Before working in child advocacy, I had a successful career as a business entrepreneur in the food industry. I owned various restaurants, including a RoundTable Pizza Franchise. I am an extremely proud father of two children. My partner and I have been together for 15 years and we look forward to a long future together.

Michael Huesca was nominated by many people, including many of his clients as a Reunification Hero, and our interview with him turned up many qualities that led to his selection. Michael is the Executive Director of POPS (Paternal Opportunities Programs and Services). When he started, he went without salary for two years. This allowed them to grow the organization from serving 360 to 990 clients.

As the largest father focused advocacy organization in Southern California, POPS gives fathers the tools they need to be empowered, engaged and active fathers. Under Michael’s leadership, POPS continues to grow, this year reaching 750 clients with nearly half of the year left. Despite Michael’s numerous contributions to this organization, he cited how, “the sacrifices I make are nothing compared to the people I work with.”

Those who nominated him described him as someone who “words cannot express” and a man who “takes personal interest in the families” he works with. On top of this, Michael’s work on father focused advocacy is a unique contribution to the broader field of child welfare advocacy that often gets overlooked. To learn about the inspiring work that Michael does at POPS, read his interview below.

By Hannah Leibson, University of Southern California

Tell us something interesting about yourself.

Before working in child advocacy, I had a successful career as a business entrepreneur in the food industry. I owned various restaurants, including a RoundTable Pizza Franchise. I am an extremely proud father of two children. My partner and I have been together for 15 years and we look forward to a long future together.
What made you interested in advocacy for fathers specifically?

Initially, I was a counselor for domestic violence victims and assisted over 1,000 female survivors. That was an inspiring experience that pushed me towards advocacy. And personally, I first became a single father at 21 when my son was six months old. I’ve always done everything in my power to make sure my children were always taken care of to the best of my ability and always felt supported at home. This task has not always been easy. As a single dad, I face bias on a daily basis which has led to personal reflection of whether or not my children were getting everything they needed to develop the way they would have with two parents. This increased awareness of the societal pressure as a dad has carried over to my passion for helping other fathers reunify with their children.

What barriers do fathers specifically face in reunifying with their children?

The cultural perception that fathers are not nurturers is a major roadblock for the reunification of children with their biological fathers. This bias pervades inside and outside of child welfare. We work to overcome these biases to help fathers prove their worthiness to the courts.

It’s unfortunate, but true, that the courts have a tendency to push for female parental involvement even when the mother is unable to adequately care for the child in question. For example, if the mother is unable to care for a young child, often custody will be given to a female family member, instead of a biological first time father. This bias not only resonates with judges, but with social workers, family members, and society at large.

Can you tell us a little about POPS (Paternal Opportunities Programs and Services) and your role in this organization?

We are an advocacy organization aimed at providing support to fathers so that they can be empowered, engaged, and active. Our organization started with the mission of reconnecting incarcerated fathers with their children. For the last two years, I have been honored to serve as the Executive Director of this incredible organization. During my time as Director, I have expanded the breadth of the organization to help support mothers hoping to reunify as well. By advocating for both mothers and fathers, we are able to stay focused on our overall objective of making sure the best interests of the children are met.

Our goal at POPS is to be advocates for our clients through the various stages of their custodial cases. While we are not attorneys, we accompany our clients to court to serve as an extra set of eyes and ears to record and document information that would have been missed had they gone alone. Many parents that we work with have gone through extremely traumatic experiences, and so in addition to advocacy, the staff members at POPS aim to provide support and compassion to the parents during these stressful times. We hope that through this process, our clients gain the voice to come back from court empowered to keep fighting for reunification.

June is National Reunification Month
For more information see www.ambar.org/nrm
What has been the most rewarding part of your job?

I have been humbled to receive invitations from reunified families inviting me to Christmas dinner and birthday parties long after their cases have been closed. Taking a step back from my job and joining these families in the everyday moments of life reminds me how grateful these families are to receive help at POPS, and how lucky I am to work there and help make these reunifications possible.

What has been the greatest challenge?

