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# ***For Parents by Parents***

**CHILD WELFARE ORGANIZING PROJECT**

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## **CWOP Honors Assembly Member Roger Green & Sania Metzger: December 3, 2002**

**By Teresa Bachiller, Parent Organizer and Kaela Economos, Hunter MSW Intern**

Our December 3<sup>rd</sup> reception honoring NY State Assembly Member Roger L. Green and Sania Metzger was a huge success. In attendance, aside from the honorees of course, were many past and current CWOP parent leaders, board members, CWOP funders, supporters, and colleagues, as well as ACS Commissioner William Bell. Despite it being the first really cold day of winter, it was a large and diverse turnout: lawyers, social workers, public and elected officials, university professors, a retired Judge, parents and youth, people who seldom see each other outside of a court room, all socializing together and talking not just about child welfare issues but about life! Both of us have worked for CWOP for less than six months, but on this day we realized how many great people we've met just in that short a time. But even better than that were the speeches. It was a powerful evening. For once, parents were the center of attention, and they all expressed how much CWOP has helped parents to accomplish. And our honorees' words about CWOP were overwhelming in their praise.

CWOP parents who spoke included: Parent Organizer Philneia Timmons, the evening's MC, Julia MacGuire, CWOP Board Vice Chair, and Fred Cotton, Jacquelyn Israel, and Sharline Nicholson, all CWOP parent Board Members. The speakers expressed what many CWOP parents feel: that before discovering CWOP, they felt lost, helpless, and trapped by the system. CWOP gave them the courage, support, tools, and knowledge that they needed to stay strong in their efforts to reunite their families and advocate for themselves. Their personal stories reflected the all-too-common sentiment that they have been judged and stigmatized by the system. Jacquelyn Israel stated that she was reminded of the child welfare system "when [she] was sitting, stopped on the express train, and the local train passed [her] by." But more importantly, they expressed that CWOP helped them discover that they possess both strength and a voice, and that that voice, united with those of other parents, is too powerful to be ignored. Julia MacGuire related that, as a parent involved with CWOP since it's earliest days, she had scarcely imagined that she would see a day that CWOP would be able to draw this kind of support and recognition. She kept pinching herself throughout the evening to make sure she wasn't dreaming.

Assembly Member Roger Green expressed an over-riding and genuine sense of humility and amazement that he would be so highly honored doing something that he feels he has to do without question. He said that helping CWOP was nothing that required an extra effort, only his innate desire and duty to help New York City families. He stated that very hard times are ahead for our community as pending budget cuts and recession threaten the vitality of our families, and it is in times like these it is particularly important for organizations like CWOP to stay active and visible. Sania Metzger expressed that in the ten years she worked with Assembly Member Green, their support of CWOP has been one of the most memorable and important works she has done. CWOP Executive Director Mike Arsham was the last to speak. On behalf of all CWOP, he thanked Assembly Member Green, Sania, David Tobis of the Child Welfare Fund, and all of the professionals and parents whose hard work and dedication has helped CWOP become what it is today.

The event was powerful not only because it showed how far CWOP has come since its humble beginnings, but also because all of the above sentiments were expressed at one time and in one room, with important members from all realms of the child welfare system there to witness it, including Commissioner Bell. The evening ended on a note of inspiration and empowerment, and we all left with renewed motivation to continue our work to transform the New York City child welfare system so that our children, our families, and our communities can thrive. This reception also served as the introductory event for our new incoming class of East Harlem Parent Leadership trainees, so we got to see our beginnings, our present, and our future all in the same room in one night.

It was not simple to plan this event. It was the first time we had ever done something like this. All through the planning process there were different opinions and disagreements over what was the best way to go about it. But in the end everyone agreed that all of the hard work, time, and effort was undoubtedly worth it, and still would have been even if we failed to raise a single dollar for CWOP- but we also managed to do that as well!

CWOP has come such a long way since 1994. The child welfare system has also changed, but it hasn't changed enough. We remain committed to creating a system where parents do not have to struggle to make their voices heard, and where more resources go into helping families than into investigating and separating them. We will continue working for change. To all of you who support us, THANK YOU !

A Nightmare in Brooklyn , by E.L.S.

My nightmare began when I was a young girl. You see, I was molested at the age of eight by one of my first cousins. I will never forget what he told me: *"If you tell, no one would believe you, and if they do, they will say it is your fault."* The words haunted me, and I believed him. I thought I had no one to turn to, not even my mother. For some reason, I blamed her because she was my mother and she was supposed to protect me from things like this. Why didn't she do anything? Is it because she didn't know, or that she just did not care? Well, I learned later in life that if you don't ask for help you will not get any, and if you just keep things inside it can kill you. Jails, institutions, or death, that's what it all boils down to. And that's where it took me.

