Debbie Flood’s work revolves around building strong bonds and relationships with all of the children and families she works with. She is much more than a social worker to these families, she becomes their friend and ally. She describes herself as a “bold person”, who will never be afraid to fight for her clients. When working with families, she taps into her own experiences and family history for support and guidance. Debbie dives deep into her cases, stepping in when agency social workers fail to do their job. She “puts everything she has into doing what’s right.” Debbie’s colleague who nominated her as a Reunification Hero explained how Debbie’s insight and work on a case uncovered how terribly the Department of social services had handled a family’s case, the deficient work of the case covering social worker, and ultimately, how Debbie’s advocacy fostered the family’s successful reunification:

“Debbie attended and advocated for our clients and their family at all Child Family Team meetings, delinquency hearings, and even the mother’s criminal hearings. She was constantly working to make sure this family, who clearly belonged together and loved each other deeply, could be reunited. It was incredible to watch and made it possible for me to be an extremely fierce attorney advocate for the three children we represented, because Debbie often had much more (and often conflicting) information compared to what the county social worker was reporting. After months of battling and preparing for the contested dependency hearing (including submitting a lengthy brief), we were able to get the department to change their recommendation from termination of reunification services to return to home of parent mother.”

Debbie has worked as a social worker and investigator for Children’s Law Center of California for 23 years and she has no intention of stopping any time soon. She asserts that helping families is her life’s calling.

By: Katie Carden, Villanova University Charles Widger School of Law, J.D. Candidate 2021

June is National Reunification Month
For more information see www.ambar.org/nrm
Tell me something interesting about yourself.

I am an adopted child and I always think it’s important to know your roots and who you are, to know something about your biological family. Because when the pieces are missing, you’re off-centered. I try to incorporate this into my work with families, it’s so important to hold families together when at all possible and to maintain relationships among families. It is really difficult to relate to society when you have no connection to where you came from or your history.

How long have you worked within the system and what made you interested in working within the child welfare system?

I first got involved with the child welfare system through working in the Probation Department. I got laid off because I was hit during a gang fight on the job. So, I went on welfare and moved back home with my parents. My friend called me and shared that she had this perfect job for me. I went to the job interview, I thought it went okay but nothing too special. Soon after that initial interview, I was offered the position and I’ve been with the Children’s Law Center of Los Angeles ever since.

I have been working as a social worker and investigator for the Children’s Law Center for almost 23 years. I primarily work with youth who are dual status, who are involved in both the juvenile justice court and dependency court. But I like to think of myself as more than simply a social worker to these families. I hold long relationships with the families I work with. I’m the person they call when they’re stuck, and they don’t know what to do or how to do it.

I was raised with strong family values. My mother is a therapist, my aunt and uncle are psychiatrists, my brother struggled with mental health issues, and my sister was substance addicted and has now been sober for 15 years. I use my own family resources and experiences to help the families I work with. Helping families reunify and succeed is what I’m meant to do in this world. I can’t help every family, but I know when I give someone information, it will trickle down to 20 other people and it might be saving some other family that I’ll never meet.

What is one thing you do when working with parents to increase the likelihood of reunification?

It’s important to remember that many of these parents or families might not have role models to look up to who taught them how to parent. I teach my families how to sit down at the table and talk to one another, I stress the importance of open communication. One of the moms I worked with just didn’t know how to organize and run her household. I went over to her house and we set up a chart in the kitchen, the chart would list all the chores or tasks that each family member needed to complete. I continued to work with this mom until she got eight of her children back in her care. But it’s important to remember that we need to continuously work with these parents, even after they get their kids back. I got really sick for one year and was unable to keep checking-in on this mother for about 4-weeks. When I returned back to work, I reached out to her and discovered that her children had been removed again. I’m still working with this mom and right now she has two of her kids back in her care. I will continue to work with her after all of her children are returned to her. Even when parents reunify with their kids,
it’s so important that social workers or community supports stay with the families for a certain length of time. Successful reunification is a long process, and it doesn’t end right when parents get their kids back.

