Lucy Tosti

Lucy has worked in the field of child welfare for 42 years. She currently works for Sacramento County's Department of Health and Human Services. It was Lucy's childhood that inspired her to enter social work and give back to her community. Unfortunately she faced several family tragedies and the nuns in her community often supported her family through these difficult times. Her admiration for the nuns and the perseverance of her mother motivated her to enter social work.

Lucy was described by her nominator as having a strong work ethic, personal integrity, and strength of character all of which have served her well as an advocate for families in the child welfare system. She has acquired a vast knowledge on the issues affecting families who come in contact with the child welfare system and has dedicated her career to helping provide families with a way to move forward to positive and lasting change. It is a rare social worker who is contacted decades later by a client previously on her caseload, but Lucy has been contacted by numerous prior clients. This speaks volumes to the impact she has had on the families she assists and her ability to provide them with the tools for lasting change. She is also a role model to her peers, who see her knowledge and skill in the practice of social work as not only an asset but also as an art form.

To get a better idea why Lucy 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 (something you wouldn't mind sharing with the world).

I grew up on a farm in the small town of Turlock, California. My father was a laborer on a hog farm and I had to grow up fast working side by side with him before and after school. My grandparents were immigrants from the Azores and Portuguese was the primary language spoken in my home. My siblings have been a significant amount of support throughout my life as we experienced multiple tragedies and challenges in our lives. They have been great teachers and the relationship reminds me all the time of the critical importance of the sibling bond.

What made you interested in child welfare?

Unfortunately my father passed away when I was young and my mother showed all six of us children the true spirit of survival. My mother was a young widow, without a driver's license or any formal education in the United States. She was ashamed of our poverty and need for welfare assistance. She therefore put herself through night school to become a nurse’s aid. I was inspired by her strength and determination. This encouraged me and gave me strength to not only go to college, but to also persevere in difficult times. I was raised Catholic and though I am not a practicing Catholic I
strongly believe it was the church’s message of service to others, that led me to my fulfilling career as a social worker.

**How long have you worked in child welfare?**

I have worked in child welfare for 42 years.

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

I am retiring in October from Sacramento County’s Health and Human Services where I have worked for 29 plus years, in reunification and long-term placement programs. Before working in Sacramento County I worked for Yolo County Department of Social Services for almost 8 years. While in Yolo County I worked in a program for families with beyond control, runaway, and truant children. The families resided in a financially depressed area, where many families were struggling to just have their basic needs met. This assignment involved working with Law Enforcement, the schools, and community resources to help provide successful interventions for families. I was also assigned to be on call for Children’s Protective Services Emergency Response investigating abuse and neglect of children. Additionally, I worked for Merced County Department of Human Services as an eligibility worker in the welfare department. I helped determine applicants’ eligibility for welfare assistance. I also worked on the HR1 conversion, converting the benefits of the elderly, blind, and disabled to the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and State Supplementary Payment (SSP) Program.

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

I found it is extremely rare when children do not want to go home. We could offer placement in Disneyland and 99.9% of children want to just be home, with their parents and siblings. This is shocking to the majority of people, who are not familiar with the system, but it has been a resounding theme. That is why it is so vitally important to help families remain together. I had a case of 4 siblings who were removed from the parents because the 5th sibling had died in the parents’ care. I was opposed to splitting the siblings up and strongly advocated to keep them together. A wonderful foster family was willing to assume guardianship of the children and they were able to remain together. This was critical to their grief and loss process, as well as their sibling bonding and development. They still keep in touch with me, as many former clients do, especially around Mother’s Day and Christmas. They keep me updated on what they have been doing and have at times asked for guidance. It is critical to a child’s spirit to always be mindful of the importance of familial relationships to a child’s development and how bonding is critical to more stable relationships later in life.

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

Child Protective Services is under the Sacramento County Department of Health and Human Services. The agency provides a number of services to clients ranging from parenting classes, therapy, transportation and substance abuse treatment. Social workers refer children and families to a host of services to address the issues that lead to the family coming to the attention of the system. We fund all of these services to provide a comprehensive approach to treatment. Sacramento County was one of the first counties to get our dependency drug court established which is a critical comprehensive approach to dealing with issues related to addiction. We have a Stars Program pairing a recovery specialist with our parents who suffer with addiction. These case management services have proven very effective for long-term recovery for our client population, many of whom have struggled with addiction for many years. The program enables parents to work closely with their Recovery Specialist, meeting with them weekly, monitoring the drug testing and treatment attendance as well as their required participation in Twelve Step Meetings.
What are some of the weaknesses?

Our caseloads continue to be out of control and I have been quite vocal about the impact on children and families. Social workers are often overwhelmed as the demands are constant and require significant strength of character to remain on course. The caseloads in reunification should be twenty cases per social worker. In my career, the caseload has rarely been less than thirty cases, and this last year we have been at forty plus. There is a significant learning curve, as procedures and laws are often changing and there is a multitude of responsibilities to adequately manage a case in the child welfare system. Unfortunately, the workload is often normalized, which ultimately is a disservice to children and families as turnover is high and workers do not stay on the assignment long enough to become proficient.

