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# *For Parents by Parents*

Issue 18

Child Welfare Organizing Project

Winter 2006

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## **\*\*\*\*\* FAMILY UNITY \*\*\*\*\***

In December 2005, four of CWOP's Parent Organizers were presented with Child Welfare Fund / People United for Children **Family Unity** Awards at the National Black Theatre in Harlem.

In January 2006, little Nixzmary Brown was killed, and the New York City newspapers were filled with stories and editorials calling for a swift return to the harsh, punitive, "when in doubt, remove the child" child welfare practice that was prevalent ten years ago.

At CWOP, we believe that the best way to honor Nixzmary's memory is through continued system change, not by returning to a time when ACS was just one more threat to family life in low income, African American, Latino, and immigrant communities.

Even in the most challenging communities, for every parent who maliciously hurts a child, there are hundreds, maybe thousands, who make extraordinary efforts to protect, preserve, and reunite their families. You will seldom find these stories on page one of the local papers. But you can read a few of them here.

### **Teresa Bachiller**

The child welfare system has had a constant presence in my family's life. As a defiant teenager, I spent some time living in a residential facility. This experience didn't seem to help my relationships at home; it only seemed to make things worse. As a young mother, I vowed that I would never let my children experience the agony, pain, and isolation I felt being separated from familiar surroundings and loved ones.

Later in my life, as a young, pregnant, single mother of three teenagers and a six year old, I tried the best I could for my children. Although I lived in the projects and was receiving Public Assistance, I maintained a loving presence in their lives and was very involved in their schooling. I tried hard to teach my children the difference between right and wrong, and what I knew about dignity, pride and respect.

Despite my efforts, my teenagers were at that stage where peers were influencing them. They began to disrespect me and their

behavior was out of control. I felt alone, and I needed help and support. I tried to discipline my children by talking to them and taking away privileges. My older children disliked my approach to their behavior, and felt that running away to my teen daughter's godparents was the answer.

To my surprise, one evening a BCW worker came to my home and explained that my children had made allegations of abuse against me. That was when my whole world fell apart. All of my children, including my six-year-old daughter were removed with little investigation. I was pregnant, alone, angry and felt betrayed by my children and my friends.

I complied with a service plan without understanding the process or my rights. Eventually my daughter's godparents began to see evidence of her disruptive behavior and refused to have her in *their* home. The intrusion of BCW in my life was detrimental to my family. It separated us and made us resent each other more. The experience I dreaded as a young girl began to haunt and destroy the bonds I was trying to maintain with my own family.

The child welfare system didn't seem to help at any of these chaotic moments in my life. The separation and destruction of my family began with my placement when I was a kid. BCW, and then ACS only perpetuated the divide in my own family as a parent. I wanted to believe that the system was going to help my family with the many problems we encountered, but its presence only seemed to tear us apart. We were shuffled into a barrage of services that never seemed to attack the real problems we were experiencing. I didn't receive many answers to the loads of questions I had, and I felt ignorant about the process and my rights.

I later became involved with the Child Welfare Organizing Project, first as a parent who wanted to know more about the system that had turned my world upside down. I went through a six-month Parent Leadership Curriculum, and now I have a job at CWOP as a full time Parent Organizer. I feel that sharing my many varied experiences in the system is helpful to other parents. My involvement with ACS now is in the role of a leader and advocate, working to change policies to work *with* and *for* the many parents and families who require assistance, not against them. Although, ACS originally had a negative effect on my life, I can now say that by putting my anger into action, ACS involvement in my life has changed me for the better. I will continue to use the obstacles that ACS put in my path as stepping-stones to positive future achievements.

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## Family Unity...continued

**Bernadette Blount**

To be honest, in the beginning, I wasn't really interested in doing any community service relating to foster care issues. I just really wanted to get my own kids and go. But then, I really started seeing the *unfairness*. I was trying to work with professionals who didn't seem like they really wanted to work with me. I had people around me that cared about me – my sister, my youngest son's father, his grandparents - and they weren't getting any recognition. What I began to feel at this point was more like an *anger*, and an outrage.

That's where Sharmeela Mediratta came in. She was the social worker working with a group I was in called Homeward Bound. She saw that my anger came from confusion, from asking the right questions but not getting the right answers. She referred me to the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP). It was a six-month training program, but I ended up staying 4 ½ years and counting.

I entered the program looking for more information, trying to get my children home. Plus, I felt it might look good on my Court papers that I was in these self-help programs. But then I saw so many other people who were going through the same thing. I met a lot of people that really wanted help, really wanted to do the right thing, but nobody was giving them the kind of help that they needed.

