Nicole Marsland was nominated as a Reunification Hero by a colleague who has continually witnessed Nicole’s compassion and devotion for reunification. Nicole has worked in the child welfare system both as a case worker and as a supervisor for ten years. She worked in the foster care system for six years, but after working on some challenging cases, she transitioned to adult protective services.

However, after two years, she realized that she had a passion for child welfare. When she returned, she came back in a supervisory role. Through the years, she has worked with countless families, yet she still treats every individual family with the love and respect they deserve.

Nicole Marsland is a tremendous support for fellow coworkers, foster families, and the parents she fiercely serves. Continue reading to learn more about Nicole's commitment to reunification.

By Larissa Zavarelli, Washington College of Law, J.D. Candidate, 2018
Tell me something interesting about yourself E.g. interesting hobby, adventure, background.

I grew up with nine siblings in Tacoma, Washington. My dad was a police officer, and I remember watching him help everyone. He truly embodied the community police officer. Watching him work with people in the community probably gave me my start in terms of helping people. He passed away three years ago, and his memorial service was filled with community members. Several people at his service mentioned things my dad had done that we knew nothing about. Even when my dad entered a nursing home, people talked about how he made their everyday lives better. That was incredibly touching to me. There is no better tribute to someone’s life than to witness the impact and influence on the lives of so many others.

What made you interested in child welfare?

When I was very young, I married a service member and moved to New York. When I arrived in New York, I did not know anyone, so I joined my local fire department. Then, I became an EMT. As an EMT, I enjoyed helping people in crisis, and through that experience, I learned that I wanted to help children and families in crisis.

What types of positions or roles have you had during that time?

I started as a foster care case worker and I did that for about six years, but to be honest, I needed a break. I had some difficult cases, so I left child welfare and went into adult protective services. Moving to adult protective services was incredibly beneficial, because that experience allowed me to see how families cope with a variety of challenges over time. But, foster care is my passion. So, I came back as the foster care supervisor at my agency two years ago.

What was one experience that had a big impact on the way you think about reunification?

One particular experience that truly touched me and changed the way I think about reunification was with a mom who was incarcerated. She had three beautiful little daughters. When I started working with the family, I had to put aside my preconceived ideas. From the beginning, I could tell that they had such a loving bond between them. I took the girls twice a month to a nearby prison to see their mom. However, to ensure reunification, the mother chose to participate in a program that would place her over six hours away for six months. The decision to transfer prisons was absolutely grueling for the mom. It was heartbreaking to watch. I made a pitch to my supervisors to allow me to take the three girls overnight to visit their mom while she was in the program. With the support of the agency and the foster mom, I was able to take them. The mom successfully completed her program exceeded expectations. She was released on work release at Christmas time. The foster mom had been keeping an open line of communication with mom and the girls, so that they could maintain their family bond. Additionally, the foster mom invited the mom to spend Christmas with the girls at her home. On Christmas morning, the girls woke up to a surprise visit from their mom. This collaborative effort was made by everyone in the community. Now, the family is reunified and doing very well.
What are some of the strengths of the child welfare system in your area?

The biggest strength in the system is our compassionate workers. You do not get into child welfare for the money or the hours. They are the strength. We really want to keep families together and return kids to their families. Livingston County also has some wonderful programming for at-risk families and relative caregivers in order to prevent foster care. Becoming a relative caregiver comes with a unique set of challenges: a family’s dynamics change once the child is placed with a relative. These changes in roles can create anger and resentment, so we try to support the entire family as they work to reunify.

What are some of the weaknesses?

One of the biggest weaknesses is courtroom delays. We have parents and family members who take time off of work, but then court is adjourned or rescheduled. I am paid to be there, but these families are putting their employment at risk to come to court, but then have it adjourned. Another weakness of the system is volume of paperwork mandates. The high volume of paperwork takes case workers out of the field and into their offices.

Describe some efforts you have made to improve child welfare practice in your area?

One of the things I am really proud of is that when a child is in foster or kinship care, we have made a commitment to meeting with the family and the supports in an initial planning meeting. Following the initial planning meeting, we have our first Team Meeting right away. Our goal is figure out why the placement occurred and what is needed to have the child return. The tone of the meeting sets the foundation for our partnership with the family. By asking parents to tell their story and then asking them to communicate to us what they would like us to do to help; we can create a strong foundation for our working relationship. We have a lot of solution focused practice, but having families come up with solutions instead of us imposing a solution can help effectively impact and change their lives. We have focused support groups; Fatherhood Connection and Boys to Men are support groups for men to discuss things happening in their lives and what changes they need to make to see their children.

What is one thing you recommend in working with parents to increase the likelihood of reunification?

Be kind and compassionate. You do not know what that person has gone through. Everyone is fighting a battle that you might not know anything about.
What advice would you give to other professionals who work in child welfare? Or to individuals considering working in child welfare?

Vicarious trauma is a big part of our job. We are emotionally traumatized by what has happened to the families. It can take a real toll on the workers. Finding the success stories, positives, and ways to come back with a positive attitude are key.

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

For Livingston County, I would advise bringing back funding for small focus courts, like drug treatment court or veteran’s court. The time and attention these families were given in those courts made a huge difference. There was a weekly conference with the treatment team and it moved the case along. Everyone was under scrutiny, the judge, the lawyers, the drug and alcohol providers, and the case worker to increase the likelihood of reunification. It was truly collaborative. It was challenging and exhausting, but very rewarding.

What programs/practices are most effective in helping parents reunify?

The underlying problem is that we must understand the problems that lie at the core of the individual. We contract with a forensic psychologist who does an in-depth psychological evaluation of the biological parents whose kids are out of the home. That evaluation spans over their entire life. The evaluation really gives us an in-depth look at the trauma that may or may not have had a hand in the current situation. This information helps us identify treatment methods that would best serve the client.

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

Sometimes court orders suggest services that are inapplicable to the needs of the parents, yet they are expected to complete those trainings and services. Court orders should be tailored specifically to the individual’s needs.
What programs/practices need to be added to make reunifications more likely or successful?

Families are immediately hit with a financial burden when a child is out of the home. They might lose all financial services that keep things in their home stable. If families lose employment or housing, then it creates a larger systematic problem in returning kids to their home.

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

We have great preventative service programs. In our Family Resolutions program, the placement advisory committee meets weekly to discuss potential at-risk families. We have case workers assigned to school districts to assist families in search of certain services.

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

The public misconception I hear most often is that the public think we are not doing enough to remove a child, or that we are doing too little too late. But because of confidentiality restraints, we are not able to discuss our progress in a case. The other misconception is that we are bureaucrats or paper pushers, and we are just collecting a paycheck. However, my workers work on weekends, through the evenings, and they spot-check families all of the time. I do not think the public understands that. This job takes a significant toll on an individual worker and their own personal life. But they do it because they care.

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

"No man is island. I do not work alone. It is a team approach, not just within the unit or the agency, but within the community. Our stakeholder meetings are vital. No one person has the solution. It is a constant practice of revamping things to see what worked and what needs to change."