For some youth, ending up in juvenile court can be a wake-up call. Other youth, however, might find themselves in court several times before correcting their path.

Such was the case with Ms. Pimley, who appeared several times before Judge Murphy in Payne County, Oklahoma for various minor offenses. The last time she wound up in court, however, was for a more serious criminal charge as an adult, and her two young children were removed and placed with her parents in Louisiana. This was the turning point for Ms. Pimley, who was devastated at the thought of losing her kids.

Luckily, Judge Murphy, seeing her potential and dire situation, did everything he could to ensure she could succeed in correcting her life course and reuniting with her children. He believed in her and gave her a suspended sentence contingent on requirements like completing an intensive drug court program, maintaining employment, and getting an education.

The process wasn’t easy for Ms. Pimley, and she encountered some unforeseen circumstances—including Hurricane Katrina—but she worked relentlessly to become a better person and a better mother.

Today, Ms. Pimley is a proud mother of three, is engaged, and helps raise her step-daughter as her own. She is a graduate of Tulane University, where she majored in Paralegal Studies and Social Sciences, and provides for her children by working as a land agent at Shell. Ms. Pimley also volunteers at the Youth Empowerment Program, where she helps mentor “at-risk” teenaged girls.

Ms. Pimley attributes much of her success to her supportive parents and to Judge Murphy, who believed in her when nobody else would.

By Rodolfo Castillo, Jr., Washington College of Law, J.D. Candidate, 2017
Ms. Pimley

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

I love hanging out with my kids and spending quality time together. We also adopted a rescue dog that is now part of our family.

It’s also very important for me to give back to my parents, who were instrumental in taking care of my kids and helping us get back together, so we often spend time at their home helping out with chores and having family dinners.

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

About a year after getting my kids back, my daughter got in trouble and my parents’ initial reaction was to think that they had made a mistake by letting me get the kids back. However, once they knew the full story behind why my daughter was in trouble, they apologized and told me that they would have done the same thing as parents. They thought I was doing a good job at parenting my kids now that they were with me, and that really meant a lot to me.

What was the worst part about getting separated?

My children were very young when they were taken away, and they were essentially raised by my parents. While I’m grateful that my parents were very supportive and willing to take care of my kids, they had a different, more lenient parenting style than me. Naturally, the kids saw my parents as their own mom and dad, so it was an adjustment for everyone when they came to live with me.

I think the adjustment was even harder for my kids because they still held some resentment towards me for not being consistently there when they were young. Still, I really wanted them to see me as their mother and respect me as an authority figure. I worked hard to provide for my children, to be a good role model, and to always show them that I love them.

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

I feel like I wasted a lot of my youth making bad decisions. Even when Judge Murphy warned me that he didn’t want to see me back in his courtroom, I kept getting in trouble. My parents were even helping me pay for community college, but I took that for granted as well. The turning point in my life was definitely when my two infant children got taken away. I realized that if I went to jail in Oklahoma while they got raised in Louisiana, I wouldn’t be out until they were in high school. I knew that I would have to get my act together and show that I was willing to work hard to be a good mother.

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

My dad was truly a wonderful man, so I’m glad my kids were able to build such a strong relationship with him, which they might otherwise not have had. Sadly, my father passed away in 2012, and it was a difficult time for all of us.

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

It has definitely shaped me into a more responsible adult. I think things would’ve turned out very differently if I had been single and didn’t have any children when I received my suspended sentence. Instead, I had something bigger than me to fight for and I did everything I could to get them back.

This experience also helped me appreciate and enjoy getting an education. Having had all of these experiences, it was easier for me to relate to my studies in criminal justice and to offer my own perspective. As part of my studies, I had the chance to do an internship with the Youth Empowerment Program, where I mentored “at-risk” teenaged girls. I continued volunteering even after my internship was over, and I still keep in touch with some of the girls I mentored. One of them even helps mentor my own teenaged daughter.

**You nominated Judge Murphy as a Reunification Hero, saying he was a big help to you getting your children back. Tell us about that.”**

Judge Murphy was like an angel in my life. He trusted me even if I didn’t deserve it. He believed in me even when nobody else would. While the D.A. and even my own parents’ recommended jail time, Judge Murphy gave a suspended sentence and fought hard to get my case transferred to drug court and probation in Louisiana.

