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# *For Parents by Parents*

Issue 20

Child Welfare Organizing Project

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## NATIONAL RECOGNITION FOR CWOP & FAMILY INVOLVEMENT IN CHILD WELFARE REFORM

In 1994, when CWOP was formed, “parent involvement in child welfare” was a contradiction in terms. As we prepare to enter year thirteen (!), “parent involvement” is now something closer to a mantra, not just in NYC, but nationwide. CWOP’s model of parent leadership development has gained much national recognition in the past year. We’ve been to Washington, DC, Wichita, Kansas, and helped organize a New York State Pew Commission Forum. Each event receives attention in this issue. While it is gratifying to see so many states experimenting with parent involvement, our experiences also confirm our belief in the essential nature of an undiluted, independent, self-directed parent voice in public child welfare reform. Especially now, when the tide appears to be turning, it is crucial that the public dialogue be informed by parents with a strong sense of their own value, collective power, and competence; so that “parent involvement” does not devolve into tokenism or an empty catch-phrase.

### Casey National Convening on Permanency for Older Youth, September 14 + 15, 2006, Washington, DC By Tracey Carter

My son James was born in 1983. I was 21 and already had one child. We were living in Queens. I worked at the grocery store owned by my children’s father. I was comfortable. I was proud when James was born. In about 1986, after I had given birth to my first daughter, things started going downhill. I hadn’t realized, but my kids’ father used to sell drugs out of the store. I guess that’s why we were so comfortable. The feds came and started cleaning up 150<sup>th</sup> Street in South Jamaica. They busted all the drug dealers. My kids’ father ran and left us, and the cops shut down the store and destroyed our house.

I didn’t know what to do. I had no income. I wound up going to my sister’s in Brooklyn. I didn’t know at the time, but I was pregnant with my fourth child. My sister helped me out a lot, but I was stressed out. I was depending on public assistance. That was when I started hanging out, and was introduced to what we called free-base at that time.

I started using drugs on the weekends. Eventually I stopped coming home. My sister was missing work. She gave me an ultimatum: either come home and be a mother, or stay in the streets. I chose to stay out there. I gave her my Food Stamps and my ID card, because I didn’t want to smoke the kids’ money up. I moved from Flatbush to Bedford Stuyvesant. A couple years later, my sister moved with the kids to Virginia Beach. She got an 800 number so I could talk to my kids anytime I wanted to. But after a while, I just stopped calling.

One day I got a paper from court, and I gave up my rights to my children. I didn’t know my sister was going to adopt them. I found that out years later. I didn’t know my name was taken off my children’s birth certificates until after my sister passed away. My sister didn’t want to do that, but they threatened her. If she didn’t adopt, they were going to put the kids in foster homes.

By 2004 I was drug free, raising my two youngest children with my husband, and I was a Parent Leader at CWOP. I found out that James was in the Army. He was in Iraq. When he came home, I went to my niece’s house in Virginia, and I finally got my time to talk with James. Some of the things he told me, I was kind of surprised, because he was so young, yet he was stronger than I could ever be. He had seen a lot of things:

kids being blown up, bombs exploding close to his platoon. He said he had thought about me often, and had wanted to see me again before he left this earth. We hugged and cried, then we laughed. I was proud of his strength and courage.

In September 2006, James and I traveled together to “Families for Life: Addressing the Needs of Older Children and Youth in Foster Care,” the Fifth National Convening of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. We got to bond and to talk more. I had never had a chance to apologize to James for not being there for him. My family had only told James that I was sick. They hoped one day I would be the one to tell James the whole truth. He said he felt better hearing it from me. He asked me a lot of questions. I was straight and honest with him. I told him “I can’t change the past, I’m just grateful that you still accept me.” Just to hear him call me “Mom,” you have no idea what that means to me.

We did a workshop at the Convening together. James was honest when he spoke. I think he respected what I talked about. He had tears in his eyes, but it felt good to be able to talk that openly in front of him, and it didn’t change his judgment of me. The response that I got back from the professionals was that they respected my not being ashamed and talking openly about my addiction. I think they wanted to hear more. I hope that by seeing the way my son and I connected in spite of our long separation showed them that this can be done. Even though my rights were terminated, it didn’t stop the love in my heart for my children, or the love in my son’s heart for me. You can separate a mother and child, but the love will always be there. Love is what is permanent, not what is written in a court order.

