

## Girl Gone

When life dealt me a hard blow, CPS took my daughter

BY SAMANTHA JOHNSON

### ON AUGUST 25, 2015

I experienced a parent's worst nightmare. I arrived at my daughter's bus stop to pick her up only to find out she was not on it. It's a horrible feeling not knowing where your child is. Then one of my daughter's friends said that she had left school with two adults.

I called the school and learned that the Department for Families and Children of Lexington, Kentucky had taken her. I called the office but did not get an answer or a return call that day, or the next.

I was completely lost. No one could tell me that my 9-year-old child was OK. I knew she must have felt scared and alone.

All that kept running through my head was how she had wanted to sleep in my bed the night before. I desperately wished I had let her.

It took almost two weeks for anyone from social services to contact me. I was told they didn't have my number.

### ACCUSED BUT NOT ASSISTED

When I finally spoke to a social worker, I couldn't form a single thought. What stood out, though, was how serious the situation was. I was being accused of neglect. Someone had reported that I did not have adequate housing and had been homeless, and that I was on drugs.

A social worker had come to visit me three months earlier to investigate a similar report.



Samantha and her daughter

PHOTO COURTESY OF SAMANTHA JOHNSON

At the time, my daughter and I were living in a hotel. The worker said it was a drug-infested area. But she also said that if I kept my daughter safe and obtained adequate housing, they wouldn't take her. There was no further mention of drug use.

On the phone with the new worker, I thought: "If it's about me not being able to support my child, why not help me? If drugs were such an issue, why not help me get treatment? Why go behind my back and take my child?"

I eventually gathered myself. I thought maybe this was what I needed to get myself and my daughter back in our own home with a stable life and routine,

which I truly missed. I also thought honesty would bring my daughter home, so I owned up to a lifetime of struggles.

### TRADING HONESTY FOR HELP

My life had been hard. I'd been addicted to painkillers ever since I was involved in a fatal car crash the day after my high school prom, and I smoked pot regularly to cope with stress. I'd been sober for long periods of time but also relapsed several times.

In my late twenties, I'd spent almost four years in prison for selling drugs. I was released early but re-arrested eight months later because I had moved without

notifying my parole officer.

I discovered I was pregnant during my second sentence and gave birth while shackled to a hospital bed. I was released when my daughter was 6 months old.

### PRISON TO PROGRESS

The first several years with my daughter were a struggle. But we'd also had good times.

From 2010 to 2014, I was in a program called One Parent Scholar House in Lexington that provides free housing to single parents who are full-time students and maintain a 3.5 GPA.

Within three years, I'd graduated with an associate's degree. It was the happiest day of my life; my daughter was by my side.

During those years, my daughter and I did activities and went to museums. When she was 7, we went on our first vacation. I will never forget how wide her eyes got when she first saw the ocean.

I thought there was nowhere to go but up. I was wrong.

### DOWN AND OUT

In early 2014, while pursuing my bachelor's, my financial aid ran out and I couldn't continue school. Since my housing was based on attending school, my daughter and I were kicked out.

We didn't have anywhere to go. We bounced around from friends to shelters for a while. Then a friend helped me rent an efficiency

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IN THIS ISSUE

## The Price of Parenting While Poor

For many parents living in poverty, the shame and powerlessness that come along with struggling to provide basic necessities for their kids are intensified by the reality that being poor increases their families' risk of facing allegations of neglect.

In this issue, parents share stories about the stress and consequences of parenting while poor and question the system's failure to address underlying causes of neglect.

RISE trains parents to write about their experiences with the child welfare system and to become leaders in child welfare reform. Our mission is 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.

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apartment. But the place was infested, everyone in the building was smoking crack and there was violence all the time.

So I moved to the hotel. Even at \$50 a night it was a lot nicer than the apartment.

That's when the first social worker visited.

### THE BIG GRAY AREA

After she left, I had packed up my stuff and took my daughter to my hometown in Fleming County, an hour and a half away, for the summer break. We stayed with my best friend Tina, who was more like my sister. In fact, I'd agreed to be her surrogate and was a month pregnant with her child.

I worked and saved some money, and we moved back to Lexington before school. I got a nice apartment and found a roommate to split the bills. Things were looking up. My daughter was in a new school, I got a part-time job and we had a roof over our heads. That's when they took my child.

When I explained my struggles to the worker, she assured me that my issues could be fixed and that my daughter and I would be reunited. It seemed black and white. But once you're in the system, you realize that there's a big gray area.

### CASE PLANS, COURTROOMS AND CHAOS

After my daughter was taken, I was required to attend weekly substance abuse classes, and was subjected to random drug testing each week. I also had to have my own residence, maintain employment, visit with my daughter and pay child support to the foster care system.

Because my world crumbled when they took my daughter, I moved back to Tina's. It was good; I had support. A few weeks later, friends helped me with money to get a new place with a yard. My daughter would have her own

room.

But living in Fleming also made things harder, since all my services were in Lexington. Every morning I had to call to find out if I needed to test, and I didn't have a vehicle to get to Lexington. My lawyer and I repeatedly asked that my case be transferred to the town I resided in, but instead, they assigned me a "courtesy worker" to check on my progress.

### FINALLY, A VISIT

On November 19, almost three months after my daughter was taken, we had our first visit.

It was wonderful. I was happy and relieved that she was OK.

We laughed and did our hair and makeup. I gave her gifts and a note explaining that I was doing everything I had to do to get her back. She hugged me tight and said she wanted to come home.

Eight days later, we had our second visit. The caseworker reported that both visits had gone well.

But on December 3, on the way to my third visit, my worker informed me that my visits had been suspended. I thought my attorney would immediately request a court hearing, but he didn't. It wasn't until our next scheduled hearing, about three months later, that it was brought up.

