



Voices From Within

Experiences of California Court Employees
With the Foster Care System



ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE
OF THE COURTS

CENTER FOR FAMILIES, CHILDREN
& THE COURTS

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Judicial Council of California
Administrative Office of the Courts
Center for Families, Children & the Courts
455 Golden Gate Avenue
San Francisco, CA 94102-3688

**Judicial Council of California
Administrative Office of the Courts**

Hon. Ronald M. George
*Chief Justice of California and
Chair of the Judicial Council*

William C. Vickrey
Administrative Director of the Courts

Center for Families, Children & the Courts Staff

Diane Nunn
Director

Charlene Depner
Assistant Director

Lee Morhar
Assistant Director

Audrey Fancy
Supervising Attorney

Stacey Mangni
Staff Analyst

Copy Editor

Lura Dymond

Acknowledgments

Voices From Within: Experiences of California Court Employees With the Foster Care System began with a message from Diane Nunn, Director of the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC), Center for Families, Children & the Courts (CFCC), to all of California's judicial officers, court personnel, and AOC staff asking them to share their experiences with the foster care system.

The project team particularly expresses our admiration and thanks to those who contributed their personal stories. For many, it was a difficult decision to share their stories. Thus, many of the entries are identified as anonymous, or some of the identifying information has been changed.

We also wish to acknowledge and thank members of the Judicial Council of California and its Family and Juvenile Law Advisory Committee for their continued attention to issues involving children in the foster care system in California and for their dedication to improving the lives of all foster care children.

The California Blue Ribbon Commission on Children in Foster Care was appointed by the California Judicial Council in March 2006 to develop recommendations on the ways in which courts and their partners can improve safety, permanency, well-being and fairness outcomes for children and families. Under the leadership of Supreme Court Justice Carlos R. Moreno, the 42-member commission is focusing on the role of the courts in achieving improved outcomes for children and families, court collaboration with partner agencies, and funding and resource options for child welfare services and the courts. The commission will submit its recommendations in a final report to the Judicial Council in the spring of 2008. These stories will contribute to the Commission's final report.

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Introduction

The idea for *Voices From Within: Experiences of California Court Employees With the Foster Care System* arose during the annual Court Adoption and Permanency Month in November as a way to highlight the experiences, both good and bad, of people working in the courts who have been there and now lead successful lives, as well as those of foster parents and others who have a connection to the foster care system.

These stories are not only being shared with the courts and juvenile court policymakers, but also with youth who are currently in California's foster care system. The courts play a critical role in their lives—no child enters or leaves our foster care system without a judge's decision. With this collection, we hope to let our foster youth know that there are individuals working in the judicial branch willing to share their experiences, and that the youth also have a future.

Although the last few years have seen the numbers of children placed in prospective adoptive homes and of children adopted improve, California still has nearly 80,000 children living apart from their families in child welfare—supervised out-of-home care. It is estimated that there are more than 12 million adults in America who have “graduated” from the foster care system.

Many former foster youth lead successful and productive lives. Unfortunately, many youth who leave the foster care system are ill-prepared for what follows—many end up unemployed and homeless. Others become institutionalized in mental health facilities or incarcerated in state prisons or local jails.

These stories reflect some of the many different ways in which the foster care system affects all areas of the courts—from those who have overcome personal experiences to those who help our foster children today. There are many stories to tell; the following are only the beginning.

A Continuing Bond

Vickie Perrier

Superior Court of Ventura County

In 1980, at the request of a friend from church who knew of four children who needed a home, my husband and I became foster parents. Since we had no children of our own and had a big old farmhouse in the process of being improved, it seemed like a perfect fit. My husband was a truck driver so the sole responsibility would fall on me, but being a lot younger then I felt capable and excited to take on this new challenge. Since I had never been a parent, I was in for a lot of surprises!

We completed the piles of paperwork, including the references and fingerprinting, and cleared the house for human hospitality. Since we were on a well, the water needed to be tested to ensure it was good for human consumption. Having completed our portion of the paperwork, all was done when we began “parenting classes,” which didn’t begin to prepare us for what we had in store. So we waited, and waited, and waited, and waited until the Department of Children and Family Services desperately needed to place the first child we were to receive. At this point they decided to take a chance on us and place the child with us before we had been officially approved.

Todd* was a small, skinny, 13-year-old boy who did not appear to be his age at all. He was the youngest of four, coming from a family that was quite the opposite of what he was about to enter. He had received no help with schoolwork, no restrictions or standards, no stability, and most of the time there was no food in the house. Since he was the youngest, there was very little food left over for him. He quickly learned the various places where he could scrounge food (garbage dumpsters, churches) or even to steal.

I remember the first night he stayed with us he curled up in the brand-new bunk bed we had purchased and the brand-new sheets and bedding and asked if I would tuck him in and give him a kiss good night. That was the beginning of a continuing bond for both of us. Since he was not able to read or comprehend what he did read, he was immediately put in the “slow” classes, where he spent most of his high school years until he reached his senior year when he was switched over to the regular classes. He needed to be motivated, encouraged, and constantly helped with his homework, but he graduated.

I remember an incident that at the time I found his behavior quite odd, only to find out years later the rest of the story. He and a neighbor boy came into the house for lunch giggling and laughing hysterically. They ran upstairs, I assumed to clean up for lunch, only to learn later that he had changed pants because of a BB wound into his knee! Todd was holding a frog while the other little boy put a BB into the frog; of course the BB went in Todd’s knee. After the other boy’s mother pulled out the BB, they came home for lunch. They were laughing to tears because they

had gotten by with this major faux pas that probably would have landed Todd in another foster home—and that is something he didn't want. Todd suffered no long-term effects of the BB wound and in fact years later revealed to me what had happened.

I am proud to say that Todd has considered me his adoptive mom and grandma to his two children and stepson. He is married, has two children, and is a security guard in Las Vegas. He supports his family and his wife's 13-year-old son as well. He is a wonderful dad who performs all the tasks that moms do too.

