was devastated. She was alone and depressed with four young children. Drugs were her escape from the harsh realities of her life.

Where we lived also contributed to her using again each time she got clean. She couldn't afford to live in neighborhoods where drugs weren't all around, so she was surrounded by temptation.

Then my brothers and I would find ourselves in a too familiar situation: Police shining their flashlights into our eyes telling us, "Wake up! You're coming with us."

Help Her, Help Me

I still have my own pain from the past, which can come crashing back on me without warning. When it does, I hurt. I don't think I'll ever fully understand my mother's actions. But gaining a better understanding about my mom and her struggles makes it easier for me to forgive her and move on with less pain.

It comforts me to know that my mom used drugs because she still carried around pain from her childhood, and she didn't know another way to escape that feeling. Her addiction had little to do with how much she did or didn't love my brothers and me.

But the social workers and judges couldn't seem to understand that. I wonder if she was ever given her chance to explain her side. Maybe if they understood her better they could've helped her more.

Listen to Our Parents

I am not asking people to accept excuses from adults whose kids are in foster care. Sometimes it takes some dramatic intervention to keep children safe. But the foster care system should not only be obliged to keep children safe and to meet their needs. They should listen to biological parents and understand their needs.

After all, foster children cannot be fully helped if their parents don't get the right help and support. Judging biological parents won't help break the cycle of abuse, addiction, neglect and pain. I believe that understanding and support really can help.

Fighting for Families

Giving parents the information they need to succeed.

BY LYNNE MILLER

When my son had been in foster care for a year, I went to a meeting at my agency to ask questions and get information about how to deal with my case.

I'd lost my son to the foster care system because I was using drugs so all the counselors said I had to go to a drug treatment program, but no one told me where to find one. They also decided I had to take a parenting skills class, but where was there one to take? If I was going to get my son back, clearly, I needed some help.

Luckily, my agency held meetings to help parents like me.

The Support I Needed

Those meetings helped me feel supported. At the time, I felt scared, guilty and angry, and overwhelmed by all these people—the judge, my lawyer, the caseworker and ACS—telling me what to do. Where I'd once had control over all of my decisions, I now had hardly any control at all. It seemed like every turn was a chance to mess up.

But soon the staff saw that I was motivated and they invited me to start volunteering, letting other parents know what the system was supposed to be doing to help them reunite with their children. I also began to speak at meetings to let staff and foster parents know that birth parents are not the enemy. Most often we're just people who have become overwhelmed by life.

Eventually, my agency, Seaman's Society for Children and Families offered me a job helping to organize a Birth Parent Advocates Program. The agency had figured out that if birth parents had someone to talk to who had been through what they were coping with, they'd be less likely to act out their anger and frustration, and more likely to cooperate with the demands of the court and ACS. They'd probably be more willing to admit they had problems, and more open to getting help.

Back in Action

I was very proud to become a parent advocate. Unfortunately, after I'd been working at the agency for four years, New York City's mayor made some major budget cuts, and the funding for many parent advocates in the city disappeared. At Seamen's, five other parent advocates and I lost our jobs.

ILLUSTRATION BY KAROLINA ZANIEWENKO, KEISHA RAMOS, PERCTELL SMITH, YC

My agency said it would hire me back if it could, and a year ago, it did just that. Now that I am back, I am supremely happy to once again support "my parents and kids," as I call them. I write a newsletter called "The Client Voice," which gives parents info about everything I can think of that they might need, and a place where they can let their voices be heard – I print their poetry, letters and stories.

I also give parenting classes and one-on-one parenting support, and run a parent support group twice a month called Families Embracing Life. Birth parents network with each other and share anything they have learned. We pick speakers to share information that the parents want and plan trips that the parents, children and sometimes even foster parents participate in, like going to the aquarium, the circus and Sesame Place.

Letting Parents Speak

When I first speak to the birth parents, I'd say more than half are in denial. Just like I did in the beginning, they like to place blame anywhere and everywhere except on their own shoulders. "My nosy damn neighbor, it's her fault for calling on me." "That stupid teacher, why didn't she mind her own business? My kids are fine!" I think "my parents" find it hard to accept someone else's judgment that they have abused, neglected or endangered their children. It's hard enough to admit to yourself that you might have done something wrong, never mind admit it to strangers who are now controlling your life.

