

Uplifting Every Voice

Together we can change the perception of parents created by the child welfare system

BY DINAH ORTIZ-ADAMES

IT WAS A KNOCK on my door in the middle of the night in 1999 that altered the trajectory of my life. I was residing in a family shelter with my 2, 4 and 6-year-old boys when it happened. I looked through the peephole and saw an African-American man and woman. They were caseworkers from New York City's Administration for Children's Services (ACS).

They told me they were there to remove my children because I used illicit substances. They walked right past me and ordered me to wake my children so they could do a "body check" for marks or bruises. My boys were afraid, but one by one they lifted their pajama tops, dropped their pajama bottoms and twirled around so the strangers could search their little bodies. I felt helpless.

The workers then gave me two slips of paper: a referral to take a urine toxicology the next morning and a directive to go to ACS for a meeting about whether I was fit to parent my children. The idea of living without my boys was unfathomable—they are the air I breathe. At one point, I told the workers that they would have to carry my children out in body bags. Instead of acknowledging my pain and desperation, they told me I was crazy and would have to undergo an evaluation.

They didn't remove my children, but said that they would do so if I failed to follow their directives. The themes of compliance,



Dinah Ortiz-Adames

PHOTO BY JENA CUMBO

submission and obedience that would permeate my 7-year battle with ACS began that night.

INVADED AND DEGRADED

There was no part of my life that wasn't picked over by the system. My children's doctors knew who ACS was and why they were in my life. Workers went to every shelter I stayed in to speak with case planners. When I tried to go back to school, the caseworker introduced herself to my advisor.

I had never felt so degraded in my life.

Those years were filled with meetings and court dates and drug programs and parenting classes and evaluations and more meetings

and court dates.

Every court appearance was an insult to my boys and me. The workers, who were allowed to speak as experts about my family, gave misinformation that was accepted without question by the court. I was silenced into submission, not allowed to speak up about what my family needed.

I never denied my use of drugs, but I did deny that I was a horrible parent because of it. I felt like the judge who was making monumental decisions about my family should know that my boys always had a meal; I never spent money the kids needed on drugs; they always had clothes and were kept safe; and I never did drugs around them.

NO POWER, NO VOICE

My children remained safely with me for several years but I continued to use drugs. It numbed me from thinking about the loss of my mother and family issues I had. That led ACS to request that my children be removed from me. I knew the workers thought that I had chosen drugs over my children and wasn't worth the trouble.

Thinking like a mother, I preemptively sent my boys to live with family members in upstate New York. Another foster care agency was assigned and my family members upstate became my children's foster parents. My children remained upstate for a few years. I saw them often and ended up living with them under the radar for some time, but when the agency found out, they tried to remove them from my family. So I moved out.

After my family was separated, I had countless new workers dictating what I should do and when and how to do it. They always found a reason to say I wasn't complying and would retaliate whenever I did something they disagreed with. Once, when I went to a program of my choosing instead of the one they referred me to, they wouldn't give me transportation to get there. When they set up a time to do a home visit at 3 pm, I'd wait until 4 at which point I would leave. They would respond with unannounced visits.

I felt trapped in a system that wanted me to fail.

Continued on page 2



IN THIS ISSUE

The Power of Parent Advocacy

In this issue, we celebrate the hard work, perseverance and success of the parent advocacy movement and of parents across the country working to end the negative perception and treatment of families affected by the child welfare system.

Parent advocates are working in many different ways to support parents, end unnecessary family separation, challenge system leaders and policymakers to implement reforms that strengthen families and communities, and uplift the voices of everyone affected by the system.

Beyond the magazine, Rise builds parent leadership to drive solutions that parents believe will help their families thrive. We take inspiration and new ideas from parent advocates leading change across the country. We hope this issue will help parents get involved, help advocates learn from one another, and encourage investment in parent leadership.

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FIRST PERSON

Continued from page 1

MATERNAL INSTINCTS

When you are powerless in a system that is tearing your family apart, you hold on to any little ray of hope. My hope and strength came from my boys and the deep and instinctual knowledge that I, as their mother, could not and would not allow strangers to obliterate the years of nurture and love I had provided to my children.

I began to educate myself about the system's policies and obligations to parents, and every time the worker did not act in accordance with them, I would reach out to a supervisor.

A few months after I moved out of my family's upstate home, they moved to Florida with my children and I followed. I was able to fly back and forth to my court dates because they were very far apart. During that time, I found an apartment and a job, and attended drug and anger management programs as well as parenting classes.

ACS attempted to make our move to Florida into a controversy, telling the judge that we moved without permission. But the judge disagreed and ordered ACS to send someone to visit my new home in Florida. If all was good, the children would be returned to me. The home visit went smoothly and after several months the case was closed.

It was as if we had finally been released after being held hostage to the system for years.

WOMEN LIKE ME

We eventually moved back to New York and I interned at National Advocates for Pregnant Women (NAPW). There, I met two wonderful women, Emma Ketteringham and Lynn Paltrow, who offered me unconditional support in building a career. We spent hours talking about what had happened to my family and how we survived. They offered materials to read and a perspective that put what happened to my family into context—child welfare systems nationwide treat families like mine



differently because of our race. The fact that we live in the "hood" where police and caseworker surveillance are a way of life makes us more likely to have child welfare called on us. In white privileged neighborhoods, there's widespread drug use, but children there aren't at risk of being separated from their parents.

I began to reflect on my own experience with child welfare—how it tore me apart, tore my family apart and continues to tear apart communities of color. I met other women who had also lost years with their children. I learned that my story was not unique. It was shared. Every story gave me strength to fight for women like me.

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UPLIFTING EVERY VOICE

For seven of the eight years since ACS was last in my life, I've worked at The Bronx Defenders, a holistic family defense practice that provides high-quality legal representation and support to parents who can't afford lawyers. I served as a parent advocate for several years and recently became the Parent Advocate Supervisor. I train and supervise seven parent advocates.