At that hearing, the caseworker painted a picture of me as a junkie, a neglectful mother who didn't care about seeing her child. She said I was avoiding drug tests and wasn't complying with my service plan. She also informed the court—and me—that my visits had been suspended because I was being investigated for sexually abusing my daughter. (That was eventually proved false.)

She asked that my visits be terminated. The judge sided with her.

If I hadn't lived this myself, I would never believe it was possible.

### SET UP TO FAIL

For the next five months, I worked my case plan and tried to stabilize my life. It felt like I was always being punished. As soon as I would get close to completing my services, I was knocked down. Domestic violence was never an issue in my life, yet DV classes were thrown into my plan.

Through all the madness, all I could think about was my daughter. She didn't know if I was dead or alive, or if I just forgot about her.

Then in August 2016, almost a year after my daughter was taken, the caseworker changed the goal from reunification to adoption. I was taking too long to finish my service plan.

She also told me that I would have a better chance of seeing my daughter if I moved back to Lexington for drug tests, so I gave up my home and moved.

For weeks I was broke, homeless and hungry. I bounced around and walked up and down the streets because I had nowhere to go. I took a third shift job at McDonald's, but even after three months, my visits were never reinstated.

### ABOUT TO BREAK

So much was on my shoulders that I was going to break. I just couldn't do it alone anymore.

I went back to Fleming, got a job and lived with my on-and-off boyfriend. I'd known him since high school and he had a nice two-bedroom house. I thought it would be best for my daughter's stability and my sobriety. I was clean and wanted to stay that way.

Six months later, on May 5, 2017, I had a termination of parental rights hearing. My attorney and I were hopeful because that's when the sexual abuse claim was finally found unsubstantiated.

That hope vanished when the case worker reported that I was, "living with a male suitor" and could not provide stable housing for my daughter or provide financially.

I couldn't win. I had to have adequate housing and be able to support my child without help. But I made \$7.25 an hour and I might get 20 hours a week. My check was garnished \$86.34 for child support to pay for my daughter in foster care. So I was left with like \$50. It was an endless cycle.

### WRONG AGAIN

Obstacles aside, I believed I would get my daughter back and I continued working hard to make that happen. I left my boyfriend's house and moved into a shelter. They helped me find a place and paid part of the deposit. I also stayed sober—my drug tests proved that I was not using anymore. I worked my case plan and even took extra parenting classes. My courtesy worker was able to confirm my progress and sign off on everything I was doing.

I thought my daughter would soon start visiting and come home.

I was wrong, again.

Two months later, I received a letter telling me it was over. I was devastated.

They stole my daughter and demonized me. All because I hit a rough patch.

### EDGE OF THE EARTH

Since then, I've felt helpless. Memories of my daughter flash through my head, her laughter, her hugs. I hear myself screaming in anger and I drop to my knees bawling. She's gone.

I'm not waving the white flag, though. My attorney filed a motion to vacate the decision and I was granted a "supplemental TPR hearing" on November 28, where I will be allowed to provide evidence that I complied with my service plan, am clean and sober, and am capable of raising my child.

I have no idea what will happen and I am a nervous wreck. But I will go to the edge of the earth to fight for my daughter.

## 'Poor' Parenting

### When poverty is confused with neglect

INTERVIEWS BY NANCY FORTUNADO AND SHARKKARAH HARRISON

*For poor parents, life often feels like an avalanche of misfortunes that invites judgment, mistrust and even charges of neglect.*

*Here Daniel Hatcher, author of "The Poverty Industry: The Exploitation of America's Most Vulnerable Citizens"; Carlyn Hicks, director at Mission First Legal Aid Office in Mississippi; Chris Gottlieb, co-director of New York University's Family Defense Clinic; Mimi Laver, director of legal education for the American Bar Association's Center on Children and the Law; and attorney Erin Cloud and parent advocate Dinah Adames at Bronx Defenders, explain the relationship between child welfare and parenting while poor.*

#### Q: Why are poor families more likely to be investigated for neglect?

**Gottlieb:** The U.S. has chosen to use the child welfare system to deal with child poverty. We're so finger-wavy of the poor that we don't address the obvious dangers poverty poses to children. Instead we blame parents for the predictable harms that result.

**Hicks:** Overburdened parents sometimes make decisions based on survival that may not be the safest situation for the child. So those families come into contact with the system.

**Cloud:** Every aspect of poor families' lives is subject to supervision. Shelters have mandated reporters. HRA workers are mandated reporters. Public hospitals report overwhelmingly more than private hospitals.

**Laver:** If they called it poverty, they wouldn't be able to remove a

kid, because some states have a statute that says that kids cannot be removed for poverty alone. Neglect is a legal term that gives them the right to remove the child.

**Gottlieb:** We have set up enormous structures for reporting and investigating parenting. Of course, as soon as you set up hotlines and encourage people to make reports, the calls start coming in and investigators start heading out.

#### Q: How do child welfare systems distinguish between neglect and poverty?

**Laver:** Every state has guidelines, but I don't think they're solid.

**Hicks:** There is so much subjectivity as to what they perceive to be a safety threat. In some cases, it's if the house has a leaky roof. If the children are being moved around a lot or they're in a home with too many people. Here in Mississippi, I've seen a lot of cases involving kids coming to school in dirty clothes or hungry or having lice.

**Cloud:** In New York, the standards have to be that you're falling below a minimum degree of care even though you are financially able to do so.

#### Q: How does having a case affect a family's ability to stabilize?

**Hicks:** Once you have a child welfare case you almost have to surpass perfection in order to get your kids back, and that's not an easy task for parents with limited resources.

**Hatcher:** In some states, parents are charged child support while their kids are in foster care; some states make it a requirement for

reunification. Other states use it as grounds to terminate parental rights. These payments are impossible for low-income parents to pay and when that starts to build up their checks get garnished and they fall behind on rent. One barrier leads to another.

**Adames:** There's also the indicated report. That stops our clients from getting certain employment opportunities and prohibits the family's long-term stability.