I let my parents talk all they want. They have a lot of confusion and mixed emotions that they need to get out. But I also let them know it's not impossible to get their kids back, it just takes a willingness to work hard. I hold up my situation before them to show them it can be done.

When my son first went into foster care, it felt like everyone was against me. Luckily, my agency was committed to working with me. If not for the understanding and compassion of my caseworker, I might not have made the effort get off drugs and get my son back.

'Expect Anger'

Most of "my kids" go home because their parents really want them back and I really push them to succeed. But just because most children are reunited with their parents doesn't mean that it's easy. Sometimes returning home after a long absence can be as traumatic as leaving.

I tell birth parents to expect a lot of anger and resentment. I explain how hard it can be for their kids to talk about what they're feeling. The anger might not be outwardly directed at them. Instead, it might get expressed as nightmares, wetting accidents, physically abusing siblings and just acting out. Many children and parents require additional therapy after they leave care to deal with all these feelings.

When my son was in care, the thing I

> It's hard enough to admit to yourself that you might have done something wrong, never mind admit it to strangers who are now controlling your life.

ached over the most was seeing the hurt in his face when he said, "Why can't I come home with you?" and hearing from his foster mom how he had very bad nightmares.

During one of our visits, I said to my son, "I bet you're really mad at me."

"Yes, a lot," was his reply.

I told him that it was OK for him to feel that way. I had let him down, but I was going to work hard to get us back together. I also told him he would have to be patient and give me a chance. I sure felt a flood of relief when he jumped into my arms and squeezed me tightly.

But regaining my son's trust fully took much more than that. Even after he came home, his nightmares continued. It took months to reassure him that he was not going back into foster care and that I would be able to be there to care for all his needs.

I Stay in Touch

After "my kids" return to their parents, I stay in touch. I offer to come and visit, to be there if they need to talk. I'm even willing to have them drop their kids with me for a while to give them a little breathing space.

The parents sometimes get overwhelmed by all the minute-by-minute things they have to re-learn to handle. They have to relearn to fix breakfasts and school lunches and to get everyone ready at the same time in the morning. They have to put to the test all the skills they learned in their parenting skills classes. They also need to try not to be too hurt or angry that their children are angry, or feel so guilty that they stop being effective parents. They still need to have rules and expectations.

I also encourage "my families" to keep an ongoing friendship with the foster parents. I couldn't justify cutting off my son's foster parents when they were such a large part of his life for more than two years. Occasionally he goes over to his foster family for an afternoon or weekend. He even went on vacation with them in the summer.

His foster parents are still there for me, too, when I need a little help. When I'm going to be late to get my son from his after-school program, I know I can call his foster mother and she'll get him and hang onto him until I get home. If I need someone to help with my son, she backs me up. I tell my birth parents, "Foster parents aren't the enemy. They can be more like the Red Cross."

The way I see it, my job is to help parents see the agency and the foster parents as supports, and to help the agency and the foster parents see the birthparents' strengths, too.

Helping the System Get it Right

Researchers at New York City's foster care agency, the Administration for Children's Services, are working on a way to evaluate preventive services—supports offered to struggling families, such as family therapy, parenting classes and job training.

One part of the evaluation will be feedback from parents on their experiences getting help. Caterina Pisciotta, associate staff analyst, has worked with parents who were involved with the system to help her come up with the right questions to ask. Here she describes how feedback from parents shapes her work:

We wanted to know from parents what they thought of the services they got. Were they good or bad? Did they get what they needed? Did they want something different? It's been interesting learning how parents feel about services.

ILLUSTRATION BY MELANIE LEONG

Every story is different, every parent needs different things. But the core of what I've heard is that when you go to an agency for help—it doesn't matter how you got there, whether you were referred or came on your own—you need to be treated decently and respectfully, you need to feel the agency cares about you and wants what's best for you, and you need the help you came for.