I have helped hundreds of families maneuver the system. I know how important it is for parents to understand their rights, their choices and the consequences when they have a case. I help them find their voice so that their humanity and importance to their children is seen.

I also speak all over the nation—without reservation—in hopes that those with similar experiences feel emboldened to speak out. I hope we can shift the perception of affected parents so that people will understand that a parent's circumstances do not mean they love or want to protect their children any less than any other parent.

In all my work, I am guided by several principles.

First, we must uplift and center parents' voices. We must really listen to them. As we work to transform this system, parents' stories and solutions must drive this effort.

We must recognize the structural forces at work in the child welfare system. We must not forget the historical context of child welfare and the long-lasting impact it has had on poor communities of color. We must see the institutional racism in this system and work to undo it every day.

We must remember that no parent, in any community, is perfect. And that parents have intrinsic value to their children. Those bonds must be respected in communities like mine, just as they are in more privileged communities. We must look to parents as the experts on their children.

I want the stories of parents to be told in their brutal honesty. We are asked to be humble, to be thankful, to say we appreciate the help. But that is not everyone's experience. It was not mine. My family is strong in spite of the system, not because of it.

I urge parents affected by the system to get involved in the parent advocacy movement. To speak up and speak out and to work alongside all other advocates to create the change they want to see. There is no better voice than that of a parent who has experienced it firsthand. ■

Peer Pressure

Together we can change the perception of parents created by the child welfare system

BY KEYNA FRANKLIN AND JEANETTE VEGA

For decades, parents in the child welfare system have felt powerless, demonized, silenced and alone.

But in some places, parents have united to use their shared experience to support one another and work for change.

Today, according to the Birth Parent National Network, there are organizations of child welfare-affected parents in California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Iowa, Ohio, Oregon, New York, New Jersey, Minnesota and Washington.

In Iowa, parents who have successfully navigated the child welfare system mentor parents with open cases in all of the state's 99 counties, paid for by the state. In Washington, a lobbying group made up entirely of child welfare-affected parents has helped to pass over 20 pieces of legislation. And this year in Minnesota, when a child welfare-affected father filed a federal civil rights lawsuit, he was able to bring out hundreds of parents to rallies to speak out against injustices.

Yet most places in this country don't have any parent advocates, and where there is advocacy, funding is limited.

Here, Suzanne Sellers, executive director of Families Organizing for Child Welfare Justice, a nonprofit organization in Chicago; Corey Best, a family engagement consultant and public speaker based in Florida; David Tobis, author of From Pariahs to Partners: How Parents and Their Allies Changed New York City's Child Welfare System; and Meryl Levine, senior associate with the National Alliance of Children's Trust and Prevention Funds, which coordinates the Birth Parent National Network (BPNN), discuss the origins of parent advocacy, its growth and the barriers to growth.

Q: Why was there a need for parent advocacy?

Sellers: I was two years sober when my parental rights were wrongfully terminated in 1999. During my case, there were no parents that I could talk to so I could find out how to navigate the situation. Being exposed to all the different agendas and personalities in the system, the court proceedings and big words and terminology was just too difficult. I didn't have anybody to help me.

Tobis: In the 1990s in New York City, we started to organize parents through the Child Welfare Fund to give them a greater voice to push the system to change. That led to the creation of the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP), where parents were trained to help other parents. Then national foundations, beginning with the Annie E. Casey Foundation and then Casey Family Programs, started to do the same.

Levine: Things changed when studies began to show that parent participation in child welfare programs could contribute to the reunification of families and lead to a reduction in the re-occurrence of maltreatment.

Q: What forms of parent advocacy exist and what impact have they had?

Best: There's grassroots advocacy. There are also advocates who work within child welfare to help parents navigate the system. Finally, there are advocates whose goal is to change policy.

Tobis: It was pressure from parents that got the inclusion of parent advocates in child safety conferences throughout New York City, ensuring that parents' voices are heard early in their cases when they face losing their children.

Levine: Organizations like the Birth Parent National Network train parents to work together to build a cohesive and unified national voice. Policymakers and child welfare leaders now request that parents serve on committees and decision-making bodies.

Best: Most recently, there's the inclusion of parent voice in the Family First Act. Parents from across the country, myself included, spent two years going back and forth to Capitol Hill testifying about the need to do something different to keep kids safely at home.

Q: What are the biggest barriers to advocacy's growth?

Sellers: In Chicago, there are two parents paid by the Department of Children and Family Services who work at the court as Parent Partners, but they're only funded to give Parent Partner services for 90 days; child welfare cases can be in court for up to two years!

I work outside the system and my biggest challenge is funding. My board donates but primarily I have a full-time job and I put some of my paycheck into the organization.

Because of child welfare's stigma, it's also hard to find allies.

I've tried partnering with criminal justice organizations to no avail. I think they think child welfare would only slow down a train that's already moving at a nice pace.

I've also tried to work with child protection here in Illinois, but because I'm not afraid to speak out against injustice, I'm seen as someone who would rock the boat and I'm pushed to the side.

Q: What needs to change?

Levine: There needs to be more research showing the effectiveness of peer-to-peer strategies and more funding so that parents can be involved in the development of policies and practices that impact families. The passage of the Family First Act gives us an opportunity to re-think the role of parent advocates to work in prevention.

We need to publicize success stories and show that parents are not monsters.

Sellers: We need national associations to underwrite us as trained, professional advocates. I don't know whether that would be a social work organization or human services organization, but if we got certified by a professional association, child welfare professionals would know that we are qualified.

We also need parent advocates in positions of authority—executive directors and deputy directors who have authority to make change within systems. Right now, parents working for the child protective system are in entry-level positions.

