Teresa Anderson-Harper

Teresa was nominated as a Reunification Month Hero by a parent attorney who has seen her grow from a parent in a series of dependency cases to the first-ever Family Recovery Support Specialist in the Family Treatment Court in King County, WA.

Her colleagues describe Teresa as a person who survived the child welfare system with super human strength and who now can be honest with parents about their faults while building trust by focusing on their strengths.

Teresa describes herself as blunt but compassionate and a person who has been where many of the parents she works with have been. In her own case, she was saved by the family treatment court’s belief in her ability to change and that she deserved the chance to change. Now she uses her experience as both a recovering addict and a survivor of the child welfare system to help parents in the same situation. She says that she lets parents know that she’s been there and shows them where their power is.

By Dana Leader, University of Georgia School of Law, J.D./M.S.W. Candidate, 2019

What are some favorite things you like to do with your kids?
On weekends, we go to museums and fishing on the Sound. Recently, we went to a Lego exhibit at the state fairgrounds. We also like to go to the beach. In a few weeks, we’re going to go camping on an island.

How long were your children out of your care?
The longest time my kids were out of my care was 6 months in one dependency case and for 17 months total. But the last time I was involved in a dependency case, none of my kids were out of my care. I was pregnant and went to an addiction specialist. I wanted to prove I was clean because of my history which could have let the state remove my children for potential neglect.

June is National Reunification Month
For more information see www.ambar.org/nrm
**What was one of the most memorable moments about getting your children back?**
When the family treatment court gave me a chance. I had a criminal history and had been able to complete rehab programs but then I would relapse. Family treatment court worked with wraparound services to help both my family and me. The wraparound services help jumpstart the family with how to help an addict in recovery, how to reframe the situation, and how to not shame the addict for the past.

The family treatment court is like a team meeting, which makes it easier to talk. Our family treatment court is totally voluntary so you can opt-out at any time. After two months, there was no way I was leaving. I felt connected and supported. I didn't feel like I had all the negative history and I was being judged on it. Everyone on the team felt I deserved a chance and had a chance to get my children and my life back.

**What was the thing you struggled with most in getting your children back?**
My internal self-conversation was very negative and my emotional self-regulation was non-existent. I didn’t have a lot of relationships. It was more about what you had and handing my money to someone to get something back. I didn’t have any meaningful relationships and I didn’t know how to create one. I had convinced myself that I didn’t deserve help. I acted out a lot of my bad thoughts because of the negative voices in my own head. At the beginning, my family focused on shaming me but therapy helped them and me reframe and begin to work from a strength-based approach.

**What was the worst part about getting separated?**
Who my children were living with and what people were saying to my kids. When your family has negative feelings for you and they refer to you in front of your kids as “your drug addict mom”. It just made everything harder because you take all of the shame and guilt that you feel and amplify it by 20 because my kids felt like there was something wrong with them too because of my behavior.

**How did you resolve those issues with the kids?**
I sat them down and was super honest about what had happened and what I was going through. I asked for help from their providers and my therapists to figure out what was the best way to explain things age-wise to show accountability to them. I had a conversation with them about what different kinds of addiction looked like because they were seeing it in me and some of the other members of my family, so they could see the differences.
I told them I can’t give those years back to them but now I’ll be the best mom I can today and that includes not letting them use shame against me to let them get away with things that they shouldn’t.

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What was the big turning point for you in your case?
When criminal drug court realized dependency court was important to me and it impacted my kids. I remember arguing with them because the two courts weren’t working together. I told them that if they can’t work together, I was going to focus on my dependency case and end up in prison because I hadn’t completed my criminal drug court case plan. So when I finally got the two courts on the same page, I really felt like anything was possible.

What good came out of the experience in your case?
Before, I was very closed off. I didn’t have any real relationships. I’ve found out that I really like people. I love seeing other parents get it. I love the support groups that I run that help parents through it. I’ve found my calling.

When did you realize that working with parents was your calling?
In the middle of training for recovery coaching, specifically during motivational interview training. I became a certified state peer mentor; I got a 92% on the test while not really knowing what I was doing. My mentor told me that I was a natural. Then, I met a parent partner who was incredibly inspiring. I tracked her down, waited for her to finish lunch –very impatiently- and asked her nine hundred and ninety nine questions. One month later, she helped me go to work at Valley City. Then, I began volunteering at family treatment court for Suzanna’s Wraparound.

