Calvin Martin is the Statewide Director of Program Advocacy and Inclusion for the Florida Guardian ad Litem Office. For over 26 years, Calvin has worked tirelessly to support children in the state of Florida. He is passionate about helping kids and creating a culture of collaboration and teamwork to help parents succeed. His dedication to uplifting those around him is unmatched. He is devoted to helping underserved communities, especially older and LGBTQ+ youth, and establishing a commitment within the system to education and awareness. As Director of Program Advocacy and Inclusion, Calvin provides training for case managers and child advocates on implicit bias within the child welfare system and calls for personnel to address their own biases when making removal and reunification decisions. In addition to providing training, Calvin works with offices across the state of Florida to develop “a culture of encouragement” to alleviate barriers to reunification. His colleagues tout his ability to connect and work well with all types of people “while remaining sensitive to individual differences, no matter rank, class, or level.” Calvin knows that “the core work of reunification is honoring, nurturing, maintaining, and rebuilding the connections and relationships that youth have with their family and community,” and he has been critical in reuniting families and ensuring that the entire department prioritizes reunification and growing children’s relationships, rather than severing ties.
Tell me something interesting about yourself.
I love comic books and I have been collecting for a long time. At one point I had over three thousand. I find comic books to be a great tool for connecting with kids in the child welfare system, because so many superheroes were adopted or raised by family members other than their parents. They are the perfect narrative to introduce and hold discussions about foster care and adoption and a great way to connect to kids.

How did you become involved in child welfare? What roles and positions have you held within the system?
In college I began teaching at the local YMCA. That’s where I first discovered my connectiveness with young people. I worked with kids throughout college, and when I graduated, I began to realize the trauma and abuse the kids in the welfare system face. I was able to connect to many of them because I grew up poor and in a poor community, like many kids in the system. I became the supervisor of a residential program and began to see the foster system as two distinct worlds: the one we believe is real, and the true one where kids go through horrific trauma that most people don’t know anything about. Especially when I started working, people didn’t talk about child abuse, it was kept quiet and overlooked. I then became a guardian ad litem in Florida and became a manager of the GAL program around the time that the Florida system was being privatized. I was the VP of a child welfare lead agency and I also worked in mental health. I currently am the Statewide Director of Program Advocacy and Inclusion for the Florida Guardian ad Litem Office.

You’ve been working to create a culture of helping parents to reunify. Can you talk a little about that?
Yes, so Florida is split into circuits and each circuit has its own child welfare system. I strive to establish a culture across all of the circuits that looks at parents as people that can succeed and be good parents, through education and training. I want the child welfare system to look at reunification through the eyes of the child, as the ultimate goal for the system. I think that by creating a platform for the parent to be successful, the best interest of the child will be met. By focusing on education and poverty, we can help parents succeed and ultimately reduce the number of kids in our care.

What do you see as some strengths of the child welfare system in your area?
In my opinion, Florida does a good job of focusing on how trauma affects kids and works hard to reduce the trauma a child experiences in the system. Everyone from judges to caseworkers embrace this type of trauma-informed care for kids and works to provide kids with the trauma care they need and deserve. I think Florida is also very committed to reducing the time a child remains in care and recognizing that children do best when they are at home. Florida also is doing great work to ensure that older youth are supported, including enacting a moratorium on aging out of foster care during the coronavirus pandemic.

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Weaknesses?
I think the child welfare system can and needs to do more to address the disparity of kids of color in the system and the impact poverty and implicit bias has on those numbers. I hold many talks on the standards we hold parents to, and how that can be different based on race or income level. Parents shouldn’t have to be perfect to get their kids back, and sometimes implicit bias and the personal values of caseworkers and managers can get in the way of reunification when it should be possible.

What programs or practices do you see as ineffective that could be modified to increase the likelihood of reunification?
I feel that Florida does a lot of great training, but that the state needs to dedicate and offer more education and outreach to LGBTQ+ youth. LGBTQ+ youth experience higher rates of suicide than their straight peers and even greater challenges than the average foster kid. By enhancing awareness and providing appropriate education to case managers and advocates, we can have a higher level of understanding and communication, for trans youth especially. These kids need better and more specialized care and understanding than many people are able to provide as of now.