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

I have tried to be a peer trainer to many colleagues throughout my career. I do no hesitate to approach coworkers and ask them to look at their families more compassionately, to put themselves in their client's situation. In order to be successful it is vital that social workers are empathetic to and understand the trauma that being in the child welfare system has on these families. I try to lead by example, make myself approachable, and be true to the ethics of social work. I do not hesitate to advocate for my clients as well as for my coworkers. For example I have often suggested that the department do more outreach educating the public about the good work CPS is doing for families. Often people only hear about the mistakes and the tragedies. We need to show people that there have been a lot of successes too. The majority of people do not have an understanding about the complexities of the system and the needs of children and families.

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

It is vital to empower the parents! There is only one person on this planet that can get their child back into their care and that is the parent themselves. By the time CPS is intervening the parent feels very untrusting of the system and it takes them a long time to realize that we are there to help. We are there to help remind them that they have done a lot of good things as parents but there are areas for improvement for child safety and well-being. It is up to the parent to take responsibility for their actions and change their behavior in order to have their children returned to them, where they always belong if possible. It is my job to help validate their feelings and remind them we all want the same thing and that is for children and families to be safe and thriving. I believe in change and will work as hard as the parents do to reach successful reunification.

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

Social work is a very noble profession. It is vitally important and sacred to help families to reunify. I always try to be the kind of social worker that I would want if I had been in the child welfare system. We should never forget the human element in our work. The majority of the parents we are helping are the children who did not receive successful interventions when they were younger. These parents love their children but without the resources and support systems to rely on children are often placed at risk for or suffer abuse and neglect. That is why this work is incredibly important!
What advice would you give to judges, agency directors, legislators, governors, or the president about how to improve the system?

The dream I wish could be realized is instead of removing children from their families that they could instead benefit from an emergency shelter for families. We are eager to protect children and we separate them from their parents without thinking of the trauma that both the child and parent suffer as a result. Isn’t it odd, we tell kids not to talk to strangers but then place them with complete strangers? We need to create a system of protection that is less reliant on removals. For instance, we need to provide greater resources for early intervention and preventative services for parents rather than the foster care system.

What programs or practice are most effective in helping parents reunify?

Parents need services to treat mental health and substance abuse issues. They benefit greatly from individual and group therapy to address issues related to domestic violence, poor parenting skills, and substance abuse. Significantly more attention needs to be paid to lifelong treatment issues that have not been successfully addressed or resolved, which impacts their ability to adequately care for their children.

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

Parents and children need to have regular interactions and bonding experiences to maintain and strengthen their bond. Our county has yet to devise a good system for helping families have meaningful visitation. Family visitation should be time spent with meaningful interactions, demonstrating good parenting skills and engagement with children in a safe and nurturing environment.

Second, there needs to be much earlier interventions. By the time that CPS engages with a family a great deal of damage has already been done. There needs to be a greater focus on family preservation. We need to change the mindset from removal to preservation. This will be a huge benefit to keeping children from further emotional trauma.

Finally, the public only hears when a child has been harmed and not about all the good work that social workers accomplish throughout the county every day. This creates a misconception about what CPS’ mission and goals truly are. We need to do a better job of educating the public. People never blame the fireman for the fire, and yet CPS is always blamed for child abuse. A manager once said to me that CPS cannot be an emergency room for all of society’s social problems, but most of these issues are placed at our door. Our child welfare workers often are in very dangerous situations. Often they are in the homes or neighborhoods the cops go to with guns and back up.

What programs or practices need to be added to make reunifications more likely or successful?

There needs to be greater attention given to mental health and substance abuse issues. Specifically, we need to be better at identifying the issues and providing the necessary funding to adequately address the multitude of social issues that families are facing.

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

Early intervention services to parents would be the most effective in helping families avoid the conditions that may lead to placement in foster care. We need to provide more educational opportunities to parents for effective services such as parenting classes as well as education about children’s emotional and psychological needs and development. Additionally, funding is necessary for the creation of more preschools, quality day care, and family support programs in the community.
Do you think there are any public misconceptions about the child welfare system? If so what are they?

Unfortunately the foster care system is in need of serious revamping. Foster parents need to be better trained to understand the emotional and psychological impact removal has on children separated from their parents and siblings. Often foster parents are unwilling to provide opportunities for children to engage in extra circular activities or even make small purchases for the child like school yearbooks or senior photographs. I believe it is critical to place children with extended family whenever possible.

Public opinion about the child welfare system is mostly based on misconceptions. The lay person doesn’t know the depth and multitude of reasons for the problems many families are facing. Part of the reason information isn’t known by the public is due to client confidentiality. However, people seriously misunderstand the ripple effect through a person’s life of early trauma. These parents love their children and don’t want to hurt them, but the stressors in their life such as crippling poverty often lead to poor coping skills and decision making. It is difficult for all of us to make changes. However, there is an expectation for our clients to change their entire life, often with little support and minimal resources, in a short period of time in order to be allowed by law to reunify. My clients inspire me all the time. It empowers me to see them make meaningful changes in their lives, and thus make meaningful changes in their children’s lives. We all need to be mindful of the fragile human condition and the impact of generational neglect and abuse.

Artwork by Shante Bullock

June is National Reunification Month
For more information: www.ambar.org/reunificationmonth