Tobis: Parent advocacy has humanized parents. But across the country the system is still very punitive. There is so much further to go so that parents have a strong say in creating a system that will benefit rather than punish them. ■

A Fight that Grew From the Roots

Minnesota parents take to the streets, the courts and the legislature

In Minnesota this year, parents and their allies began protesting what they say are routine violations of families' rights as well as bias that leads to the overrepresentation of black and Native American families in the child welfare system. In Minnesota, a black child is three to five times more likely to be in foster care than a white child, and a Native American child is 17 times more likely to be in foster care, according to Kelis Houston, chair of the Minneapolis NAACP's child protection committee, and Dwight Mitchell, a child welfare-affected father and founder of Family Preservation Foundation, Inc., who filed a federal civil rights lawsuit against what he says is the unconstitutional seizure of children.

Their efforts brought out hundreds of parents to rallies and led to proposed legislation that has been covered by newspapers and television.

Q: How did you get involved in organizing child welfare-affected parents?

Houston: I worked at the emergency placement unit of Hennepin County's central intake shelter for five years. It's the first stop for children just removed. Almost 100% of the children were African American and they remained with us much longer than their Caucasian peers. I spent time getting to know some of the parents and I realized, "These are good parents."

I also served as guardian-ad-litem for three years and witnessed blatant racial bias. For example, I was assigned to an African-American mother with infant twins. She was locked out of her home on a hot summer day and her babies became overheated. She and a relative brought the babies' temperatures down with cold compresses but not before CPS was notified. Her children were

immediately removed and placed with non-relatives. In contrast, a Caucasian mother used illegal substances while driving with her child and crashed her vehicle. CPS was notified but the child was not removed until her third or fourth DUI. Her child was placed in relative care and returned much sooner than the African-American babies. I witnessed this trend throughout my entire time as guardian.



Dwight Mitchell

Mitchell: I work as an international management consultant. I was in Minnesota working. My middle son, who was 11, was acting up and I punished him, with simple corporal punishment, on the behind. The next day, my son told his babysitter and she called child protective services. They removed all three of my children. They returned two after five months, saying there was no evidence of abuse. But they kept my middle son for 22 months. My kids have never been the same.

Q: Can you describe your organizing efforts?

Houston: Child protective services is able to get away with what they do because parents don't know that whole communities are facing this. I've been joining parents together and bringing them to the legislature to testify. We've given countless interviews to reporters. We've been

really trying to amp up awareness around racial disproportionality here. We had a rally at the capital to say black children matter.

Mitchell: I knew what was done to my family was unconstitutional, so in September 2017, I started an association called Stop Child Protection From Legally Kidnapping Children—over 5,000 parents have joined as members in the last 5-months—and I filed a federal civil rights lawsuit on behalf of my association. Our biggest rally was on October 9 in front of the federal courthouse; 200 families showed up with signs and banners and matching shirts. One of the things I said in my speech is, "You can't tell me there isn't something wrong with this system when so many people are saying, 'Me too, me too, me too.'"

I believe one of the primary reasons I've received so much media attention is that I was able to present the media with a lot of evidence. I submitted 85 pages of official Dakota county documentation that showed that everything I was saying was true. When I filed the lawsuit, 40 parents from our association filed affidavits stating that the same unconstitutional practices happened to them.

Q: Dwight, can you tell us about what you hope your lawsuit accomplishes?

Mitchell: If we win, parents would be told their rights at the first encounter with CPS. They'd be told, "If you can't get a lawyer, we'll provide you with one for your initial hearing." Right now, I think every parent was like me. They didn't have a lawyer at the initial Emergency Protective Custody hearing. They were told, "Come to court tomorrow to talk about your kid." None of us knew that we could present evidence to the judge to

refute the allegations or file a motion to dismiss the case to get our kids back immediately. This first hearing is the most unconstitutional aspect of the entire proceeding. They take your children without giving you an opportunity to present a defense.

The law is also vague and written so broadly that they can remove your child for anything. If the lawsuit is successful, if there's no physical harm to a child, then the law would say that they cannot remove the child.



Kelis Houston

Q: Kelis, can you tell us about the African American Family Preservation Act (AAFPA) and why you've been working to get it passed?

Houston: First it would make sure social workers made active efforts to keep black children at home, and when out-of-home placement is necessary, immediately place children with kin. Any party to the case could petition the court for reinstatement of parental rights. Right now, the only person who can is the county attorney who asked to terminate those rights in the first place. If this law passes, we believe we'll have a drastic reduction in disparity, more families kept together and better outcomes for our children. ■

Collaboration Is Our Key

How parents in Washington State are changing hearts, minds and laws

In 2007, Children's Home Society of Washington held a statewide summit for child welfare leadership. Parents who had been involved with the system made up 10% of participants. The keynote speaker, Brenda Lopez, "stunned everyone with her story of losing her kids and then getting them back and becoming a transformational person," says Nancy Roberts-Brown, former director of Catalyst for Kids, a statewide coalition affiliated with the Children's Home Society.

That summit led to two parent leadership efforts: the Washington State Parent Ally Committee (PAC), which focuses on statewide policy advocacy, and the Parents For Parents program, which provides peer mentoring for families in the dependency court system in 14 counties.

Here Roberts-Brown, who helped create both programs, and Alise Hegle, advocacy lead for Children's Home Society, describe parent leadership in Washington State.

Hegle: While my case was still open, I was invited to observe one of the PAC meetings. I was really nervous but I wanted to see if I had a role in any of this. I remember recognizing that all of the pain of my past could now be used to help change the trajectory of the parents behind me.

When my case closed, I began mentoring parents, literally the next day, through the King County Parents For Parents program.

It's powerful if you can imagine a room of parents like myself who've been through intense personal pain and trauma—and now we're on the other side, walking families through the system, seeing social and racial injustices, and then identifying opportunities for change and ways to raise up parents' voices at the policy level.



