
For Parents by Parents

Issue 17

CHILD WELFARE ORGANIZING PROJECT

Fall 2005

CWOP HAS EXPANDED OUR BOARD AND ELECTED A NEW BOARD CHAIR

It is with great pride and pleasure that we announce the election of CWOP's new Board Chair, Ms. Sharwline Nicholson. Ms. Nicholson is a domestic violence survivor who ultimately turned pain into power by initiating the landmark lawsuit Nicholson v. Williams. In this case, a federal judge ruled that removing children from the custody of battered women solely on the basis that they had witnessed or "engaged in" domestic violence was a violation of their constitutional rights. Ms. Nicholson is a recipient of the Susan Schechter Leadership Development Fellowship, created through the Family Violence Prevention Fund and CONNECT. She is currently developing a training and educational video which will reflect the parent's perspective on challenges facing battered women involved in public service systems, including child welfare.

Sharwline Nicholson, CWOP Board Chair

I realized at an early age the importance of parent / child attachment. I grew up with my father. My mother immigrated to the US when I was two years old. I yearned for her love. I made a promise to myself that when I had my children, they would never be separated from me.

I am a single mother with two children. I had the heart-wrenching experience of separation from my children due to inequity in our child welfare system. I am a survivor of domestic violence. I was victimized twice. First came the assault and injuries that I sustained from my child's father. The second victimization was the child welfare officials' response: taking away my children and putting them in foster care.

These victimizations made me realize that children's interests were being overlooked and that parents really had no voice. I also realized that being poor is a crime. There are few resources for poor, single mothers, and forget it if you are a black immigrant. The child welfare system does not assess the harm that can be done to children by removal, as part of their investigation.

I saw these inadequacies in our child welfare system, and started a crusade. I was personally outraged by my children's removal, and the *Nicholson v. Williams* class action lawsuit bears my name, but it became possible because of the many women who shared my pain. I take this opportunity to say thank you to these phenomenal women. They knew the risks, but shared their experiences to help others, in spite of the possible repercussions. This shows you the true role models they are to their own children.

The victory of the lawsuit was incredible. The team of lawyers who believed in us, and who worked tirelessly and relentlessly, cannot go without being recognized. This is an incredible journey that I do not intend to quit. I have been on CWOP's board since 2002, and I am truly honored to be the newly elected board Chair. I am truly grateful to be a part of an organization whose goal is to keep families intact.

Please welcome all of CWOP's recently-inducted Board Members:

- **Jillian Cohen**, Social Work Supervisor, Center for Family Representation, former CWOP student intern
- **Kaela Economos**, Program Officer, Child Welfare Fund, former CWOP student intern
- **Terrasina Johnson**, Parent Advocate, Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center, 2004 CWOP East Harlem Parent Leadership Curriculum graduate
- **Bevanjae Kelley**, 2004 CWOP East Harlem Parent Leadership Curriculum graduate
- **Milagros Sanchez**, Outreach Worker, CASAWorks/Palladia, 2004 CWOP East Harlem Parent Leadership Curriculum graduate
- **Robin Wiley**, 2003 CWOP East Harlem Parent Leadership Curriculum graduate
- **Jill Zuccardy**, Attorney and Director of Sanctuary for Families' Child Protection Project, trial and appellate co-counsel in *Nicholson v. Williams*

Two other important changes in CWOP Board membership:

In September 2005, **Julia MacGuire** resigned her seat as CWOP's Board Vice Chair in order to devote herself more fully to her work in the public schools, her college education, and her family life. One of our first Parent Organizers, Julia has been part of CWOP since our inception in 1994. Julia had placed her children in foster care voluntarily, believing that this was the best way to protect them at that time. It took the next ten years to bring her children back home, through countless delays, obstacles, betrayals, and disappointments. Julia never stopped fighting, never gave up hope, and became an important role model for us all. Her ten-year odyssey parallels CWOP's own journey: sometimes fractured, always challenged, struggling for dignity and respect, but – in the end – a family.

Continued on Page 2

CWOP Board, continued from Page 1

Finally, this newsletter would be incomplete without grateful acknowledgement of **John Courtney**. Anything we could possibly write about John in this space would, inevitably, fail to do him full justice. Our founding Board Chair from our inception, without John there would simply be no CWOP. John Courtney's character as the consummate child welfare professional - willing both to take risks and to share power with parents - is personified by his decision to vacate his Chair for Sharwline Nicholson. In so doing, he has moved CWOP an important step closer towards becoming a truly parent-led organization. John will continue to serve on our Board, and to help and advise Sharwline during this transition process.

VOICES OF OUR PARENT LEADERS

The following are excerpts of stories written by 2005 CWOP East Harlem and Highbridge Parent Leadership trainees in writing workshops led by Nora McCarthy of Youth Communication / Represent. More fully developed versions of these stories may appear in future issues of Represent or Rise, a new publication written by and for parents.