During the time that Todd was with me, I had eight different children at various times, but Todd stands out as the one child I was supposed to have in my life, for which I am truly grateful.

**The child's name has been changed for his protection.*

Unconditional Love: Foster Youth Do Have a Future

Leila

Superior Court of Ventura County

I became a foster parent with a private agency. It was rewarding to have the opportunity to become a foster parent and to make a difference in a child's life.

I fostered a little boy and his sister. The little boy was only 15 months old and his sister was two years old. It was just five days before Christmas when I received them. It was a gift to us and a gift to them to be able to share our home, love, and caring, which these children knew little about. It helped my children realize not to take things for granted. The foster children had been neglected and were taken to Casa Pacifica in Camarillo as a temporary living arrangement before coming to my home.

All their belongings were transferred to me in a brown trash bag. It nearly broke my heart. You hear about neglected children out there who are less fortunate. It is not the same until you get involved. It seems like another world.

The experience of dealing with the biological parents can be quite challenging. They seem to blame you—the foster parent—for why their children are where they are, but the reality is that you are trying to help fill the voided area. There were court-ordered visits two to three times a week. I have a wonderful mom who became my respite to help transport the children to their visits.

Months went by with to-and-from visits. The court hearings started, evaluating the mom's and dad's progress. The mom wasn't doing what she was instructed to do. She would show up for the visits when it was convenient for her. The boy's dad was incarcerated. The dad of the girl had just found out he was the dad and was trying to get custody and do the right thing. This was chaos.

Well, months went by and then years. It was now a few years later, and I was asked if I would be interested in adopting the boy. The parents at that point had lost their parental rights. The sister went with her dad. There was no doubt—the boy was part of our family. I am glad it turned out that way. The attachment was definitely there. He was the son I never had. I adopted my son during Court Adoption and Permanency Month in November. That made it even more special.

My son is soon to be seven years old. He is very smart. He just finished playing t-ball and now plays football despite his asthma. He has four sisters. He is loved unconditionally.

Unfortunately, he doesn't have any contact with his biological sister. I was told that the dad gave her back to the mom. In the best interest of my son, he will not be able to visit with his sister as of yet.

I have referred several people to become foster parents. I am currently a mentor for other foster parents here in Ventura County. There are people out there who care about the foster youth system and want to ensure that today's foster youth do have a future.

Taking on the Challenge

Jim

Superior Court of Yolo County

Thank you for taking on this sometimes forgotten story. My wife and I have adopted three children (two with special needs) from the state system. Fortunately our children had very little exposure to the foster care system, so I can not share much.

But during the adoption process we learned more than we wanted to know about those children who did not become part of an adopted family and served their time in the system.

It still makes me cry when I see the older children. I am sending this to say I support this effort to get the success stories out there and also to provide our court family with some incentive to look at these children differently and perhaps take on the challenge (because it can be a challenge).

Nobody Knows

Michael

Administrative Office of the Courts Senior Employee

Nobody knows this, but I was a foster child in two other states. It was, quite literally, hands down, the worst experience of my entire life.

Let me discuss how I ended up in the system. I had moved from back East to a house in Washington, that, if I lived in it today, I would be Bill Gate's next-door neighbor. I had three siblings. I was 15, gifted, and managed to routinely finish my homework before ever getting home. I managed to pull down a 3.5 GPA with zero effort. Contrast this to my siblings having to trudge through a minimum of two-plus hours of homework every night and barely pulling 2.0 averages.

One thing led to another, and given my lax attitude about how unchallenging school was, I skipped classes during the day and still managed to pull down the good grades. And yet, because my siblings and I went to the same school, they knew what was going on and decried the lack of fairness that I never seemed to have homework and I always had plenty of time to spend with my friends. Add the fact that I was skipping classes, and my parents decided I was an incorrigible bad influence and had to go.

Initially, I didn't believe them, until my stepmother one day made arrangements with a social worker with the Department of Social and Health Services in Bellevue, Washington, to turn over parental rights, and quite literally, dropped me off at their office without so much as a suitcase. While forgoing some other thoughtful contact I had with my stepmother previous to that, which was equally as caring, let me outline my experiences in the foster care system.

My first placement was that night into a group home in South Central Seattle, which at the time was not a far cry from South Central Los Angeles with respect to demographics. It was a very rough, very dangerous neighborhood.

I was dropped off at about 10 p.m. by the caseworker where I was escorted downstairs by both the caseworker and the lady of the house, a really nice, older, African-American woman. Both of them seemed nice and cordial and happy to have me there. And then believing her job was done, the caseworker left and the lady of the house instantly changed from being welcoming and nice to being forthright and angrily laying out the rules.

1. DSHS pays for two square meals a day with the assumption that you will be at school or at work between the hours of 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. I do not care where you go or what you do during these hours, but you must not be in the house during these hours. If you are sick, go to the hospital.

2. Dinner is served at 6 p.m. If you are here, you get fed. If you are not here, you go hungry.
3. The doors lock at 9 p.m. If you are on the other side of the door when it locks, you're a runaway as far as we are concerned. Don't bother knocking.

The next day, I asked the lady of the house where the nearest high school was so I could enroll. She pointed me around the corner to Franklin High School with a warning that I probably shouldn't go there. I went anyway and as I climbed the steps of the school it became readily apparent why I shouldn't go there as I experienced racial epithets and was told by many, "You are in the wrong neighborhood, white boy." I turned around and left, never to return to this nearly 100 percent African-American high school.

Three weeks later, I found myself on the wrong side of the locked door shortly after 9p.m.

A few days later, I contacted my social worker and she brought me to juvenile receiving for juvenile hall and said I would have to stay there in the waiting area until she found me a placement a few hours later. She managed to find me a home back in Bellevue and took me there. The same rules would apply to the second group home as the first.