Alise Hegle and her daughter

CHANGING LAWS, CHANGING MINDS

In the last 7 years, PAC has helped pass over 20 state legislative items and budget reform efforts. We've been writing our own bills and following them through all the way to the implementation stage. And that doesn't include all the other bills where legislators have said, "Wait, have we heard from a parent?"

An early bill was about background checks, to make it easier to place children with relatives. Another was to give incarcerated parents more time to reunify with their children. A bill instituting Family Assessment Response (FAR) changes how investigations are handled so that parents facing more minor allegations aren't facing a really scary investigation. Through a bill passed in 2015, the Parents For Parents program was funded by the state with a goal of expanding to every county by 2021.

When we're developing our advocacy agenda, we look at: 1) What are the barriers parents are experiencing in multiple communities across the state? 2) What are issues other organizations are not thinking about? There's always a battle. We've moved the needle forward in one area, but there's always more to do.

The biggest themes are: housing, parent-child visits, incarcerated parents' rights, racial and gender inequity, and prevention to keep families from entering the system.

PARENTS AT EVERY TABLE

Roberts-Brown: The overall goal is that parents affected by the system be part of the team as a matter of course. People now say, "We don't want to have this meeting if we don't have the parent voice. We have to know how this is going to impact parents."

Hegle: What's needed now is funding, funding, funding. We have parents with all of this passion. But people also have kids at home and not a lot of money. If parents are experts, they should be compensated accordingly. We're making a lot of strides funding direct service work, but if you have the word advocacy in there, it's much harder.

Parents also need a lot of training and supervision. One of the hardest things for me is trying to be a change agent within a system that makes my heart break. Parents are very, very stigmatized in the child welfare system. Working with our Parent Allies, I see times when their whole demeanor looks completely different. Often it has to do with the burden of

what's happening at the ground level to families, which is very hard and demeaning in many, many of our cases.

BUILDING POTENTIAL

Roberts-Brown: The impact parents can have also depends on the system. If parents are welcomed and trusted and listened to, then they can be totally instrumental in advocating for parents. If someone brings in a parent but doesn't believe in parent advocacy, that can be an impossible situation.

Hegle: When we first come into a brand new community to begin a Parents For Parents program, we reach some resistance—some fear and biases come up. It really takes those professionals who are change agents in a community to say, "This is a great thing."

Collaboration is a big key to our success. Parents working in the system have to work even harder to show professionalism. We may have to deal with really hard things being said and done to us, but we just have to keep reminding people that love conquers all and that parents really can spearhead a movement.

Roberts-Brown: I will never forget, when FAR was becoming law, one of the key child welfare legislators came to one of our meetings. She was a very strong child advocate. She was a very strong foster parent advocate. But she was pretty wary of parents. She was going to spend 15-20 minutes with us. We had 15 or so parents at the meeting who introduced themselves one by one and told their stories. Her jaw dropped. Her eyes opened. She took copious notes. She spent an hour with us, and she left the room an advocate for parents. ■



Nancy Roberts-Brown

I Needed an Ally

My case changed when my parent advocate believed me

BY REBECCA MOHAMMED

I AM 51 YEARS OLD with four children—Adam, 31; Osman, 27; Julio, 17; and Samantha, 10. Samantha came home to me from foster care five months ago.

Ever since I was a child, I've struggled with depression and addiction.

My childhood was painful. My mother died when I was 7. One day she went into the hospital, never to come back out. I remember the cops at the door to say that my mother had passed. I was in disbelief.

My mother's first child, Dorothy, came and took us away from the stepfather that never loved us and that sexually abused my sister. We were finally free. But not even one year later, Dorothy passed away in the house with us. My sisters and I were put in foster care. Life was not the way I thought it would be.

FIGHTING FOR LIFE

My childhood taught me that I had to be tough. I never talked about seeing my sister being sexually abused by my stepfather. I felt that no one would believe me. I learned to fight so that older children wouldn't mess with me. To survive in foster care, I tried to hide feelings from myself.

They say that living by your own mistakes is the best way to find your way. But without guidance, you can be leading yourself to disaster.

Getting married at 19 to a man I didn't love was the biggest mistake of my life.

I finally got the courage to leave with my sons but I had no clue what it would be like to live on my own with two children depending on me. I tried until I couldn't deal anymore. Then my sister came and took my sons, and I went from guilt into a deep depression. That made me start to use



Rebecca Mohammed, Graham Windham President Jess Dannhauser and Parent Advocate Peggy Gibbs

GARBAGE AND GUILT

When my third son, Julio, was born, he went to live with my sister from birth. I went into treatment to give myself a chance at life, and I was clean for 10 years, but I did not open up fully in treatment. I left still holding on to a lot of garbage and guilt, and I relapsed.

Eventually ACS removed my youngest child, Samantha. That day I thought I was going to die right on the spot.

I couldn't hide from myself any more if I wanted to bring my daughter home. But I did not want to go into treatment.

Treatment seemed never ending. Plus, the first program I went to was dirty and disgusting. The second one had a lot of active addicts. I couldn't see myself progressing there.

For 18 months I was visiting my daughter but I was not making progress on my case, and my case planner and I were always arguing. Believe me, we had clashes. Some people can be angry and not show it, but I'm not one of those people.

The workers were not trying to accept that attitude from me. My worker would say to me, "We can end this visit!" I even felt that the workers wanted me to overreact so they could write it down in a report.

NOT COMING ACROSS THE RIGHT WAY

My caseworker would not hear that I really did need a different kind of program. I also knew that I was too aggressive when I tried to talk to her.

Finally I spoke to the parent advocate at the agency, Peggy Gibbs. She took me to the side and we talked about what was going on. Peggy told me, "Listen, I'm sending you to Greenhope." When I went there, I realized that was just what I needed.

Greenhope is an all-women's program. I needed a place where I could spill my guts without a guy trying to judge me, date me or distract me. (When you're in a program and you're around men, they know you're vulnerable.) There were some women

there that didn't like me because I was still being aggressive. But it felt like a safe place for me to work on myself.