Juan Rodriguez

I had not seen my father in six years, since I left the Dominican Republic in January 1975. He had not aged a bit since I last saw him. He was a high maintenance individual, his mustache carved with perfection, fingernails manicured, hair styled neatly. Looking at him in the coffin, I thought about our past. Why were you so violent with us, when you loved us so much? Even though I was his oldest child, I could not ask questions when I was younger, because the consequence was the belt. His family leadership was as a drill sergeant, demanding respect and inflicting pain.

I honestly can say that his demands for us to stay home after school, and not to wander around, kept us safe. Because there was lots of danger on the streets, and even in the schools. It was typical for the cops to beat or kill anyone they felt was against the Balaguer regime. My days in DR were bittersweet and full of hypocrisy. Most days, we ate breakfast, put on our uniforms and went to school. Around 12 noon, the older students used to come in and interrupt the class. "Compañeros", they said, "there is going to be a 'movilización' today." They left the classroom chanting, growing in size.

I will never forget the nasty smell of tear gas, even a day after it was launched at the schools to break up the demonstrating. There was a feeling of despair among the parents who lost their children due to police brutality. Today I realize that my father meant well, but I swore that I would not be like him when I became a father. I want to use the beneficial part of my father to change the future of my children: allowing my children to go to the park, play sports, developing an open communication with them, and allowing them freedom of speech. Telling them that I love them, and reminding them that after a rainy, stormy day, the sun shines, commencing a beautiful and brilliant day.

"For Parents By Parents"
 is the quarterly newsletter of the
CHILD WELFARE ORGANIZING PROJECT

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We welcome articles, stories, poems, or letters, in English or Spanish, from parents who have been involved with the child welfare system. Please mail or e-mail to the address above, with your contact information.

Linfa Carrion

One day I was home alone when the police came to the house with a search warrant and found all types of drugs and even a gun. I didn't know that my brother-in-law was selling drugs from the house, and I wasn't involved, but the police arrested me, and ACS took my children.

I did everything ACS told me to do: parenting classes, drug counseling, and finding an apartment big enough for me and my daughters. In Court, ACS said they would not give my daughters back, telling me, "That's not enough for us." I tried to speak to my lawyer about what was happening, but she never called me back. The whole time my children were in care, I met with my lawyer only twice. The last time I spoke to my social worker, she told me I would get an appointment to go back to Court, but instead I received a big packet of papers telling me that my rights were terminated. I had no idea what went wrong.

On January 7, 2005, I thought my nightmare was going to happen all over again. ACS knocked on my door with the allegation that I left my 1-year-old alone, and that I was allowing drug trafficking out of my apartment. But thank God, this time I got the help I needed to prove that the allegation was unfounded. When I told my friend what happened, he told me to call the Child Welfare Organizing Project. They introduced me to a social worker and a lawyer at the Center for Family Representation, and they helped me prove my case.

My social worker, Ms. Wanjiro, went with me to talk to the ACS social worker. In the meeting, ACS said they wanted me to take drug tests again. I was willing to do it, but Ms. Wanjiro said that I didn't have to because the allegation was not about using drugs, it was about allowing my apartment to be used to sell drugs. Ms. Wanjiro told ACS that it was against my rights to ask for a drug test, and against my rights to take my children, because the police had pressed no charges against me and there was no evidence that I was hurting my kids. I was so relieved that my case went down differently this time, because I had someone with me who could explain what my rights were, and who could stand up to ACS for me. I only wish I'd had someone by my side the first time. I'm sure I wouldn't have lost my two girls to the system if someone had explained to me then what I needed to do to get them back.

Rosita Pagan

It's a long story what happened when my children got taken away. The nightmare of sexual abuse had turned into a worse nightmare—the nightmare of being absolutely unable to protect my kids. I wondered, "Have they eaten? Bathed? Are they warm? Is the foster family treating them well?" Those thoughts made me feel even more depressed, so I drank even more.

Finally I was sent to detox, and to rehab upstate. Once I'd been sober for a month or so, I started feeling better about myself and began to believe I could get my life back on track. I told myself, "I have to get my family back. I'm not worthless. I can accomplish things if I make an effort."

During my ordeal with drinking and having the girls removed, not once did I have to worry about my son Louie. With all this drama going on, Louie always stood by me. I wasn't aware of all the shame he was holding inside. He's going to turn 21 years old, but I can recall when I was drinking he would ignore me and go outside to play basketball with his friends. He would never invite his friends over because he didn't want his friends to see me drunk. He was a good kid. He always attended school. But looking back now, I realize that school for him was an escape route. He loves basketball. His room was filled with posters of Michael Jordan. His dream was to become a great basketball player.

