Moshammet Rhodd

Moshammet Rhodd was one of the first clients of Brooklyn Defender Services, Family Defense Practice (BDS-FDP). After her two children were removed, Moshammet fought for seven months to be successfully reunified. She was later offered a receptionist position by the organization’s director, who saw something special in Moshammet.

Over the last seven years, Moshammet has become a leader in the office. She is now the organization’s Court Coordinator, a role which involves filing thousands of motions, handling communications with court staff, and at times supporting client parents who are experiencing the same hardship and trauma of removal that Moshammet experienced years ago.

The colleague who nominated Moshammet describes her as a relentlessly positive force amidst the brutal, adversarial child welfare system. She is also credited as being a source of hope and encouragement to clients and a true inspiration to her colleagues in their constant efforts to keep families together.

By Chrissy Cullen, Loyola University Chicago School of Law, J.D. Candidate 2021

June is National Reunification Month
For more information see www.ambar.org/nrm
Tell me a little bit about your kids.
My daughter is about to turn 19, she just graduated from high school, and is going to SUNY at Buffalo. She is very bright – she received more than $20,000 in scholarships. My son is in seventh grade and he is having one of his best years. He has a 3.6 average in school.

How would you describe yourself as a parent?
I'm understanding but very motivated. I'm also very educationally driven because I didn't complete college, and I know it's so important for them to get an education.

Tell me about your experience with the child welfare system.
I was a client with BDS-FDP in 2008. The day my children were removed was almost like the perfect storm. I had shared custody of my daughter with her father and he'd bring her to school on Mondays and little did I know she'd missed a lot of days. One day I let her stay home from school and a teacher came to my house and knocked on the door. I had gone next door to the neighbor’s house to use their computer and my one-and-a-half-year-old son and seven-and-a-half-year-old daughter were home alone for about an hour. My daughter opened the door because she recognized the teacher and told her that I was out doing something. The teacher called the police and they came and took the kids. I went to the precinct to find out what was going on and was arrested for child endangerment. When a case worker came to question me, I admitted to smoking weed when the kids were not home. I signed the kids over and let them remove the kids because the worker said it would be easier and I didn't know any better.

How long were your children out of your care?
My kids were removed for seven months. During that time, I had to take parenting skills classes and do drug addiction treatment. I did well and became a peer counselor for the program. Then Lauren Shapiro of BDS-FDP asked if I wanted to be part of a “Know Your Rights” panel, which featured lawyers, social workers, parents, and advocates teaching others about their rights regarding the Administration for Children’s Services (ACS) and resources that can help. I also did three videos for BDS-FDP on my life and story.
**What was one thing you struggled with the most?**

Since my daughter went to live with her father and my son was placed with my brother, the biggest struggle was trying to get the kids to see each other and getting to visit with them as a family.

**What was the best advice you received?**

I was resistant to treatment because I felt like marijuana wasn’t a drug. Other people were shooting up and using dope and I felt like I wasn’t doing anything wrong. The realest thing I was told is a drug is a drug. You can use anything as a drug. It’s the addiction, it’s the same actions and same pattern of behavior.

As far as attorneys and counseling, they can do everything in court for you, but you have to do the work. If I'm not following through on my end, it all means nothing.

**What was one of the most memorable moments about getting your children back?**

The most memorable part was my first overnight visit. Just being able to have dinner with my kids and getting to ask them every day, “How was your day at school?”

**How long have you worked in child welfare and what types of positions have you held?**

I was offered a receptionist position at BDS-FDP in 2012. I moved up to administrative assistant work, and then was promoted to Court Coordinator. I file all the motions for children to be returned, for visitation, and for custody. I build relationships with attorneys, even attorneys with ACS, judges, and other court staff. I collaborate to reach end results.

When I was the receptionist, I was the first person parents would see when they were going through the most difficult thing in their life. Dealing with the law is hard in any instance but when it’s your children, it’s something different. It’s your family, it’s emotional, and it hurts. When people come to you, they’re at the lowest moment in their life. I understood what they were going through and their pain.
In addition to being Court Coordinator, I now run a program called Parent Leadership Institute (PLI). We take former clients who exhibit advocacy skills and give them tools and training on active listening, using open-ended questions, knowing the audience, and more. We help them with resume writing and then link them up with a program for a parent advocate job. Some parents don’t have jobs and helping them get this job means the world to them. Sometimes parents are labeled as a neglector or abuser. When the state puts you on the registry, people are less likely to hire you. Many parents see this as an opportunity to work and embrace it – even those who are not that far away from their case. Some parents might not be able to be a parent advocate, but they can be a parent leader by sharing the information with others.