I got myself situated with the other group home kids, and I noticed that they were always constantly whispering. When I inquired as to why, I was told that there were microphones in the heating and air conditioning vents in the group home children's area. In complete disbelief, I broke out a screwdriver the next day shortly before dinner was to be prepared and started unscrewing the vent to look for said microphone. Sure enough, when I dropped the vent from above my bunk bed, there dropped the microphone, followed immediately by the lady of the house barreling down the stairs yelling about WHO IS VANDALIZING MY HOUSE? Keep in mind; we're talking about two screws that hold an air exhaust vent to the ceiling in the basement. She saw the vent unscrewed and went ballistic, calling 911 and insisting I be immediately removed by the police and criminally charged with vandalism.

When I described to the police officer what I did and why, he asked the homeowner if he could inspect the facility because, if there was a microphone in the vent, she was in violation of the law. In light of my allegation, she refused to allow him to inspect it. Since the police officer could not inspect the alleged vandalism, he wasn't going to charge me on just her say-so.

I was taken away by my caseworker after a police phone call and placed in a group home next to and just west of SeaTac Airport.

This was my third group home in a month. In this group home, children were used as virtual slave labor. The rules of this house were that if you did not work in the family business, you stayed in your room. Going to school was not an option because the school was too far away.

The family business? Mr. M. M. collected fiberglass window knockouts from aircraft fuselages under construction at the Boeing aircraft factory. The kids would sort this fiberglass and remove layers of Kevlar and plastic from the fiberglass and put it back into the bags.

Each super-sized bag, which was sorted without the use of gloves or respirators like the ones the workers on the Boeing assembly line used, would earn one dollar. It took about an hour to sort a bag. He would later use a special machine to chop up the insulation and blow it into people's wall cavities for uninsulated homes.

By night, he would take the foster children who worked during the day to go dumpster diving in the Seattle/Renton industrial area for goods he could sell at the flea market or weekend garage sales. We would stop by the Shasta drink plant and take coke out of the trash as well, bringing it to his house as soft drinks to be consumed by the household and for the aluminum to be recycled. It was then that I first heard about and signed up for the Job Corps. I stayed at the group home for about six months before I decided that I was indeed nothing more than slave labor and ran away.

Again, a few days later, I contacted my caseworker. She finally placed me in a highly structured group home program within the Seattle YMCA.

Upon commencement of my family receiving bills of nearly \$3,000 per month, I was finally contacted by my father with an arrangement of pulling me out of that group home. He would place me in a residential hotel two blocks from Pike Place Market where I would stay at my father's expense until I entered the Job Corps.

The group home system is a foster care youth's first exposure to the system; a system designed to warehouse children until they are 18 with minimal competent oversight and overwhelmed caseworkers. I was just a number in a system that is horribly broken and probably costs more in the long run in social costs to the people of the state (for prisons, jails, and welfare) than providing and paying for the necessary opportunities for people going through it.

I can't speak to the California system. I can't imagine it being much better. And I suspect, in light of all the challenges I had to overcome to sit in this chair today, that few of my foster peers ever would rise to this level because they lacked the opportunity and the drive.

My drive was rooted in proving my parents wrong.

These days, my parents' heads are spinning for I was the only one of four children who ended up in foster care . . . and the most successful of all my siblings. My parents live in regret and have constantly apologized. Sadly, my stepmother died in regret in 2005. It's a sad story with a relatively happy ending (I'm here aren't I?)

A combination of hard work, dumb luck, and mostly staying out of the path of law enforcement, and a decent amount of education and intelligence lifted me from living on the streets at 15 to where I am today. Many of my peers were not so fortunate and got caught up in the street life and an endless cycle of drugs, violence, poverty, and homelessness.

There were no good experiences in the foster care system. There was some opportunity, though, in some highly structured programs that I did take advantage of, such as something called “emancipath,” the path to emancipation.

No child should ever be subjected to the foster care system or even the emergency group home system without having a personal advocate who is serious about keeping them on track and constantly monitoring the dependents, facilities, and, most especially, the people who run them.

Just One Voice

Jenna

Superior Court of Shasta County (and Alameda County)

My name is Jenna. I am 24 years old. My adoptive mother, who works in the Shasta County courts, asked for my thoughts and requested that I write about my experience in the foster care system.

I was a ward of the court (in Alameda County) until I was 18, though I was told when I was 16 that I was going to be emancipated. I graduated from high school when I was 16 because I was involved in a college connection program that earned double the credits that you need to graduate from high school. In addition to being a high school graduate, I became pregnant. These two things led my social worker to believe that I was ready to be on my own. I had briefly mentioned emancipation and asked what it entailed in June of the year I was to graduate from high school.

I was not working at the time, nor did I have any plans to. However, the social worker had to have me doing something, so they encouraged me to fill out financial aid papers for college and get on the waiting list to enter the dormitories on campus. I was able to get priority into the dormitories because my social worker spoke with the director of the dorms requesting that I be moved to the top of the list. The director of the dormitories was concerned about having a child living in the dormitories, especially a pregnant one. However, my social worker assured her that when the baby was born it was going to be placed for adoption. That August I moved into the dormitories and was ready to begin college.

In the beginning it was fun—I got to make my own decisions about when I wanted to go to bed, when I got up, what I ate, and where I went. This, however, was short-lived; I had no concept of how and to whom I was supposed to pay bills. Someone helped me set up phone service, which there is obviously a monthly bill for. I had to pay the rent for the dorm room that I stayed in and I had to buy all my own food for the first time in my life. When the phone bill came, I put cash into an envelope and gave it to the director of the dormitory, who took it not explaining to me that she did not have any connection with the phone company. When the rent was due, I handed cash to the person in charge of the hall that I was living in. She handed it back to me, saying that she didn't need it for the rent and to hang onto it. Which is just what I did. By October, my daughter was born. After returning to the dormitory, I found that not only had I been kicked out because my grades were failing, but I was also being kicked out because I had failed to pay rent for living in the dorms. Little did I know that I was supposed to turn in the money to the business office.

