Jennie Dilley was nominated as a Reunification Hero because of her consistent commitment to reunification with her son. Jennie’s former case worker described her “unconditional love for her son” as the source of strength and motivation needed to reunify with him. However, initially Jennie’s case worker had doubts about her ability to overcome her addiction and reunify with her son.

While coming to terms with her addiction, Jennie checked herself into rehab at Jordan’s Crossing. She initially struggled to participate in the program, attend meetings and therapy sessions, and she even considered leaving the program.

Nevertheless, once Jennie began adhering to the rehab program and excelling in the supervised visits with her son, she blossomed. After several months, she was able to bring her son to the rehabilitation facility to begin rebuilding their relationship. Through the support of her family, her case worker, Jordan’s Crossing, and Heart & Hand, Jennie regained sobriety.

Jennie’s perseverance and tenacity ultimately led to success in reunifying with her son.

By Larissa Zavarelli, Washington College of Law, J.D. Candidate, 2018

What are some of your favorite things to do with your child?

I enjoy playing peek-a-boo with my son, going outside with him, and playing on the swing set. He is constantly learning, and every day with him is different.

How long was your child out of your care?

My son was out of my care for five months. He was in kinship care with my sister until I got him back at the end of those five months.

June is National Reunification Month
For more information see
www.ambar.org/nrm
What was one of the most memorable moments about getting your child back?

I finally felt successful. The last time I felt like I had done something right was in high school. Before I finished rehabilitation, my son’s lawyer told me that I would never get him back, so getting my child back was a big accomplishment.

What was the thing you struggled with most in getting your child back?

I struggled mostly with not having my son. I checked into a rehabilitation program designed to give mothers an opportunity to complete the program with their child. I was there for two months, and even with the progress I had made, my son’s attorneys were unable to support reunification at that time. So, it took me another month before I was able to get my son back. This process was challenging, because I constantly felt inadequate. I could never do enough to prove that I wanted my son back.

What was the worst part about getting separated?

The worst part about getting separated was that my son was so far away from me. He was three hours away, and I only saw him when my DHS worker brought him to me once a month. Both of my case workers worked diligently to help me get my son back. Destiny Kitchel, my Tribal case worker, in particular, fought tirelessly for my son’s return and I truly appreciated her efforts.

In the process of working toward reunification, did you discover things about yourself – strengths, abilities, interests, passions – that surprised you or that helped you achieve your goals?

Through the process of reunification, I regained my self-esteem. I battled an addiction for 15 years, but with the motivation and hope of reunification, I have now been able to stay clean for a year. When I started to turn my life around, I gave up everything: pop, candy, and using my phone. I had been so numb for so long. While in recovery, I had to teach myself how to feel again. Though this experience was challenging, I now have a renewed sense of self-confidence.

What was the big turning point for you in your case?

The turning point for me in my case was when I realized I had a problem. I knew that I could not live with my addiction and that my son deserved a better life.

"I learned how to love life again and that every day is an adventure."
What good came out of the experience if any?

I went from having nothing, to renting an apartment, buying a car, and appreciating the opportunity to spend every day with my son. Now, I am almost finished with school, I have an internship, and I hope to someday manage hotels.

How do you think this experience has changed your life for the long term?

This experience has shown me that anything I put my mind to, I can do. I am strong enough to do anything.

What was your experience like in court? Was it what you expected? What was difficult? What was helpful?

I had a bad experience in court initially. I felt like everyone was against me. As I walked out of the courtroom, once I cursed the judge and the DA, because I felt like they judged me without knowing me or my story. I was told that because I failed to show that my behavior changed, I would never see my son again.

Before beginning rehabilitation, I felt very negative about the system and the necessary process to get my son back. Initially, I felt like my DHS worker was against me because she held me accountable for my actions. However, at the completion of the case, I realized that I could not have reunified with my son without her help.

On visitation, were you able to meet with your child? Was it supervised or unsupervised? How often?

Before I entered the rehabilitation program, my supervised visitation sessions were only one hour per week. After I completed the program, my visitations were still supervised, but each session was two to three hours long. After showing signs of progress, I received four weekends of unsupervised visits. Finally, my son was able to stay with me at the rehabilitation facility.

Tell me one person who was a big help to you getting your child back? For example, a social worker, lawyer, service provider, the judge.

Destiny was instrumental in helping me get my son back. She advocated and fought for me at every step of the way. The court did not recognize and appreciate all of the changes I had made, but Destiny did. She was encouraging, and she was genuinely proud of me when I got my son back.
Was there anyone else that was important in helping you get your child back? For example, a relative, a member of your church, temple, etc.

My parents also played a crucial role in helping me get my son back. They repeatedly and consistently told me that - 'I could do this.' There were times that I wanted to quit the rehabilitation program, but they talked me out of leaving and sent me pictures of my son to help convince me that completing the program was worth it.

The rehabilitation program, Jordan’s Crossing, advocated for me through the whole process. Another organization, Heart & Hands helped me get an apartment so that I could back on my feet. Heart & Hands is a twelve month program that helps women and children find affordable housing. With everyone’s support and help, I was able to get my son back.

Were there services that you did not have that would have found helpful?

No. Destiny purchased items for my son: clothes, diapers, and a crib. There was nothing more anyone could have done to help me. I am blessed.

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

I would advise judges, agency directors, legislators, governors, and even the president not to be so negative and discouraging. We are trying. The court process is lengthy, so I feel fortunate that my court proceedings lasted for only thirteen months.

What is the biggest thing you would want someone else to know about your experience? Other parents? Attorneys? Child welfare staff? Judges?

"Don’t give up. Everything happens for a reason. God doesn’t put anything on you that you can’t handle."

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

Not only did I get my son back, but my relationship with my sister improved through this experience. We had struggled with our relationship since high school. But, while my son was in kinship care with my sister and her husband, our relationship improved. She took care of him for five months. Even now, we say 'I love you' to each other, and recently, she and her husband brought my son outfits for the summer. We have strengthened our bond as sisters through this experience.