If we want to do the right thing as parents, why can't anybody help us when we're reaching out our hands for help? I was asking ACS for help, but they decided not to give me any until it was too late. It wasn't until my children were placed in foster care that evaluations and various services were put in place. Why did it have to go that far?

I now work for an organization where I can provide information to parents about how to get help without being penalized. I know people that have a deep knowledge of the system, and my own knowledge has deepened. When you come to CWOP, you have people in your corner where you can describe a situation in your life and not worry about someone picking up the phone to call State Central Register. We won't try to hurt you because you come for help.

I like providing that assurance that I'm not a Mandated Reporter. A person shouldn't always have to watch what they say and how they act. They shouldn't have to worry about "Do I look like somebody who deserves help?" That just bothers me. I want to be able to give a person assurance that if you're telling me you need a drug treatment program, or that you need something to eat, you don't have to worry about telling me the truth. I like being at a place that you can come to without that fear. I like being in a safe house.

Did foster care have an impact on my kids? Oh my God! You took children that I thought had some behavior problems, and you changed them into spiteful, malicious people. I've had my daughter call ACS on me. I've had an ACS worker have to tell this 16-year old child "You do not use ACS as a weapon against your mother." Thank God I got a seasoned veteran to

***"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*

come to the house this time, because if I didn't my children could have been back in foster care. I never had runaways before. Now, the disobedience is off the wall. They know that there's a certain limit that I can go, a line that's drawn. If I cross the line, that's it for me.

ACS has completely undermined my authority in my own home. ACS has made me feel insecure and inadequate as a parent. I've never had so many doubts and questions about myself, my parenthood. I'm preoccupied with the front of my house looking a certain way, so that if ACS knocks on my door it will look like a respectable house. I worry about how much food is in the freezer. These are all things I never worried about until ACS came into my life.

My children have changed. They definitely have a lot more attitude. They learned more about their rights than I learned about mine: "I can go to a certain kind of doctor if I want to, I don't have to tell you or ask your permission." When did kids get all these rights? I don't remember having rights at the age of 14, 15, or 16. I remember that somebody older was in charge, and there was a line that I couldn't cross. Now it's just totally and completely reversed. I have issues with that.

So my feelings are very mixed. I've met some good people through this experience, but it hasn't been a good experience. I wish I could have met those good people without going through all the grief I had to go through before I got to them. I wish they could have been available while I was struggling to keep my family together, before it was too late. At the same time, if it wasn't for those good people, I don't think I would have made it through this mess. If it wasn't for the safety net that I had, if it wasn't for CWOP, for example, I wouldn't have known that I could get an allowance to feed my children when they started coming home for weekends. ACS wasn't trying to tell me that. I learned that almost by accident. I learned through CWOP how not to lose my apartment while my children were in foster care. I had to come close to losing my apartment first. So how can I describe the impact? ACS hurt me a lot, and helped me a little, and sometimes the help was by accident, or by a lucky coincidence. Do you understand what I mean when I say "confusion"? My family is still under reconstruction. We are a work in progress.

### **Carlos Boyet**

My experience with ACS has impacted my life in many ways. It has inspired me to help out in my community by giving many parents knowledge and the services I once needed to gain full custody of my child when he was taken from his mother because of allegations of neglect.

There are so many loopholes that families fall into when trying to navigate the system by themselves. I was one of those parents who was clueless as to what was occurring with my child's life. In court I was left dumbfounded. When I asked for a lawyer, they told me I didn't need one. My chance of getting my son was looking very slim.

A social worker called me because my child was overdosed with a drug called Valium. My child was hospitalized for a week at Jacobi Medical Center due to the drug that was given to him in the care of a foster parent that ACS found fit to care for a child with developmental disabilities. When we returned to court after that incident my son was placed with another foster parent instead of me. I wondered if my son had died in their care, what were the consequences? If I were to overdose my child with a drug, would I be out here in society or would I be locked up? To my amazement, they found all parties clear of any wrongdoing.

I started to care about my community, because this type of practice happens far too often, and the people who get hurt in this situation are those most vulnerable: the children and their parents. Being educated, informed, and alert is the only way to survive.

My son was only six years old when he was placed in foster care. While in care he was sent to eight different foster homes. The terms that were used in court were so unheard of to me that I had to keep asking the person next to me what was meant by that. Instead of helping me, they would send me to do drug testing. Each time I went it was negative, but the lack of respect for me was visible.

I felt so powerless that it made me arm myself with as much knowledge on parent's rights. Thanks to the Bridge Builders - Child Welfare Organizing Project, the Highbridge Community Life Center, and Legal Services for New York (LSNY) / Bronx—I was awarded custody of my son in May 2005.

