Suzanne Sellers

Suzanne is described by her nominator as the mother any child would be proud to have. She and those she works to assist have been well served by her charisma, dedication, humility, and empathy. Suzanne suffered from drug addiction, and in 1999 her parental rights were terminated. It was not until her children turned 18 that she was able to reunify with them on their own terms. She draws from her experiences and has become a powerful advocate for other parents experiencing the child welfare system. When termination proceedings were first brought against her she made the decision to get clean and she has stayed clean ever since. She has earned an MBA from DePaul University, a Master’s in Public Policy from the University of Chicago’s Harris School of Public Policy Studies, and is currently working on a Master’s in Divinity at Trinity International University.

Suzanne’s story has become an inspiration for other parents through her work as a parent advocate. At the Family Defense Center in Chicago, Illinois she teaches a writing workshop for affected parents as a method of helping them to understand they are not alone and to let the healing process begin. She has also had the opportunity to speak truth to power through her various speaking engagements about parent advocacy and justice for families in the child welfare system. Suzanne may not have gotten the help she needed in her own case, but she has dedicated her life to changing others’ lives.

To get a better idea why Suzanne 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 like to go out to dinner, to the movies, and to the theater. We also like to talk about our goals and dreams.

How long were your children out of your care?

Well in 1999 the termination of my parental rights had been finalized. While they were out of my care I saw them when I could but they were not living in my home or in my custody. I was not reunified with my children on our terms until they turned 18. My daughter turned 18 in 2011 and my son turned 18 in 2013.

What were some of the things you struggled with during the process of trying to reunify with your children before the termination of your parental rights?

I had many difficulties with the Illinois Department of Children & Family Services (DCFS). There were many services that I did not receive from DCFS, and I felt stigmatized for a variety of reasons. I felt that I received disparate treatment for being a former drug abuser, for being
a single mother, for being African American, and for suffering from crippling poverty and homelessness. I believe all of these factored into an unfair assessment of me. The true struggles I faced were trying to understand the court proceedings and getting through them. I was 2 years clean and sober and yet the caseworker continued with the termination proceedings of my parental rights. On the day of the termination trial I felt I was coerced into signing over my rights to a couple who had expressed interest in adopting rather than having the court adjudicate the matter. I was convinced by the people surrounding me and advising me that I should sign away my parental rights because if I didn’t my kids were going to be adopted overseas and I would never see them again. I was also told that I would never be able to get a job because the termination would be on my record. It was all untrue but I was scared. I will go to my grave regretting signing over my rights. I have been blessed to have been reunited with my children. We are not a perfect family and my children have questions. We do not know each other as well as I would have liked; however, I feel blessed to be able to strengthen our relationship now.

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

I was saddened that my kids would not know themselves meaning that they would not know their family history or even their medical history. I was concerned for their well-being and whether they would think I had thrown them away and didn’t want them. I did not want them to feel bad about their situation or that they didn’t know their heritage. Now we have been reunified we are finding those familial traits that we have in common. We actually have a lot in common. For example my daughter and I share a mutual love for purses.

**In the process of working toward reunification, did you discover things about yourself?**

Yes! I discovered that I am not a failure and I have a gift for helping others, especially families.

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

The biggest thing I had to work through was getting clean. When termination was first recommended to the court it was the shock that awoke me and struck me right in my heart. I resolved immediately to get clean and the looming threat of the termination of my parental rights only strengthened my resolve. I immediately started calling rehabilitation centers to try and get myself checked in. I kept thinking about having my rights terminated and wanted to fight for my kids. I was clean for 2 years before my rights were officially terminated. When that happened I didn’t spiral out of control I stayed clean. I wanted to be a mom that my kids were proud of, and I kept telling myself we would be reunified someday. I believe had I had an advocate in my corner I could have gotten my children back.

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

My experience made me an activist and gave me a purpose. I want to help families to be reunified and have the justice they deserve. This is my cause in life. Even though my kids are grown and we have been reunified I still want to fight for justice for other families.

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

It was horrifying, horrifying, horrifying. I don’t have the words to describe what I went through. I felt like I was being herded through the process like cattle. I was not helped to understand what the process was, what was going to happen to me, what was going to happen to my children. No one was advocating for me. There were several changes in caseworkers, social service agencies contracted by DCFS to manage my case, and in public defenders. There were continuances granted frequently, and I didn’t know why
they were being granted. It slowed the process substantially every time a continuance was granted. It appeared as though everyone in the system had a different motive. I include the judges, the caseworkers, the attorneys, DCFS and its hired social service agencies – everyone. All of the people running the system have a camaraderie because they work together every day. They only see the people like me working our way through the system every few months. The clients get the short end of the stick because this process is about my whole life, my legacy, and my children’s lives hanging in the balance. But for the people working in the child welfare system this is an occupation.

Were you permitted visitation rights? How often were you able to see your children?

