Jason Bragg has been through the dependency system as a teenager and, years later, as a parent. He is now a Social Services Specialist for the Washington State Office of the Public Defender, and a Reunification Month Hero.

Jason facilitates a program for fathers in dependency cases, often for high-needs cases.

Jason was nominated because he stands up for parents in the face of injustice and fearlessly ensures their rights and dignity are defended.

While working to get his son back, Jason realized he loved helping parents understand the dependency system and helping them self-advocate. After being reunified with his son, Jason said he realized how much of a privilege it was to parent his son, and that through the dependency process he not only met his wife, but was able to complete dialectical behavior therapy which helped him overcome his addiction. Now Jason works to help parents make the same journey he did to become safer parents and more stable people.

By Dana Leader, University of Georgia School of Law, J.D./M.S.W. Candidate, 2019
How did you become involved in the dependency court system?
I was involved first when I was a teenager and, later, with my own son.

How long was your son out of your care?
Slightly over a year.

What was one of the most memorable moments about getting your child back?
Winning. Child protective services said they’d never give me give my son back. Once I got clean, the department had no concerns about my parenting other than my past drug use and previous inability to stay clean. It took me 90 days to realize that I wanted my son again because I thought I didn't deserve him. I felt like they didn’t want me to succeed and I finally did. When I got my son back, I cried. I couldn’t believe that I finally had the privilege of parenting again.

What was the thing you struggled with most in getting your child back?
When the case plan created unintended barriers. The 12-step programs are required but act as a barrier. Everyone there is a drug addict and can’t pass a background check because of their previous history even if they have been clean for seven or eight years. Which means they can’t help with the case. They can’t supervise visits, can’t transport, can’t act as housing or visitations sites.

I met someone, who is now my wife, who helped me learn to stand on my own two feet. The department said that because I was with my partner, who also had a history of drug use, they wouldn’t return my son. Even though she had been in recovery for years and was successfully parenting her children. They said I was choosing her over my son.

In the process of working toward to reunification, did you discover things about yourself that surprised you or that helped you achieve your goals?
I got a proper mental health diagnosis. I was diagnosed with borderline personality disorder and saw a counselor who worked with me using the dialectical behavior therapy workbook. It really helped with my black or white thinking. Through that intensive work, I saw a positive behavior change I hadn't seen before.

When I was trying to get services, I felt as though I was being treated differently for being a father and an addict. I learned that I had a passion for helping people. When I started learning to advocate for myself, knowing that I could disagree with the department and have evidence to support my position was a huge tool that I started to use to help other parents who were in the same program as me.
What was the big turning point for you in your case?
In December 2012, we filed a motion to regain custody. The department’s lawyer said that my wife had a bad background and that she was a bad person. They said she was “allegedly” eight and half years clean, which for anyone who is in recovery is a horrific thing to hear someone say about you.

The judge dismissed the motion without prejudice and instructed the volunteer guardian ad litem and the department to gather information about present circumstances and stop focusing on previous history.

After they started looking at where I was right then rather than where I had been, I was able to get my son back.

What inspires you today?
The system was broken when I was involved and the system is even more broken today. The department turnover is really high, so helping parents learn to have a voice and communicate that in a constructive way is beautiful. It’s amazing to be part of a process and see someone’s light come on and see them start to change and want to help people.

What do you think are some of the strengths in your child welfare system?
Parent for Parent which is a program where parent allies are stationed at courthouses to meet with parents as they first come into the system.

There’s also a lot more stakeholder buy-in including people at the attorney general’s office, state-level office of the public defender, and professionals in the department who believe and value what the parent ally says. Our professional allies have been instrumental in helping this important movement continue and grow.

What are some weaknesses?
We still have naysayers who think parents have no business at the table. The numbers say that for families who have the same social worker through the case, reunification is very likely to occur; with two changes in a caseworker, it’s unlikely. Most cases I’ve worked with, there are five to nine social workers.
What advice would you give to other professionals who work in child welfare?
Let’s put the social back in social work. Let’s have a conversation. Let’s sit down as a group and find out what this family needs to be successful. I understand that email and phone calls are quicker but there’s something to be said about that human connection.

What advice would you give to judges, agency directors, legislators, or governors?
Talk to the experts and know the experts are the people who have been through the system. Currently, they get input but we need to listen to the experts to see the unintended consequences.

What programs are most effective in helping parents reunify?
The Housing and Essential Needs program which helps parents who are coming out of treatment to get into clean and sober housing.

What are some ineffective programs or attitudes?
One of the things that’s a barrier is not finding out what’s actually going on with the family. I see so many parents with cookie cutter services for things they may not need.

There’s a shift that I’m encouraging, which is a focus on safety. The question isn’t “would the child be better off in foster care?” or “would the foster family be able to provide more to the child?” but “is it unsafe for the child to remain with their birth family?” and “what are the safety concerns?”

What preventative actions do you think would be most effective in avoiding the conditions that may lead to foster care?
Better access to services. With the nationwide heroin and meth epidemic, access to treatment. When you have someone who wants to go to treatment, making them wait three to six months when they want to get clean just doesn’t work.

In Washington, there is only one treatment center where fathers and their children can do in-patient treatment together while there are several for mothers.

June is National Reunification Month
For more information see www.ambar.org/nrm
Do you think there are any public misconceptions about the child welfare system?
That belief by the department that drug addicts want to be strung out parenting their children. I think that most of our parents involved in the dependency system with the correct supports and treatment could reunify with their family.
There are also the misconceptions that parents have such as the department gets $15,000 for every child they adopt out.

Anything else?
I believe that most of our families can reunify, with the proper support and supportive services put in place. As professionals, we have to always be prepared to engage with the parent and provide “on the ground direct services” when that parent reaches out.

We have to change the message in foster agencies who are licensing foster parents who are coming into foster care to adopt, and focus on foster families who are coming into foster care to help families reunify.

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