It was a battle within a battle trying to hold onto my sanity while I opened up a Pandora's box and let everything out that I'd kept in for so long. My therapist helped me be free with it, and cry and cry.

Greenhope also helped me with my anger. There was a group called "How Not to React." Someone would act like a worker, telling you, "You're not going to get your child back." We would role play. Not reacting is hard for me, but it helped me stay calm to remember that the worker is not the judge, and they don't make the decision, no matter what they write down on paper.

MY WORDS FINALLY HAD POWER

Still, my relationship with my worker did not improve. She didn't seem to believe that I was going to my program and complying with the agency.

Ms. Gibbs suggested that I go to the ACS Office of Advocacy, which helps parents and youth in foster care with their cases. They did an investigation, and a new worker was put on my case.

Soon after, I got unsupervised visits, then overnights and then weekends. I still didn't see my daughter coming home to me, though. My case seemed never-ending.

But on October 10, 2015, 10 months after starting with my new caseworker, by the grace of God, my daughter returned home.

When my parent advocate stepped in at the moments when I was stuck, what made the biggest difference for me was being believed. Unlike when I was a child, I could speak up, and my words finally had power. ■

Writing a Wrong

The courage of dedicated advocates can correct the injustices in the system

BY LATAGIA COPELAND-TYRONCE

I UNJUSTLY LOST 7 of my 8 children to the child welfare system because I was seen as unfit because I was a poor, African-American mother in an abusive relationship.

During my fight for my family, I discovered how child welfare professionals who don't know you or your children can decide that you are a disease that your children need to be cured of.

Now I am determined to bring about change by writing about the harm that the child welfare system causes in the black community and advocating for policy change.

Nationwide, African-American children are 15 percent of the child population but 34 percent of the foster care population. They are more than twice as likely to enter foster care as white children.

For my family, these statistics are personal.

KIDNAPPED

It was early 2013 when I was separated from my six daughters, ages 9 months to 9 years.

I was 26, going through one tragic and traumatic experience after another. My mother, my only true support, passed away, and then I was illegally evicted from my home in Toledo, Ohio. I was also in a draining, 10-year abusive relationship with my children's father.

Even so, I was an honors student majoring in nursing.

I tried my best to shield my children from their father's violence by putting on a happy face. I didn't realize how much the relationship affected them until after they were taken and started therapy.

I also didn't know what my daughters eventually told my sister—that their father was sexually abusing them. My daughters didn't tell me

because their father threatened them. My sister didn't tell me, either, but took my daughters straight to CPS. Then she disappeared from my children's lives.

CPS informed me that my children had been taken into protective custody. I was inconsolable.



Latagia Copeland-Tyronce

DEVASTATING DISCLOSURE

CPS accused me of using drugs and allowing my children's father to maltreat them. These allegations were false. A week later I learned about the sexual abuse allegation from investigators.

My sense of guilt and hurt for my girls was overwhelming. I left my children's father immediately. He was arrested two weeks into the case, pled guilty and was sentenced to 30 years in prison.

Once the shock and outrage subsided, I concentrated on moving forward with my girls as best I could. But CPS treated me like a co-perpetrator, not a victim of domestic violence.

CPS also refused to provide me services or assist me with finding

housing. I found my own services within the first eight weeks of my case, submitted to a mental health assessment even though I had no history of mental illness, and didn't miss a single visit with my girls.

My girls continually expressed how much they wanted to come home.

In spite of all I did, a termination of parental rights petition was filed against me less than five months into my case. The petition claimed that I had continued my relationship with the offending parent and alleged neglect, mental health issues and active involvement in the maltreatment of my children. CPS even used the jailhouse testimony of my children's father against me. He claimed that I would be unable to care for all of my children alone. I was dumbfounded and furious.

I immediately filed complaints against the supervisor and caseworker. My complaints were ignored. The court granted the TPR four months later.

HEARTBREAKING GOODBYES

I can only compare my final visit with my girls to a funeral. My children were bawling. They wanted to come home. The caseworker forcefully marched them away.

I appealed the termination to the Sixth District Court of Appeals.

A few months later, I gave birth to my first son, who was promptly removed from me despite being healthy, from a different father and having a safe environment ready for him.

I fought for my son. I submitted to random drug tests and another mental health assessment. I also continued to appeal my daughters' TPR—acting as my own attorney—all the way up to the Ohio Supreme Court, but they refused to hear my case.

That rejection broke me. Then CPS petitioned for TPR on my son. It was quickly approved.

RIPPED FROM EACH OTHER

It has been four-and-a-half-years since I've seen my girls, now 14, 12, 10, 9, 7, and 6, and three-and-a-half years since I've seen my son, 4.

I don't know what has happened to them.

There isn't a day that goes by that I don't love and long for my children.

I eventually left Ohio, got married and welcomed a son, now 2. It's the love and support of my husband, my children and a few friends and family that have gotten me through.

I have managed to achieve some measure of dignity knowing that my children and I didn't deserve to be ripped from each other, and that I did everything possible to be reunited with them.

A CALL TO ACTION

I have devoted the past five years to advocating for parental rights and family preservation. I have studied child welfare policy and published policy analysis papers online via SlideShare. I write social justice articles on my blog, Tagi's World, and my work has been featured in BlackMattersUs and published on Medium. I am also an active member of several social justice organizations.

I advocate for the creation of the African American Child Welfare Act (similar to the federal Indian Child Welfare Act, created to protect children from our country's long history of destroying Native American families). My goal is to help change state and federal legislation so that what happened to my family cannot happen to another. ■

Standing Strong

The knowledge, skills and peer support parents need to lead

Supporting parents and working to change the system brings meaning to advocates' lives. But it's also painful work.

Here, Rise Training Director Jeanette Vega, Senior Parent Leader Nancy Fortunato and Parent Leader Keyna Franklin explain their own journeys and the support they believe all parents need to lead change. Both Jeanette and Nancy began at NYC's Child Welfare Organizing Project, the first parent advocacy and peer support organization in the country.