'We Need Your Input'

People tend to think you make up questionnaires just based on what you think is important in your own brain, but the quality of the questions you ask determines the helpfulness of the feedback you'll get. We wanted to get parents involved so we'd be sure that our questions captured their experiences.

We met with a group of parents and told them, "We need your input. You're the ones with experience with agencies and with workers on a day-to-day basis." We let them know that our partnership would be an ongoing process. First we'd ask about their experiences, then we'd look at the themes to see what they felt was important, then we'd come up with questions to use with other parents, and then we'd have them take a look at the questionnaire to see if we captured the important aspects of their experiences.

A Way to Do Good

The parents were so heartfelt in sharing their stories, so honest and open. All of the stories were incredibly sad and emotional. The parents didn't participate because they wanted to rip on the system. They were really looking to change the system. If they had a bad experience, they said, 'I don't want this to happen to others,' and if they had a good experience, they said, 'I hope this will help the system do more good.'

ABOUT Rise

Rise is a magazine by and for parents who have been involved with the child welfare system. Its mission is to provide parents with true stories about the system's role in families' lives and information that will help parents advocate for themselves and their children.

For more information about *Rise*, or to join the writing staff, please call Nora McCarthy at (212) 279-0708 x113. Or find *Rise* on the web at www.youthcomm.org/rise.

Most of the stories were written by participants in the writing group run by the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP) and *Represent* magazine. CWOP is an advocacy program that teaches parents about their rights. For more information about CWOP, call (212) 348-3000. *Represent* is a magazine written by and for youth in foster care nationwide. For more information about *Represent*, call (212) 279-0708.

Rise is published by Youth Communication, which is dedicated to publishing stories by those whose voices are rarely heard in the media. It is funded by the Child Welfare Fund.

Get Free Copies of Rise!

If you would like to receive copies of Rise for yourself, or to hand out to parents or staff, please fill out the following information and send it to: RISE, 224 W. 29th Street 2nd fl., New York, NY 10001. Or call (212) 279-0708 x113 if you have questions.

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'You Have to Fight'

My son went into care when my boyfriend broke my son's leg. He'd hurt me, but I never imagined he would do anything to my son.

Losing my son was the hardest thing I have ever gone through. I felt so alone with no one to care for and with no hope whatsoever.

A couple of months later, my boyfriend was arrested and jailed. But my son did not come home.

My first worker didn't ask what I needed or explain what I was supposed to learn from parenting classes or why I needed to go. I felt lost each time I went to court. I did not know what to do or say. I felt like I couldn't trust anyone.

I tried to comply with the requirements, but beyond that, for more than a year, all I did was cry and wish my son would come back. I cried for my son, who was only 3 and didn't understand why he was taken. I cried for myself, too.

Support from Other Mothers

Eventually I started to learn who I was and what I wanted from my life. Therapy helped. I kept a journal of everything that we discussed, and in those logs I dealt with the pain from my past.

I attended groups with other mothers with kids in foster care. That helped too. Most of the women in the groups were much older than I was, and when I heard their stories, I said to myself, "Damn, that could be you. You have to fight. You cannot let this happen to your son."

I started to read books on how to fight back. I read law books, books on child welfare, domestic violence, social work, poverty and oppression. Those books gave me the strength to see that I was part of a bigger problem, and I began to say, "The system cannot screw me."

Someone Heard My Story

I began putting my demands on the table. I met the executive director of my agency, New York Foundling, and she saw my potential and hired me to be a parent leader. But while my agency was holding me up as a parent leader, my caseworker was threatening to terminate my rights.

Finally, I got my 10th caseworker, and she told the judge what I had accomplished and how much my son was hurting without me. It took me six years to get someone to hear my story and send my son home.

—Diana Henriquez

Parents! We need you!

If you're in preventive services, have children in care, or have gotten your children back, we're interested in your story.

Work with an editor experienced in helping parents tell their stories. Make your voice heard.

Your experiences and insights can help others.

No experience is necessary. Se habla Español.

Call Nora McCarthy, editor of Rise, at (212) 279-0708 x 113 or email nmccarthy@youthcomm.org

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