#### Q: What can help parents in need keep children safely at home?

**Hatcher:** Congress can make federal funds for preventive just as available as funding for foster care so more services can be provided before child welfare gets involved. "Title IV-E," the biggest source of funding to child welfare, is federal money that the states get and give to agencies only when kids are taken from their families. Other federal funding is supposed to provide services to families to prevent the need for foster care. That money is much lower and is limited.

**Gottlieb:** We should be pushing for free, quality day care and better public assistance. We need to provide social services that are aimed at helping, not punishing, families in need. We also need to make sure all parents involved in the system have quality legal representation.

**Cloud:** One of the biggest challenges we have is that the people in charge of deciding what happens to poor people are not in poverty. They have no idea what our clients are going through.

# The Do's and Don'ts of Parenting While Poor

BY SHARKKARAH HARRISON

*Parents struggling to provide for their children are often surprised to learn that gaps in basic care such as inadequate food, clothing and safe, stable housing can result in allegations of neglect and child removal.*

*Here, social worker Rick Barinbaum of The Center for Family Representation, and attorneys Eric Cloud, Mimi Laver and Carlyn Hicks (see p.3), explain what parents should be mindful of when hard times hit, and reforms that would prevent families from being separated because they're poor.*

**Q: What should poor parents know about caring for their kids? In what ways can they shield themselves from neglect charges?**

**Cloud:** Parents should know who mandated reporters are because the law puts a lot of pressure on schools and other mandated reporters to make reports. Also, try to have food in your home at all times. If that's not possible, have food stamp receipts to show

investigators.

**Barinbaum:** Treat interactions you have with any professional—whether it's at a school, a doctor's office, or shelter—as an opportunity to show your best side. Connect with your community so you have supports that know you and how you parent.

**Cloud:** The Court system is not sympathetic to the practical complexities that many people face. I would advise against leaving your kids home alone, even for a brief period of time. It can result in an arrest and a removal.

If you must leave your child with someone, make sure it's someone you trust because you can get a case for leaving your child with an inappropriate caretaker

**Laver:** The key is to know your child. Even if the law says 10 is a safe age to leave a child alone, if your 10-year-old is not responsible enough to care for themselves, the child should not be left alone.

**Hicks:** If there are safety issues in the home that put the family at risk, immediately request repairs in writing and document all communications with the landlord.

**Barinbaum:** If an allegation of neglect is made, find professionals or respectable community members that see your strengths and ask them to come to court with you. If they can't, give their contact information to your lawyer and try to get documentation to bring with you.

**Cloud:** Unfortunately, your best option is to work with your lawyer and advocate to negotiate the best service plan possible and be consistent in visitation and working your plan.

**Q: What needs to change so that families aren't separated because they're struggling?**

**Cloud:** We should trust poor people to raise their children. No legal change will help without this critical

culture shift. Public hospitals, which primarily serve poor people, should have training on the impact of reporting families to child protection and develop greater sensitivity about when not to call in a case.

**Hicks:** An increase in federal resources for programs such as Head Start would help lift the burden felt by parents who feel they have to choose between work and their children's safety at home.

**Laver:** In some states, parents don't have a court hearing until 20 to 25 days after a child is removed, and a lawyer isn't appointed until then. There are some states where parents don't even get attorneys.

Our goal is to change the way things are currently done from a system that punishes poor families to a system focused on strengthening families and ensuring that children remain safely with their parents. ■

## What Is Neglect?

**The Federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) defines child neglect and abuse as:**

*“Any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation, or an act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm.”*

**FAILURE TO PROVIDE:**

- **Physical**—Not providing basic needs, including appropriate nutrition, shelter, hygiene and clothing.
- **Medical and dental**—Delaying or denying recommended health or dental care for a child.
- **Educational**—Failure to enroll a child in school, or homeschool a child. Not addressing special education needs. Allowing

chronic absenteeism from school.

- **Emotional neglect**—To ignore, or be emotionally unresponsive. Also, to deny adequate access to mental health care.

**FAILURE TO SUPERVISE:**

- Leaving a child unsupervised (based on length of time and the child's age/maturity) and not providing appropriate caregivers.
- **Engaging in harmful behavior**

(including domestic violence and drug or alcohol abuse) in a child's presence.

- **Not protecting a child from safety hazards** (including hazards in the home).

To find each state's neglect laws visit: [childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/state/](http://childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/state/)

# Neither Neglect Nor Abuse

Poverty and a series of bad judgments led to my daughter's adoption

BY ERIC MULLINS

**IN 2005, I FELL IN LOVE** with a woman and moved across the country to be with her.

But when we arrived in California, she and I and her little girl, Casey, were cramped up living with friends. Eventually we got our own place, but it was hard to make ends meet. I'd earned my associate's degree in horticulture but couldn't find anything in landscaping. After a while I was willing to work any job, including a temporary job at an amusement park.

After about a year, we had a daughter, Cadence. But soon after, I found out that my girlfriend was running from the Department of Children and Family Services because she'd wrecked her car with Casey in it. When DCFS caught up with my girlfriend, they allowed us to keep Cadence, but Casey, who was 7, was taken into foster care.

I was shocked. I loved being a father to Casey. I went on the slides with her, built snowmen and was a guest at her tea parties. We worked hard to get Casey back. Social services also helped with our rent. After a few months, Casey came home. But the stability didn't last.

## AM I STILL DAD?

Over time, I learned that my girlfriend had a mood disorder and could be violent when she wasn't on medication. She also abused drugs and alcohol. She cussed at me and attacked me.

When my daughter was 2, I decided I had to leave the relationship. I could only afford a room in an apartment with friends, so I left the girls with their mother. She'd never been violent to them, so I thought they'd be OK. But child protective services was still monitoring the home. When they

found my girlfriend intoxicated and the girls unsupervised, they took both girls into foster care.