Aside from lack of funding, which inhibits us from expanding and taking all of the cases we want, so much of our job is spent attempting to shift the social and cultural bias towards favoring reunification. Society perpetuates the belief that fathers do not have what it takes to parent a child on their own.

‘A father can’t care for the child like a mother’ is a common sentiment we seek to combat and challenge through proof of the positive benefits of reunification.

Can you talk about a particular memorable case that sticks out in your mind?

A few years ago I encountered a case where both the mother and father (unmarried) sought custody over their two children. Both parents were substance users and so 14 months into the case the mother relapsed, but instead of the father receiving custody, the children were going to be put up for adoption because the father was allegedly “not ready.”

We helped get the father in a position where he could successfully care for his children and he won custody. Several years have passed since the case left the court, and the children continue to live happily with their father who has since remarried. Additionally, the children’s mother still visits her children on regular visits.

More than anything, this particular case sticks out to me because of the work of one social worker who believed in the father and fought for reunification against bias and the odds against him. This case also serves as an example of a positive reunification that served the best interests of all members of the family.

What is one thing you recommend to parents you work with at POPS that may help them increase the likelihood of reunification?

The most important thing I try to help my fathers to understand is that the whole process is about patience, learning, and growth. To help teach this, I always start with a reality check so that the fathers understand that throughout the process, they will have to prove their worthiness. Simply saying, “I’m innocent” will not win them their children. The sooner the fathers recognize this, the sooner they will reunify. I’ve been around the block enough to learn that fathers must be humble, truthful and transparent when creating a game plan for the future.
What programs/practices do you see as the most effective in particular regarding helping fathers reunify?

A key feature necessary to helping fathers reunify is recognizing that men and women communicate differently. To gain more understanding for fathers, child welfare organizations, attorneys, and the courts must help facilitate a “father friendly” approach to reunification. In order to create the best outcomes for the children at stake, we must fully understand the individuality of each case we work on, instead of wrongly assuming that every case fits a mold.

Are there programs/practices that are not effective and need to be changed?

Yes, the separation of parents. I believe we need to work with both parents by providing parallel case plans and tools for the family to work together. Child welfare advocacy is a process of growing and learning that resides in a desire to make a situation better for the lives of those affected. While not every program is perfect, each program is rooted in a desire for positive change.

What preventative actions do you think would be most effective in avoiding the conditions that may lead to foster care?

No single fix or organization is going to change the face of child welfare by themselves. Instead, the field must follow the lead of organizations like the Annie E. Casey Foundation who run successful programs that aim to keep children out of foster care. Child welfare advocacy is an overwhelming area right now, with more families in need than resources available. To help mitigate the overburdened system, increased attention and resources must be allocated to help this cause.

Do you think there are any public misconceptions about the child welfare system?

Yes I do, and I believe that public misconceptions fall partly on the agencies themselves. Many people see the agencies as institutions instead of individuals. The pervasiveness of this mindset perpetuates the parental notion that the agencies are just out to take their children. This negative belief leads to fear and the doubting of agencies intentions. While I bring up this information to highlight a misconception, I do believe that agencies are not all consistent in their practices and do hold some severe biases that inhibit them from putting the interests of the family first at all times.
What advice would you give to judges, agency directors, legislators, governors or the president about how to improve the system?

The system needs to be less investigative and defensive when trying to build a case. The courts have a tendency to ignore the presumption of innocence, and the child welfare agencies are so fixated on protecting themselves that the best interests of the families often comes second. We hear the statement ‘best interest of the child,’ however it is hard for the system to live up to that statement.

Is there anything else about you or your experiences that you want to highlight?

Too often society and individuals want to give up. They think, it’s too expensive to help a drug addict rehabilitate, or those people will never change. But research has proven that children who grow up without the presence of a biological father or mother face increased risks of alcoholism, incarceration, and lack of access to education.

Knowing this, we must do everything we can possible do to by working towards reunification without putting dollar amounts to it. Especially in non-profits, we are restricted by funding, but with increased hope and knowledge of the benefits of reunification, we will have the societal support and funding necessary to make even greater strides in the field of child welfare.