He also awarded custody to my parents so my children wouldn’t have to go into a foster home. His professionalism, thoroughness, compassion, and use of discretion made a world of a difference for me and my children, who are now honor students.

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What is the most important thing you would want someone else to know about your experience?

I think it’s very important to believe in yourself and to know that your past doesn’t have to define you. We all make mistakes, but we can also all move on and work towards more positive outcomes. Parents, regardless of whether they have custody, should know that their kids will always need them. Kids are very resilient, but they need to know that you care about them and that you believe in them.

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

The cases before you are not just a name on a paper. When you're before a judge, it’s comforting to see that the judge believes in you. In my case, I knew that being a judge was more than just a job for Judge Murphy. His most important asset was his commitment and dedication to doing the right thing for the sake of the children. He never made snap judgments and took all factors into consideration before rendering a decision.

In working with youth now yourself, what are some of the strengths of the child welfare system in your area?

Creating partnerships with community-based organizations such as Youth Empowerment helps a lot. There are also other nonprofits in the area that work toward helping youth feel like they’re a part of something. It’s important to have programs that focus on helping youth develop positive actions and beliefs and that gives them a sense of belonging. Otherwise, they may end up in the wrong crowd or gangs.

What are some of the biggest weaknesses?

There’s generally a lack of wraparound services that take a holistic approach to working with youth. Some programs address only the symptoms rather than the main cause of a problem. Other programs are reactive and do not work proactively to prevent some of the issues. Also, schools could improve by including in their curriculum some of the skills that these youth need, such as conflict resolution and budgeting.
Judge Robert M. Murphy

Judge Murphy is currently an Administrative Law Judge in Spokane, Washington and presides over administrative hearings involving child support and substantiated findings of neglect and abuse. Throughout his career, Judge Murphy has practiced in both the private and public sectors.

He presided over Ms. Pimley’s case in Payne County, Oklahoma, where he worked as an Associate District Judge from 1994-2008. During that time, Judge Murphy presided over juvenile and mental health hearings as well as civil, criminal, and family cases.

He was also instrumental in working with Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) to keep the length of foster care stays one of the lowest in the nation. He appreciated his nomination as a Reunification Hero by Ms. Pimley, but wanted to ensure that her hard work was acknowledged as well.

You have been very involved in your community and have held a wide range of volunteer positions in various organizations. Can you tell us which activity or two you have enjoyed the most?

I have really enjoyed participating in church activities and working with high school students, especially when coaching moot court teams. I enjoy working with young people because I like learning about their thought processes. I like the idea that they’re full of energy and in such a transformative stage in life, in which we can still have a positive influence.

I have coached students from more mainstream schools as well as from alternative schools that serve “at-risk” students. In some ways, I’ve found coaching the alternative school students to be more rewarding. The fact that they competed was a big deal for them. Being part of a team, traveling in a bus, and competing in extracurricular activities were things many of them hadn’t done before. Even when we didn’t win trophies, the kids enjoyed the experience.

I have also received positive feedback from their principal, who said that the students who participated in moot court had generally improved in school and had become role models for other students.

Were you always interested in child welfare matters, or did you wind up getting involved throughout your career?

I more or less fell into it. At first, I did some private practice and handled only a few child welfare cases. I found that field of law to be difficult, yet interesting, and definitely much more complicated than I thought it was. When I became a judge, I started figuring out how much the child welfare system can impact a person’s life and the role courts play in that process. I realized that the decisions I made in my court really made a difference.
Do you think other judges that are not directly involved in dependency cases are similarly aware of the huge impact they can have on reunification?

I think they are aware, but philosophies vary from judge to judge. For example, many have heard of the “school-to-prison pipeline” and the collateral consequences youth can face. I think about things like that and I try to prevent some of those negative impacts.

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

I’ve had many, but one practice I implemented in my courtroom seemed to make a difference. While the safety, health, and welfare of the child are always important goals, reunification should always be a primary goal. When deciding a case, I also consider the fact that parents are still developing and are in a state of flux. This might require me to monitor and pay attention more closely to a case.

Thus, I required in all cases that the children appear in court. First, you can learn a lot simply by observing how children interact with their parents. Second, it is important for children, especially older youth, to be involved in their own court hearings. Although some people don’t feel it is helpful, I required it even for infants because it shows that they are real people and not just names or files on the docket.

What are some of the strengths you’ve observed in the child welfare system?