I wanted to get custody of them. But I didn't know how to find a suitable place. I didn't ask the agency for help with rent, and they didn't offer any. I thought of asking my family, but I was too ashamed. Instead I simply prayed, read the Bible and slept long hours. My feeling of hopelessness was the absolute worst feeling I've ever felt.

Then after a couple of months of only seeing my daughter at weekly visits, she began to call the foster father Dad and me Eric. That hurt so much.

## NO ONE PULLING FOR ME

Still, in the first few months, I went from supervised to unsupervised visits. I thought my daughter would return to me. But then the first caseworker left, and I had no one in the system pulling for me. My daughter's foster parents, who had so much more money and stability than I did, wanted to adopt my daughter, and they regularly made negative reports about me and the mother. The new caseworker backed up everything they said.

I also made a big mistake trying to work with my ex, who entered rehab after the girls were taken.

For about six months, I went to visits with her to help her be the mother I'd once known. But she fought with the caseworkers, her lawyer, my lawyer and the judge.

Finally I decided to have visits alone, but I still went to court with her and delivered clothes and toiletries to her in rehab. When I said no to anything, she'd make up allegations that I took Ecstasy. Even though I tested negative, the drama didn't look good.



PHOTO COURTESY OF ERIC MULLINS

Eric Mullins

## A SERIES OF TERRIBLE ERRORS

Toward the end of 2008 I got a phone call that hurt: Casey was going to be adopted. The worker made clear that further contact was not allowed, not even to say good-bye.

A few months later, the worker told me that if I didn't find a suitable place, I could lose Cadence, too. I moved into a small apartment in an unsafe part of town. There wasn't much space, so I packed our belongings in the bedroom and figured we'd sleep in the living room. But this was against department policy. Then my daughter's attorney came by and reported that my place was cluttered and I lost my overnight visits.

I felt so overwhelmed that I smoked pot one day at a neighbor's. I knew it was wrong but I felt hopeless. That led to a positive drug test, and the worker moved

me back to supervised visits.

## OUR BOND WEAKENS

By then, Cadence had been in foster care for about two years. Something in me continued to try and I managed to find a full-time job at a fast food restaurant.

But daily life was so hard. My daughter and the agency were in an expensive area, far from my neighborhood. I didn't have a car and getting to the agency took three hours by public transportation. Sometimes I'd make appointments with the caseworker not knowing how to get there. I looked bad when I missed them.

I always found a way to make it to visits with my daughter, even if I had to eat cheap for a week. This was never mentioned in court, and my bond with my daughter kept getting weaker.

When termination finally came, it was hard to function. A family from church took me in and never judged me. Then they helped me move back to Virginia to be with my family.

## HOLDING ON TO HOPE

It has been five years since I last saw my daughter.

I've met and married a supportive woman and found a full-time job. I volunteer with the Cub Scouts, and go to church and counseling to cope with my past. Still, it's hard to accept that if I'd found a decent home when the girls went into care, I might never have lost them.

Mainly, I hold onto hope that later I'll see Cadence again. I hope to see Casey, too, whom I still love. I have a savings account for Cadence and I mail her letters. I pray one day a judge will see my progress and let me be in my daughter's life. ■

# Broke and Alone

It wasn't love that made me open the door to my daughter's unstable father

BY ANONYMOUS

**WHEN I WAS 23** and my doctor told me I was pregnant, I put my head down and burst out crying.

A piece of me felt grateful that God chose me to bring life into the world. But I also felt angry, ashamed, selfish and scared. The father and I had only been dating a short while. Plus, I had a job but he didn't, and neither of us was financially secure.

Still, when my boyfriend told me that he was against abortions, I took it as a sign that he would stick around and I convinced myself that we could make it work. After all, his family owned a house, he received SSI and, after I got pregnant, he found a job handing out fliers. I myself had gone from a rebellious teenager to someone able to hold down a job.

## PUTTING MY LIFE ON TRACK

My mother died when I was 7. My aunt became my guardian but she was tough and not affectionate. By high school, I had so many painful feelings that sitting in class wasn't something I felt able to do. Then, when I was 17, my aunt placed me in foster care, where I felt lonely and unloved.

Working was one way I felt successful. My first job was at McDonald's, which I loved. Then, a year after I left the system, I found a job as a home health aide. My connections with patients felt very meaningful. One had been a famous jazz singer who told me stories about her life.

There was also stress on the job, including relatives who used drugs or flirted with me, so sometimes I'd call in sick, and after almost two years, they fired me. But shortly before I found out I was pregnant,

I found a job at Meals on Wheels. I figured we'd be OK.

## MY FANTASY CRUMBLES

But soon my fantasy crumbled. Trying to make the best of a bad situation brought child protective services into my life.

It began when my boyfriend started showing a scary, volatile side. I tried dealing with it at first, because other times he was loving

the whole "let's be a family" talk. I was depressed, lonely and relying on public assistance. Plus, I wanted my child to have a father. So despite the order of protection, I let him come in and out of my life. I told myself that after I had the baby, I'd find a job, be superwoman, rely on myself.

After my daughter was born, my daughter's father continued to act threatening at times, especially

when she asked why my tiles were separating and my floorboards were rough.

Then CPS took me to court for child neglect for staying in a violent relationship. I was dumbfounded. I thought neglect meant parents who don't care for their kids or let them go hungry, and that wasn't me at all. I felt terrified and unfairly judged. But I also swore that if I didn't lose my daughter, I'd find other sources of support and build myself up again financially.

## BACK ON TRACK

Because there were only two documented incidents of domestic violence and I was willing to do anything the court ordered, my case was not founded and my daughter was not removed. Instead I was sent to preventive services. To my surprise, I got what I needed. My preventive worker connected me to therapy and a parenting support group, which I loved. She also contacted CPS for a child care voucher.

For me, that piece of paper was a huge lift. It let me get two part-time jobs, one at Rise and one as a proctor at a college. Financial stability made me less needy for the father, or some other toxic person's help.

