Edwin Taveras is invested in serving the community he has claimed as his own since he immigrated from the Dominican Republic with his mother and brother right before beginning high school. He went on to obtain a degree in psychology and a Master of Social Work with the intent to work with children in foster care.

A co-worker at the Bronx Defenders nominated Edwin Taveras because of his clear passion for advocating for the children and parents in the child welfare system. In his role as an advocate for the parent in the reunification process, Taveras works with them from the beginning of the case to the end.

Taveras wants to address the root issues behind why parents initially interact with the child welfare system. Behind every court case is a family struggling. Despite his high success rate in reunifying families, Taveras does not describe it as successful because of the frequency of repeats in the child welfare system. He wants to increase the accessibility of services that these families need to achieve reunification and avoid future separation. As a Spanish speaker, he sees a gap in services for the Bronx community and wants to work to close that gap.

Taveras sees the child welfare system as community work. He is passionate about his role as an advocate for the families that live within his community and look like him.

By: Tess Davey, Georgetown University Law Center, J.D. Candidate 2022
Tell me something interesting about yourself.
I grew up in the Dominican Republic and came to New York right before freshman year of high school. I am a native Spanish speaker, so I learned English once I arrived. I never intended to stay, but this community has become my home. A wonderful mentor in high school put me on the track to where I am with a graduate degree and working to give back to the community.

What made you interested in child welfare?
I always wanted to work with kids. When I came to the United States, I lived in Washington Heights where there are a lot of supportive organizations. My family benefitted from the welfare programs, and I wanted to give back to this community. During my undergraduate time, I learned about foster care and have been passionate about working with children in the system ever since then.

How long have you worked in child welfare? What types of positions or roles have you had during that time?
I have worked in child welfare for five years. My first two years, I worked as a social worker for the foster care system in the Bronx. I was a case manager, so I was working directly with kids placed in foster care and working towards reunification. This is now referred to as a reunification worker and included referrals to services, writing court reports, etc. For the past three years, I have worked with the Bronx Defenders in more of an advocate role.

Can you tell me more about your role at Bronx Defenders?
I work alongside the parents’ attorneys in representing them in the child welfare process. This includes instances where there are conflicts with the schools, attending conferences with clients (the parents), being present at court hearings, communicating with New York City’s Administration for Children’s Services (ACS) workers, attending school meetings, making referrals for parents, and generally providing support for the clients in a holistic way. Being an advocate for the parents, especially in the initial stages, does not always mean fighting for reunification. Once parents have been separated from their children, I work with them to fight a system stacked against reunification for the purposes of protecting the children. There is a natural bias against the parents at the beginning and the social workers must work to have the parents seen objectively and be heard by ACS.

As a native Spanish speaker, are many of your clients Spanish speakers? How can this population better be served?
Most of my cases involve Spanish speakers. We have other advocates who speak Spanish, but we need more. To better serve non-English speakers, we need to educate the population on how the child welfare system works – what the process entails, its purpose, and their individual roles in the process. The child welfare system does not exist in other countries like it does in the United States. Thus, education and outreach are crucial to inform clients and families about available services, standards for childcare, legal involvement, and the role of the large state organization of ACS. The Bronx Defenders has community days with other agencies to provide such information. There is also an early defense hotline. More Spanish speakers are needed in social services for the child welfare system and the services for which I need to refer my clients, such as therapy.
What was one experience that had a big impact on the way you think about reunification?
There was no one experience. Instead, it was the general lack of understanding, or empathy, for my clients and the patterns that I began to see in the child welfare system. The ACS workers have a difficult job in the court room and often, due to rushing or covering themselves, mistakes are made. These mistakes or rushed decisions lead to separation of families, sometimes forever.

What are some of the strengths of the child welfare system in your area?
The Bronx Defenders’ size enables nearly every case to have an assigned a social worker. The social worker is an advocate for the parents from start to finish of the reunification process.

What are some of the weaknesses?
Racial inequality is the biggest weakness in the area, and throughout the system. Additionally, the system does not have enough funding. There is also a high worker turnover due to burnout; the workers do not get enough support that they need to do the job such as salary, benefits, supervisor support, mental health support, etc.

Describe some efforts you have made to improve child welfare practice in your area?
Our efforts are to work collectively as a team to set an example for other agencies and ACS for how we work with parents. We are pro-parent, without any judgment. We also want ACS to see us as an example because at the end of day we must work with them. The attention we provide parents in attempts to reunify the families is what differentiates us. We listen to the parents and hear their stories before making any conclusions.

What is one thing you recommend in working with parents to increase the likelihood of reunification?
You must work with ACS workers as well. Regardless of how they treat you or how you feel, parents need to have a relationship with the ACS workers because they have a significant impact on the cases.

What advice would you give to other professionals who work in child welfare? Or to individuals considering working in child welfare?
Earn the trust of the parents. Show the parents that you are passionate about helping them. This means working with them beyond just making referrals. Many of the clients have experience with the system and feel hopeless. When parents see you care, it gives them hope and can motivate them to engage in the reunification process more fully.

What advice would you give to judges, agency directors, legislators, governors, or the president about how to improve the system?
Treat the issues holistically and look at the reasons behind why the clients come into the courtroom. Most of these parents have young kids without support. Root issues leading to interactions with ACS are mental health issues, lack of health insurances, lack of benefits, etc. The judges usually just look at the allegations made by ACS instead of the broader picture.

“We are pro-parent, without any judgement.”

June is National Reunification Month
For more information see www.ambar.org/nrm
What programs/practices are most effective in helping parents reunify?
Looking at the situations through a trauma lens. A lot of the clients are coming from trauma, and that needs to be addressed. Also, just what I said with the non-English speaking population. We need to inform clients what they are doing and why for each part of the reunification process.

Are there programs/practices that are not effective and need to be changed? If so why?
The idea of forcing services on clients is not useful. Clients do not want to be forced to do things, especially when they feel they do not need the service. For example, a client with seven kids being forced to do parenting classes, despite the problem being financial, only adds additional burden and frustration. I think there is a way to combine a lot of services. For example, if the client has a therapist that works for them, then it would be better to have the therapist work with the parent on anger management rather than mandate the parent attends an eight week group on controlling anger issues in addition to their regular therapy.

What programs/practices need to be added to make reunifications more likely or successful?
I wish that we could supply services to the clients ourselves. Unfortunately, since we represent the clients, this would be a conflict of interest.

Do you think there are any public misconceptions about the child welfare system? If so, what are they?
Yes, there are a lot of public misconceptions about the child welfare system. People tend to think it is highly effective and that it is a happy place for kids, better than with their parents, and neither of these are true.

What preventative actions do you think would be most effective in avoiding the conditions that may lead to foster care?
I have mentioned some of them, but one that particularly repeats itself is mental health problems. The lack of affordable and continuous mental health care is a huge underlying issue for parents in the child welfare system and is not currently being addressed. Most of my clients are in court because of mental health issues and they are not engaged in services either because they are not aware of them or cannot access them. There is a lack of Spanish-speaking providers to even refer my clients to. It is challenging to find therapists which negatively affects the reunification timeline, further worsening the parents’ mental health. While I have volunteered my services, it is difficult to maintain a full time job with Bronx Defenders as well which is why I have decided to leave Bronx Defenders and dedicate my time fully to providing mental health care services to this population and attempt to address one of the primary problems for my clients.

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