

# Reunification Heroes



## Laurie



Laurie is the single mother of a beautiful nine-year-old daughter. A daughter that was removed from her care at only 4-months old. While Laurie's daughter was only in care for a short time, the experience made a big impact on her family.

Laurie explains that she was an alcoholic for most of her adult life and never planned to parent. However, after getting pregnant at the age of 39, her daughter changed her life.

Laurie credits her successful reunification to Alaska's Therapeutic Court Program. A program that permitted her to participate in a residential substance abuse treatment program with her daughter by her side.

Because of the impact the program left on Laurie, she now participates in the therapeutic court Alumni Group and contributes to Alaska's Center for Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. Her advice to other parents involved in the child welfare system is to "never give up hope because reunification is possible."

*By Krista Ellis, Washington College of Law, J.D. Candidate 2019*



### **What are some of your favorite things to do with your daughter?**

I'm a single parent, I work full time, and now I'm going to school full time. Any time that I get to spend and just talk with her, I value. Just today, we went outside to play. We walked around the block, rode bikes, practiced cartwheels in the lawn. It's all very simple, any time she gets with me, I do what she wants. We cook, we do crafts, we love to travel.

### **What was one of the most memorable things about getting your child back?**

I felt like there was hope again. I had been involved with the Office of Children's Services for about three months before I was accepted into the Family Care Court (now referred to as Therapeutic Court) and I had been told by one of the social workers that I was not a good candidate for reunification. So, to be accepted into the program and have my daughter move with me into a residential substance abuse treatment facility for mothers and children gave me hope. I was relieved that someone was willing to give me a chance, after I was told by another person that I was not a good candidate. When I was accepted to Family Care Court part of the stipulation was that reunification must be a goal; this was a big source of hope for me. At that point, I knew I had a shot, but before I did not.

“I felt like there was hope again.”

### **What was the worst part of being separated?**

Not being able to be with my daughter. I had not planned on ever being a parent. I was almost forty when I had my daughter. I didn't think that I had very maternal instincts. I was an alcoholic, suffering for most of my adult life. My daughter changed my life. She made me re-evaluate what I wanted to do. She made me want to become the person that I always hoped I could be.

She was only four months old when she was taken from my care. I loved being a mom, what I missed so much were the things I wanted to do with my daughter but was unable to do. I wasn't allowed to see her without supervision. We couldn't do Mommy and Me Yoga, take dance classes together, or things like that. Even though she was small, I worried that if I couldn't quickly reunify with her then there might be long lasting effects from not being able to bond with her.



## **In the process of reunification, did you discover things about yourself – strengths, abilities, passions – that helped you achieve your goals?**

I discovered that I could go through challenging times without resorting to taking a drink or other substance to get through it. That was always my coping mechanism in the past. Before I discovered I was pregnant, I really had no hope that I could stay sober so I was literally waiting to die. I was just existing. Having my daughter and with the hope of reunification, I believed that I could have a life again. I had a will to live.

## **What was the big turning point for you in your case?**

One of the turning points would be my decision to absolutely start abstaining from alcohol. Once my daughter was removed from my care, I had no reason to not drink, so I did. I remember going to a supervised visit while I was hungover from the day before and I couldn't get through the two-hour supervised visit. I had to ask that my visit be ended early. That was my last drink. I knew my daughter deserved better. It broke my heart. I only got to visit her for two hours a week and I was so hungover that I couldn't do it.

Another big turning point occurred about a month later when I was accepted into the Therapeutic Court. Like I said, I had been told by a social worker that I was not a good candidate for reunification or that program. Before being accepted, my daughter was in care with my mother. I remember asking my mother to adopt my daughter because I didn't think I could do it. She told me to try one more time and not long after, I was accepted into the Therapeutic Court. That was definitely another turning point.

## **What good, if any, came out of this experience?**

I learned that I could work within systems. I have been sober since March of 2009, which is a miracle to me. I finally got my bachelor's degree, which was twenty years in the making. I am currently pursuing my master's degree, an MBA in Health Services Administration. My career has taken off and before this experience I was unemployable and homeless. Now I own a home. My daughter goes to a great school and we are actively involved in the community. I have become a contributing member to society and that is all through this process.