**What do you like about your job?**
People think I just file papers and do motions but I feel they’re very important. If I do my job incorrectly, someone might not get to visit their child or get the hearing they’re supposed to. Or if I do it right, this motion might be the motion that helps a person get their children home or might be the motion that opens everyone’s eyes to what is really going on in the case.

**What is the hardest part of your job?**
It always depends on others. If a motion is not ready, I can’t file it. Even in those moments, I still inspire my co-workers, some who are fresh out of law school. I remind them that this is a difficult time period for the parents and that sometimes the hardest road you have ever been on will bring you to paradise.

**What is your relationship with client parents like?**
We see the same clients a lot. Some clients are still the same as when I had a case years ago. I am very much a support when I can be, but not as much as when I was a receptionist. I make time when I’m in court to see the clients. I remind the parents this is just a moment in time, that this is not what the rest of your life is going to be based on. This too will pass. You have to be ready for your next journey.

When I was a receptionist, there was one client I met whose alcoholism was affecting everything, her kids, and even her hygiene. I usually hate when a client goes to jail but for this client it was probably the best moment of her life because she came home sober, a whole different person. To see the growth in others is what astonishes you.
What is your approach to working with client parents?
I never give up on anybody. It just takes different things to motivate different people. With the right motivation and right support – sometimes as simple as a kind word, sometimes knowing someone is saying “I see you and your progress” – you can change people’s lives for the better. More than you can ever imagine. Even encouraging attorneys when they have lost a hearing and they are depressed by saying, “This is why you are here, being part of the system to change the system.”

What is one piece of advice you give to parents involved in the child welfare system?
I ask them to educate themselves and ask questions. If you can communicate how you are feeling, having that dialogue can make things so much better. Also, it’s not about you, it’s about the kids.

The kids are the ones who feel the most impact, whether you think so or not. My son was one-and-a-half years old and he only stayed in care for seven months but every month up until when he was five years old, he would run out of his bed to my room to make sure I was there.

Can you tell me about some efforts you have made to improve child welfare practice in your area?
I went to Lobby Day the past two years. The first time I was nervous and only spoke a little bit but this Lobby Day I took it full steam. I spoke at the Million Dollar Staircase in the State Capitol in front of a group of people, including senators and reporters. It felt very empowering to give a voice to people who most of the time no one hears.

I was there to support two bills. The first is the Preserving Families Bond Act. We want legislators to give judges the power to allow contact to continue with family members after termination of parental rights, but only in the best interests of the child. On the first day, I met a man who was locked up while his child was caught up in the child welfare system. They were trying to terminate parental rights. When he came out of jail, he was allowed to have visits and take his son out of state to visit family. While they were bonding, the father’s rights were terminated and he had to discontinue contact with his child. He was so sad because he felt like he failed his son and that his son is going to think that his father did something wrong. The son is 11 years old now and he’s going to always have the feeling of rejection, like his father and his family didn’t want him when that is not the case. Legislation won’t change his situation, but it would prevent others from experiencing the same.
I also pushed the State Central Registry (SCR) bill. If you are found to have neglected or abused your child, you stay on the registry in New York until your youngest child is 28 years old. The SCR doesn’t differentiate between what is neglect and what is abuse, and the level for neglect is so low that a dirty house can constitute neglect. The registry punishes young parents who are still learning and making mistakes – it will affect their lives until they’re in their 40s or 50s. It keeps parents from getting jobs, dooming them to poverty, which people feel is neglect itself. That is why I go to Lobby Day and push these bills.

I also just helped create a new “Know Your Rights” pamphlet for when parents are confronted by ACS. Dealing with ACS is the scariest part of your life. I know this is a corny slogan but think about the “I before E” rule. To me, it means put your intelligence before your emotions, except after C – your children. You’re always going to go with your emotions when your children are involved.

**What advice would you give to judges, agency directors, legislators, governors, or the president about how to improve the system?**

It’s easy to make someone look good or bad on paper, but when you realize each piece of paper is an actual family and an actual life, that means so much more. Anyone could make one mistake and have a child welfare case, and it could mean the difference between your family living with you and living with strangers. It could mean missing all birthdays, Mother’s Days, and holidays with your children. Sometimes we just talk about making a change but don’t do it. We could spend less money by helping families rather than separating them. We need to make people real, not just numbers. Everyone is a person and they have feelings.
It’s also important to understand families don’t always look one way. Just because my family doesn’t look like your family, doesn’t make it any less of a family. A family is a group of people who love each other and stick together. As long as there is love, there is family. We need to stop judging based on appearances. Family could be a single mother, father, grandmother, or ex-partner with children.

**Is there anything else about you or your experiences that should be highlighted?**

I've made a lot of mistakes in my life; I’m 36 and not perfect. The thing I got right is my kids. I'll never give up fighting for them.