I’m a person made from the dirt. I’m very hands-on with my families because I have experience with life and working through the trenches. I’m going to weather the full storm with the families I work with. I’ll be there for all the good and all the bad days. I take the time to truly listen and I respond if a family is struggling. I offer whatever help I can. If you don’t have any food, I’ll go buy you food. If you need a ride to an appointment, I will drive you there.

What are some of the strengths and weaknesses of the child welfare system in your area?

A lot of our problems and successes stem from child welfare agency social workers. Our social workers are really a mixed bag. Some of our social workers are great, and they really do try. Many of them feel like they just can’t do a lot because of their supervisors’ control over them, but the social workers try, and they bring strength to the kids. Even if you have great social workers, these workers do not get to stay with the kids they work with long enough. Some social workers are amazing and do such good for the children, but they don’t work with these kids long enough to provide the critical help these kids really need. The kids remember the good social workers, they tell me about them. So, it’s positive that the social workers made this memorable impact on a child, but it’s a tragedy that they were unable to keep making these positive impacts.

All social workers are overworked. There is not enough training for caseworkers or for family placements. When caseworkers or placements are introduced to these children, the kids are often at a place where they’re so out of control, they are so hurt or traumatized by this entire process. Caseworkers or foster parents are comparing these children to their own children, and they’re thinking that these kids should be model children, like their own kids. But it doesn’t work like that. You need to meet the kids where they are and recognize all that they’ve been through.

What are some of the biggest challenges facing parents when they’re trying to reunify with their children?

The social workers and the system are the biggest problems. Some social workers are vindictive. They don’t like the kids or the parents, so they do the bare minimum and they don’t try to help. Sometimes, it’s not the social worker’s fault, the type of social worker you are depends a lot on who you are and where you came from. I’m working with one family and the social worker doesn’t like the mother because Mom went to jail for a theft charge. Mom did her time and she’s now working very hard and diligently to get her children back. But this social worker only focuses on Mom’s mistakes, she’s punitive and disrespectful. As a social worker, you cannot treat people like that. Some social workers are just judging, they’re not listening, they’re not helping. It is not the social workers job to criticize the parent, it is the social workers job to help the parent.

We as a society are so judgmental. We judge parents according to what they’ve done, and we refuse to forgive them for their mistakes. These parents need to be treated with respect. Just because a
parent made a mistake, that doesn’t mean that they are “bad parents”, it just means that they might be a parent who can’t do it all at the moment. The department and the people who regulate child welfare rules are people who have never been in foster care, who have never been poor. They are often people who have always been rich or privileged. These people have a total lack of understanding. If you’ve never been poor, how would you know what policies and practices are best for these families?

**What is one thing you or your team does when working with parents to increase the likelihood of reunification?**

CLC primarily represents children but we also have some children who become parents. If we represent the child, I have to get permission for the parent’s attorney before I can speak directly to the parent. When I am able to work with a parent, I do so diligently and with great respect for the work that needs to be done.

I am a strong advocate of parenting classes, substance abuse or mental health treatment, teamwork, and open communication. I work with parole agents and probation officers. I sit down with parole agents and probation officers and discuss what’s going on and the history of these parents, kids, and families. I look at the full picture and am always trying to identify creative solutions. I figure out what services are needed, who’s providing those services, how to ensure parents have reliable transportation to those services. We can’t just provide parents with a plan or guidelines and leave them to figure out how to implement those plans on their own, we need to dive into the nitty gritty details and determine exactly how this plan is going to work. I ask for a lot of mental health testing for both parents and children.

Too many social workers or attorneys hear their clients say “okay” and just accept that this means they understand all that is going on. I sit down with parents and document everything. This is difficult, parents might have their own problems and might need help understanding exactly what the next steps are.

