Sheri Green

Sheri works as a parent advocate in California, helping parents involved in the Child Welfare system understand the reunification process, helping them understand the court system, accompanying parents to meetings, and being a strong motivator for parents trying to navigate child welfare. Sheri does an excellent job of being direct and honest with clients while motivating them and supporting them. Her work with clients has been essential to so many successful reunifications.

Sheri is such an effective advocate for her clients because she can draw from her own experiences. She was an addict for ten years but with the birth of her son and the possibility of having him permanently removed from her care she was motivated to make serious life changes. Since the day her son was born, Sheri has been invested in learning how to best care for him and is to this day his best advocate. She displayed a commitment and focus to the goal of reunification with him. She was honest about her issues and the help she needed. Her honesty ensured that she was able to make lasting changes.

To get a better idea why Sheri was nominated as a Reunification Hero please read her inspiring interview below.

By Kathryn Byers, J.D. Candidate 2016

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

We are outdoorsy people. We love camping, fishing, dirt biking, etc.

How long were your children out of your care?

I have four children ages 25, 22, 19 and 9. The three older children were from a previous relationship. Only my youngest was ever out of my care. I had watched my boyfriend lose his 3 year old daughter to adoption because of his addiction and inability to stay clean and sober during his child welfare case. On December 5, 2005, I relapsed and minutes later my placenta ruptured and I went into premature labor with my son. I was released from the hospital and my detention hearing was held on the same day, December 9, 2005. My son was born pre-mature and therefore remained in the NICU until his release December 30, 2005. Ultimately my son was
returned to me on July 25, 2006, and the case officially closed almost one year later, December 12, 2006.

**What was one of the most memorable moments about getting your child back?**

I felt complete again. It tore me apart being unable to take him home from the hospital, tuck him in at night, or simply to hold and touch him.

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

In the beginning I struggled with my methamphetamine addiction. Eventually, I was living in an active addict house and have remained clean ever since December 6, 2005. I knew from the moment my son was born what I needed to do to never lose him. After I was released from the hospital I went to our local outpatient drug program and made an appointment for an assessment in preparation for my detention hearing later that day. Asking for help can be difficult and I struggled with it for years or I wouldn’t have been an addict for ten years. Once I made the decision to ask for help my whole life changed.

**What was the worst part about getting separated?**

The worst part of the separation was not knowing how he was being treated in his new foster home. As it turned out, his foster family was amazing, but early in the process I was frightened at the prospect of strangers coming to pick him up and take him away. In addition to which I was not allowed to meet or see the foster family at first.

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

Oh yes! I came from a family of four generations of alcoholics. I grew up around AA and NA meetings. I knew what I needed to do to have my child returned to me. My addiction began when my mother lost her battle with cancer. I never allowed myself to grieve and the pain became overwhelming. I was an addict for ten years. I burned a lot of bridges and surrounded myself with other addicts. However, the ten years of addiction were much harder than working to remain clean. I lacked coping skills and I learned that about myself.

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

Even though I knew what I needed to do to be reunified with my son, it was something my Dependency Investigation social worker said to me that made a deep impression. She told me that my baby was white and he was adorable. She said without qualification I had six months before he was adopted. She was straight with me and gave me no room to falter.

**What good came out of the experience if any?**

My son was diagnosed early with cerebral palsy and because of my experience I am able to be a present parent making medically informed decisions on his behalf.
**How do you think this experience has changed your life for the long term?**

I now work as a parent advocate. My responsibility is to be there for people. I take my responsibility very seriously and even feel guilty when I take vacations. I don’t want to let my clients down.

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

The whole thing is a blur now, but I do remember my first appearance before the judge at my detention hearing. I told the judge “I will walk through the fires of hell for my baby!! No one is going to raise him but me!!!” The judge warned me it would be the hardest thing to accomplish but I merely replied I did not care.

I went through several case workers. My first had to transfer my son’s case because she had worked on his half-sister’s case and felt she couldn’t be unbiased. The transfer was to an intern who wanted to help but was not in a position to make decisions. Shana Rousseau was my last case worker and she was amazing. She was a cheerleader of my accomplishments, and yet was direct with me about the areas I could improve.

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

I visited my son every day in the NICU. I stayed for as long and the nurses would let me, sometimes even overnight, just to hold him and care for him. I just wanted to bond with him. He was in the NICU for 29 days. Once he was placed with a foster family I was permitted three 3-hour visits a week because of my previous time spent with him in the NICU. Soon the foster family became comfortable with me and I had basically unrestricted access to him. The foster family saw my quick enrollment into supportive services favorably. I participated in such services as a Day Treatment Program, NA meetings, and connecting with other recovering addicts that had at least two years of clean time. Plus, I never relapsed.

**Tell me one person that was a big help to you getting your son back?**

I actually have two. First, I want to highlight Regina who was my son’s foster mother. Regina became one of my biggest cheerleaders, and she and her husband are still in our lives today as my son’s grandparents. Second, I want to highlight Judith. I had been invited to an NA Women’s Potluck dinner December 10, 2005. I shared my story of addiction and my son’s placement with a foster family. Judith heard my story and she later told me it touched her heart. By January 1, 2006, Judith had offered to let me, a complete stranger, come and live with her.

**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.**

Ken, my son’s father, was also very important to my recovery. We are still together having been reunified with our son. We were there to support each other through the process of becoming sober.
Were there services that you did not have that you would have found helpful?

No, my case workers were very thorough. I received mental health services, attended NA meetings, and parenting classes. I even received a voucher through HUD’s Family Reunification Program, which had not been available for many years. Through this program a family has to be recommended by a professional they are working with. In addition to which the professional has to give a presentation to a panel about the family.¹ I was granted so many blessings on my road to recovery.

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

I would tell other parents that the most important thing to do is take it seriously and follow your case plan because it is the road map back to your children.

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

Rubber stamped case plans do not fit every client’s issues or needs. There needs to be less concern with crisis management and more concern with trying to keep families intact. For example, if a mother is in an abusive relationship the first response should not be to break up the family and remove the mother. There should be an attempt to get the husband the counseling and anger management courses he needs to be a better partner. There should be an attempt to preserve the family unit if possible. Unfortunately, where I live due to budget cuts the county is only providing the basic services.

Is there anything about your work as a parent advocate that you would like to share?

Regarding my job as an advocate...I just do what’s in my heart. I enjoy helping others and letting them know that they are not alone. Support especially from family and friends is not very common in the beginning when someone is involved with CWS. I myself am grateful that I can be a support to someone during a very vulnerable, scary, shameful, and horrific time in their lives. My purpose is to provide them with hope.

¹ For more information on HUD’s Family Reunification Program vouchers please visit: http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/program_offices/public_indian_housing/programs/hcv/family

Artwork by Shante Bullock

June is National Reunification Month
For more information: www.ambar.org/reunificationmonth