Chiho Sakamato Gunton

Chiho Sakamato Gunton was nominated as a Reunification Hero by a colleague who has witnessed Chiho’s persistence and solution-oriented approach when working with families toward reunification goals.

Chiho uses her experience as a permanency social worker with the Department of Health and Human Services to better serve families in her current role as a case manager with family defenders at the Oregon Parent Child Representation Program. Chiho’s colleagues credit her with being a catalyst for family reunification.

By Krista Ellis, Washington College of Law, J.D. Candidate 2019
Tell me something interesting about yourself.
I have a background in outdoor education. I grew up in Japan. I moved to Australia and eventually to America where I worked as a wilderness therapy field instructor in Utah. I liked working with people and helping them, that’s what got me interested in social work.

How long have you worked in child welfare? In what capacities?
I began working in child welfare right out of graduate school in 2009. I started working for the Department of Health and Human Services (DHS) in California as a permanency social worker. Later, I did some work with independent living with transitional youth. Then I worked as a permanency social worker in Oregon before transitioning to my current job. Now I work for Oregon’s Parent Child Representation Program as a case manager for family defenders.

Can you briefly describe the Parent Child Representation Program?
It started as a pilot program around 2014. They added case management in 2015 with two counties. The county that I work within, Linn County, started with seven attorneys and three case managers. The program grew and more counties were added. Typically, attorneys refer clients to us case managers. We find services in the community and work with parents to reach their goals.

You were previously a DHS social worker. How does your work with the Office of the Public Defender compare to that?
Both are social work but the jobs are different in many ways. The goal is the same, the goal is to help reunify families. Many see DHS as more of an authority figure. Some parents have difficulty connecting to you when you have removed their children. Now, working at with family defenders, I can more easily build a relationship with the parents.

What do you believe are the benefits to having a case manager in addition to a DHS worker?
It is a benefit to the parent. They feel that they have a social worker that they can trust without a doubt. The clients know that I hold their confidentiality. They know that they can speak freely with me about their case. This is helpful for unseen problems that the family may need assistance in addressing.
It benefits DHS as well. Sometimes a DHS worker does not have the trust of a client. As a case manager for the parent, I can represent the client’s story on their behalf. Due to my experience working with DHS, I can communicate with the client to ensure that they understand what DHS wants or explain the policies behind the requirements. Sometimes my clients may not explain things the best way so I can be in the middle to assist them when talking to their attorney or to DHS.

**Can you describe one case that impacted your view of reunification?**

I worked with a father in a case that was brought in because of an incident of domestic violence between the parents. Apparently, the parents got into a fight in front of the children. A fight in which the father was the aggressor. There were underlying issues including poverty, neglect, and substance abuse. The father was very angry; he was mad at DHS. He didn’t understand the DHS intervention or why they requested him to take anger management classes.

Despite any problems, this family was very close. The parents had two teenagers, a son and daughter. This dad never missed a visit while his children were in foster care. I worked with the family on several problems, including housing. The family was homeless so I helped them apply for housing. After two years, we finally got the family housing. The children were finally going to reunify with the parents. The son moved back in with the family but the daughter enjoyed her foster home and wanted to stay. The father knew that he was never going to change the mind of a teenage girl so they agreed on guardianship with the foster family. Then the case was closed.

After the case had been closed for a while, I received a call from that father. He told me that the daughter had come home and wanted to stay. He didn’t know what to do because she had run away from her guardian. I was able to talk to the attorneys and they altered the guardianship to allow the daughter to return home. The family is all back together again and now they are doing fantastic.

**What advice would you give to other professionals who work in child welfare?**

I strongly believe that it’s a relationship. You have to know that you are working with a human being. Respect is highly important. We never know everything, we never know the full story. We all have different experiences. Fear is not their fault. Some of these people have experienced trauma. Having a child removed is a traumatic experience. We are there to help. Trust is important. We have to build the relationship to work effectively.

“It is important when working with families to know that it’s not one size fits all.”
What is one thing you do in working with parents to increase the likelihood of reunification?
Each family is different. I usually remind them about their strengths. These families are not in an easy situation. Sometimes they have a hard time following what DHS says. I usually ask families – “What is most important to you? What makes you stronger?” Usually they know what they need to do – whether it’s to stop using drugs, find housing, etc. Asking them makes them think about it and talking through it makes it seem more manageable.

What program do you find most beneficial to helping parents reunify?
This program [Parent Child Representation Program] and good family defenders. Attorneys here listen to clients, fight for clients, and work with DHS to assist their clients. The attorneys and case managers here are dedicated to helping Linn County.

What programs would you like to see added to make reunification more likely or successful?
We need more housing programs. There is not enough housing. It is basic need. We say this all the time, but we do not have enough shelter.

We could use improvements for transitional housing for those with substance abuse problems. There are some programs out there but typically they require a clean urine analysis before clients can get in. The problem is that a lot of people are not at that point but they need the housing. The stability could be a big help to get them clean.

Is there anything else that we should highlight?
This model is working. Amy Miller, the Deputy Director for the Office of Public Defense Services, has put forth a lot of hard work. We have such a great support system. I hope that this program continues to grow and other states see the work too.