Taylor

Taylor is a fighter. Over the course of her 14-month battle to regain custody of her children, she never, ever gave up. Taylor’s children were initially removed because of domestic violence and a profound lack of any support. Through it all, Taylor persevered.

To do so, she had to overcome a toxic amount of negativity from her family – primarily from her in-laws and husband. Having grown up in the foster care system herself since the age of 3, Taylor had no other family to support her through her struggles.

As her attorney, Katherine Santelli, described in her nomination, Taylor won the hearts of every agency employee involved with her case because of her love and commitment to her children. When she was treated with disrespect or impatience, she never responded in kind. She was consistent to the point of relentlessness in asking for services for her children. Taylor never missed a meeting, whether school, medical, or visitation. She sold Christmas trees to make money for transportation; she cleaned hotel rooms to buy her children clothing; and she endured horrendous living conditions so that she could save money for an apartment.

We had the pleasure of interviewing this inspiring individual.

By: Elizabeth Ottman, J.D. Candidate 2017

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

I try to make games out of everything we do. Since I don't have a car, we walk a lot and the kids get grumpy about that. To make it fun, I'll pretend that I'm lost so that the boys have to show me where to go. They'll point out landmarks they know and it keeps them laughing and engaged.

I always take time to play with all of my kids. With my daughter, we play dress up and make believe - I let her paint my nails the other day! She likes to play with her kitchen set too.

And with my boys, I'll play video games, sports, or we'll color/draw. The boys love all types of technology, so we like to watch YouTube videos as well. Basically, we try to keep things really fun in our house.

How long were your children out of your care?

I have a total of 5 kids. My two oldest were lost through adoption. Currently, I have 3 kids - a daughter and two sons. My daughter is 3, and my sons are 5 and 7.

1 Please note that the family has asked to use pseudonyms in order to protect their privacy.
My daughter was out of my care for 12 months and my boys were out of my care for 14 months.

**What was the most memorable moment about getting your kids back?**

Once I got my daughter back - that really changed everything for me. That was when I realized that I was going to get them all back, and it felt really good. As I mentioned, my first two kids were taken away from me and lost through adoption. So, I had this feeling of hopelessness that had been following be around for a long, long time. Once I got her back, that feeling finally lifted.

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

I think the guilt, shame, and hopelessness.

My whole life I haven't had any self-worth. My own mother gave me up for drugs. She was a heroin addict. When I was 3, I remember going to visit, and she had my brother with her. I used to wonder, "Why does he get to stay and I have to go?" That's where my guilt comes in with my kids now - because I know how it feels.

I understood that my mom couldn't be a parent to me at that time, but I've hated myself my whole life because of her. She was supposed to love me, but chose heroin instead. I realize now that what happened then doesn't matter - it can't matter - all that matters is my kids and doing better than she did.

It feels really good to know I was able to get my kids back and do what my mother never did for me. I was going through a rough patch myself, but I did it. It was really hard, but I fought. And thanks to that, I have a whole different outlook on my life now.

**Were you able to meet with your children regularly? Was it supervised or unsupervised?**

When I had visits, it was supervised, but they let us interact with relative privacy. A supervisor was there of course, but she didn't hover.

The visits were awful though. My kids didn't understand what was going on, so they thought it was my decision. When they had to leave, they would start screaming and trying to tear my hair out. It was hell.

When they would show up for visits, sometimes they were dirty or needed haircuts. My daughter was really little and one time showed up with cuts all over her face from apparently falling down the stairs. Where were these people who were supposed to be watching her when this was going on? This didn't happen when she was in my care, but I'm deemed unfit?

She was moved to a different foster family after that. That family had a biological son who played sports nearby, so they let me go to the high school when he was playing to see her.

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

Yes. I really think there should be a health line for parents in crisis. I think there should be more parent support when they're going through something hard. They need someone to help – I know I did.
I was in a bad relationship with my kids' father. I had actually left with the kids at one point and we were staying with a friend of mine. Once I found out that my son was getting bullied by my friend's son, we got out of there, but I had nowhere to go. So, we moved back in with my husband.

Once we were living with him again, I got very depressed. I had been sexually assaulted while we were staying with my friend, so that was another thing I was dealing with. I wasn't on any medication and didn't have any help. Going back to my husband really made me want to kill myself. I was really depressed and didn't want to be with him, but I felt stuck.

When I told him about my depression, he said he'd take care of things, so I went to the hospital to get help. I wasn't in a good place. Once I was in there, they came and took the kids. I was just trying to get help and they took my kids. For the longest time, they wouldn't explain why they took them either. It was awful.

I hope other people don't have to go through the same thing as me.

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

My biggest struggle was definitely finding adequate housing. That was the key to getting my kids back, but it was so hard.

For the longest time, I had nowhere to go but back with my husband or with his sister. It really kept me trapped. In February 2014, I was living with my sister-in-law when I got a letter from Community Teamwork Incorporated talking about my number coming up for Section 8. My attorney, Katherine, drove me to their office and I got my voucher for Section 8 housing. Right then and there, my heart just stopped. Because you know what Section 8 housing means? It means I've got a place to live!²

It also meant that the court would change the permanency goal from foster care to reunification.

Even after I got my voucher, it took me forever to find a place because I have bad credit and was on disability. It wasn't for lack of trying to find a place too! I wanted my own place - I called and emailed everyone. I finally found an apartment in June 2014, signed a lease, and put down a $1,200 security deposit. Because I had so much trouble finding a place, my voucher had run out a couple of times. You are only allowed one extension, so I almost lost my apartment.

Fernanda Ferria really helped me out with the housing. I had spoken to her and cried my eyes out about how hard it was to find a place. I even wrote a letter to Obama! No one ever wrote back, but Fernanda called me back and fixed it.

So on August 22, 2014, I moved in. By September, my daughter was living with me again, and by October, the boys were back.

**Who were the people who were the biggest help in getting your children back?**

Fernanda Ferria, who I previously mentioned, secured my section 8 housing.

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Another good person was Janelle Wilson. She was the one who put my name in the lottery for section 8 housing. I see her sometimes and always yell - THANK YOU!

Norah Wollman, my DCF worker, was a huge help. I trusted her. I knew she had my back. She really listened to me. She was one of the few people I met during this process that I really felt comfortable with.

My mother-in-law, Nancy, was very helpful while the kids were out of my care. She would drive me to visits and appointments up until she passed away.

Katherine Santelli, my attorney, really helped me too. She was my attorney with my older kids. I was briefly placed with another attorney when my 3 younger kids were removed, but we didn't work well together. One day, right after my kids were taken, I just happened to be in Salem, MA near Katherine's office and I saw her at her car. I ran over and started bawling my eyes out trying to explain what had happened. We both called the court and were able to get her reassigned to me.

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

I think it's really important for people to know their rights and to find support. I felt like my rights were pushed and violated. If I had a better support system, I think I would have been able to handle things a lot better.

**Did you discover anything from the process?**

I realized that I am a good mother and a good person.

My life now is all about my children. My husband used to tell me all the time that I'm going to screw them up because I'm screwed up. And then I would look at my biological mother and see how screwed up she is. But now I realize that I'm not like that. He's wrong.

I've never had a good parent figure, but I know what a good parent is. And because I didn't have what was needed from a parent when I was growing up, I know what **is** needed. I realized that I'm different - better - than my biological mother.

I live for my kids. I still get sad sometimes, but my life isn't about me anymore. I'm getting up every day for these little people I brought into the world. They didn't choose to be here - I brought them here. I need to bring them up to be good responsible people, and I'm going to do it.