### **Tracey Carter**

ACS came to my house at 12 midnight with two police officers. They told me to wake my daughter up and get her dressed. The cops told me to cooperate. The worker was pulling her out of my arms. She gave me a paper saying it was from the court, but it wasn't. It was signed from her supervisor from the office. They lied to me. I had no clue where they took my daughter. I got a hold of the worker two weeks later, to be told my daughter is in an agency in Brooklyn. A month passed before I got to see her. It was the worst feeling any mother could go through. I would not wish that on my worst enemy. But it has made me a stronger, wiser person today. What I did not know back then, I know now, and I am more determined than ever to help those in need.

My experience with ACS has made me very active in helping parents. I feel connected to the community. I am able to help them understand how the system is supposed to work. I have done much outreach for parents to know about resources in the community. I support families who go to court. I am a co-facilitator of the support groups held every Monday in Highbridge. I help with referrals if parents come seeking legal assistance. It is not easy, but knowing there is someone who understands what they're going through and has experience with the system makes it a lot easier to fight even harder for your family and believe in yourself.

I share my experience because if I did it, maybe another parent can do the same. Especially being a recovered addict, I know first hand. I overcame the drugs and now I am able to talk and share what I have been through, being homeless, eating out of garbage cans, sleeping on trains. But when they took my daughter out of my arms, they might as well have took a knife and put it through my heart. That is how I felt.

But it made me stronger and determined to change my life. That made me say "do something" and I did. I used my energy and focus on rehab and not missing a visit. It was not the best experience, but if I can help the next person my rewards are answered. Nothing brings me great joy but to see a child with their bio-mother.

#### **Intro. 492 Update**

In December 2005, Intro. 492 - legislation establishing an empowered Parent Advocate Advisory Committee to the NYC Administration for Children's Services - was passed unanimously by the New York City Council and signed into law by Mayor Bloomberg. This is an important step towards creating an independent, legally sanctioned voice for parents as child welfare policy-makers in New York City and beyond.

Thanks are due to many people, but especially to Council Member Tracy Boyland, the principal sponsor, and twenty other co-sponsors; the members of the City Council staff who helped shepherd the legislation through numerous re-drafts; and ACS Commissioner John Mattingly, for his openness to negotiating a version of the legislation that can move directly from law into implementation.

Thanks to everyone who showed interest and supported the Child Welfare Organizing Project through this long process. We promise we will work very hard to assure that this law is implemented in a way that maximizes the credibility, effectiveness, and influence of this precedent-setting Committee.

## Scared of ACS

By "Sara" (a pseudonym), Age 14

I am scared of ACS. All the news reports of the deaths of kids scares me. My Mom is being investigated by ACS now because the Board of Ed can't keep track of our school record. No one cares that Mom and Dad are not abusing me and my brother,. The only abuse we got was in the foster homes they put us in. ACS took us from our family and put us with people who told me and my brother my family didn't want us. I knew they were lying. I knew my Mom would get us back. That's what I held onto during night after night of abuse. I never wanted to talk about what happened to me in the four foster homes I was in because I was ashamed. I didn't want people to know what happened to me. I wanted to write a story so everyone could understand there are kids who are scared of ACS. ACS was not a savior to me. I hate them so much but my Mom tells me not to hate. ACS sees all parents the same once the call is made. My Mom and dad then have to prove why they should be allowed to keep us. I think ACS should have to prove why they should be allowed to take kids. ACS called my new school and I don't want to go back there. I think they are coming. I was scared to go to school because they will come to the school and remove me and put me in a foster home.. I failed a test I had to take for my new school on purpose because I'm scared ACS will come to the school and take me. I will be so glad when I am 18 and my brother is 18. Then I know ACS will never be able to put us in a foster home again. When I started to write this story, my Mom asked me: If I had a chance what would I say to ACS and people who read this? I wanted to say please leave me and my brother alone and other kids who don't need to be put in foster care. I want to be a normal kid. I don't want to be scared to go to school. I don't want to jump every time there is a knock at the door. I want to feel safe in my own home.

### 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.

## CHILD WELFARE ORGANIZING PROJECT

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CHILD WELFARE ORGANIZING PROJECT

CWOP is supported by the Child Welfare Fund, the Community Resource Exchange Reality Checks Fund, the Daphne Foundation, the Ira W. DeCamp Foundation, the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, the Fund for the City of New York, the Highbridge Partnership for Family Supports and Justice, the Hite Foundation, the New York Foundation, the New York Women's Foundation, the North Star Fund, the Open Society Institute, the Shannah Ley Foundation, the Valentine Perry Snyder Fund, a variety of individual donors, a Member Item Grant from New York State Assembly Member Roger Green administered by the New York State Office of Children and Family Services, discretionary grants from former New York City Council Speaker A. Gifford Miller, and former Council Members Tracy Boyland and Philip Reed