What inspires you today?
The freedom that people get once they find the path. I also like seeing the better outcomes for the kids once there is less negative in their lives. The whole point of all this is to help the kids.

What do you think are some of the strengths in your child welfare system?
There are a lot of services in our area which are helpful. Our newer social workers are much more open to addiction and recovery, specifically understanding the difference between sobriety and recovery. They are looking at the long term stability from addiction, not just compliance with the court case plan. We also have the Family Assessment Response program which offers 90 days of voluntary services to families who have an allegation of abuse or neglect against them. These services include rehab and mental health services. Often, parents have access to parent partners at the local mental health agency. Parent Partners can validate the parents feelings by identifying with the parents and helping them get hooked up with services that work for them. We focus on meeting the parents where they’re at.

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What are some weaknesses?
We do not have a lot of therapeutically-educated legislators, judges, or doctors. Many of them don’t realize that their language changes how parents feel about themselves and can make parents feel like giving up even if the professional doesn’t say that exactly. Professionals can have a large impact on the case by their attitude and use of language.
We also still have a lot of old school supervisors who see addicts as people who don’t deserve their children because they are inherently bad people.

How do you deal with pushback in your community?
I teach professionals about addictions and potential therapeutic interventions. I try to make professionals see addicts as human and make professionals understand that parents can and do change.

What is one thing your child welfare community could do to help support reunification?
There needs to be a family counseling component. Families need to be able to let go of the anger they have at the addict and put it in the right place. When the family's not heard, it’s hard to have them take you back, which makes it harder for children. Counseling would help relieve the shame and trauma from years and years of dependency.

What advice would you give to other professionals who work in child welfare?
Addicts are human. Our addiction doesn’t mean we aren’t intelligent. You need to use therapeutic ways of dealing with addicts and set the right tone. You need to be up on therapeutic responses to addiction and know the difference between sobriety and recovery. Sobriety is simply abstaining for a period of time but recovery is growing and dealing with the behaviors that caused and are caused by the addiction.

What do you mean by “set the right tone”?
Everything we think we know about bedside manner doesn’t apply to an addict. We [addicts] cognitively distort what we hear based on how we feel. If you were to tell me a few years ago that there were things I needed to work on, I was going to hear that I was a terrible parent, I was never going to make it and it was useless for me to even try.

What can you do to set the right tone?
I tell them that I’ve been there. I show them where their power is and how to access it. That dark area in your head isn’t as scary as you think. It’s already lit up, you just need to make the connections so you can see the light.

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What programs are most effective in helping parents reunify?
In general, working with wraparound services and teaching professionals to reframe issues. Specifically, Parents for Parents offers assistance at the 72-hour shelter care hearing and follows up with classes and what we call “Dependency 101” which explains the dependency case process, “Dependency 201” which focuses on life skills, and “Dependency 301” which talks about parenting, the job search process, and any particular life skills the parents need.

Another program, New Traditions, has a “Life During CPS” support group which meets once a week. Drug dependency court has one meeting every six months which makes it easy to relapse but the weekly meetings give more structure and support.

What preventative actions do you think would be most effective in avoiding the conditions that may lead to foster care?
In-home dependency services would help in all but the most extreme cases. Maybe we could bring safe family members into the home instead of taking the kids out; it would promote stability for the kids while also reducing the stress on the parents. It would also let parents build good routines with the kids there instead of having routines that don’t take the kids into account and fall apart as soon as you get your kids back.

Currently, there are no aftercare services in a typical child protective services case, only in family treatment court. Aftercare services are critical because that’s when the parents are most likely to relapse.

Do you think there are any public misconceptions about the child welfare system?
Many people think that social workers are coming to take the kids for no reason, because they’re not holding themselves accountable. Parents fear child protective services because they don’t understand the criteria for removal. They think the state wants to keep kids but really the state wants the case closed as soon as possible because it’s costing them money. We need to focus on recovery as a deciding factor in closing a case once removal has occurred.

Anything else?
Social workers should have parent peers who have been through the system. It would help remedy bias and help them understand that life happens and social workers need to be more flexible.

There also a shortage of reliable Urinalysis labs. Most of them are only open 9-5 on weekdays. We need to have more flexibility in hours available and understanding on the part of professionals that life and traffic happen.

Professionals, in general, need to know that mental health is not a reason to prevent you from getting your kids back. There’s no such this as JUST chemical dependency, there’s always a mental health issue with it. So penalizing parents for having a mental health issue while in recovery doesn’t help anyone.

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