My children were adopted. Once a parent’s rights are terminated, there are no court mandated visitations. After parental rights termination, any interaction between the parent and children is completely dependent on the will of the person(s) who adopt. In terms of children being put up for adoption as a result of the termination of parental rights through the child welfare system, I am not an advocate of this. I feel it is only permissible in extreme circumstances because the termination of parental rights is too severe a “solution” in most cases. In my case for example, when I was an addict I did what I could to ensure that my oldest child was with family or friends when I was not able to care for her, and that the people she was staying with had the things necessary to care for her like diapers etc. I was trying to do what was best for my child in a difficult situation. Once I decided to get clean for my children and was able to secure on my own the services that were adequate for my needs, I was steadfastly committed to that goal. To reiterate, I was clean for 2 years before my parental rights termination. I believe adoption is too severe in most cases because once it occurs the people who adopt your children have all rights regarding your children and as the parent stripped of my rights I have no recourse or remedy. I would argue it is very damaging for the child to not be able to fully know and have a relationship with their parent and equally traumatic to have your child taken from you. It is possible that people who adopt your child likely do not understand the trauma that both parent and child are experiencing.

Were there services that you did not have that you would have found helpful?

Absolutely! I needed help to gain admission to an adequate inpatient drug rehabilitation program. I wanted help to stop using drugs. I never denied that I was an addict. Yet for the most part, I had to seek out this treatment on my own. Before my case was referred for parental rights termination, DCFS referred me to an inadequate outpatient program, which was not a situation that was going to help me get clean and stay clean. I stopped attending when it became clear that the other participants were still using. One person I remember very clearly was obviously high and their arms were bleeding from needle use. I tried another short term inpatient rehabilitation referred to me by DCFS that also proved to be inadequate for my needs. After those experiences it seemed as though DCFS didn’t expect that I would attain and maintain sobriety. They were only there to set goals for me to accomplish without offering assistance in reaching those goals. Nevertheless, I continued to seek out on my own help to get clean. I even had to sue the state of Illinois to pay one of my medical expenses. I had checked myself into detox for a couple of days at a hospital and was billed several thousand dollars. Detox had been required on my safety plan. When I went to get help to pay this bill DCFS refused to cover the cost of a service they had required I complete. I believe this affected the outcome of my termination case and that my suit against them angered the State.

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

I would advise parents to never sign away their rights. Let the court take them from you if that is what they are going to do. You will always regret signing your rights away.
I also believe that the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA) is in dire need of reform. I believe the time limits need to be extended as they are too short especially for issues such as drug addiction. There also needs to be a change in funding. The incentive to place children into foster care or to put them up for adoption is too great. The funding should be invested in frontloaded services to prevent children from being placed in the child welfare system to begin with. The funding should also be geared toward reunifying families. I also believe that the name should be changed because it is misleading. The name insinuates that a child is not safe unless they are adopted, which is not necessarily true.

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

I want them to know we are not merely numbers we are families. We aren’t a docket number and we aren’t a caseload. Please don’t stigmatize and judge us. Please treat people as people. Just as important: give us fair treatment under the law.

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

My work at the Family Defense Center has involved working as a Parent Volunteer and Parent Empowerment Program Member (2006 – present); a leader of a Parent Advocacy Network Workshop entitled “Know Your Rights” (June 2014 – October 2014); as a Development Coordinator (June 2012 – September 2012); on the Board of Directors and a member of the Resources and Contingency Planning Committee (2008 – 2010); and I volunteered as a Paralegal Assistant (2006 – 2008).

At the Family Defense Center I have been teaching a writing workshop for affected parents. This experience has shown me a real camaraderie among a group of like-minded people. Expressing our thoughts has shown many of them that they are not alone and helped the healing process. The students have become the advocates and are able to help heal one another. The child welfare system is a traumatic and hurtful experience. There should be a greater emphasis on group work to empower those who have suffered this kind of trauma. I have been able to provide advocacy, peer-to-peer advice through the sharing of my own experiences and lessons learned, a shoulder to cry on, a listening ear, referrals to services, and friendship to my writing workshop students and also dozens of parents that have had contact with the Family Defense Center over the years. These people are from all walks of life, but our commonality of experiencing injustice from the child welfare system binds us.

Over the years, I have had the ability to speak at various engagements and venues about parent advocacy and justice for families in the child welfare system. These are all opportunities to tell my story to people in power. I believe every little bit helps to further the cause and create awareness of the injustice being carried out. Recently I have had several speaking engagements on behalf of the Family Defense Center at their National Reunification Day celebrations. I hope to inspire parents who have experienced the child welfare system to become advocates. I have participated on several Reunification Day panels and have presented on topics such as “Turning Your Stories into Advocacy” and “The Journey to Becoming an Advocate”. At the June 2014 Reunification Day in addition to my being on the panel I presented a comedic monologue entitled “My Life.” I will also have the opportunity to speak at the American Bar Association’s 4th Annual Parent Attorney Conference this July.

**Artwork by Shante Bullock**

June is National Reunification Month
For more information: [www.ambar.org/reunificationmonth](http://www.ambar.org/reunificationmonth)