Are there any preventative actions that you think could put a stop to children from being removed?
My immediate thought was education, but that is only part of it. There needs to be funding for services to be made available to all parents. Mental health services, housing and transportation are vital to helping a parent succeed and reunify with their children. We know that a lot of parents look for these services on their own, but have trouble finding them because the community doesn’t have the proper network for these services. Another thing that could be beneficial is getting education tools for parents virtually. We’ve seen an uptick in parental participation in hearings and services now that many things have gone online because of the coronavirus. If parents were able to get more services and education from their homes, perhaps there would be more participation for preventative measures as well.

What services do you feel are most helpful to assisting families reunification?
I think the most important thing that help parents reunify is mental health services. I think we have only just recently been learning the value of talking to someone and addressing past personal trauma and how that past trauma affects our own actions now. Many parents cite being able to talk about how their own trauma created the behavior that caused their child to be removed and correcting it as the thing that helped them get their child back. Additionally, substance abuse services are very important and highly related to mental health. Having a support system to help get clean can make all the difference in reunifying families.

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What kind of training have you provided to improve the child welfare system in your area?
I first like to look at the demographics of the children in care in the specific area and do some analysis to see if there are any strong patterns regarding race, poverty, length of time in care etc. The data directs the steps we need to take. From there we start building strategies to address those patterns to move the needle and reduce the number of kids in care. Then, we can implement an action plan and check in with the community on an annual basis to see if the action plan has worked, to tweak things that need help, and to refocus our efforts on another problem. I also work to recruit case workers that have similar backgrounds to people of the community they serve and I look at the retention rate of volunteers in the area, especially volunteers of color to see what we can do to assist them and keep them able to work to help kids.

Is there one experience or family that changed the way you view reunification?
There is! I used to think that when a parent’s parental rights were terminated that reunification was no longer an option, that our job was now just to keep the kid in as stable an environment as possible, but one family changed my view. There was a girl, seventeen years old, she had been in foster care since she was twelve and had been in over seventy foster care placements in those five years. She suffered a lot of trauma during her years in the system, but she would always track her mother down even after parental rights were terminated. We noticed that she behaved perfectly when she was with her mother, the opposite of what she was like in care. We started to think that now that she was older, reunification might be possible. After seeing her return home to her mother, everyone working with them felt joyful and celebrated. I started seeing reunification through the child’s eyes, as the ultimate goal.

What advice would you give to others working in child welfare or someone considering working in child welfare?
I would tell them to build a rapport with parents, kids, peers, service providers, and the community. The ability to collaborate with those you work with, including parents, could make the ultimate difference in a child’s life. Nothing works in this system without teamwork and collaboration. Find a mentor and let them help you grow. Acknowledge parents’ strengths to build up their confidence so they can excel from there. A lot of parents are lacking the support they need, and the confidence boost you give them could be exactly the jumping off point they need to be a great parent. I would also say that anyone who works in child welfare needs to be passionate about what they do, and they need to make sure to take care of themselves. Even Batman needs to take the night off sometimes.

Do you have any advice for judges, legislators, or even governors?
I would say that we need to be able to balance the needs of the child and the family that come into conflict. The child welfare system is a very slow-moving system and it leads to many people not actually
getting the services they need. A difference can be made if judges and legislators can successfully manage the administrative lag. I would also say that we need to develop policies and practices that encourage collaboration between families and the system to help kids and there needs to be a greater cultural shift to make reunification the preferred goal.

**Do you think there are any public misconceptions about the child welfare system?**

Many people think of child welfare departments as just child removal agencies. This is based on a power imbalance and a historic mistrust of the department. The Department has a lot of power over the families they work with. Caseworkers come into someone’s home and judge their lives and have the authority to take their child away, and that scares people. I think child welfare agencies can work to change this misconception by building a better relationship with the community they serve through education and support services for families.

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