Reunification Heroes

As one of Gina Wassemiller’s colleagues wrote, Gina “has seriously worked miracles” for families as a parent mentor in Washington State. In her role, Gina uses her lived experience as a parent facing the child welfare system and person recovering from addiction not only to support, counsel, and mentor parents, but also to connect them to needed resources and services as she fights for reunification alongside them. “I love what I do, and I could not do it the way that I do if I didn’t walk my own journey,” says Gina. “I share my vulnerability with the parents I work with so they know it’s okay to be vulnerable and to be truthful. We connect because I know what it was like.”

When Gina first encountered the child welfare system

In December 2006, just before Gina’s son Keegan turned two, he was removed from her care due to what Gina describes as “my meth addiction as well as the pattern of domestic violence in my relationships.” This was not Gina’s first experience with her substance use interfering with her parenting—her parents had intervened and were raising her first child, Christopher, by that time—but it was the first time that the state, not her family, intervened.

Gina recalls the first court hearing in that case as an overwhelming experience. She did not feel supported by her attorney, and she “couldn’t get back to my house to get high, get numb, fast enough.” The two years that followed were challenging. She did not know any other parents who had their kids removed, let alone anyone who reunified with them. Gina complied with some services, and worked with a therapist, but was not in a place to be honest about her ongoing drug use. She attributed her son’s removal to the violence in her previous relationship, and shared that she had left the relationship.
But she hid from the child welfare agency that she was in a new violent relationship with a man who was selling drugs. She recalls a violent robbery in which her boyfriend was shot and numerous federal law enforcement raids of their home. Although she participated in therapy consistently, she was still not honest, even with her therapist, about her ongoing drug use. She “never felt safe enough to tell [her] truth, that [she] was using.”

In August 2008, Gina gave birth to her third child, a baby girl. Twelve days later, Gina relinquished her parental rights to Keegan, thereby allowing her sister and brother-in-law to adopt him. “I knew how I was living and I needed to make sure he had the life that he deserved,” says Gina.

**The turning point**

In the year after the relinquishment, Gina continued to struggle with addiction and parenting her baby daughter, Darina. She does not know why she avoided involvement with the child welfare system, but her family was planning its own intervention. In September 2009, her father confronted her after coordinating with her family and Darina’s father’s family. Gina quickly realized that she “couldn’t manipulate the situation anymore. There was no option other than doing the right thing.”

“That was the first time I could tell anyone in my family that I was using and needed help,” reports Gina. “I said I needed treatment and a safe place for Darina.”

The next morning, a Child Protective Services worker visited Gina. Gina “was finally open.” “I’ll never forget that guy,” recalls Gina, “he met me where I was and talked to me in a way that I could talk to him and tell my truth.” This led to a voluntary case with Darina, and ultimately led Gina to addiction treatment for the first time. In October 2019, Gina will be celebrating ten years of sobriety.

**What made the difference**

In 2010, Gina was first connected to the parent support group, “Life During CPS.” Gina says that participating in this group was “the foundation for me having the life I have today in advocacy and parent support.” For the first time, Gina met parents who had been through what she was experiencing, and the experience instilled hope in her. Gina participated in inpatient treatment and then spent six months at the Everett Gospel Mission, a women’s shelter, while Darina stayed with Gina’s mother. Gina then entered the YWCA Project Reunite program, an 18-month transitional living placement, with Darina, before finally getting her own apartment. Now, Gina is raising her daughter and working to support other parents experiencing involvement with the child welfare system.
Life as a parent mentor

“Each of my mentors helped me be the mentor I am today,” Gina reflects. She thinks back often to her first experience with the child welfare system with her middle son. Gina’s goal is to “help families each day try not to go through where I was in the first case.” She is a contract social service specialist with the Washington State Office of Public Defense, and volunteers to lead a support group, “Surviving Into Thriving,” on Thursday evenings. “I am a parent ally,” says Gina, “I still wear that role because I earned that role through my journey.”

Gina “meets parents where they are,” and often uses her recovery network and other resources to help parents meet their own basic needs so that they are in a better place to work towards reunifying with their children. She reports that housing instability and unsafe or unsupportive home environments are often significant stressors for parents whose children have been removed. “I remember having to go back after leaving the courthouse [after the first removal hearing for her son] because I needed a place to stay.” Gina tries to “help parents meet their basic needs on the first day I meet them.”

Because Gina’s family took in her oldest two children, Gina’s firsthand experience with kinship care gives her a valuable perspective as well. With respect to rebuilding and establishing her relationship with her sons, “it’s a learning experience,” she reflects. She tells parents whose families are caring for their children, “I know sometimes it really hurts, but I wish and hope for you that someday you will get to a place where you are thankful they were there for you and your child.”

While walking the path toward reunification alongside parents, Gina advises them: “We’re trying to build a strong foundation for you. If we miss a piece in putting together your foundation, you might end up right back here. Only you know what you need, so you need to tell me if we’re missing something.” She has often told her mentees, “if you’re doing a service and it’s not helping you, let me know so I can help you get what you actually need.”

Gina is in constant communication with the parents she supports and with the agency social workers that manage their cases. When parents she works with have supervised visitation, Gina asks the social worker: “What do you need to see to get to unsupervised?” And then Gina helps the parents navigate each of the needed steps.

She stands by parents through their ups and downs. When a parent she’s working with “falls off” or struggles to comply with services or sobriety, “I’m the first person they call.” Gina’s parents “know they can call me right in that minute, because I am a part of that safety plan, and I am there, and they know there’s no judgment.”
Importantly, Gina enjoys working alongside dedicated parent attorneys. “I love them all,” she shares. “They make me feel a part of the process. Our passion and empathy for [each] family are the same, and are connected. They really admire the work that I do and respect where I’m coming from.”

And the feeling is mutual. Gina recalls helping a new mother access a new transitional housing program earlier this year. Just before the court was about to place her baby with her in the program, one of her urine tests came back dirty. Her attorney knew she hadn’t used and was able to request a hair follicle test which showed that the prior result had been a false positive. The mother and baby are now living in the program. One of the best parts, Gina says with pride, is that the program is only three miles from Gina’s home, so Gina can go check on mom and baby regularly.

Gina’s daughter, Darina, has “been raised around advocacy” for families. As the child of an incarcerated father, Darina successfully advocated through a video to have her father moved from federal prison in Texas to Oregon so that she could visit him more easily. At the age of 10, Darina has now spoken on multiple panels about having an incarcerated parent. “Through the advocacy she has watched me do, she’s been able to do advocacy on her level with her voice,” Gina shares. “My journey has been instilled in her.”

Gina often sees system policies and expectations that tend to dehumanize the families she works with, but this just inspires her to work harder. She pushes the system to focus less on “policy living” and more on what she calls “love living” for children. Her approach has garnered her support and respect, including from agency social workers. Gina reports that sometimes social workers reach out to her, even when she is not working their cases, to ask her to help the parents. “Gina, I really need you to help this mom, I can’t get her clean. I need your help.” And she offers it without hesitation.

She implores the system to avoid “making a judgment or impression by what’s on the paper” and to instead see the parent “as a human being.”

Gina affirms: “My motto is people change and families reunite.”