Sharon currently works as a Family Crisis Therapist in the state of Delaware. She was motivated to become involved in the child welfare system because of her work as a correctional officer, and every day she uses that experience to inform her interactions with clients. She believes in the importance of treating others as you would want to be treated, and above all she works diligently to reunite children with their families.

In 2018, Sharon was assigned a case where her agency was granted custody of seven children by Family Court due to concerns of dependency and neglect. Over the course of multiple years, Sharon dedicated her life to that family and eventually helped them achieve reunification. The judge on the case, Judge Natalie Haskins, was incredibly impressed by Sharon’s work and said that she “wholeheartedly believes that case would not have resulted in reunification if any other worker, besides Sharon, had been assigned to it.” In her nomination, Judge Haskins highlighted Sharon’s empathy and commitment to the pursuit of reunification no matter how much work it takes. “Sharon is a cheerleader for the parents and very focused on reunification. She goes the extra mile for parents and does not make an excuse if she forgets to follow something in a Court order. She also establishes a connection/bond with the parents that help them trust and take advantage of the services she offers.”

By: Faith Blank, ABA Intern 2020, The University of Oklahoma Class of 2021
Tell me something interesting about yourself.
I love cooking. I was raised in a family whose behaviors are reflective of a southern family culture. Food was a priority and sharing food with others was a generational family tradition.

What made you interested in child welfare?
Prior to my current employment, I was a correctional officer. I retired from that job a few years ago. When employed as a correctional officer, I would ask myself, “Why is this happening? What would make a person keep doing things that would bring them back to these conditions?” Ultimately, the social-cultural behaviors within the Correctional System became so immoral to me, and I felt as if I was a part of a culture which violated my personal beliefs and disrespected the rights granted to all people under the United States Constitution. I felt as a human being, it was my responsibility to work to help the people predisposed to encounter correctional facilities. In order to do that, I went back to school, first earning an associate degree in Liberal Arts, followed by a bachelor’s degree in the study of Criminal Justice. I then continued my education by earning a Master of Science within the study of Forensic Sociology and Criminology. Today, I am halfway through the completion of a doctoral program within the field of Prevention Science.

How long have you worked in child welfare?
I have been at my current place of employment for over three years, but I first got involved through my work as a social work intern at a County Correctional Facility located in Pennsylvania. Getting approval to intern as a social worker was challenging because I was employed as a correctional officer within the same system. Fortunately, the Commissioner of Social Services was aware of my work ethic and granted me permission to complete my internship as a social worker.

What types of positions or roles have you had during that time?
Aside from being a social work intern, I have held the position of a Family Service Specialist, Senior Family Service Specialist, Master Family Service Specialist, and was recently promoted to the position of a Family Crisis Therapist. As a result of each promotion, the challenge of getting reluctant clients to engage and remain engaged in services has increased. With each assigned case, all of my diligent efforts go towards achieving the goal of reunification or stabilizing the family. If you are really committed to these goals, you are sometimes required to go outside of the norm; you need to understand the behaviors associated with each risk factor you encounter and see people’s life stories in their entirety. I believe in the psychological theory that your behaviors are more informed by your developmental environment than your biology, and my work ethic demonstrates my belief in this philosophy.

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

There was one family that has especially had a big impact on me. Unfortunately, I had to take custody of their seven children. In order to achieve the goal of reunification, I devoted my life to them from 2018 to March of 2020. I became a part of their household, which required me to establish a mothering relationship with the parents, a grandparent-grandchild relationship with the kids, and a non-relative relationship with all of the other relatives. I did whatever I could to support this family whether that meant I had to work weekends, be available outside of work hours, or make my personal contact information available to the parents and the older children. If I had to be at their home at 6 am to get the parents to engage in services, I did it. If I had to take the parents to court to address criminal matters, that’s what I did. If I had to advocate for the children’s education, I went to the school and did it.

I also addressed the parents’ issue of low self-esteem. I am proud to tell you that today, the father is financially secure, living in a five bedroom fully furnished home, and has no behavioral concerns. I think what really opened the door to positive behavioral change was the day that I apologized to the parents for what they experienced in their childhood; that was the breaking point. From that day forward, they started to engage with services, and they continue to do so; sometimes they just call me to say hello.

