Nina has experienced the child welfare system from multiple angles: as a social worker, as the executive director of the Kansas Family Advisory Network (KFAN), as a foster and adoptive parent, and as a minister. For Nina, her roles as a minister and social worker are intertwined because true ministry involves social service – helping and empowering people who are struggling with life’s challenges.

Nina strongly believes in the power of families. As a foster parent, Nina has actively supported the birth parents on their path to reunification. As a professional, Nina has worked to ensure that parents and relative caregivers have access to the same knowledge and tools as foster and adoptive parents, helping them better advocate for their families and achieve reunification.

Tell me something interesting about yourself.
I'm a veteran. I served in the U.S. Army. I loved it because I was born and raised in New York City, in the Bronx, and I was able to go to Germany twice. It was amazing. I fell in love with it.

After I got out of the military, I moved to Kansas because that’s where my first husband was from. Germany prepared me for smaller town living compared to New York City. Wichita, Kansas seemed like a really nice place to raise children.
How long have you been in the child welfare field?
I have been in the field for more than 20 years. I have a Masters in Social Work and I am an ordained minister. They work perfectly together because ministers are really in the social services field. I became an ordained minister first. I swore I would never be a social worker because after working in the field you see what people think about social workers. When you tell people you aren’t a social worker, people immediately relax. I was 51 when I graduated with my Masters and now I’m working on my clinicals. I’ve always done counseling, but this will allow me to take it to a whole new level.

What made you interested in child welfare?
I’ve always enjoyed working with kids and families. It’s always been a passion of mine.

I used to work for Wichita Children’s Home where children were placed when removed from their parents. I left the home to become a foster parent because I felt like I could do more to help children and their families than just being an employee of an organization. Once I became a foster parent, I was able to help the birth parents do what they could to get their children back.

In 2002, I was hired by Lutheran Social Services and since then I’ve been working in the child welfare arena. I’ve always believed in the power of families. The most interesting dynamic and system God developed is the family unit. There are so many people and personalities that make up a family – the good, the bad, the ugly – but they’re still a family.

Then an opportunity came for me to take over this organization, KFAN. One of the many things we do as an organization is training. I believe in educating families. We send our children to school from kindergarten to 12th grade and expect them to learn. As parents, we need to continue to grow and learn in the area of parenting because children do not come with instructions.

Can you provide an example of one of your trainings?
In our Healthy Relationship Training, parents and kids have real conversations on sex, drugs, peer pressure, bullying, and other topics they might not have discussed. We hold the trainings at the organization and in the community to be where the people are. We held it once at a church and a woman who was a member of the church was having a hard time with her son. One activity was to choose positive words to describe her son and the woman cried because she realized the words she had been speaking about him were not positive. It made her rethink how she thought about him.
Can you briefly describe KFAN?
KFAN provides free prevention and intervention services to families. We provide support, education, advocacy, and training. We are parent allies, so if parents are involved in the child welfare system, a Kansas statute allows us to go to court with them as a support. We also connect families to any services they need.

Our primary goal is to help restore the family unit. We catch them at one point in their lives – when life is hard, things are not going as they hoped, and they either need to get resources or seek outside help to change their family’s dynamic. We try to give families hope. We are for the family. We empower families to ask for what they need and help them get what they need.

We are the only organization of this sort in Kansas. We have three offices around the state and will be opening one more. We try to hit areas where there is a great need for these services.

Do you think there are public misconceptions about the child welfare system? If so, what are they?
Everybody thinks birth parents are horrible people, that they must have done something wrong to get their kids pulled. That’s a huge misconception. I’ve trained foster parents over the years and a lot of people are scared to work with the birth parents because they think the parents have abused their kids. Birth parents are judged and found guilty before they even have a chance, and then they have to jump through so many hoops to get their kids back. There are lots of misconceptions around birth parents.

What was one experience that had a big impact on the way you think about reunification?
I love my family but my family growing up was not perfect. We had a lot of issues, but we still were family and cared about each other. You don’t realize growing up that you have a good family until you get older and realize that you had it good.

It has always been my desire to help restore families. I have adopted six kids from the child welfare system and all of my girls had relationships with their birth parents because that was important to them. My original goal was to help the families get the kids home but when that didn’t happen I was able to adopt the kids and allow them to continue to have relationships with their parents.
Can you describe some efforts you have made to improve child welfare practice in your area?
One thing we have done is bring back the parent ally. All of our case manager staff are parent allies and can go to court to support the parents. We have also advocated so that trainings for foster and adoptive parents are now open across the state to birth and kinship families. We are also working with kinship families statewide. Any relative caregiver can call us, and we will help them navigate to get the services they need for themselves and the kids. People don’t understand the strain of caring for another relative’s child. It changes the dynamic of the family system and relationship.