Even with the voucher, working and parenting has been harder than I ever imagined. My daughter has special needs, which has made it too hard to work full-time. I need and want to be there for my daughter.

Still, being able to work even part time has reminded me how ambitious I am to give my child the things I never had and to set that strong example for her. ■



PHOTO: STEVEN ZESWITZ

and respectful. Then one day we got into a fight on the street because I wanted a break from him. The fight got violent, and the police were called. But when I took a few days off work to file a police report and get an order of protection, I lost my job.

When I got that order, I was also told by Safe Horizons that, because I was pregnant, I had to relocate. In my new apartment, I literally had nothing, not even a bed to sleep on. When I couldn't find another job, it hit me how little support I had.

## 'FAMILY' TALK

Then in the last weeks of my pregnancy, my daughter's father started coming around again using

when we fought about money. So after a few months, I told him he could only see the baby with other people around, at friends' or family members' homes.

One day, he came by anyway, demanding to see his child. I was very low on money and he said he had presents and money for the baby, so I let him in. He didn't have anything, acted threatening and refused to leave. I called the police. Because I already had an order of protection, the police called CPS.

## DUMBFOUNDED

When the investigator came to my apartment, she acted like I was too caught up in love to protect my child. She also wore a frown

# Trapped

## I know what my son and I need but I can't afford it

BY JASMIN GONZALEZ

**MY SON WAS 2** when I aged out of foster care. Soon I was going to college full time, working 40 hours a week and paying my own child care. Things were easier when I had the group home staff to help. Once I left care, I had nothing. If I failed, I'd be screwed. And to the shelter we'd go.

I wanted to prove that, just because I grew up in care, there wasn't anything wrong with me. I wanted to complete college in four years and then find a rewarding job. I didn't want having a child young to stop me.

But because of my busy schedule, I barely saw my son. Monday through Thursday, I would take my son to daycare, then go to school and work. On Thursday evenings I'd drop him at his father's for the weekend and then go back to work. I was always super tired and backed up with housework so I often ignored him even when we were together.

At the time, I also didn't know what to do about his behavior. If we were in the store and he wanted something, or we walked a route he wasn't used to, he would throw himself on the ground, screaming.

His tantrums were particularly bad on the subway. One time a man yelled at me, "When the hell are you getting off? You can't shut him up." I felt like people were always staring and thinking, "This is why teens shouldn't have kids." I felt like it was my fault I was in foster care, my fault I was a young mother, my fault I lived in the projects, my fault I was poor, my fault my son was bad. I got what I deserved.

### CONCRETE HELP

Then the cost of his daycare increased and I could no longer



Jasmin ans her son

PHOTO COURTESY OF JASMIN GONZALEZ

afford it. I quit school and for five months took care of my son during the week and only worked weekends.

During that time, I felt panicked that we'd wind up in the shelter like many other foster youth. I also filled out the food stamp form incompletely and was left without food for two months. I had to ask a manager at work to let me take

### I want to help my son more, but not having money makes that harder.

food home for free.

Finally one day I melted down and went running to my public housing office, shaking, and exploded in tears. The woman there let me cry. Then she adjusted my rent, based on my current pay stubs, down \$200 a month so I wouldn't be evicted. She also connected me to a social worker who helped me find a daycare where my son could go for free.

### HELP FOR MY SON

The daycare was great, with small classes and nice teachers. Soon, I was able to pick up more work and I even had time to join a gym.

Then one day my son's teacher told me that when she asked him to bring his chair to a spot at the table, he walked around the table in confusion, and he also had tantrums in class. When group home staff had asked me if I wanted my son evaluated, I felt that something wrong with him meant there was something wrong with me. But I knew there had to be a reason for my son's behavior and I trusted the teacher, so I agreed to an evaluation.

We discovered that my son needed speech therapy, and over time his behavior changed drastically because he learned to use his words. When I saw how well he was doing, I felt guilty. All this time I'd gotten angry with him when he simply didn't understand me. But I also felt good that I'd made a choice that gave him the best shot at achieving his dreams.

### POVERTY'S ENDLESS CYCLE

After that, things went well for four years. I worked less to spend more time with my son. Unfortunately, I had to put college on hold. But it was worth it to see my son blossom into a funny, talkative kid who loves to dance, play games and read, especially about animals.

Then my sister had a housing crisis and asked to move in with me for six months. I didn't feel I could say no to her—she'd just had a baby. So I started working six days a week to support us all. Soon after, my son began getting upset and having tantrums in school. The school said they didn't have the resources to help him so I found him therapy outside of school. My college dream is still on hold.

Right now, I feel so tired and stuck. It feels like every time I start to get ahead, someone needs something that makes me put myself on hold. I want to help my son more, but not having money makes that harder. My son's particularly unhappy in his afterschool program. But I'm working so much that it's hard to find the time to find a program where he might be happier. I also don't have the money to pay someone to take him to a program outside his school.

I'm trying to do a little at a time without overwhelming myself. I don't want to go on public assistance, but if things don't turn around quickly for my son, I may do it for his sake. Through all the struggles, I try to keep my eye on the prize. For me, that's college and a job I love; for my son, it's just helping him be happy and comfortable in his own skin. ■

# Safe Inside

## I'm helping my son feel secure despite difficult conditions

BY SARA WERNER

### LAST YEAR I REUNIFIED

with my son, Aaron, who spent his first two years in foster care. Aaron is now 4 years old with curly brown hair, brown eyes and a smile that makes everyone want to smile, too.

Aaron's foster family had lots of money for clothes, toys, everything. When we reunified, I thought Aaron would be unhappy not having a large TV with cable and tons of fancy toys. He was just happy to be with his mom. Still, I work every day so my son will know the feelings of safety, security, and love despite the difficult conditions we are in.

### SHELTER: OUR ONLY CHOICE

Before Aaron was released to me, I was living in a supportive housing program for adults with mental

illness. Since my income on SSI isn't high enough to afford an apartment in New York City, our only choice was to spend our first day together as a family going to a shelter.