When we approached the subject of beginning a trial period of reunification, the parents requested I do so in a staggered manner, beginning with the youngest children and gradually bringing the older siblings home for extended periods of time. Eventually, we reached the day when all of them were home, and I would spend my weekends visiting and sitting with my schoolbooks, just enjoying witnessing the happiness of this family. I taught them to make popcorn the old-fashioned way, on the stove, because it was less expensive. Saturday’s became family movie night with popcorn and juice; all cell phones were turned off. On my Sunday visits the children would hug me and say, “Mommom that was the best, my mom and dad are really doing good.” Moments like that help you know that this work is your calling, this is what you were made to do, that you are supposed to help those who have been exposed to adverse behaviors.

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

The child welfare system in the state which I currently reside in is the best I have ever seen. Residents of our area have access to a variety of prevention and intervention services provided to them by all different departments of our government. As a Family Crisis Therapist in the Division of Family Services, I can submit referrals to contracted intervention service providers who will provide specialized support to my clients as needed. For every case handled through my agency, we base our intervention on an individual case plan based on the client’s needs. Through a referral, I can provide my clients with clothing, food, or most other basic needs of all human beings. One practice across our state which is most helpful is that various organizations utilize the media to communicate the availability of resources, I can then forward this information to clients and encourage them to share with the people around them.
What are some of the weaknesses?
On a broad level, effective communication skills could be improved. As an employee within a child welfare agency, it is important that we be mindful of our demeanor when we engage with clients. A major obstacle we encounter in this line of work is that our clients have a mistrust of the system, and often my clients are resistant to engage in services with me as a treatment worker as a result of their experience with the initial investigation of their case. Because of this, it is important that we, as social workers, are conscious of our demeanor when first interacting with clients. We must remember our communication skills impact the client relationship, as they do with any other human relationship, and respect is due to all persons.

What are some efforts you have made to improve child welfare practices in your area?
One of the assets I brought to the agency is my knowledge of the theory of criminology. It is important that we support the practice of community policing, and an incredibly important part of community policing theory is that agencies work together for the benefit of the community they serve. Keeping that in mind, when I go to a community, I introduce myself to the officers at the local police department. Through doing that, I am able to gain the support of that police department and establish a respectful relationship with the police department which is often beneficial if it becomes necessary for me to petition the Courts for custody of children, and I am required to transport the children from the home. It’s my way of promoting public safety.

It has been normal practice for me to maintain a working relationship with the Foster Care Unit within my agency, share research literature on the impact of foster care, and to emphasize to my team members the importance of being thorough when filling out foster care placement paperwork. Details like the child’s religion are extremely important because if you put a Muslim child in a Jehovah’s Witness household, you are not only subjecting them to the trauma of being removed from a bonded relationship and putting them in a new environment, but you are also subjecting them to a new religion. If child welfare employees are aware of the impact of placing a kid in foster care and the importance of reunification, and if we diligently fill out the necessary paperwork so as to minimize the trauma that a child experiences, then we are doing our jobs. If through that work I can save just one child from experiencing more childhood trauma, then all is well within my soul.

What is one thing you recommend in working with parents to increase the likelihood of reunification?
You have to continue to be diligent in your efforts, and you cannot let personal bias or frustration impact your behavior. You have to put on a creative thinking hat and think of different ways to get people to engage; you cannot just have a semi-structured protocol for how you address the behaviors and concerns that we deal with. One course of action does not fit the bill for every human being. Above all, you have to respect people. I live by the philosophy that, “There but for the grace of God there go I.”

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

If you are not really committed to helping others, then I do not think working in the child welfare system is for you. But if you believe that it takes a village to raise a child, then I think child welfare is the right place to be. I really believe that kids are our future. They are the most innocent human beings, and with all human beings it begins at the stage of infancy. If a child is not given the opportunity to create meaningful bonding relationships and given a sense of security starting at infancy, that will impact their behavior for the rest of their life. I try and address this through my work. It is also imperative that we do away with stigmas. If we can get rid of the stigmas and show people respect, I think that child welfare workers can save lives, but we have to be diligent, and we have to tell the truth, and perform our duties without bias. In summary have a code of ethics when you perform the duties of your employment.

