

Parent Partner Stories:

From Parent-in-Crisis to Parent Partner—Nancy Colon's Story

Nancy Colon is a parent advocate with the Detroit Center for Family Advocacy. She previously worked as a parent partner for the Building Community Partnership Initiative through the Association for Children's Mental Health in Detroit. She is a member of the Steering Committee for the National Project to Improve Representation for Parents Involved in the Child Welfare System, www.abanet.org/child/parentrepresentation/home.html. She shared her experiences as a parent and parent partner with Michigan judicial officers, attorneys, and other professionals at a luncheon speech on October 2009 at the Lawyers for Families Symposium in Lansing, Michigan. An adaptation of her speech appears below.

Losing My Children

In March 2004, I got a call from protective services asking me to come to a team decision-making meeting and to bring my five kids. I had no clue what the meeting was about, except that they had questions about my children and a situation that was brought to their attention. I sensed something was wrong, but could never have imagined what would happen next. I sat at the table confused, lost, and hopeless. I had no lawyer to explain what was going on.

For the past two years I had been living with domestic violence. Protective services accused me of neglect and my five children were placed in four different foster homes. I didn't have any family support or friends to help me. Because of my situation, my caseworker thought it best to send me to a shelter an hour from Detroit. I lost everything that mattered: my children, my job, my home, and my dignity.

Alone in Crisis

The first court hearing after the removal was a blur. I didn't know what to expect and couldn't stop crying. I had never been in a courtroom before. I met my attorney a few minutes before my hearing. He reviewed my rights and told me nothing would happen that day and another court hearing would be scheduled. I left the courtroom in crisis wondering

when I was going to wake up from the nightmare.

For the first few weeks after removal, I did not know if my children were okay or where they were. I knew I had to get them back, but I

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found myself in a shelter, with no job, and clueless on where to get help. I had 30 days to do something before the shelter closed its doors and asked me to leave. I was told I would receive services if I left everything behind and started a new life. But everywhere I went people kept telling me they could not help me.

Treatment and Visits

Three weeks after my kids were removed, the intake worker came to the shelter, gave me my treatment plan, and asked me to sign it. I didn't have a chance to closely review it, give input, or go over it with my attorney. I didn't know what to do and thought I was just going to get the kids back in a few weeks.

It took the intake worker three weeks to set up my first visit with my children. As you can imagine, this visit was emotional and hard for

all of us. We had not seen or talked to each other for so long.

A Move for the Better

I went back to the shelter after the first visit determined to get my babies back. Time went by and I was still going from shelter to shelter trying to find a stable place and start working on my treatment plan. Obtaining resources and assistance in a new city was hard. After months trying, I moved back to Detroit.

I was scared to move back because I thought the caseworker would take my kids away and I would never see them again. But I knew it was the only way to get my kids back. I knew what agencies to go to for help. I knew that my church, school, and ex-employer would support me. When I moved back to Detroit, I stayed with a friend and, for the first time, I felt I was stable and could breathe easier. I started working on my treatment plan, working two jobs, and saving money.

I still needed help understanding the court process. I never knew what to expect at the next court hearing or the difference between the court hearings. I was always intimidated by the referee. I knew he had the power to decide whether I would get a second chance to be a mother again. Every time I went to court I thought I was going to get my kids back, not knowing I needed to complete my treatment plan before the referee would

consider it. I thought as long as I was working on what the court had asked me to do and found a house I could get the kids back right away.

Navigating the System

My attorney was friendly. But at my first hearing, after reviewing my case for five minutes, he told me the best thing to do was to admit to all the allegations because this would help me get my kids back sooner. I did it because I wanted my kids back. Through the process, I sometimes felt he was more intimidated by the referee and everyone else in the case than I was. At times I wanted to tell the court that I did not agree with something or explain a situation, but the theory seemed to be that I should go with the flow and not argue because that would help my case.

My attorney took time to answer some of my calls and provide me guidance. We met five or 10 minutes before each court hearing and he always told me I was doing a good job. But he never met with me outside of court, reviewed my service plan, or filed any motions on my behalf. I never dared ask too many questions because I didn't want to complicate things or delay the process more.

I was already fighting with an agency that did not believe I could reunify with my children. I had to deal with foster parents abusing my kids while they were in the system, and a court that was focused more on my progress than terminating the father's parental rights.

Reunification at Last

Finally I completed my treatment plan. I received a new worker who became my advocate. My kids were placed in new foster homes with foster parents who cared about my family, wanted to see us together again, and supported us.

With their help and the support of my community, my children came home in June 2005 and are doing great.

I believe if my attorney had advocated more for me or pushed things a bit more my children could have come home faster and not experienced the pain they did. If I had an attorney advocating for me early on and received the right prevention services, my children would not have been removed from my custody.

Becoming a Parent Partner

Out of this life experience I became a parent partner, working with parents in my situation. I provide them emotional support, resources, and guidance—something I did not have when my children were in the system. Working as a parent partner gives me the chance to see how parents are treated by their attorneys and the system. I see how important it is to communicate openly with your attorney and know your rights as a parent.

I have seen attorneys humiliate their clients. One attorney told a client how bad she smelled and asked her if she could read. He didn't think there was anything wrong with his behavior and was surprised when she asked for a new attorney.

I had another client whose attorney went the extra mile for him, ensuring he understood the court process and his rights, and that services were provided in Spanish so the family could benefit. She always called him a few days before the hearing to review his progress and ask if he had questions. She got to court early and conferenced with everyone in the case. She sat with him and provided support and guidance. After the hearing, she always told him what steps to take next and encouraged him to call her if he had questions or concerns.

Now I am working at the Detroit Center for Family Advocacy as a

parent advocate. Our mission is to keep kids out of foster care and reduce the number of children in care by providing support and legal assistance to families. We have a team—attorney, social worker, and parent advocate. Together we work on identifying needs, setting goals, helping parents deal with legal issues, and providing resources and support services. I can sit with the birth parent and provide emotional support. I can share my story and encourage parents.

Lessons Learned

I would like you to know how important the work that parent's attorneys do is, and the impact they have on parents. Sometimes parents might be a little impatient and not know the best way to communicate their emotions or needs. They might not understand all the legal talk and how important getting things done might be.

We look to you as our most important advocates, a source of guidance and our only link to communicating with the courts. You are the only person who can tell the judge that we are good parents, that we love our children, and sometimes make mistakes or let things get out of control. We sometimes think attorneys can fix everything, but don't always understand how things really work.

Don't forget why or what made you become a parent's attorney. I believe a parent's attorney is someone who wants to advocate for and support parents when they are in need. When working with a parent, remember to listen to the parent and advocate for what works best for the family, not just what the books taught you or what society says. If you make a positive impact today, it will change what tomorrow will look like in a family's life.