What programs or practices are most effective in helping parents reunify? Least effective?
One of my former frustrations with the child welfare system was that everyone focused on the foster parents and adoptive parents but if the initial goal is reunification, why aren’t birth parents getting the same training and attention? We had classes out of the wazoo for the foster parents, but none for the kinship caregivers, family, or the birth parents who the kids were supposed to go back to.

Now our DCF has approved and opened up all trainings to all families. Kids want to go home, and kids want to be with families. If we don’t teach birth parents the same knowledge and tools, we’re doing an injustice to that child and that family.

What are some of the strengths of the child welfare system in your area?
I’m very proud of Kansas right now because they are becoming more family-focused in child welfare rather than being just child-focused. In all the years I’ve been in child welfare, the family was the missing piece. Everything was for children and foster and/or adoptive parents. Now they’ve shifted their focus to helping restore the family. When you work with the family, you change your community. When you help families get jobs, stable housing, and restore relationships with their kids, you don’t realize how much of a difference you have made in your community.

Another positive in Kansas is the child welfare system and child-in-need-of-care court system are really collaborating and striving to improve the system and help get kids home.
What are some of the weaknesses?
Kansas is a privatized system, so the biggest drawback is that every four to six years the contract changes, and then the parents and children get assigned to someone new and that can slow down reunification. If a parent’s worker doesn’t transfer to the new agency, they get a whole new worker who doesn’t know the case or the history.

Another issue that is everywhere is the high turnover of child welfare staff. This is especially an issue when it comes to reunification because knowledge of the family and child is lost whenever someone leaves.

What preventative actions do you think would be most effective in avoiding the conditions that may lead to foster care?
We need to increase opportunities for families to get assistance for longer periods of time. Families also need access to healthcare. If a parent has a mental health issue but they don’t have a medical health card, how are they going to get help? They need to be able to get the necessary help so kids don’t have to go into the system.

Then there are parenting classes. If I have a parent come to an office to take a parenting class, are they going to remember everything when they go home? We need to get services in the home and help parents right then and there when they do inappropriate parenting. They need hands-on experience. Parents have such a long list of things to do and one of them is parenting classes. Some parents just take the class in order to check off the box as a requirement met. But if a parent can do the training in home or go through parenting training with their kids, it can have a greater impact. Families need in-home or in-school services because a lot of times that’s where the problems are.

I’m also happy about the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) because it will put more dollars into prevention and keep the kids out of the system. The system is not the place to raise kids. It’s not the answer. Once you take away that child and separate that family, they will never be the same.

What advice would you give to other professionals who work in child welfare or to individuals considering working in child welfare?
Go into it with an open mind because each family is different. You cannot judge a family because you have not walked in their shoes. Be open, be non-judgmental. It’s only by the grace of God that it’s not us and it’s them. You can’t live and work in a box when you’re helping families. You have to accept them as they are and understand this is just one chapter of their lives. You have the ability to change history, to change the trajectory of where that family is going.
What advice would you give to judges, agency directors, legislators, governors, or the president about how to improve the system?

I would say the same thing: don’t judge the families. We all come from different walks of life. Some of us have been blessed, some people have never experienced a negative thing in their lives and when they come across someone who struggles with drug addiction or abuse, sometimes it’s hard to put your mind around it. They are people just like us, but they need resources and opportunity to change things.

Is there anything else about you or your experiences that we should highlight?

Here at KFAN, I have been blessed to be surrounded by people who have the same passion for families as I do, people who have caught the vision and are running with it. I could not do this by myself.

One of our staff members is a former client and a single dad. His two daughters were removed a few years ago over a false allegation. They ended up staying in the system because of the father's drug use. KFAN supported the father throughout the case by helping set up meetings, attending case plans, and accompanying him to court. After he was reunified with his daughters but still in aftercare, we helped resolve issues he was having with his oldest daughter by helping him put together an incentive chart for the daughter. After he completed aftercare, we continued to communicate with him and his daughters. Now he works at KFAN and helps others who need help putting their families back together.

We have another staff member who was also a previous client. KFAN helped her get her daughters home safely after they had been removed. She now works for us and advocates for families and connects them to resources for housing, food stamps, and their medical needs. She is there for birth parents and kinship families when they need to talk and helps show them that there is hope for their cases.

KFAN also takes social work practicum students and two of them stayed on to volunteer and now work here because they fell in love with what we do. I also have other staff who have dealt with child welfare and one staff member who dealt with the foster care system as a teenager and now feels like this is her calling. I have been blessed with people who have a heart for the families. I could not do this work without them. I am also grateful to all the agencies and organizations in Kansas that believe and support the work that we do. I am grateful for them all.