### **Tell me about your experience with Therapeutic Court.**

First step involved completing the alcohol/drug assessment and being able to do whatever the outcome of that assessment revealed. For me, that meant long term residential treatment, group and individual therapy every day, all day, Monday through Friday, making all scheduled court appearances for 18 months, attending 12-step meetings and getting a sponsor.

“I would not have been able to successfully reunify without the Therapeutic Court being available.”

### **Tell me about the Therapeutic Court Alumni Group and its impact.**

Once court had finished, I was really searching for a way to stay connected because it had made such a profound impact on my life. I was asked to speak on the graduation of Therapeutic Court where I met Alumni from other branches. Alumni from DUI Court, Drug Court, and Mental Health Court invited me to join the alumni group so I could stay connected to other people that were successful in completing therapeutic court programs. I quickly became very active in that. I now serve as the groups' Treasurer and facilitate weekly peer support groups for current participants.

We reach out to others going through the process, no matter what therapeutic court they are in. I don't get to go back as much as I'd like, but I try to go back to the Family Care Court and encourage those individuals. I like to put a face to a story and let them know that it is possible to finish that 18-month or 2-year program.

### **Tell me about your work on the formation and development of the Alaska Center for Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD).**

That is a newly formed non-profit agency. Because I was not intending to get pregnant or have a child, I did not realize that I was pregnant until the end of my first trimester. So now my daughter is affected by my drinking in early my pregnancy. While that was a concern of mine that I was very honest about, there was no sign that my daughter was affected until started kindergarten when some signs presented themselves. I really had to fight to get the diagnosis because she appears very normal, she has an average IQ, everything else is very normal about her. She has some cognitive disabilities that are not really visible unless you are spending time with her.



My goal now is that I get her the proper support. I was asked by the diagnostic team to be a parent advocate. They asked me to share my experience and my story with others. I just did a speaking engagement at the Alaska Association for Addiction Professionals where I shared on the topics of multigenerational effects of alcoholism in families and FASD. I remain heavily involved. Because the agency is brand new, we are still hoping to get to more providers. We hope to share the problems that drinking early in pregnancy can bring later in life and that they can be life-long. We also want to shed light on how it can be preventable. This is something I am passionate about.

### **Why is it important for you to give back to parents and families?**

Because it was such a scary day for me when the Office of Children's Services came to my door. I didn't have any hope. I think it is important that families know, from the very beginning, that reunification is possible. I had a suggestion, and years ago looked at this with OCS, about services that should be provided to the families following removal. I asked, "what can we do for these parents in the very beginning when OCS comes to the home and the children are removed?" I firmly believe, the parents need support at that time, as well as the children. I was fortunate that my daughter went to live with my mother, but not everyone is that fortunate. I had support, but not everyone does.

### **If there someone that was critical in getting your children back? Maybe a social worker, judge, attorney, relative, friend?**

There was a whole team of people that believed in me before I believed in myself. First of all my mother. The therapeutic court treatment team, my social worker, and my daughter's guardian ad litem were all a tremendous support. I had a wonderful mental health therapist who changed my perspective and encouraged me to "not allow anyone to stomp in my garden." I had always shied away from working with the legal system, so to have people in the legal system on my side was just amazing.

### **What is the biggest thing you would want others to know about your experience?**

Never give up hope. When hope is lost, it's difficult to get back. Ask for help. Know that it is possible – I cannot express that enough.

### **Is there anything else about your experience we should highlight?**

Another really important thing I strive to do is to reduce the stigma associated with substance abuse and children in the system. We are not bad parents. We love our kids very much. People that suffer from substance abuse, it's not that they are choosing alcohol or drugs over their children. They just don't have the proper support or have not found the right treatment yet. Prior to this experience, I had a lot of judgement about parents who allowed their children to be taken away. My perspective has changed.