Reunification Heroes

Heather Sanders

Heather is a Family Services Worker with the Tennessee Department of Children's Services. She is described by her co-worker as diligent and driven. Heather was the first of her family to put herself through college and has shown the same kind of dedication to her clients. Heather has worked diligently for over a year to reunite four children in foster care with their birth mother. The birth mother suffered from addiction issues, a lack of support, and insufficient income at the time the state took custody. Though the birth mother had to reside several hours away from her children for much of their placement in foster care, Heather worked closely with the foster father, who was willing to adopt the four kids, to facilitate visitation with the birth mother in the other city. Heather and the foster family were able to assist the mother in obtaining local housing and moving back closer to her children, which in turn encouraged more extensive visitation. This summer the children will begin a trial home placement with their mother thanks to Heather’s diligence and determination throughout the process.

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

*By Kathryn Byers, J.D. Candidate 2016*

*Tell me something interesting about yourself*

I am the first person in my family to put myself through college. I also truly enjoy reading any genre. I usually read a book every two days.

*What made you interested in child welfare?*

I really liked the idea of making a difference in someone’s life. I worked retail, food service, and customer service jobs before this and it was not fulfilling work. I wanted to make a difference to someone.

*How long have you worked in child welfare?*

I have been working in child welfare since 2006. That’s nine years now.

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

I first worked in a resident group home for teen girls helping to provide direct care to the girls; I now work with the Tennessee Department of Children Services as a Family Services Worker.
What was one experience that had a big impact on the way you think about reunification?

I'm not sure that there has been one experience that impacted me. I often think that it is but for the grace of God that I did not end up like many of my clients. I always try to put myself in another’s shoes to try and understand where they are coming from. It is a traumatic situation for these families but they will always be a family. They will always love their children.

What are some of the strengths of the child welfare system in your area?

We have a lot of social welfare programs that are targeted at every kind of group whether it is a teen mom or a child with a handicap. The court system is also very responsive to working with Family Services.

What are some of the weaknesses?

While we have a large transportation network that is able to serve many people it doesn’t connect everyone. There are still a lot of rural areas that are not able to use any of the city’s transportation services. This places a greater burden on the case manager and families to connect with local resources and programs. Another troubling issue in East Tennessee is that of babies with Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome. There is a widespread problem with abuse of prescription pain medication in East Tennessee. Babies born to addicted mothers are filling neonatal intensive care units in Tennessee faster than the health care system can figure out how to treat them. In the past decade, the number of babies in withdrawal has increased tenfold. Last year, 921 drug-dependent babies were born in the state.

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

We have CQI or Continuous Quality Improvement meetings. Any suggestions we have about improvements that can be made at the Department of Children’s Services we “take it to the circle” and begin a dialog about the issue. Eventually if there is agreement that the idea is a useful one it works its way up the management chain, but this is a way to have an open dialogue and encourage improvements to the Department. Specifically, we have focused on improving the percentages of documented parent/child visits that are occurring within our region. Regular contact and interaction between family members is crucial in maintaining the connection between family members who are not able to reside together in the same home. Through training, education, and focusing on this issue, our region has improved from roughly 33% in late 2013 to around 50% of documented at least twice monthly parent/child visits during early 2015.

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

One thing I would recommend in working with a parent is to build a relationship with them. Have one on one discussions with them being open and honest about their situation. They have to trust you if you are going to be able to work together toward reunification. In the case of the birth mother with four children in foster care, the children were able to reunify largely based on open communication between myself, the foster family, and the birth mother. We had many
meetings, phone calls, and home visits to encourage and foster a relationship between the team. I was able to work with DCS in the mother’s state so that they could help provide her with resources and support. Encouraging the foster and birth families to have open communication was also instrumental. This type of relationship is paramount to the children’s feelings of comfort and helping to resolve often conflicted feelings by the children about returning to the home of their biological family and leaving the foster home.

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

You are only planting the seeds of change and are not always going to be around to see them grow. You can’t know for sure what your impact will be on a family. While you should always work hard for your clients you have to know how to set boundaries. It took me several years to learn how to distance myself emotionally, but self-care is vital in this line of work. You are trying to help people in often desperate situations and it can be difficult not to become emotionally invested in the outcome. It is important to empathize with your client but not become overly invested.

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

I would advise them to remember not to overburden the social worker. People often don’t realize the time and work that is needed to try and help people. I would also like to point out that the paperwork is often redundant. We are asked to fill out three different forms that state substantially the same information.

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

Therapy for the child and the family is very important. Entering the foster care system is a traumatic experience. Even if the child seems alright it is important that they be able to come to terms with being removed from their family even for a brief time, or the reasons behind the removal.

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

There will be exigent circumstances that require the removal of a child for safety reasons, but generally I believe it is important to attempt to find family members before the child is removed. Kinship care is a very important alternative to placement in foster care and yet it is not an option that is always fully explored for some reason. This could be due to the fact that CPS has to meet certain time frames when closing a case or possibly it is a funding issue. Regardless, it should be a priority to find the extended family of a child before they enter the foster care system. Possibly we should implement short term placements before a child is placed in foster care.
Do you think there are any public misconceptions about the child welfare system? If so what are they?

There is a belief that social workers do not support and work with families toward reunifications. Many families feel that the Department only wishes to keep their children in foster care and to have them adopted by foster families. There is also a misconception that children are removed from homes too easily. In truth, CPS does a great job of working with families and providing services for periods of time before the children are removed from the birth home.

Artwork by Shante Bullock

June is National Reunification Month

For more information: www.ambar.org/reunificationmonth