It all comes down to the people working there. We need good, committed attorneys and staff, who then become real assets to the system. For example, in Washington we had a lot of trouble getting state funding for the representation of children in dependency proceedings. Yet, we know cases work better when everyone has an attorney, especially children. In tough cases, the biggest assets are good attorneys and good judges that are dedicated to their work and well-prepared to do their job.

What are some of the weaknesses you’ve observed in the child welfare system?

There is a lack of support systems. If you can get a good support system for parents, you’ll have better outcomes. However, many times resources are overtaxed and some are only available during weekday business hours, and that doesn’t tend to work with the parents’ schedules. There will always be good programs and good ideas, but they will only be effective if they meet the clients where they’re at and tailor the services to their needs.
Besides requiring that all youth appear in court, what other efforts have you made to improve child welfare practice in your area?

If I detected a potentially difficult case, I’d have more court appearances and hearings. Although the standard was to hold a hearing every 90 days or 6 months, in a tricky case, I would start with weekly hearings until things were on stronger footing. This also generally encouraged the people involved with the case to prepare for the next hearing sooner rather than later. I would also try to come up with a real permanency plan for the child rather than accepting a generic one.

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

It really does make a difference if the judge looks like he/she really cares. You don’t need to make decisions based on passions to show that you care. You also have to be courageous. For example, even though I was an elected judge, I did things like requiring all kids to appear in court because I thought it was right, even if it was initially unpopular.

What advice would you give to other professionals who work in child welfare or to individuals considering working in child welfare?

Let parents know that people really do want them to succeed. They might initially be skeptical or uncooperative because they feel everyone is out to get them. Let them know that your priority isn’t to take away their children.

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

Courts can be overly formal and intimidating. In the juvenile arena, sometimes you need to be more informal, but that can be difficult because the courtroom architecture tends to be set up for trials. It can be scary, especially for younger youth. Formality doesn’t have to be so black and white, and we should aim to design courtrooms that create a less intimidating atmosphere.

What programs or practices in your area are most effective in helping parents reunite with their children?

Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) was a good program in my area and it helped with reunification a lot.

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

A lot of times, in a prosecutor’s office, the new attorneys get all the juvenile cases. However, they then leave for another job or are “promoted” to adult cases. We had one prosecutor in our county that had been there for 6 years (and is still there), but that was the exception rather than the norm. We need to change mindsets and our legal culture to make working with juvenile cases considered just as important as working with other cases.

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What needs to be added to make reunifications more likely or successful?

The system could always have lower caseloads. We also need more judges and more training, but I have definitely found a minority of judges that really want to do this type of work. As I started out, training was harder to find, but now there are more publications and trainings. I myself now contribute to publications by the ABA Section on Litigation and Children’s Rights.

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

Early intervention and early childhood education are definitely necessary. The longer you wait, the more difficult it becomes to help out kids. For example, I think that hospitals should report when parents flunk a drug test so they can receive help, like in-home services. Likewise, pre-schools should ensure they are noticing different issues so we can provide early services to the children.

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

It’s a double-edge sword, but there are some misconceptions about privacy and confidentiality. Many hearings are closed to the public, especially if they involve children. However, this hides what is really going on from public view until there is a tragedy. A lot of lawyers don’t know what’s going on with the child welfare system or how it works.

It is important for both the public and the bar to know how these systems work and the roles they play. Of course, the courts and the law can’t solve all the problems, but they can certainly help a lot. Many lawyers might not have training in child welfare, but they do have common sense and are good at cutting through the red tape to get things fixed. We need to be better informed to do a good job and to be better assets to the system.

What do you think motivates many people to stay in this field of work and become good assets to the system?

They can get a real sense of satisfaction in accomplishing something. Take Ms. Pimley’s case. I wasn’t necessarily expecting that she would go on to graduate from a great college and become a mentor for other youth, but I did believe she could turn her life around and become a good mother for her kids if given the chance.

I was certainly glad to hear from her and find out that she’s doing well and has been reunited with her kids. If she had gone to prison instead, her story might have been very different, and her own children might’ve wound up in foster care or delinquent. She broke that cycle and is an example of why we do this type of work.

Yet, I want others to know that there are definitely other people like her. In fact, the other day I ran into a young lady who had appeared in my court and was now doing very well and attending Oklahoma State University. That’s what makes this line of work very rewarding.