Ryan Kamada has served as the Magistrate of Weld County, Colorado, since his appointment in 2015. Prior to his appointment, he was in private practice where he first began representing parents and children in dependency and neglect cases.

Throughout Magistrate Kamada’s career he has emphasized the importance of reunification by remembering that other than the death penalty, there is no more serious an order a judge writes than putting a child in foster care or terminating parental rights.

Magistrate Kamada acknowledges the seriousness of separating families and continues to work alongside other child welfare professionals to develop best practices that can benefit families and children.

_by Krista Ellis, Washington College of Law, J.D. Candidate 2019_

**Tell me something interesting about yourself.**

One thing I’ve been thinking about a lot recently is that my grandparents, originally from California, were moved to Colorado and placed in an internment camp during World War II. Once they were released, our family did not have enough money to move back to California so that’s how my family came to live in Colorado and we’ve been here ever since. We discovered this because my grandfather joined the military while in the internment camp. As the men left the internment camp for duty, there was a sketch artist that created a portrait of each man. A few months back, I received a phone call looking for the families of those men to return the portraits. Interestingly to me, the Colorado Supreme Court building being named after former Governor Ralph L. Carr, a supporter of Japanese-Americans’ rights during World War II.

June is National Reunification Month
For more information see [www.ambar.org/nrm](http://www.ambar.org/nrm)
How long have you worked in child welfare? In what capacities?
I have worked with children and families for over 10 years. I have worked on many sides of a case. For 3-4 years I represented parents. I served as a Guardian Ad Litem for 5-6 years as well. Now, I’ve been on the bench for 3 years where my docket covers dependency and neglect matters.

How did you come to practice in this area?
It’s a long story. I graduated from Colorado School of Mines with a degree in mechanical engineering. I planned to go to law school and eventually practice patent law to make the big money. I practiced patent law for a few years until the company I worked for wanted me to relocate. I wanted to stay at home in Colorado so I went through the phone book calling firm after firm to find work, even offering to work for free, like an internship, for a few months. One day I went to court to observe and happened to see a dependency and neglect docket. I talked to the judge after and said, “I want to do that.” From there, the judge started appointing me to represent parents.

What was one experience that had big impact on the way you think about reunification?
When I began in this field, I did not grasp the importance of reunification. We think we have to get kids out of their homes to save them, which is sometimes true, but we forget the damage that removal can create. I remember working as a Guardian Ad Litem for a seven-year-old boy several years ago. I’ll never forget something he told me. He said, “you’re the one that took me away from my mom, I’m going to dig a grave and bury you.” That is strong coming from a seven-year-old. I think that was a moment that I realized there will always be a void if we don’t get these kids home.

“…there will always be a void if we don’t get these kids home.”
What advice, if any, do you have for other professionals considering entering the field or practicing in the field?

I have two pieces of advice:

First, we have to realize that these parents owe us nothing. We have come in and disrupted their lives. We need to earn their respect. It goes a long way when we, as professionals, go in with that mentality.

When I was still in private practice, I worked with one father that had a felony on his record. He kept telling me that he couldn’t get a job. I found a job fair directed at employing felons. I told him that I would help get his resume together and drive him. I learned a little more hand holding helps parents trust us and builds relationships with them.

Second, it is easy to conduct passive case management – just telling people what to do then repeating their (in)actions to the court. Active case management is key to helping these families. We need to be checking in with parents and offering services.

What is one thing you recommend to parents to increase the likelihood of reunification?

It is a hard ask, but parents should be transparent. Those parents that are 100% transparent are most likely to achieve reunification. The level of transparency is typically a good gauge on how successful they are going to be.

Explain what a Trauma Informed Courtroom means to you.

It’s all about emotional intelligence. The second a parent walks into a courtroom they are analyzing the atmosphere – the mood, what attorneys are talking or laughing together, set up, everything. A lot comes down to when we have to talk about the parent’s failings. Each failing the Department points out should be followed by how they will help address the issue. This helps because the individual can hear the problem but does not immediately feel helpless.

How do you provide a voice to families in the courtroom?

During every hearing, I provide the parents a time to respond. This happens during every hearing so the parents have this expectation that they will be heard. Sometimes we run close on time with schedules but the parent statement is never forgone. I don’t just let the attorney speak for them. Typically, parents tend to respond to the negative statements made by the department first. This is, of course, natural to defend one’s self. The time for the parent to speak provides them with the opportunity to tell me anything they may want me to know. I ask the parents to share what works for them and talk about their strengths with them.
Can you describe the “Best Practice Court Group”? 
The best practice court group is comprised of a judicial official, respondent parent counsel, guardian ad litem, CASA worker, court clerk, Assistant County Attorney for the Department, a case worker, and mental health professional. This group gets together quarterly to discuss best practices. The month prior to these meetings a brown bag is held and all attorneys in the field are invited to join. They discuss problem areas or changes each group would like to see. In Colorado, our best practice court group has made a lot of procedural changes to benefit the system.

Why are these “best practice” efforts important to reunification? 
There are three pillars of focus: (1) visitation, (2) substance abuse monitoring, and (3) services, whether drug or mental health. The best practices team addressed gaps of visitation schedules. It also addressed long waiting periods for substances evaluations. We now have someone at the shelter hearing that can schedule the substance abuse evaluation. This has significantly reduced the wait time for a parent to complete the evaluation.

What programs would you like to see developed to make reunification more likely or successful?
Each community has its own challenges. In a slightly rural, large geographical community, public transportation is sometimes not possible. I once wanted to attempt to use only public transportation for a week and I couldn’t do it. Getting to work and getting the kids to and from daycare; it was impossible. We sometimes just give parents a bus pass and expect them to participate in services but it’s hard. It would be great to have a program to relive the transportation barrier.

Is there anything else about you or your experiences that we should highlight?
There is no signature more important that I can make than signing an order to remove a kid from a home. It is so serious, I cannot express how serious it is. We are now an ACE [Adverse Childhood Experience] score when removing children.

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