Fortunato: When I was a parent affected by the child welfare system, I understood what it was like to feel powerless, shamed and judged, but I had no knowledge of how to advocate for myself and my family.

I entered CWOP's parent advocacy training program because my experience with the system left me wanting to empower myself and give back to parents like me. It was an inspirational experience. There were about 10 parents and we quickly bonded because we all knew what it was like to have ACS come into our lives.

Speakers came to teach us the history of the system, how it works and how bias and racism affect families of color and the LGBTQ community, while lawyers explained the legal aspects of the system. The training helped me understand that many families in my community fight adversaries in many systems, like the police, the schools and mental health services. It helped me put myself in the parents' shoes while also giving me the ability to work with professionals in the system.

Most of all, it gave me a feeling

of support, and that gave me the courage to stand up for myself and my family and to fight for other parents and their rights.

THE POWER OF OUR VOICES

Vega: Attending rallies and going to City Hall with CWOP to give and hear testimony helped us understand the big picture of what we were fighting for. We learned to not be afraid to share our perception of the system.

Through CWOP's training, I also began writing for Rise. I was very reluctant to tell my story. Most people I knew didn't even know my son had been in foster care! As I began to write, my tears would roll down. But other advocates encouraged me to share my experience. When I finally told the heartfelt story of my son's removal, I could feel my heart not hurt as much.

Fortunato: When I wrote my first

story, the challenging part was going back to that moment when ACS was involved with my family. Some of those memories you really don't want to remember. But it was a healing process as well. It sat with me, and then it hit me, "I'm really done and it's over." I saw that I was able to stand strong in the midst of chaos.

Seeing on paper how I had overcome all those struggles also helped me better understand how to build other parents up.

At Rise I've also participated in two public speaking workshops. It was challenging because I'm not an eyes-on-me type. But the public speaking director taught us breathing techniques. Sometimes she'd put a song on and have us stand in the center of the group and move to the rhythm. It was to get us comfortable being in the center without feeling like, "Oh my God, I'm going to mess up." Those

workshops gave me the courage to project my voice.

WORKING IN THE SYSTEM

Vega: In 2008, CWOP started training parents to work as Community Representatives in Child Safety Conferences, where the decision is made whether to remove a child from home. The Community Reps help parents advocate for themselves. During my first conference, I had flashbacks of my own case, but CWOP prepared us for that and taught us how to focus on helping the parent.

Because of CWOP's training, I knew what ACS considered a safety concern. I was able to coach parents into committing to address those risks so that their children wouldn't be removed. I used my book of resources to call service providers from right inside the conference.

When ACS made a decision that we didn't agree would benefit a



Rise's Jeanette Vega, Nancy Fortunato and Keyna Franklin

parent, we were trained to call people in authority to discuss it. At first, we were seen as overly aggressive, but over time ACS saw that our work helped bring down removals in our community.

After that, I worked for three years as an advocate at a foster care agency. It was empowering to help families reunify and have my work really mean something. But it was also difficult.

I was viewed by some of the workers as a former child abuser coming to help other abusers get away with it. It was hard to see the judgments. It was also harder to gain parents' trust because following protocol sometimes made parents feel as if I was there for the agency and not them. CWOP taught us to say, "I'm not ACS. I am here as a parent advocate to support you and your case."

Fortunato: I also worked as a Community Representative. When I had my first client, I was very nervous. I didn't want the parent to see me as another person getting into her business. My training allowed me to step back and remember that I was there to be a support, clarify information, help parents stay calm, be open-minded and get whatever resources they needed.

COPING WITH EMOTIONAL EXPOSURE

Vega: Four years ago I started working at Rise as a parent leader, and now I'm the Training Director. We train child welfare professionals to build positive relationships with parents, work with parent advocates across the system to bring their ideas into Rise's advocacy, and speak publicly about ways to reform the system.

Fortunato: At Rise, I present regularly to lawyers, caseworkers and CPS workers, judges, CASA. People need to know what parents go through when they are facing the child welfare system. For me, the message is to treat people with humanity and respect and to understand that people should not be guilty if they made a mistake but should be lifted up to overcome their challenges.

At the beginning, the hardest part for me was reading other people's stories out loud that were part of our presentations. Those stories really touch your soul; they kept bringing me back to my own moments of struggle. There were times when I would hold my breath and just say to myself, "You're not going to cry right now."

A few of us always present together, and when we notice one of us getting emotional, we gently put a hand on a shoulder, or say, "You got it. Just take your time." After presentations, we go to a coffee shop to talk about how we felt so that we can go home in peace.

My training allowed me to step back and remember that I was there to be a support, clarify information and help parents stay calm, be open-minded and get whatever resources they needed.

Vega: At times I've been criticized for working too closely with the system, allowing the system to use my voice as an image of change when the system hasn't really changed that much. It's complicated because there are times when I also ask myself, "What am I really doing being

so connected to child welfare staff?" Still, I believe that I am influencing the system from the inside. I believe my voice needs to go as high as I can take it so that people in authority understand how we can do so much more for families.

SUPPORTING PARENT ADVOCATES CITYWIDE

Franklin: One part of my work at Rise is assisting Jeanette in running Rise's Parent Advocate Leadership Group, a group of 12 advocates who work at different foster care and legal agencies throughout NYC and come together once a month.

We talk about what steps we'd like the city to take to change conditions for parents facing the child welfare system and the role parent advocates should play. We want to see advocates funded to be out in the community, like schools, shelters and hospitals, to keep families from ever coming into the system.

We've also pressed ACS to fund more parent advocates. Right now, many agencies only have one advocate for hundreds of parents. Advocates would have more impact working within foster care agencies if they could meet parents from the beginning and stay all the way to the end, even after reunification.

