Chuck has struggled with addiction throughout his life. As the single father of two autistic sons, he felt he reached a turning point when his children entered foster care. At that moment, he knew that he needed to get clean to get his boys back.

In just 6 months’ time, Chuck worked to beat his addiction, graduated from Family Treatment Court, and obtained medical and educational supports for his sons. Chuck is now working to help similarly situated parents through a local peer support program in Ohio.

Chuck describes being separated from his sons as a “dark time” but encourages other parents in this situation to “make the best of a bad situation.” Throughout his recovery, Chuck missed being with his sons daily, but worked vigilantly on the 12-step program and on becoming a better person.

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

What are some of your favorite things to do with your kids?
We spend a lot of time out back. They like to play outside. They swing on their swing set and they love to swim. My kids have autism so we spend some time inside. We spend time on Youtube, learning about things. We watch old Disney movies. They like to go out to the park. I usually take them one at a time out to play in public spaces, so I might take one to the park one day and one swimming later. It’s difficult to take them both out at the same time.
How long were your children in care?
They were in foster care for about 6 months. They have been back with me for about a year now.

“There is no closer thing to hell on Earth than being separated from your kids.”

What was one of the most memorable things about getting your children back?
The peace that you feel. There is no closer thing to hell on Earth than being separated from your kids. I felt this peace when they were back. We had to get back into the routine of them being around and that took some work for all of us.

Can you talk about some of the obstacles you faced in getting your sons back and how that has affected you?
I struggled with addiction my whole life. I used drugs to escape reality. One of the biggest obstacles was getting through everyday life without the drugs. Now, I’m two years clean. I worked during that time to become a better person. I learned a lot about myself.

What was the worst part about being separated?
I only got one visit a week for one hour for the first four months. I struggled with addiction, but I never abandoned my kids. The hardest part was just not seeing them every day. Eventually I got overnight visits then weekend visits before I got them back full time.

I was also overwhelmed. Both of my kids have autism and it affects their behavior. It can be frustrating. Family services helped me get medication for the kids.

In the process of reunification, did you discover things about yourself – strengths, abilities, or passions – that helped you achieve your goals?
I worked my 12 steps. It opened my eyes to things I did poorly in the past. I learned more each day to make me better. It gave me time for self-realization that I didn’t have time for before.
What was a big turning point for you?
Once the kids were in foster care – I knew if I stayed clean that I would get my kids back. I needed to become clean. I know how it sounds, but I know the kids were better in foster care if I was not clean. I had 4-6 months to work on my steps and get clean.

What was one major challenge in your case?
There is no autism knowledge here where I live. The people at family services helped build a network so that I can get help with medicine and other things. I really want to start a support group for families with children with autism.

How are you and your children after reunification?
We are good. We are still dealing with medication changes but the kids are progressing. I’ve learned that, with autism, we can’t put expectations… I learned that while dealing with my addiction and working with other addicts as well, we just can’t put expectations on people. I’ve learned to meet them where they are at. I do that with the peers I work with and my sons – I meet them where they are at.

Generally, we are a close family – me, my mom, and my sons. My mom helps me a lot. She’s been a great support. And now, I have a girlfriend that is good with my kids; she’s loves them just the way they are.

Tell me about one person that was a big help in getting your children back.
Annette Deo, the Family Treatment Court Director – She was one of the first people that believed in me. She set up a meeting with several of the people involved with the case. Case workers don’t always have the time or the money to do everything. Annette pushed to get everyone around the table. I’ll never forget her help.
Tell me a little about the Peer Support Program – your experience as a participant and as a leader.
People with lived experiences help guide others, whether it be drug addiction, mental health problems, or veterans. While participating in the peer support program I learned so much about self-care. Some people in the program use the 12 steps, some turn to Christianity, and some exercise. Everyone can find what helps them to recovery. For me, the 12-step program was important, but it doesn’t necessarily work for everyone.

My main goal when helping others through this program is to simply open doors for recovering addicts. I would like to see them get the opportunity. I want to be a resource to them because I’ve been there too. I’m willing to go to appointments, remind them about appointments, and talk to them about what is really going on in their lives. Because it is a peer run program, they are more open to talk to me than to a case worker or DHS. They know they can trust me and that I will keep their confidentiality. My goal is to open the door for them.

What is the biggest thing you would want a parent going through a similar situation to know?
Make the most of it. Having your kids removed makes for dark times. I remember I was mad at the system. I know at that point I wasn’t able to care for them how they needed. Staying clean was important for me and the kids; this gave me the time to become a better person. So my advice is to make the best of a bad situation.