I think James has a lot more questions for me that he hasn’t asked. Some things he’s not ready to know yet, and I have to respect that. We just have to keep that communication going. I just love James for who he is. He’s comical, he makes me laugh, he makes my recovery feel worthwhile. I think my presence has made it a little easier for James to do what he has to do in his own life. He can always pick up the phone and call Mom. I think he’s a little more comfortable with himself now, knowing that he doesn’t have to worry “Where’s my Mom?” That pressure of worrying whether I’m alive or dead is off him now. I think that makes a big difference.

On October 16, 2006 CWOP and the North American Council on Adoptable Children co-organized a New York State Forum intended to highlight the Pew Commission's recommendations for national foster care and family court reform (see [www.pewfostercare.org](http://www.pewfostercare.org)). New York City Council Member Melissa Mark Viverito and United States Congressman Charles Rangel were featured speakers. CWOP's newest Board member, Eloisa Gordon-Mora, moderated a panel that included Teresa Bachiller, of CWOP's East Harlem staff, and Bevanjae Kelley, also of CWOP's Board. The following are excerpts from Teresa and Bevanjae's opening remarks.

### **Teresa Bachiller**

I am a Parent Organizer at CWOP. I have been a contributing member of this community my whole life. As a single mother of five children, I have always tried to do my best. I never missed a PTA meeting, attended all of their activities, helped them with their homework, and pushed them to excel.

When my oldest kids were teenagers, they started to reject my discipline. They ran to their godparents, and falsely accused me of abuse. ACS took my children with very little investigation. I was compliant and did everything needed to bring them back home, but with little understanding of the process or my rights.

ACS came back into my life at a very difficult time. My adult daughter had an accident that effected her memory and judgment, and we came into conflict over custody of my grandson. It was at around this time that I found out about CWOP. I completed their Parent Leadership Curriculum, and became a Parent Organizer.

I am committed to using my knowledge and experience to educate and help other parents. I am part of a powerful voice of parents from communities like mine who are working to change the system. Although ACS originally had a negative effect in my life, I can now say that putting my anger into action has changed me for the better. I have been able to make a difference in the lives of other parents who have had experiences similar to mine.

### **Bevanjae Kelley**

My daughter was struggling, unable to recover from a childhood tragedy, and her life was spiraling downward. At age 12, she had been kidnapped and abused. Before this, she was a sweet little girl, smart in school, trusting. Over the next few years, beginning at age 15, she had two children. Because of her past trauma, she seemed drawn into abusive relationships with men. She made erratic and irresponsible decisions regarding her children. Soon

ACS became involved. She was in a residential program for young mothers. Someone there reported her for failing to return on time when she left her children in another resident's care. She was charged with abandonment.

My grand-daughters were four and 14 months when I became their foster mother. After 15 months, my daughter had made little progress on her case plan. She needed therapy and they didn't provide therapy there. They were always testing the mothers for drugs, but my daughter didn't have a drug problem.

I legally adopted the girls six years ago. I felt pressured. The law said my daughter had 15 months to comply, and she wasn't ready. Her lawyer never returned her calls. Everyone she talked to said she would never get her kids back. We didn't know anything about the system. I would have preferred to be the girls' guardian and not have to participate in terminating my daughter's rights.

Both girls have significant issues. One has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, and everything has been a roller coaster ride these past few years. Both girls have been also diagnosed with oppositional defiant disorder.

Despite some struggles, we are now doing well, thanks to a program that serves families with children who have a mental illness. They help the family work through problems instead of calling ACS. Services include 24-hour access to a psychiatrist, a case manager who coordinates services with the school, a respite provider who takes the girls out three times a week, and a therapist who provides in-home family therapy once a week. We were part of that program for about two years and it was very helpful. We all have more coping strategies and things are so much better. I really wish these same types of services could have been available to my daughter when the girls were younger. Everything would have been different then.