It's important that ACS and the foster care agencies hear from parents and advocates like we do at Rise. We encourage foster care agencies to get feedback from parents, and have parent councils, where agency leadership can hear directly from parents what's working and what's not. We've also asked ACS to start a Parent Advisory Council that brings parent advocates together regularly to share their insights and work with leadership on change.

In Rise's Leadership Group, each

meeting, we eat. We laugh. We make jokes. Advocates talk about their advocacy journeys, which help them reflect on why they stay committed to this work. They also share what's on their minds and discover what they're thinking in common.

Fortunato: As a parent advocate who has seen many sides of this system, I know how much parent leaders need community. We need places where we can share our struggles and ideas, and decide as a group how to make systemic change. When parent advocates don't have that, we can feel just like parents in the system: powerless, and like there's no justice.

Vega: All the work parent advocates do to change the system—from supporting parents, to advocating for legal change, to speaking out about what's broken in the system, and even to letting the system know when it's done something that has helped—is needed. The more parents stand together the louder our voices will be, and that we will help create a true system of support for families. ■

Rights of Passage

Legislation is needed to protect due process for parents

Joyce McMillan is a child welfare-affected parent and the coordinator of We Are Parents Too at Sinergia NY, an organization that supports and advocates for people with disabilities and their families. The former program director of the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP) in NYC, McMillan explains why she believes the only way to really protect families is through community action and legislation.

Q: How did you become a parent advocate and what roles have you had?

A: I joined the CWOP Parent Leadership Curriculum in 2014, and two years later I became the organization's program director. I wanted to create programs that would educate parents and enable them to advocate for themselves and for others. I also created a speakers' series with the New School's Center for New York City Affairs to elevate parents' voices by having them engage in robust conversation about the child welfare system and other systems that violate the civil rights of poor families of color.

Q: What made you focus on legislative change?

A: Many advocates were saying that the system was changing and that things were getting better for families, but to me those changes were in practice and practice is always at the discretion of the foster care system. There are almost 8,500 children in the foster care system throughout New York City's five boroughs. That's life-shattering for families and devastating to their communities. I want to do more than help families navigate the system after their children have been taken. I want to prevent their children from being taken—unless absolutely necessary—by establishing legal rights for parents and families.

I've put together a coalition to create legislation that would take people indicated for neglect off of the State Central Registry after five years, instead of having them on there until the youngest child in the home at the time of the case turns 28. Right now, having your name on the registry carries almost the same weight as a felony conviction. That record can block parents from getting housing or cause them to lose it. It can also

be a barrier to gainful employment or moving up in their current careers. Yet most parents on the registry have never been afforded an attorney or even spent a day in court.



Joyce McMillan

I am also working on drafting legislation regarding Miranda Rights for parents because there is no due process in the child welfare system. Case managers can knock on your door, enter your home, strip search your children and interrogate you and your children. They can look in your cabinets and search your house for anything that they decide is a risk to your child's safety. They are empowered to remove your children

at their discretion. Removing children based on what might happen in the future is like arresting someone because you think they are about to commit a crime.

If parents are going to be treated like criminals, they should have the right to an attorney the minute CPS knocks on the door. They should have the right to remain silent until their attorney is present without it being viewed by CPS as them having something to hide. I would also make it mandatory for CPS to videotape the questioning of children so that there is actual evidence of what they were asked, what they answered and the context of their answers.

Q: What are the steps to creating legislative change?

A: You need to identify allies. You also need to educate people so that they know the importance of supporting the legislation. You need to find a lawmaker to back your legislation. The process could take years and not go anywhere or it could lead to major reform, but you stick with it because our children's well-being is at stake. ■

The Many Faces of Parent Leadership

Across the country, parents are leading change in child welfare. Meaningful parent leadership in child welfare reform is not limited to one-on-one advocacy. Nationwide, parent leadership includes:

- Direct peer support: Such as parent advocates at foster care and legal agencies;
- Peer information and guidance: Providing material such as Rise's magazine;
- Policy and practice briefs: Writing or co-developing influential papers;
- Training: Parent-developed and parent-led trainings for professionals to understand parents' perspectives and work effectively with parents;
- Input: Serving on committees, task forces, etc. to inform policy and practice;
- Research design: Partnering with researchers to design and implement research;
- Practice model development: Co-designing and co-leading the implementation of new programs;
- Political Advocacy: From sharing stories as part of a professional-led campaign to change laws or policies to parent-led community organizing. ■
- Consulting: Offering guidance or co-creating practice tools, training curricula, etc.;

Someone By My Side

I felt totally alone before I met my agency's parent advocate

BY ANONYMOUS

MY CASE BEGAN in 2013 when I was 22. CPS removed my oldest daughter, who was 18 months, because my mother called them. She'd found out that I was pregnant again and had stopped taking my psychiatric medication. I was also stuck in an abusive relationship with the father of my unborn child.

After my daughter was taken, I was alone and scared and turned to drugs. I stopped going to therapy and missed visits with my daughter.

I knew I needed help but the workers made me feel stupid for staying in a DV relationship and for having a second child.

It wasn't until a year into my case, after my second daughter had been born and also removed,

that a parent advocate came into my life and lifted me up.

It was a cold, rainy day in March. I had a conference scheduled at the foster care agency. My abusive ex was scheduled for a separate conference with the same team, but for my safety he was supposed to arrive later. When I arrived, he was there.

Immediately my chest felt tight and I couldn't breathe. I began shouting: "I want a supervisor. A caseworker."

A woman walked over and introduced herself as the agency's parent advocate. She asked me if I wanted to take a walk.

She took me outside and we spoke about why I was upset. She told me that she had been in my situation

herself and reminded me that I was the most important person to my kids.

After I calmed down, she walked me back inside and joined me in the conference. To my surprise, she told my caseworker and supervisor that it was unfair that I hadn't been offered an advocate earlier in my case because I obviously needed support.