After packing up all our belongings, waiting all day at the city's shelter intake, and speaking with countless workers, we were sent to a temporary place overnight. The place was ice cold, dirty, and had a bare mattress on the floor. My son was already upset about the different changes going on, so he kicked, screamed and finally vomited everywhere. He fell asleep in his stroller covered in my blankets and sweaters. I stayed up all night keeping watch over him.

The next night we were moved to a shelter. All by myself, I had to wheel Aaron in his stroller plus

wheel two suitcases in deep snow. Nobody offered to help, because everyone was involved with their own stories. When we arrived, I saw roaches and mice, and people cursing, shouting and smoking weed.

I felt horrible about taking Aaron to unknown and possibly unsafe conditions. I kept wondering: "Am I being selfish by getting him back? Who am I doing this for?" Aaron grew up thinking his foster parents were his Mommy and Daddy, and I was taking him away from that into horrible conditions when I didn't even know if I was going to do a good job as a mother.

### SAFETY INSIDE

Still, I have come to see that I can help my son feel safe inside himself



PHOTO: STEVEN ZESWITZ

Sara and her son

# Promise of Partnership

## New confidential resource centers for NYC families

BY NICOLE GOODWIN

*This spring, NYC's Administration for Children's Services will open Family Enrichment Centers (FECs) in three neighborhoods with high child welfare involvement—Highbridge and Hunt's Point in the Bronx and East New York, Brooklyn—run by Good Shepherd Services, Graham Windham and the Bridgebuilders Community Partnership. Each site will have a director, two parent advocates and a community liaison.*

*Jacqueline Martin, Deputy Commissioner for the Division of Preventive Services, and Kailey*

*Burger, Assistant Commissioner for Community Based Strategies in the Division of Preventive Services, explained the goal of partnering with parents and discussed whether ACS can truly deliver safe and confidential help to families.*

### Q: What are Family Enrichment Centers?

**Martin:** These are neighborhood spaces that families can walk into no matter what their level of need or circumstance, whether they are in crisis or just have questions

that they want answers to without feeling judged or criticized.

**Burger:** So many families get prevention after there's a crisis. We wanted to focus on providing a place where you can come in at any time. Maybe you just had a baby and you're nervous and want to meet other moms. Maybe you're a grandma and want extra support for your little ones. We hope we can keep families from needing intensive services by providing help early.

### Q: How are they different from other preventive services?

**Burger:** These centers will not provide case management or intensive services. There's no intake process. You don't have to sign any forms or give up any rights. People can get free support without being tracked in a database. Information about families cannot be shared unless the parent gives written consent.

The goal is to not make this a place where they can drum up referrals to ACS. But the staff are



despite the conditions around him. What I remember growing up is that other kids had a lot more money, more toys and more vacations than I did. But my mom was always hugging us and kissing us, and telling us how much she loved us. That is what I want to give to my son.

### **I can help my son feel safe inside himself despite the conditions around him.**

One way I help Aaron find happiness and wonder is in books. I have enough books to open up a small library. Aaron loves me to read to him. I also encourage Aaron to find happiness in his own imagination. One day, I was playing

and joking with Aaron, and I picked up an empty toilet paper roll and put it by my eye. Aaron said, “Wow, a telescope!” I got the idea that we should color it and put stickers on it for a project. He likes to hold it against his eye and tell me what he can see through it.

I’m good at finding all the fun, free activities I can do with my son. His school gave us a cool culture card so we can get in free to lots of different museums and zoos. We also go to the library, to the park, and to free community events like health fairs.

I’ve been lucky that New York City started offering pre-K. Aaron is in a wonderful school. I volunteer in the classroom so I get to know the kids and other parents, and get support, advice and friendship. While Aaron is getting smarter

every day, I also have the time to shop, cook, clean and go to therapy and my writing program by myself.

### **BUILDING A LIFE**

I know that where we are living is temporary, and one day we will I have to pack up and leave. I wonder: “How will my son feel about this? Will we move somewhere better, or worse? Will I have to start building my life all over?” For now, all I can do is keep working on building a life for my son and me where I am.

We have a puzzle of a house that Aaron likes to put together. I tell him to separate the pieces to make it less stressful and less complicated, to find the corners and then the edges, one piece at a time. I am trying to do the same in building a home for my child. ■

mandated reporters. They have to report imminent risk to a child. There will be transparency about that.

We’ve made special efforts to prevent the kind of stigma and experience folks have received in our current system. Contractors are prohibited from using any space that they currently use for foster care or prevention. We didn’t allow agencies to hire staff that currently work in prevention or foster care. The job descriptions required that they hired folks that were free of connection to the child welfare system.

The other thing is that every offering has to be co-designed with families. We’re opening the doors to start a conversation and

build relationships. The next seven months will be about hearing from parents and understanding what folks want. The FEC staff will be going out and doing community meetings. We’re providing stipends to parents to participate. Then we will have a grand opening and say here’s our parent board and here are the offerings we have. So the first few months we may have a parenting class, a knitting group, or a resume workshop—whatever the community wants. Then needs will change.

### **Q: How will you address poverty?**

**Burger:** We’re focused on mobility. We brought in experts and models, one called Mobility Mentoring,

which has been proven to get families from homeless shelters to making \$60,000 or more a year. It’s about getting people to a place where they feel like they can financially sustain themselves.

### **Q: What do you see as the challenges to building trust?**

**Martin:** Communities, especially those of color, are so used to having ACS leave a footprint that often times has felt like oppression. What we need to be able to do through these centers is create that sense of: You know what’s best for your family. You know what help you need. We just need to help them get those needs met. ■

## **Step-by-step financial independence**

*Economic Mobility Pathways (EMPath) in Boston pairs low-income parents with professionals to support them in gaining the resources and skills needed to attain financial self-sufficiency. Nicki Ruiz de Luzuriaga, Associate Vice President of Capacity Building for EMPATH, explains how families can move up financially.*

### **Q: How can mentoring help parents improve their economic stability?**

**A:** Participants are paired with “Mobility Mentors”. Some participants are homeless and not working. Others work full-time but are still struggling. They face obstacles that include unpredictable work schedules, low pay, inadequate childcare, unsafe housing, and countless others.