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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.*

### **Systems of Care Summit – Wichita, Kansas, October 25 – 27, 2006**

By Mike Arsham and Violet Rittenhour

In October we traveled to Wichita, Kansas for the US Department of Health & Human Services / Administration for Children and Families Systems of Care Family Involvement Summit, with our partners from the CRADLE in Bedford Stuyvesant – Jean Andrews, King David Conyers, Lisa Hines, and Valarie Taveras. We met Parent Advocates and Parent Partners from states including California, North & South Dakota, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Nevada, Kansas, Oregon, and Colorado. It was good to see so many states developing staff roles for parents in their child welfare systems. We appreciated the opportunity to spend time with our colleagues from Brooklyn, and we got to know them better. We were glad we went, but we also came away with some pretty complicated mixed feelings.

Many of the Parent Partners were people in recovery, like some of CWOP's Parent Organizers and Board members. Most worked mainly with other parents in recovery. Most worked directly for their local public child welfare agency, and some were unpaid volunteers. Some of the counties had very strict screening procedures determining who could or couldn't serve as a Parent Partner. Unlike CWOP's Parent Organizers, many of the Parent Partners described themselves in very negative terms. Most told very one-sided stories of being neglectful, irresponsible parents who had changed their ways thanks to the child welfare agency, and who were now helping other parents change by working in cooperation with the public agency. Almost no-one spoke of any need for the child welfare agency to change or improve its practice.

Except for some of the Native Americans from the Dakotas, CWOP was just about the only conference participant to question this idea that public child welfare agencies are perfect and always do what is best for our children. We pointed out that substance abuse is not the only thing that brings families in contact with the system. Public child welfare workers are not infallibly helpful, law abiding, or respectful of families, and a good Parent Organizer knows when to work in cooperation with public child welfare authorities, and when to confront and challenge them.

We also suggested that professionals designing a "system of care" and then inviting parents to participate in it, on the professionals' terms, may lead to some positive outcomes, but is not truly "partnership." Working mainly with parents who are on the county payroll, or otherwise dependent on public child welfare authorities, can severely limit those parents' autonomy and freedom of expression. We witnessed this over and over again during these three days. Many conference participants thanked us, and told us that these things "needed to be said," but that they had not felt safe in saying them. Our partners from CRADLE were also very understanding and supportive of our point of view.

Government was never intended to be a substitute for parents, or to raise children. Parents may sometimes need help and training from professionals, but professionals must also be prepared to accept training from parents on knowing their boundaries and respecting families. There is no set way to be a family. There is not a universally accepted book on how to be a family. Service providers must learn and respect the differences between families. What works for my family might not work for your family. Should we limit our view of the system to parents who have problems and addictions? Or can we acknowledge that the system itself has problems, and is still addicted to forms of 'service' that hurt and degrade families?

Does anyone think we are really doing all we can? Are we really doing our best to service our families? We will never reach our potential for excellence if we stay in the box and delude ourselves that all parents in the system are just drug addicts and abusers. Every family is different. We need more professionals who aren't afraid to say: "we have made mistakes, we don't have all the answers;" and who look to parents, youth, and communities for some of those missing answers. Only then we will have public child welfare systems that are truly doing all they can, and giving it their best effort.

### Quotes of Note

"Revolutions are never based upon...begging a corrupt system to accept us into it. Revolutions overturn systems... Back during slavery...there were two kinds of Negroes. There was that old house Negro and the field Negro. (T)he house Negro always looked out for his master. When the field Negroes got too much out of line, he held them back in check. He put them back on the plantation. The house Negro could afford to do that because he lived better than the field Negro. He ate better, he dressed better, and he lived in a better house...And he could talk just like his master-- good diction...He didn't want his master hurt...When the master's house caught afire, he'd try to put the fire out...But then you had some field Negroes, who lived in huts, had nothing to lose. They wore the worst kind of clothes. They ate the worst food. And they caught hell. They felt the sting of the lash...If the master's house caught afire, they'd pray for a strong wind to come along."

El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz (Malcolm X)

"Many people fear nothing more terribly than to take a position which stands out sharply and clearly from the prevailing opinion. The tendency of most is to adopt a view that is so ambiguous that it will include everything and so popular that it will include everybody. Not a few people who cherish lofty and noble ideals, hide them under a bushel basket for fear of being called different"

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

### **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

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