So I was homeless because I didn't go to classes and didn't pay rent when it was due. According to my social worker, she was working on the emancipation papers, but, considering that I was

homeless at that point, I should have been placed back into a foster home. After all, social services were continuing to receive SSI on my behalf, though I never saw a dime of it and didn't even know that I was on SSI until years later. This is just one example of how ill-prepared I was for the "real world" after being in foster care. I can laugh about all of this now, but as I reread this I find it hilarious that I was so naive.

Now perhaps a little background on how I became a foster child. I was placed in foster care the first time when I was three years old during a court battle regarding molestation by my father. I was eventually placed back with my mother but was back in foster care when I was seven, after my mother gave me a black eye before sending me to school that morning. I was placed in an emergency foster home for nearly a week before I was sent back to my mother's house, where I stayed for the next three years. After being beaten by my mother and molested by my brother over the next three years, I was placed in a psychiatric hospital after I hit my mother and began cutting on myself. I was in and out of psychiatric hospitals for the next eighths, until I was placed back in a foster home. Over the next three years I was placed in over 25 different foster homes, by that time due to my out-of-control behavior. I was then placed in a level-14 group home in Redding that specialized in behavior modification

I remained in that group home for a year, while social services worked on a reunification plan. I blossomed at the group home—it was the first place that I felt safe, and the first place that did not kick me out when I ran away or became violent either toward myself or others. I was reunified with my mother when I was 14 years old. I was only back in her care for three months before she decided that she no longer felt she could handle me and signed her parental rights over to the state of California. I was placed back in foster care and began the cycle of behavior again. I was placed back into the same behavior modification program, where I immediately changed my behavior. Social services deemed that I did not need that level of care and placed me in a foster home in Redding. I remained in that foster home until I was sent to the dormitories at the college.

During my stays in foster care my mother was always willing and eager to be involved in my "treatment." Throughout my stay in the group home she made the eight-hour round-trip drive to Redding every other week to spend time with me. However, as soon as I was released from the foster care system, all visits and phone calls stopped. I was 16 when I was released from foster care, and I will be 25 in a month and have seen my mother a total of four times. I can count the number of phone conversations on two hands and still have some fingers left.

That brings me to my adoptive mother. I was apparently up for adoption when I was signed over to the state. However, typically people don't want to adopt older children, and they surely don't want to adopt older children with behavior problems. When I was 19 years old, I went into the Job Corps program in Nampa, Idaho, after becoming homeless again. There I met my best friend, and, because I didn't have anywhere to go for Christmas, she invited me to go with her to her house. Oddly enough, her parents lived in none other than Redding California. After that Christmas I knew that someday, somehow, her mother would someday be my own. After a long

three years and a lot of heartache, I was finally legally adopted by my adoptive mother on November 15, 2003.

I am now almost 25 years old, I live in Vancouver, Washington, where I work full time and am enrolled in college. I maintain a 3.5 G.P.A. and am hoping to be accepted into the master of social work (MSW) program at Portland State University. I have always wanted to share my story about foster care with other people in hope that it might make a difference.

While Alameda County deemed me a “success case” when I was a pregnant high school graduate who went through a total of 38 foster and group homes, I now know what being a success case really means: it’s about figuring out who you are, where you stand, and what you believe in— and then putting your life into action despite what others think about who you should be or who you are.

I am just one voice, but sometimes it only takes one voice to finally be heard.

~~Success is the reward for accomplishment.

An Ordinary Girl With an Extraordinary Story

Commissioner Nancy B. Williamsen
Superior Court of Stanislaus County

This is a story of an ordinary girl who was born in an ordinary house in an ordinary town—and, one would suppose, lived a very ordinary life. Her name is Alice, and her life’s story, however, is extraordinary.

Alice was born in rural America at the end of the Great Depression. Born in a “simpler” time, Alice lived through many events that are common today . . . divorce, substance abuse (alcoholism), domestic violence, abuse, neglect, and a mother who had a revolving door of relationships with men.

When Alice was in the fifth grade, she and her older sister, Juanita, were removed from the home of their mother, Rose, and became foster children. On entering foster care, Alice was a small and thin child, perhaps even undernourished. She was a shy, quiet girl who did not like to draw attention to her or have others draw attention to her. She liked to be what some would describe as “living under the radar.”

Alice never knew why she and her sister became foster children. Back then, children were seen and not heard and questions by the children about family decisions were seldom if ever tolerated. Decisions were made affecting Alice without any input from her, and no explanations were ever offered. They just happened.

While in foster care, Alice and Juanita were in many placements. Some of the foster homes were good, some merely okay, and some quite terrible. In those days, foster children were often used as farm labor or household help. Today we would say they were treated almost as domestic servants. It was during this time as a foster child that Alice learned many skills—farm chores, housecleaning, and child rearing. She was expected to not only have good behavior in the home, but to complete her assigned chores efficiently and quietly, without complaint.

Just shy of a year of being in foster care, Alice and Juanita were returned home. In addition to not knowing why she entered foster care, Alice never knew why she was returned home. Unfortunately, it was back to the same home she had been removed from . . . alcoholism, abuse, neglect, domestic violence, and her mother’s continued revolving relationships. Now home, Alice and her sister often provided for their own care, doing the cooking, cleaning, laundry, and other domestic chores. Their mother worked outside the home, often as a cocktail waitress or bartender. Although she was always considered a hard worker, she also played hard.

When Alice was in seventh grade, she returned to foster care. This time, however, she knew why. Her mother had contracted tuberculosis (not so uncommon in the 1940s) and had to be

hospitalized. Although Alice returned to foster care, Juanita was labeled “incorrigible” and went into a reform school, which is similar to a group home today. Unfortunately, Juanita refused to stay at the reform school and ran away. Alice constantly worried not only about her mother’s fragile health, but also about her sister. After two years in foster care, Alice returned home, this time to care for her newborn sister, Bertha. At 14, Alice was again dealing with the same dysfunctional family issues she’d known all her young life.