We start with a self-assessment so that participants can reflect on where they are and where they want to be. The participant may want a job, for example; but then realize they need to secure childcare before they can work.

We hope to build a person’s ability to think about and plan for the future, to juggle multiple priorities and to adapt to new circumstances.

### **Q: What results do you see?**

**A:** While it can take five years or more to become financially stable, people can start taking steps immediately. For example, we work with homeless families to open savings accounts and get into the habit of saving a little bit every week.

We start with small goals and build momentum from there. ■

# When Finding Housing Is a Job in Itself

BY PIAZADORA FOOTMAN

**SIX YEARS AGO I WENT** into the New York City shelter system. For 11 months, I searched for apartments like crazy. I had few options. I had just come out of a psychiatric hospital. I had a 4-year-old son and was pregnant with my daughter. I had a housing voucher and was living off of Supplemental Security Income (a Social Security program) and food stamps. I went in and out of real estate offices until I found an apartment at the western edge of the Bronx, in the River Park Towers.

The area was bad and flooded with drugs. I wanted to give my children better than what I had growing up, but I was down to my last straw. I had no choice.

I tried to make the best of our one bedroom by putting up curtains that matched my living room set and buying cable TV. But the apartment began to fall apart soon after we moved in. The toilet stopped up, the elevator didn't work, and the landlord didn't make repairs. On winter nights, we would freeze because the windows let in cold air. We would put on hats and gloves, with long johns under our pajamas.

Even so, I felt that I was making progress in my life. My mother was a drug addict who didn't take care of me. One of my grandmothers raised me with extreme physical and emotional abuse, always saying things like, "You ain't never going to be nothing, just like your mother." I felt as if my fate had already been painted, and in fact I did become an addict and lost my son to foster care, but I got treatment and got him home. I also enrolled in college and finished two semesters. My plan was to get my children settled,



Pia and her son

PHOTO BY TODD SOMODEVILLA

finish school, get a job and support myself.

Then came nearly 18 months when my life was overtaken by running here and there to try to

**It has been so different to live in a nice area without violence, drug use and dealers in the park.**

hold on to our housing. All my plans for moving my life forward fell apart.

It began with a letter saying that the New York City voucher program that helped pay my rent was being discontinued. Neither the Department of Homeless Services nor the city help line offered any

information that helped me. A few months later, I got a letter from my landlord's lawyer telling me that, because the voucher had ended, I was in danger of being evicted. At the rental office, I was told to get public assistance. For that, I needed a letter from my son's school, which I had to request and pick up in person; a letter from Supplemental Security Income and a letter from my rental office. I spent five hours applying at the Human Resources Administration office. Then I went to another unit for emergency rent assistance. I needed proof of an active public assistance case; a letter from a judge stating the exact amount of rent owed; and a letter saying my landlord would lower my rent. That took weeks.

When I went to turn in those

documents, the worker told me that my center had been changed to Center No. 17. She told me it was in Brooklyn, two hours each way from my house by train and bus. I could not find someone to pick up my son from the school bus if my appointment went long. In the end, I just kept him home from school and took him with me. When we got to Center No. 17, the worker asked me, "Why did you travel all the way to Brooklyn when there is a Center No. 17 in the Bronx?" Luckily she agreed to help me. I must have thanked her 10 times.

Going from appointment to appointment, I felt defeated and depressed. For weeks I had done nothing but gather paperwork. I could barely go to my part-time job, and I had to drop out of school. My life already felt as if I were riding in a small boat with just one oar, always patching up the holes.

Now my boat was leaking. I said to myself everyday, "How am I going to keep us from drowning?"

After several months, I was able to qualify for a new housing voucher and stay in my apartment.

Just a short time later, though, my landlord sold the building. We would have to move. The good news was that people with low income were given Section 8 vouchers (the federal government's housing assistance). This change terrified me (I had 60 days to find an apartment) but I was also hopeful. Section 8 is a long-term affordable housing program.

I yelled and cried a lot during my apartment search. Everyone wanted three months' rent and a broker's fee. If I had almost \$6,000 in savings, I probably wouldn't need a voucher. Finally, I spoke with a

# No Room for Families

## How the housing crisis contributes to kids entering foster care

BY SHARKKARAH HARRISON

landlord in Yonkers who had an apartment for \$1,800 with only one month's security.

When I arrived, I saw a guy sweeping the front steps. I thought, "This is going to be a well-kept building." Then I stepped into the apartment and was overwhelmed with happiness and unworthiness. It was huge and beautiful, with three spacious bedrooms. I wanted to cry.

It has been so different to live in a nice area without violence, drug use and dealers in the park. My children and I have met our neighbors. I'm not scared to let my children (my son is 10 now, and my daughter, 6) play outside. We even have cookouts in our yard.

Before, I had to keep my guard up. I felt as if I had to become a monster to protect my children from harm. Although nothing is perfect, finding stable housing in a nice area is our little peace of mind and paradise.

I don't think I'll be dependent on rental assistance, public assistance and Supplemental Security Income forever. Having order in my life is making it possible to have direction again. I am back at work and achieving my goal of slowly and strongly moving forward at my job. Now my children and I have little bonus adventures. One evening in July I took them to the Yonkers boardwalk to sit on a blanket and have an Icee, something I never would have felt free enough to do a year ago.