My son had shut me out so he could take care of himself. My son was ashamed of me and the way I was wasting my life away. But once I got my act together, he allowed me to enter his domain. He had a girlfriend that I didn't even know about, and she didn't know Louie's sisters were in foster care. They'd been dating since junior high school. Once he entered high school, he started playing high school basketball. His girlfriend, Anita, always attended his games. The first time I met Anita was in a street fair. It was the Puerto Rican Day Festival on 116th Street. I was talking to some friends on 117th Street when my son asked if I could take a walk with him. We went down the block and I noticed a very pretty young lady just standing there. We approached her and Louie said to me, "Mom, this is the love of my life, Anita. Anita, this is my wonderful mom." She hugged me and gave me a kiss. I felt weird because my son was in a serious relationship and I missed it. He'd been dating Anita for two years before I met her. I knew my son was proud of my life turning.

The Center for Family Representation (CFR)

is prepared to assist parents very early in the life of their ACS case. Ideally, referrals should be made through CWOP to CFR shortly after the initial contact with ACS, but before an 18-B attorney is assigned; particularly, but not limited to, Harlem families. Due to the limits of CFR's capacity, all CWOP referrals to CFR must be made through Teresa Bachiller—(212) 348-3000

ATTENTION HIGHBRIDGE RESIDENTS

(Bronx Zip Code 10452)

GET LEGAL HELP

with the child welfare system & other legal issues (housing, benefits, taxes, etc.)

CALL THE BRIDGE BUILDERS

ADVICE LINE:

(718) 928-2880

Get answers to your questions, and learn to protect your rights when:

- You have a child in foster care
- Your child is having problems with Special Education
- You want to clear your name from the State Central Register of child abuse / neglect.

Alicia Gabriel

Yo tuve muchos problemas con mi hija desde que ella tenía tres años y le descubrieron que tenía un soplo en el corazón. Lo me asusté mucho: No! No! No! No podía estar tranquila en estos momentos.

Cuando ella tenía 5 años, la inscribí en el pre-kinder. Cuando yo la llevaba a su escuela pasaba mucho trabajo para yo hacerla caminar hacia la escuela. Había veces que tenía que cargarla en mis brazos para poderla llevar a la escuela, y ella llorando, pateando, tirándose al piso. Era demasiado difícil para yo hacerla entender que en la escuela no le iban a hacer ningún daño.

Ahora con tanta lucha pidiendo, ella ya está en una escuela especial. Ella ha logrado hablar en la clase con algunos compañeros y con su maestra.

Ella también, desde el pre-kinder, comenzó a recibir terapia de hablar. Ahora yo puedo hablar con mi hija, ella me contesta de lo que ella sentaba en la escuela regular. Ella no querían llamar atención por hablar. Ella no podía concentrarse bien en la clase y no entendía nada de lo que la maestra le decía a ella a parte de: tienes que trabajar o tienes que permanecer sentada!

Aunque la maestra me ayudó cuando les hacían la evaluaciones del distrito y nunca tenía un problema con mi hija, hasta este año yo no firmé ningún documento del estado. No quería firmar otro papel hasta que mi hija se referida a una escuela especial. Yo logré en el año pasado que ella comenzó su clase especial; ahora estoy mas tranquila porque yo sé que ella se siente mejor. Gracias a Dios.

Los doctores nunca determinaron un razón exacto por lo que tenía mi hija. Ella requiere mucha paciencia. Pero gracias a Dios que con tanto esperanza, yo sé mi adorada hijita está feliz. Ella me cuenta que se siente muy bien en la escuela ahora y yo le contesto: "Yo se mamá, yo se."

Quote of Note

“Our daily activities, our time, our energies are all expended in the social agencies. The false choice—of whether we should become revolutionaries or merely be social workers—allowed us to avoid a series of much more important choices; more important because they were choices about actual and possible avenues of action, and about areas of activity in which we as social workers might make a difference. The issue was whether we were going to take sides with the agencies and further our careers, or with the victims of an aggressively cruel capitalist society. Were we in our daily work going to defend the practices and policies of the hospitals, courts, prisons, foster care agencies, welfare departments, and mental institutions for which we worked, or were we going to use our jobs to defend and protect the poor, the sick, the criminal, and the deviant against these agencies? That is the real and difficult challenge.”

Richard A. Cloward and Frances Fox Piven
“Notes Toward a Radical Social Work”
1975

CWOP Mission Statement

Through organized client involvement and collective advocacy both inside and independent of the system, the Child Welfare Organizing Project will change / transform the quality of services provided to New York City families through the New York City child welfare system.

Nuestra declaración de misión

A través de la participación organizada de los clientes y la acción colectiva ambos dentro de y afuera del sistema, el Proyecto cambiarán / transformarán la clase de servicio provisto por parte del sistema de protección de niños para las familias en la Ciudad de Nueva York.

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