Meghan Shepherd has been nominated as a Reunification Month Hero because of the unwavering strength and resilience she exemplified while reunifying with her son and daughter.

At the beginning of her journey towards reunification, Meghan lived with her two children in a hotel room. During this time, Meghan began dancing in a club and doing drugs. Eventually, a DCF worker came to her home, and administered a drug test that Meghan failed. Her children were sent to live with her son’s grandmother.

Two years later, Meghan was “still dancing and [she] had done nothing to really move forward in [the] reunification process.” Meghan credits meeting her boyfriend, Eric, with sparking her motivation to complete the necessary steps to get her children back.

After completing trainings, counseling sessions, and both supervised and unsupervised visits, Meghan has triumphed over her addiction and reunified with her children. Meghan is a shining example of dedication, hard work, and strength. Continue reading to learn more about Meghan’s story.

By Larissa Zavarelli, Washington College of Law, J.D. Candidate, 2018

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

The kids really like gardening, so we do that a lot. Our garden has watermelon, tomatoes, cabbage, and raspberry and strawberry bushes. My kids really enjoy the process of watching a seed become a fruit or vegetable.
How long were your children out of your care?

My children were out of my care for over two years. They were taken away in October 2013 and our family reunited on February 15th 2016.

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

The most memorable moment was when my grandma passed away in October 2015. She was the backbone of the family. Her health had been declining, but she passed away suddenly. Her death really affected me. She was disappointed in me for getting my kids taken away, so at her funeral, I promised her that I would do everything in my power to get my kids back.

I was able to get my unsupervised visits before Christmas, so I was able to spend Christmas day with them. However, when my kids finally came home, they were very confused. They were under the impression that they would have to go back into foster care, but being able to tell them “no you don’t have to leave” and seeing them smile and say, “forever, forever, forever?” was amazing. They were really happy.

What was the thing you struggled with most in getting your children back?

I struggled with getting up early for classes, taking city busses, attending weekly meetings and drug screenings, and doing all of this without a vehicle to get me there. I had trainings almost every day of the week. However, I made it a point not to miss anything because it would take longer to get them back. In fact, I even got a perfect attendance award at the completion of my program.

What was the worst part about getting separated?

At first when they were taken, my son’s grandma had them. I would spend the day with them, and work at night. But, when she got a call that her mom was sick, she had to move to help take care of her, so she could no longer look after my kids. It was really difficult to know that my kids were being sent to live with people I did not know.

I was in the middle of getting all of my stuff done, and it felt like it was all of my fault that they had been sent to live with a stranger. But my boyfriend told me to “suck it up [because] what’s done is done. You gotta fix it now.” I knew that I could either go south with this, or I turn this into something positive. I chose to stay positive, motivated, and to continue to do what I needed to do to get my kids back.
In the process of working toward reunification, did you discover things about yourself – strengths, abilities, interests, passions – that (pleasantly) surprised you or that helped you achieve your goals?

Through my classes and meetings, I learned that I actually enjoy giving speeches. I even gave a speech at the Pinalles County courthouse. At first, I thought ‘why am I here? These people are worse off than I am.’ But then some people spoke about their past experiences and how they had changed.

So, I became more comfortable telling my story. A lot of people gave me feedback and complimented my speaking abilities and the content of my speech. It feels good to know that I can help people by just telling my story.

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

The big turning point in my case was making the promise to my grandma at her funeral. It was especially hard because I was making progress, but I could not physically show her the changes I had made.

What good came out of this experience if any?

Having my kids home and being able to look at all of my certificates of completion has been so rewarding. I never thought that I would be able to finish my classes, get clean, finish my substance abuse treatment, and finally get my kids back. They told me I would never see my kids again. It is wonderful to see all of our kids playing and getting along, and watching my boyfriend chase the kids around the house tickling them. My kids get excited when my boyfriend comes home from work, and they like being here with his kids, too. I don’t think they would want it any other way. It is nice to actually feel good about myself again.

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

I am stronger. I know what I am capable of doing now. I have my kids. As long as I have them, I am okay. My kids are my best friends in the whole world. I do not have to show any emotion on my face and they know I am upset. After I did a televised interview, my kids now call me their “Star Mommy.” They are sweethearts.

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

At first, it was difficult just being there. It was especially challenging when I had not made much progress in my case. I just felt like even if no one was trying to belittle me, I felt like I was disappointing everyone. I am a mother trying to get my kids back, and the reality is, everyone is looking down on me. But once I was able to complete twenty clean drug screenings and trainings, while also still visiting my kids who were an hour and a half away, the judge finally recognized my progress. I could tell that he was genuinely happy for me.
Tell me about visiting your children when they were in care.

Two of the visits were supervised by a case worker at the park. That was hard to deal with because you do not realize, until it is you, just how hard it is to be supervised around your own children. I could not even take my own child to the bathroom. One time, my daughter whispered in my ear “I love you,” and as I went to whisper back “I love you,” I got in trouble for whispering. Even your conversations must be supervised.

Once I was allowed to take them on unsupervised visits, we would go the mall and window shop, ride rides, and drink milkshakes. At home, unsupervised visits were hard, because it felt like I was taking the world away from them every weekend when I had to bring them back to their foster family.

Tell me one person that was a big help to you getting your children back?

Patty Gerhard, my substance abuse treatment counselor, was an angel. She made it easy for me to open up, and she made me feel like she cared about me and my story. She would actually call me on her days off to make sure that I was doing what I was supposed to be doing. She made it easy for me to do the rest of the things in my case, too.

Was there anyone else that was important in helping you get your children back? For example, a relative, a member of your church, temple, etc.

Eric, my boyfriend, is amazing. I met him when I did not have my kids. He pushed me to get clean and get off the drugs. He bought me new clothes and a new phone, so that I could cut off ties with people who would have been a bad influence. He helped me clean up my life. He pushed me. He comforted me on many several of the harder days. He made it possible for me to get to where I am today.
Were there services that you did not have that would have found helpful?

I worked with a reunification counselor, Nikita, and she was really good at having a full list of services in my area that would help me out: clothing services, food pantry, and etc. But, I do not think that there were any services that I would have found to be more helpful. Nikita was great at notifying me of various services available in my area.

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

This is not easy. There were times I did not want to get out of bed. But if you do not get up and move, nothing else is going to move forward. Basically, you have to want it. If you do not want your kids, you are not going to do it. It hurts your brain. It hurts your heart. It is not easy, but it is worth it. I am so thankful that I opened my eyes and woke up when I did.

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

Every little thing helps: every class, handout, and resource is helpful. As bad as the word “handout” sounds, it really does help. Receiving clothes and food items made my kids happy. Even if I did not partake in certain services, it was good to know those services were there. We are well off enough that if my kids need a pack of underwear, we can buy it. But, I know other families who cannot do that. Every little bit helps. It made a difference to know someone cared about me enough to provide services for my family.

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

It is a really long, tough process. It feels draining and you want to give up a lot, but my kids made me feel like I had to do it. My kids are my best friends, and I do not know what I would do without them.