My family life is not problem free, but it is stable and happy. I think my children are learning that we can keep looking for ways to save our lives, and we won't always struggle. ■

*Worrying about where your family will sleep while fearing the removal of your child is a burden that parents increasingly carry. In 2015, more than 200,000 families with children experienced homelessness in this country.*

*Here, Ruth White, Executive Director of the National Center for Housing & Child Welfare, explains how housing insecurity makes families more likely to face child protective investigations, have their children removed, and face delays in reunification.*

**Q: How do homelessness and inadequate housing connect to family separation?**

**A:** The federal government says that about 10 percent of removals are related to housing, but that's just removal. There's also reunification. The number of kids that can't go home because their parents don't have housing is closer to 30 percent across the U.S.

Every state statute is different. You can have 50 different ways to determine if a child can be removed. But it doesn't really matter what's in a state statute. Once child welfare intervenes, if they find that the family's homeless but the system cannot offer any housing resources, they will remove children—even when it's against state law to remove a child simply because parents are homeless or to prevent reunification due to housing. They break their own law because they believe children are unsafe and they don't have enough housing resources to fix the problem.

**Q: Why are families increasingly experiencing homelessness and inadequate housing?**

**A:** Americans at every income level have seen their housing costs grow considerably and completely out of proportion to their income over the last decade. Communities cannot respond to the homelessness that they see in front of their faces. It's bad all over the country.

The best anti-poverty programs are Section-8 and affordable housing run by public housing authorities, but we do not support our public housing authority. We've tried to privatize it, undermine it and shrink it.

**Q: What affect can foster care have on homelessness?**

**A:** When young people go into foster care and age out, there's not a more predictable form of homelessness in the US right now. We know exactly the date that a kid is going to be homeless, because it's either going to be on their 18th or 21st birthday. Yet the child welfare system fails time and again to capitalize on that predictability and prepare them for independence and self-sufficiency.

**Q: What has been shown to make it less likely that children will be separated from their families because of housing?**

**A:** In the U.S., we have a program that is over 20 years old that has been proven to work and proven to save the federal government millions of dollars—the Family Unification Program. It can be used

for prevention or reunification. These are vouchers that are distributed to public housing authorities and they can only issue a voucher to a family that has been referred by a local child welfare agency. It's a very small program, but it just received another \$20 million. It needs to grow considerably. ■

## It's Not Just You

**Homelessness is a major cause of family separation. Over 850 NYC children in foster care are there because their parents cannot afford housing, according to the Institute for Children, Poverty & Homelessness**

**Here are NYC facts:**

- **More than 62,000 men, women and children sleep in shelters each night.**
- **Three-quarters of shelter residents are families.**
- **Almost 40% of shelter residents are children, with 45,692 children spending at least one night in a shelter between July 2015 and June 2016.**
- **The average length of stay in NYC shelters is more than one year.**
- **Approximately 58 percent of shelter residents are African-American and 31 percent are Latino.**

# When Ends Don't Meet

## Lack of affordable housing can affect the strongest families

BY JEANETTE VEGA

### WHEN MY SON REMI WAS

2, he was taken from me for three years. I felt so much hate and fear.

When he returned home, I was ready to create a loving, stable environment for him. I wanted to know that he was safe. I wanted him to have a yard to play in. I wanted him to have space to have fun.

Over time, my husband and I got more financially secure. When we saw Remi thriving, we decided to have more children. Life felt good.

### TRAPPED IN POVERTY

But in 2008, I felt that fear again when we lost our housing.

It started when I was 28 and went on welfare because I had a high-risk pregnancy with my third son. I stayed on welfare to be my son's mother and care for him when he was diagnosed with severe asthma. I had my husband's support and I earned \$300 every two weeks working part-time as a parent advocate.

Still, by the end of the month I was always borrowing for Metrocards and I didn't have enough money for all my bills.

So when my third son was 3, I went back to work full-time, earning \$1200 every two weeks as a parent advocate at a foster care agency. It felt empowering to touch people's lives and help families reunite.

### DEAD ENDS

But after six months, when the food stamps stopped completely because of my new income, I found myself in worse financial shape than when I was on public assistance. A few months later came the devastating news—I owed \$10,000 in back rent.

Before, welfare had paid \$900 of



PHOTO: STEPHEN REISS

Jeanette and her youngest son

my rent while I paid \$250. I didn't receive notice that my rent subsidy had stopped until after 10 months on the job, when the landlord sent me an eviction notice. We had three months to find a new place.

Everywhere we looked was a dead end. It felt crazy to again not know how to keep my family together and provide my boys with security and safety even though my husband and I both worked full-time and we'd come so far as a family.

### A LUCKY BREAK

Then, three days before our eviction date, a friend said he had an empty basement apartment across from the boys' school and he'd only charge us \$600 a month.

The place was filled with old furniture and car parts. But my children's father cleaned it up. I felt like a child on Christmas when I saw it clean.

For a little over a year, that apartment helped us give our children the life we want for them:

basketball and football in the back yard; no worries about safety.

During the summer, the pool was filled and we would barbeque. To me, a big family means love and security. So when we were living there, I got pregnant again.

### DESPERATE AND DEPENDENT

Then, in 2013, the owner sold the building.

We looked and looked but only found a one-bedroom sublet for \$1400 a month—more than double what we'd been paying. A few months after moving in, we discovered that the woman subletting to us had robbed us and never paid the rent. Once again, we had to go.

I was eight months pregnant. All the efforts to keep or find a home led me to lose my job.

For the next five months we were homeless, staying with friends and family. At times, there wasn't room for all of us, and my children's father would sleep in his truck.

Twice, we went into the shelter. But when roaches crawled out of the refrigerator, we went back to depending on friends and family. In 2016, we paid a realtor \$1250 for a one-bedroom for me, my husband and our four boys. I was just grateful to have a place of our own.

### HARD TO MOVE FORWARD

I want people to know that in this country, even when you're working, you can go through so much just trying to keep your children in a home.

If we want parents to work and children to thrive, we need to do a better job assisting families who are trying to make it keep their homes and families together. ■