By God’s grace, Alice was blessed with keen intelligence and resourcefulness. Working as hard at school as she did at home, Alice graduated from high school just before her 17th birthday. Upon graduation, she went to business school to learn office skills, paving the way to working full time to support herself before she turned 18. Shortly after completing business school, she met the man of her dreams, and they married. She was 18 years old; he was 19. By the time Alice reached 20, she had a family—a husband and two little girls. Our story could end here, but it doesn’t. Now is actually when the extraordinary story begins.

When Alice was 21 years old, she and her young family had to flee their home as the river in the town where they lived was rising dangerously close to their home. To escape the impending flood, they loaded up their car and, as the story goes, drove all night until they almost ran out of gas, which happened to be about 300 miles away in a town in which Alice’s husband’s sister lived. Alice and her family lived with her sister-in-law’s family until she and her husband could secure jobs and rebuild their own family’s life in a new town.

Two years later, Alice received the tragic news that Juanita had died during childbirth, leaving behind five children, all under the age of seven, including a newborn son. Alice and her husband were asked to care for the newborn, which they readily agreed to do. Juanita’s children were from three separate relationships. After the funeral, Alice went to pick up the newborn, but Juanita’s boyfriend (father of three of the children) had cleaned out the household belongings and moved the family away. He left Juanita’s two older children with Alice’s mother, Rose. Alice was very concerned for her sister’s three youngest children, but what could she do? He was, after all, their father. Alice never saw those children again, except for brief glimpses through closed curtains. The two older children, a boy and a girl, went to live with Rose.

At age 24, Alice was hospitalized with tuberculosis. She had contracted the same illness that had hospitalized her mother. Although Alice loved her husband, she knew that he was too immature to raise her little girls by himself. Alice was very determined that her girls would not be foster children. Alice also knew that her mother would not be an appropriate person to care for her children. Alice called her mother-in-law, Bea, who was then in her 60s, and asked her to move into Alice’s home and care for her children. Bea, a kind, compassionate, and loving person, readily agreed. Due to the contagious nature of Alice’s illness, the hardest part for her was that she was unable to touch, hold, hug, or kiss her little girls the entire time she was in the hospital. It broke her heart to have to visit her children through the glass windows of her hospital room. To save herself and her little girls from heartbreak, she made the difficult decision to ask Bea not

to bring the girls to visit her. Alice was hospitalized for seven long months without contact with her children.

Never one to wallow in misery, Alice continued to rely on her intelligence and resourceful spirit to make the best of her situation. While she was hospitalized, she saved all her disability checks (she had worked full time before becoming ill) and on release from the hospital had enough money for a down payment on a small home in a family-oriented neighborhood. Alice was to live in this home for the next 29 years. As Alice had moved a lot as a child, the dream she had for her own children was that they would not have to experience what she went through. No more moving, changing schools, and making new friends every year or so. Stability was very high on Alice's priority list.

When Alice was 30 years old, Rose was again hospitalized. Alice's baby sister Bertha was now 16 years old and needed a place to stay while Rose was in the hospital. Alice's niece, Barbara, who had been living with Rose, also needed a place to stay. Although Alice was now a stay-at-home mom with only her husband's income to support the family, Alice agreed to have her sister and niece live with her. There were now six people living in Alice's small two-bedroom home. Needless to say, it was quite cozy. Alice and her husband did not receive any money for the care of her sister and niece so the household money was tight. Even so, God provided and Alice was very happy. At the end of the summer, Bertha returned home to live with her stepfather.

Unbeknownst to Alice, her stepfather was receiving state money to care for Barbara. The social workers were asking too many eligibility questions, and he was concerned they would find out that Alice was caring for Barbara. The stepfather called Alice and told her she needed to return Barbara to him immediately. Alice objected, saying that it was the middle of the school year and Barbara needed to have stability. Her stepfather insisted, leaving Alice with little options. She didn't have legal guardianship of her niece; her mother did. Rose was supporting the stepfather's insistence that Barbara return to him. Although Alice knew this was not right, she felt she had no recourse and returned Barbara to her stepfather. This was a period of great sadness and stress for Alice.

A few months later, Alice's husband announced that he had quit his job, giving two week's notice. Again, what was Alice to do? Her youngest daughter had just been diagnosed as needing surgery. Now, in two weeks' time, there would no longer be health insurance coverage. Alice convinced the doctors to schedule her daughter for surgery within the next few days. In the mid-1960s, her daughter's surgery was considered major and she was hospitalized for 10 days.

During the hospitalization, Alice's daughter was exposed to rubella (German measles), which she passed on to Alice. What Alice didn't yet realize was that she was pregnant. This was at a time before there was a vaccination for rubella. Rubella is extremely dangerous for pregnant women because it can cause birth defects. Alice worried throughout her entire pregnancy. She worried for the health of her unborn baby. She also stressed because she had no health insurance

for her family and her husband was having a difficult time securing new employment. In spite of all this, Alice never lost hope that things would be better.

When Alice's baby was born, it was a healthy boy, and she was ecstatic. Alice's little family was complete. Although there was very little money to go around, everyone was healthy and Alice once again was happy. More troubles, unfortunately, loomed on the horizon.

By the time Alice was 38, it was clear that her husband had succumbed to alcoholism and the disease had taken its devastating toll on her family. She was now divorced and a single parent to three children. Alice had returned to work fulltime and, although it was a struggle, she managed to continue to provide stability for her children. Now, finally, did Alice live happily ever after? Not quite, but all of Alice's ups and downs have not been told. Remember, this is a story of an ordinary girl.

Alice eventually retired from her job and remarried. She moved to Northern California and began to enjoy some of the leisurely things she'd had no time for during her youth and while raising her family. She learned to play golf and now plays regularly. Always enjoying helping others, Alice does volunteer work in her community. She finally appears to have a peaceful, happy life.