**Are there any programs or practices that are most effective in helping parents reunify?**

Family reunification programs, counseling, child guidance programs, drug and alcohol programs, and housing services are incredibly effective in helping parents reunify. I am constantly staying up to date on what services are out there. I use every resource that I can tap into to help get these kids back with their parents. I visit the services I use. I’ve even sent kids out of state if I’ve identified a program that better suits them in another state. I get family members into parenting classes, school and tutoring programs to help kids graduate. If possible, I want the kids and parents I work with to get their high school diploma or GED. A diploma empowers them. They prove to themselves and to the world that they can complete something.

**Are there any programs or practices that are not effective and need to be changed?**

Most of our programs and services need to be improved. We don’t have the mental health training in this country that we need. I have two children who have mental health issues. If I didn’t have training
in mental health or support from my family, I would be a DCFS mother. The programs we provide to kids and parents need to incorporate mental health education and training on serious living skills, such as buying a house, renting an apartment, paying off debts, understanding cotton comes from the ground not out of the bag – just basic living skills! Many of the families I work with don’t know where their food comes from, we just need to incorporate basics back into the program.

Do you have any cases or incidents that helped you better understand or realize the significance of reunification?

I think about my clients ALL of the time. I reach back and touch base with them. Just last week I called the state hospital because I found out that a kid I love was in the hospital. I called the court and talked to the judge, who ordered that the young woman be released. This child had a rough life, her grandmother said openly in court, in front of this girl, “I’ll take the son but I don’t want the girl, you can keep her.” Eliminating familial connections and relationships is so traumatic for a child. I found a placement for this child and visited her every day. This was a turning point for me in understanding real dynamics in mental health, where I stood, and what my role was. Can I change some of the traumatic experiences for these families? No, but I can make sure that they have someone there for them. Now this girl is going to call me one day and I’m going to get in my car and go wherever she needs me.

Was there one experience that had a big impact on the way you think about reunification?

I was a foster parent before adopting my child and I had Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) worker interrogate me and investigate my home because I had marble on my baseboards. They looked under the bed, sifted through my fridge, opened all the drawers, etc. The caseworker asked if I had weapons in my home, I told her that my husband who is a Commander Lieutenant kept a gun in the home but that it was locked away. I was then insulted because I refused to tell this caseworker where the key to our locked safe was. The disrespect that the department has for these parents is out of control. If parents do not have the right person to help them navigate through this process and deal with the obtrusiveness of the caseworkers, parents are going to have a very hard time.

Describe some efforts you have made to improve the child welfare practice in your area.

My brother and I established the Curt Flood Foundation to better support children in the child welfare system and to fill holes or gaps that we witnessed in the system. We buy things for kids and families that the Department won’t buy. We raise funds to provide for children’s health & fitness, mental well-being, and social relationships. We try to make sure that kids and families in the system are treated with respect. If a child is really self-conscious about her teeth or smile, we’ll fund her braces. We’ll try to help kids who want to get their hair done professionally or see a dermatologist for skin problems. We help children in the system feel like they’re being treated with basic human decency.

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Is there any advice you would give to other professionals who work in child welfare? Or to individuals considering working in child welfare?

You must listen to your families. Many people will listen, but they won’t hear what the parents or kids are saying. Build strong bonds and connections with families – don’t be afraid to get “too close”. Identify people in the community who might be able to help these families. I have a friend who’s the VP of a bank, I will call her up and ask her to meet with families who need help with financial planning. There are so many people who would like to help and who are able to help these families in the community. Tap into those resources. It is important to teach people, to show people how to develop new skills, but make sure that you do not belittle them in the same breath.

If you believe in something, don’t be afraid to stand up for it and stand alone if you have to. I talk back all the time, I fight with the department and what’s considered “proper” procedure and regulations. Do I get in trouble? All the time. But I’m not afraid to stand up for what’s right and what’s best for these families. I like my job, I only dislike the bureaucratic bullcrap that goes with it.