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

The best programs are evidence-based programs. For example, in our state the services of New Behavioral Network (NBN) have been instrumental in fostering positive parenting skills for some of my clients. Another program which I find highly favorable is the Child Development Watch (CDW), this too is an evidence-based program which has been reviewed by scholars and deemed to effectively enhance the development of infants and toddlers with disabilities or developmental delays.

To do your job as a child welfare worker, you need to know what services are available to protect the kids and be prepared to connect parents with the resources they need to care for their own children.

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

When I first joined my current team, it was normal practice to refer clients to familiar service providers who had been established within our state for years. During my first course within my Prevention Science Doctoral Program, I began to learn of the differences between an evidence-based and a non-evidence-based program. To further explore that difference, I began to engage my clients in conversations about their experiences of engaging in these non-evidence-based programs. Thereafter I would select evidence-based programs for each client based on their specific risk factors. However, if a client took the initiative to enroll themselves in a non-evidence-based program, I would respect their efforts and do my part to supplement their education as needed. In the event a client’s needs are not being met, it is my responsibility to make contact with the service provider or refer them to a more appropriate service provider, which would most likely be an evidence-based program.

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

I think we need more strengthening families programs. If we strengthen families, we can influence positive behaviors. I think parenting styles are important, but we must give consideration to the social and cultural differences of all families. If we can get parents to do simple things like sitting down and having family dinner, those experiences allow a family to come together through communicating with
one another. It provides children with emotional support if they feel that someone is listening to what they have to say.

Parent engagement is extremely important for successful reunification. So how do we engage parents? We create programs that get families to come together. For example, we could have two-hour group sessions for parents to vent. Although we as facilitators need to have some type of structure to our sessions, we also need to have flexibility for our audiences. We need to give them opportunities for family strengthening. We need to make contacts in social environments with families, and have activities, like arts and crafts that they can do together. We need to share community resources, or a place where people can relax and feel welcome to use the resources available to them. I think the unique thing about me is that I do not disrespect any of my clients. I do not care how disrespectful they are to me. I respect them, and I am truthful with them. I am fair in the process of achieving my goal of reunification or family stability and consistent in my diligent efforts.

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

We as a society need to address poverty. Poverty is a risk factor associated with most of the negative behaviors that cause children to enter the child welfare system today. You also cannot dismiss the impact of stigmas associated with the have and have nots. People should simply be treated as people. My family taught me to respect myself and to respect others. To help those in need, to love my children and children who I encounter, and to always remember that every mother who gives birth to a child has some love for that child but may not know how to show it.

Do you think there are any public misconceptions about the child welfare system? If so, what are they?

The biggest one is that we just want to take people’s kids. That hurts the most for me. The thought that I would want to take a child from their parents is the most hurtful thing because I know the damage of taking a child from a bonded relationship and putting them in foster care; I know that can have an everlasting impact on a child. What I think the public doesn’t consider is why people choose to work within the child welfare system. For me, it is my way of pursuing social justice, respecting the rights of all people, protecting the children of Delaware, and demonstrating that there are still good people in this world who really care. All the while I hold onto my belief that if you do good in life it comes back to you.

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

Thank you for caring to hear my story. My current employment is not my job, it’s my passion as a human being. I am so humbled by this nomination. In my eyes, I am simply behaving the way my family taught me to behave. I was taught to treat others the way you want to be treated. If you say you’re going to help someone, keep your word. If I can save the life of one child or change the developmental environment of one child, then maybe there will be one less juvenile confined behind bars, one less person suffering from
addiction or mental health concerns, one less family grieving over the loss of a loved one due to destructive behaviors, one less adult who lives in poverty for the remainder of their life because they are unable to gain employment due to their criminal history, and one less child who suffers abuse and neglect. I want to be remembered as Mommom.