What happened to Alice's nephew and niece who were raised by her mother, Rose? Her nephew enlisted in the Army and served two tours in Vietnam and two tours in South Korea. Like many Vietnam veterans, he suffered posttraumatic stress disorder and became homeless. Ravaged by mental and physical illnesses, he died at an early age.

What about Alice's niece who had lived with her? Barbara entered foster care as a teen due to sexual abuse, physical abuse, and neglect. She aged out of the foster care system. Barbara had lived through abuse and neglect and knew she would be able to see it coming a mile away. Now with her own family, Barbara knew she would be able to protect her daughter. However, Barbara's daughter also entered the foster care system after being sexually abused by one of Barbara's many boyfriends. Barbara's granddaughter also entered into foster care due to neglect caused by substance abuse.

And so goes the cycle of abuse and neglect.

What happened to Alice's children?

Alice's oldest daughter put herself through college and became a medical technologist working in a hospital blood bank. She married and has two children.

Alice's son, born exposed to rubella, also put himself through college and is a youth pastor. He also married and is raising his three children.

What about Alice's middle child, her young daughter who contracted rubella in the hospital? She also put herself through college, became an attorney and is now a superior court commissioner in Stanislaus County, daily making decisions for children who are in foster care.

This is my mother's story, but told through the eyes of her child.

Alice was fortunate. Throughout her life people helped her form character traits that would help her weather the many storms that everyone has in their life. She is tenacious, hard-working, responsible, compassionate, hopeful, optimistic, determined, frugal, pragmatic—and the list goes on. Alice cannot always identify which person in her life helped form a specific character trait, but they were teachers, foster parents, relatives, social workers, and even her own mother.

An ordinary girl with an extraordinary story.

The Only Person in This World She Trusts

From Being a Girl's CASA to Her Parent

Anonymous

Superior Court in a Southern Region County

In August 1994, I was transferred to juvenile court. For six years I had worked in many departments of the superior court, and I looked forward to my new assignment with curiosity and excitement. Little did I know how greatly the decision to transfer would affect my entire life.

My husband and I were finally on our own. After 18 years of raising twin daughters, we gladly sent them off to college. It was a whole new world for us. The “empty nest” syndrome set in, and I found myself bored. At work a relatively new program was coming alive. The Court Appointed Special Advocates program (CASA), was actively seeking volunteers to mentor children of the system. I thought “why not” and signed up for the training sessions. I became intrigued and saddened at the same time at the neglect and abuse these children had suffered. I saw a whole different side of life that I had never seen.

Sara* was six years old. She had been severely neglected and abused the first four years of her life. She had been taken away and given back to her birth mother three times. Her birth mom was a meth and heroin addict, also an alcoholic. She repeatedly beat and emotionally abused Sara, often leaving her by herself for days. Sara was currently living with her aunt. I was assigned to her case.

In October 2000 I met Sara for the first time—a scared, frightened, beautiful, little girl. We had an instant bond. I spent every Saturday with Sara. We laughed, played, ate, shopped, read, and made jewelry. She was a kid who was adored for the first time. After about a year, Sara trusted me enough to let me know what was going on in her aunt's house. This included physical and emotional abuse and drugs. I reported it all. However, child welfare staff made the decision that Sara was lying and she would stay with her aunt and dependency should be terminated. The “mother bear” in me came out. As her advocate, I fought very hard for Sara. I provided the only stability, love and friendship she had. Sara's aunt was caught. Ironically her children had been removed from her, and Sara was to be removed as soon as another foster home could be found.

May 15, 2002, is a day that my world changed forever. Sara came to live with us. I am fortunate to have a husband whose words were: “She is a child; you are the only person in this world she trusts; what kind of people would we be if we didn't give her a home?”

Sara has been our foster-to-adopt daughter for three and one-half years. Years of struggle, love, heartache, fun, acceptance, patience, court dates, braces, rock music, worries—all the things we

thought we were done with. However, God, in his wisdom, had different plans for us and who are we to question him?

**The child's name has been changed for her protection.*

Foster Care or Private Adoption?

Tamara

Superior Court of Fresno County

Twice I have tried to go through our county's adoption program—the first back in 1993–1994 and the second just a few years ago—2003.

Many years ago my husband and I decided to adopt. (We already had one child of our own.) For six months I repeatedly called the county's child adoption department. For 6 months my phone calls went unreturned. I finally was able to reach a supervisor two or three times, but each time I was told that they had not scheduled any adoption orientation classes and they did not know when they would do so. After a few months of being told this, I gave up and went to private adoption.

We contacted a locally recognized private adoption agency and were instantly placed in the orientation program because we were willing to adopt an African-American child (we are Caucasian). The orientation program was geared toward ethnically diverse adoptions, and it was wonderfully informative. Later that year we had completed all of the orientation classes and had successfully completed our home inspection/investigation.

Once approved, we were immediately consulted about adopting twin African-American girls with delayed development as they were born very premature. Since twins were something we had not considered, my husband and I decided to think about it.

During that time I had become friends with the then-county assistant director of social services. During a luncheon I talked to her about the adoption. She was very much opposed to interracial adoptions as she felt children should be placed only with adoptive parents who shared the same ethnicity. She actually told me, "I submit to you that there is an African-American family out there that could adopt those girls, and I can promise you I can find an infant white baby for you in our system." I quizzed her about the number of possible minority adoptive parents out there and she agreed it would take years to place the girls but that they would be better off. I asked, "Better off in foster care for years to come than in a loving home? Even if the adoptive parents were of another color?" She answered affirmatively. Needless to say, I saw why the foster care system was broken.