Later, when the agency director spoke of my inconsistency in visiting my kids, my advocate noted the many services I had to complete and said it was clear that I was overwhelmed.

Many times, she tried to get the agency to see how I was feeling. I wasn't used to people standing up for me. It meant the world to me. ■

It's Hard to Witness Day-to-Day Practices that Hurt Parents

BY ANONYMOUS

I've been a parent advocate at a foster care agency for many years but my time working one-on-one with parents is limited. So is my power to change agency practice.

One mom who I worked with for over a year needed support, stability and maybe just a better therapist. I listened to her pain and I invited her into our support group. But I wasn't regularly included in her case planning.

That made it harder to help when her reputation was built into a negative one. She became defensive, and rightly so, and ended up surrendering her rights.

She still keeps in touch with me, and shares that she has contact with her child. But it was painful to see that words hurt and can destroy people's spirits.

It also upsets me when the agency allows foster parents to cancel visits without a backup plan; when they ask to change the goal from return-to-parent to adoption in the 12th month while the parent has been waiting for three or four months for services; that they don't give parents full information about what a "conditional surrender" of their parental rights really means; and that "concurrent planning" for both reunification and adoption is often not clearly explained.

I do what I can. I tell parents, "Make sure you get your driver's license, have a good car and gas, and know the road you are about to get on, because you just entered the race of your life." ■

Creating a Global Community of Parent Advocates

ACROSS THE GLOBE, parents find themselves on the outside of systems that make decisions about them and their families, just like they are here in the United States. And just like in the United States, poor parents and parents from ethnic and racial minorities are more likely to lose their children. That's true in rich countries and in poor countries. In fact, recent visitors to Rise from Finland and Norway shocked us when they told us that there are more children in Finland and Norway in out-of-home care than in NYC, even though both countries have fewer people than NYC and less poverty.

In the last few years, David Tobis, who helped to start the parent advocacy movement in New York City, has been speaking with government officials and parent advocacy groups across the United Kingdom and in Finland about ways to involve parents in child welfare decision-

making and reform. In December, eight child welfare-affected parents from the United States, Scotland,

by involvement with child protection; how to fight forced adoption; how to create a wide range of voluntary



Advocates at the first network meeting

England and Australia, as well as professionals working to reform those systems, met in the city of Edinburgh, Scotland, to launch the International Parent Advocate Network (IPAN). Also included in that network are parents and their allies from Ireland, Wales, Finland, Norway, Bulgaria and Belarus.

The network also discussed how to stop child welfare systems from blaming individual parents for societal issues such as poverty and gender-based violence; how to combat shame and stigma caused

support for families; and how to make sure parents are at every table of every system that makes decisions that affect children and parents.

Tobis reflected: "Children's rights and their voices have been a significant part of efforts to improve child welfare systems internationally. The voice of parents has largely been absent from those reform efforts in most countries. IPAN will help ensure that the voice of parents will be loud and clear, that the rights of parents will be respected, and the needs of their families will be met." ■

Paying It Forward

As a peer mentor, I help fathers and change the system

When child protective services entered Dustin McClard's life in 2014, he was using and selling drugs, and facing the possibility of prison. His twins were removed shortly after birth and remained in foster care for three months while he went to treatment.

Now McClard works as a peer mentor at a family service agency in Portland, Oregon. He spoke to Rise about how his mentor, Tim, helped him get sober and become a peer mentor to other fathers in the child welfare system

From the very beginning of my case I was in fix-it mode. I wanted to go 100 miles per hour in the right direction. I was fortunate to get probation, so I wanted things to change in a hurry. Everything was a checklist to me; my mentality was check, check, check, get everything done.

I thought I could do it all by myself. My fix-it mode mentality was good motivation but I was going too fast. Substance abuse recovery doesn't work that way. That mentality can be dangerous to recovery.

MEETING A MENTOR

Tim was assigned to be my mentor when I was 5 months into recovery. He showed me how to slow down and utilize the people in my life—my probation officer; my caseworker, who was wonderful; and the parents in my support groups. He connected me to the right people and services.

Tim was an active mentor on my case for about three months. Then we'd see each other at the support group and kept in casual contact—a phone call or a text every few weeks, checking in.

He taught me, by example, that I could be both a recovering addict and a good dad. He helped me see

that the choices I made and my chemical dependency don't define the person that I am.

I realized that, like Tim, I wanted to help other dads have a voice and the ability to overcome challenges and be good parents.



Dustin McClard and his children

OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEADERSHIP

In Portland we have a Fathers Advisory Board, a group that advises local child welfare on improving policy, perception and procedures specifically for dads.

We also have a Parents Advisory Council, which meets with the leaders of child welfare and human services throughout our state to provide information about what's happening to parents in our communities. It tries to bridge that gap between child welfare leadership and the ground level.

Tim saw that I wanted to get involved and he referred me to the Fathers Advisory Board. A week after my case closed, I interviewed to join, and they welcomed me. Then I joined the Parents Advisory

Council. I connected to parent mentors from around the state and I eventually applied and started working as a mentor at a family service agency

HELPING DADS HELP THEMSELVES

Now I see myself in so many of the dads that I support. Like me, they just want to get through that checklist and get CPS out of their life as soon as possible. I help to ensure that they are successful long-term.

At first, I had the mentality that it was me and this dad against everybody. But I learned that it isn't about me helping them—success is when dads are able to advocate for themselves, when they're sending emails to caseworkers, when they're showing up for all their meetings half an hour early. That's when they are truly helping themselves.

I wanted to help other dads have a voice and overcome challenges and be good parents.

SERVICES FOR DADS

One of the most frustrating challenges is the lack of services for dads in our state, especially affordable housing. It's the biggest barrier that keeps families separated.

Dads going to treatment also don't have the opportunity to take their children with them the same way a mom would. There are about 76 treatment beds in the metro area where a mother can go with her child to get clean, and only two for dads.

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