My husband and I did decide to adopt those two beautiful, loving, and forever kind-little girls. As to the difference in our races, none of our friends or coworkers expressed significant concerns; all were supportive of this adoption. One of my employees said it best and this had the biggest impact on me. She said, "Well, Tammy, at least we know that for the rest of their lives they will always have one other person in the world who fully understands what the other person

has gone through, if anything.” To this day, they have not experienced any significant or noticeable racism. And they are best friends.

About three years ago my husband and I decided to adopt an older boy (age 8–14) from the county adoption system. Each time I heard about these older children in foster care and the fate they were to endure, I would cry. My requirements were that the child not be physically disabled or had suffered significant sexual abuse as both my husband and I have active full-time jobs and we have three young girls at home. Still, we were willing to adopt a boy with delayed learning or some psychological issues.

By this time I had become friends with the county’s new social services regime. I made contact with a highly placed manager who, during a staff meeting talked about my family’s desire to adopt an older boy and that they were going to make it happen. As I understood it, there weren’t too many people out there willing to adopt older children.

I immediately received a phone call and family visit, and then we were contacted by a second social worker who didn’t seem to have all of the correct information. Then we were told we first had to go through foster care orientation and training, which we were surprised about but started the process. Then we were contacted by a third social worker and offered a seriously physically and mentally disabled infant! Yes, an infant! I respectfully reminded them that I was not a stay-at-home mom and that we wanted an older child without significant disabilities.

Then I was contacted by my old private adoption agency, asking me why I was going through the county rather than them? I asked how they knew about it and evidently one of the social workers called them and asked if they had completed the home study. Unfortunately, a few weeks later my family decided that my widowed mom needed to come live with us, so, in essence, we lost our fourth bedroom, which would have accommodated another child.

Still, it is our hope to adopt again one day, and we will adopt an older child or even children. Next time, however, we will coordinate not with our county social services department but instead with our private adoption agency. As they explained it to me, they could “deal with the county bureaucracy so that [we] would not have to.”

Finding Empathy From Experience

Anonymous

Superior Court in a Bay Area County

Let me start my story at the end. I work for a large superior court division in a Bay Area county. I have worked for the court for almost 10 years now, and I find deep personal satisfaction in serving the public as a Court employee. I am also a mother of a young girl, whom I love more than anything on the planet. It took a long time for me to commit to becoming a mother, because my relationship with my mother was the largest disappointment in my life to date. She basically had a child (me) too young, married a man who was a sexual predator of children, and chose him over me when I was old enough to say enough was enough. I was 13 years old at the time.

At first I didn't want to tell the authorities why I didn't want to return to the family home, so I was pegged "out of control." I kept running away from home and being placed back in the home because the goal, I was told, was reunification of the family. I didn't want to tell people about the things I had endured over a period of seven years; I just wanted to be out of the situation. My stepfather had told me he would be sure to convince the world I was a liar if I ever spoke up, and I had no reason to disbelieve him.

After about three placements back into the home, I finally told someone why I didn't want to go back. I was placed in a group home, and the court process formally began. Some people in the system actually sided with my parents' version of events—that I had made up my story to manipulate events. That did little to endear me to the folks who said they were advocates to my face but said something much more harmful to my survival in court documents. I read the documents from the court and attended counseling sessions with various counselors who seemed to struggle to remember me personally.

During all of this, I met another foster child who lived in a different county. She suggested I move there, as the group home would take me if I wanted to leave the county I had grown up in. Figuring I had nothing to lose, I requested the transfer through my social worker. I was denied because, in so many words, counties don't pass their problems around. So I ran away and ended up being placed there anyway. It frustrated me that I was forced to disobey in order to achieve the end I had tried to pursue legitimately. Needless to say, social workers on both ends of the state were incensed when I left the system entirely right after the transfer proceedings began.

I struck out on my own at sixteen, vowing to avoid the mistakes of my mother. I lied about my age to obtain employment, worked various retail and food service jobs, and began attending community college on a part-time basis for the next few years. I was planning to attend law school in the future, maybe to right the wrongs for others that I could not prevent from happening in my own life. I lucked out and got hired as a "gal Friday" for a paralegal and began working with the court as a courier.

After getting to know court employees, I thought pursuing court employment would be a great way to see if becoming a lawyer was really what I wanted to do. I started as a student worker (ironically at the juvenile court), then moved up to a paid position, where I worked for a few years. It was there I realized court employment was what I wanted to pursue, not work as an attorney.

Looking back on the most awful period of my life, I can see that the court was the only organization that did me no harm. I was given copies of my dependency proceedings as a juvenile, the first time it seemed to me I was able to read for myself the story of my life as a dependent of the court. The language was always impartial and rote. The only inflammatory portions of those documents were the various opinions of the “experts” contained in those reports. The words of my parents had no more weight on their face than my own in the eyes of the court. I was a person with rights, for once.

I know how scary it was to display your most personal and private matters to a room full of strangers, of having to repeat your tale of sorrow over and over until you were able to find the help you needed. I understood how hard it was to listen to someone telling you what papers needed to be filled out when you felt like the world as you knew it was coming to an abrupt end. As a court employee, I derive great satisfaction from being able to empathize with all of that, knowing the resources I can direct similarly situated people to in their time of need, and doing it in a way they could understand and feel respected—many for the first time in a long time. I abandoned my pursuit of law school for what I felt was a higher calling, working for the court.

My life is very “normal” now. I am married to a great person, I own my own home, and I serve on various volunteer boards in my community. I have the admiration and respect of a close group of friends who love me for who I am, no more, no less. I made it on my own, and so can every other person who started the way I did. Take advantage of whatever resources are available to you. If there are no resources available, create your own opportunities.

The circumstances that make you a dependent of the court are generally awful. If you can survive that experience, you can overcome most obstacles in this life. I have.

Without a Safety Net

Anonymous

Court of Appeals Employee

My experience is not my own but that of my nephew, now a grown man of 24. He was removed from the home of his father, who was my brother (now deceased), and his mother, after they brutalized him emotionally and physically.

I was unaware of his situation because my brother and I were not in touch with each other. A side note is that my brother had suffered such treatment at the hands of his father and I believe it predisposed him toward violence and indifference to his own son. On my brother's death, I sought to locate my nephew, a minor at the time, so he could receive his social security benefits.

I located him in an Individualized Education Program (IEP) special school and placed in a group home. Unbeknownst to me, he had been in the foster care system for approximately 12 years. My nephew reluctantly shared some of his experiences in foster care, and they were not positive. Of course, his emotional and behavioral issues likely contributed to his treatment, but he emerged from the system damaged nonetheless.

After I located him, I attempted to bring him into our family through holidays, birthdays, and gatherings. My nephew appeared to enjoy our times together and professed to love me and his newfound cousins. We shared many holidays together.

Once he turned 18, he could no longer live in the group home. Although we supported him, we could not provide my nephew with a new home. I had seen the writing on the wall because of reports from school and the group home, and I knew I did not have the skills necessary to cope with his special needs.

He was provided with referrals to apartments that were managed by the county in which he could learn life skills. He did not avail himself of the opportunity because he did not want restrictions placed on his conduct, such as not smoking on the property. At loose ends, admittedly by his own design, he fell in with a local gang or gang "wannabes." He was attracted to the gang lifestyle because they became his family—one that could not or would not discard him as he felt his parents, the foster families, and the group homes had.

Despite my attempts to show him a better lifestyle, my nephew turned to the easier path of criminality. He did this because he felt safer in the gangs than in group homes. For whatever reasons, while in the foster care system my nephew did not receive the emotional and mental support he needed in order to turn his life around. Although he professed to love me and my family, he could not be deterred from the gang lifestyle.

At the time of this writing,* he was incarcerated after violating parole. He was just barely 19 when he was first arrested for drug trafficking charges. He has been in and out of jail and prison at least three times that I am aware of. Because of his gang lifestyle, we no longer have a relationship as I cannot have that influence in my home.

I wish I had a more positive experience to share with you. I believe my nephew might have been saved from himself had a safety net been in place for 18-year-old displaced foster care recipients. Without the structure and support of the foster care system, my nephew was unable to negotiate his way on his own.

Thank you for providing this forum and for working toward helping these lost kids. My nephew's story is not unique, but it broke my heart nonetheless.

*Postscript: He is currently out of custody and thus far his record is not for violent crimes. Hopefully, he will remain "On Recognizance (O.R.)" and not escalate into more trouble.

Building a Future: From the Inside to the Outside of Juvenile Courts

Daniel J. Eberhardt

President, Eberhardt Construction, Inc.

It was the summer of 1968, and I was riding in the back seat of a Fontana, California, police department squad car on my way to the San Bernardino County Juvenile Detention Facility. It was a small crime that got me arrested (my fault), but, more importantly, I had no stable place to live at the time.

I was 15 years old and had been abandoned by my very mentally unstable mother and had no idea who my father was.

Given the above circumstances, I was deemed a ward of the court and after spending about one month in juvenile hall I was placed in the care of my half-sister and her husband—my new foster home in Eagle Mountain, California. Although my sisters' husband was not keen on the idea of having me live with them and our relationship was strained to say the least, it was the best thing that ever happened to me.

I had two years of high school to finish. With the help of my probation officer, I was able to graduate from high school in the spring of 1970. For a graduation present I received a sleeping bag and encouragement to do well now that I was on my own.

As I had no choice, I relocated back to Fontana and rented a house with money I had saved from a job I had during my last two years of high school. I enrolled in Chaffey College but could not afford to stay in school, so it wasn't long before I enlisted in the Army under the Voluntary Draft Program.

After spending two years in the Army, I had earned enough GI benefits to put myself through college. While in my second year at Valley College in San Bernardino, I met and married my wife of 32 years. She was 19 at the time, and we were married by a justice of the peace in Colton while her parents were on vacation! After graduating from Valley College, I went to University of California at Riverside for one year and then to Colorado State University for three years where both my wife and I graduated with a bachelor's of science degree in industrial construction management. After working for several construction firms, we relocated back to California in 1988 and in 1996 opened our own construction firm.

So, needless to say, it was with great pride that I attended the dedication of the new San Bernardino County Juvenile Dependency Court facility in the summer of 2004 as the general contractor who built the facility 36 years after the people there helped me get back on track.

Thank you, County of San Bernardino, for all that you do to help those who truly need it.

You Are Not Alone

David D. Criswell

Superior Court of Santa Cruz County

My name is David. My twin brother Keith and I were born in 1967. Our birth mother was not able to care for us and decided we would be “better off” put up for adoption immediately. So, off to social services we went.

Because we were twins and the demand was for single babies at that time, we would have to be split up. Our mother didn’t want that; she wanted us to be together. The only way to keep us together was for her not to sign relinquishment documents until after we were six months old. That meant foster care.

We were in foster care for a year and three months before being adopted together. I certainly don’t remember our foster families, but I understand that there were three during that time and by all accounts we were treated well. My adoptive mom told me that she met our last foster mom and that she was very nice, caring, and generous.

Being put into foster care and moved around time after time may not have been ideal, but it was necessary and I am grateful that there was (and is) a foster care system that could care for my brother and me. Without foster care I can only imagine what might have happened to us! What decisions would have my birth mom been forced to make in her condition? Where would my brother be today? What about me? Foster care made everything work out as best as it could.

Both of my adoptive parents have passed away, and I just recently met my birth parents. My birth mother explained her situation and, boy, am I glad there was foster care for us!!! In my opinion, it saved our lives! In foster care we really were “better off.”

Today I work in the same courthouse where our adoption was finalized. I get the opportunity to see foster families and adoptive families all the time and it’s really awesome! I can truly say “I’ve been there,” and it really does work out!

So, if you’re a foster kid reading this, just know that you are special, you are not alone, and that you can do and be anything!!!