I remember when I first started getting high. At first it was just drinking. When the drinking was not enough I moved to smoking reefer, and for a while it made things okay. I was able to be a part of the in crowd. I got in alright, so far in that I could not see my way out. As my need to be with the in crowd increased, so did my drug habit. When the drinking and reefer were not enough, I turned to speed, mescaline tabs, cocaine, and anything else I could get my hands on. That was when my mother and I started our family feud. We could not be in the same room if she was not drinking. Well, with me it was a little more than that, but if we were not under the influence we could not get along. While we were under the influence we were the best of friends. At least until she stopped drinking, and then the feud was an every day thing because I was not ready to give up my existence, not just yet. I had my friends to hang out with as long as I got high.

I can remember drinking until I had blackouts, waking up in the morning in strange places or at home with no clothes on and not knowing where in hell they were. That still did not stop my road to destruction. I kept going and going like the little bunny on TV. My mother had put me out of the house a couple of times and I just brushed it off and started sneaking around to get high. I managed to graduate from high school, did a year of college, and even went to the Job Corps for a year. It did not help because I kept hearing somebody calling my name so loud and clear. It was the drugs. They told me that I did not need anybody, that they would be all that I needed – a shoulder to cry on, a listening ear when I needed to talk, my friend, my buddy, my pal. And the drugs took over slowly but surely. I was to the point that it did not matter what people said to me, they did not understand me like my drugs.

There was a time when I started to feel tired and wanted to change my life around. But I just did not know how to do it and I was afraid to ask for help. I ended up pregnant. I figured that this was my way out. I thought that if I had a kid I would experience love and things would change. It did not help. Things got worse. I was still getting high, only now I had a baby with me, taking him to the crack spot, selling his jewelry and milk to get high. Eventually I had another son and things got even worse. I found myself in the EAU shelter in the Bronx. At first, I was doing okay. I had managed to stop getting high because I was not familiar with the Bronx and fear set in. I started getting high again while pregnant with my third

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We welcome any articles, stories, poems or comments in English or Spanish from parents who have been involved with the child welfare system. Please send, mail or e-mail to the above address along with your contact information. If we use your submission we will contact you regarding any edits before printing.

child, a little girl, who was born positive tox for cocaine. She spent her first couple of weeks with my mother and then was returned to me. About six months after that, I found myself in Court trying to convince a Judge that everybody was wrong and that there was nothing wrong with me. I had to spend six of the most miserable days in jail and then come home to find out that it was not over, it had actually just begun. We went back and forth to Court, me with my *"I don't need anybody I got my drugs"* attitude. I eventually lost my kids to the system and was told that I needed to get into a drug program. Like any other addict, I did not see why.

This was one fight that I intended to win, but now the drugs could not speak for me, nor could they guide me to the truth. Instead, they took me further away from myself. I began to hate everybody, my mother for taking my kids in, the system for not giving me my kids, and men, for what my cousin did to me. My hatred kept me out on the streets for another two years. I walked the streets at night to make money to get high. I even had a couple of men try to rape and kill me in the same night. I would just go home, get cleaned up, and back on the street. I have the scars to prove it. I have a scar on my leg that cut into my veins, and if I had not gone to the hospital I would have bled to death. As soon as I left the hospital, I was back on the streets making money to get high.

But one day it came to me that I had to try one time to get myself together to make a life for myself if I wanted to live. So I called my worker and asked her could I go to an inpatient program? She said something to me that made me say *"Yes, I need to go away."* She asked me if I was sure that's what I wanted to do. And from that day on we had a very special bond. I went into this program and hated every minute of it, but in reality it gave me something that I would always be grateful for: it gave me ME, and whatever else I needed to restore my faith in my higher power and myself. I completed the program and did an outpatient program as well. After four long years I got my kids back, and my self-respect. I went back to school and got my Associates Degree. I am presently working with the agency that my kids were in care with, as a Parent Advocate. I plan to go back and get my Bachelor Degree within the next year.

My kids are my world, but I had to realize that I am no good to them if I can't help myself first, and that's what I did. Today I can say: *"Don't look down on me because of where I've been, just look at me and watch where I'm going!"*

*CWOP Parent Organizer Philneia Timmons served as Mistress of Ceremonies at our December 3, 2002 reception honoring Assemblyman Roger Green & Sania Metzger. The following is a transcript of her introductory remarks:*

Parents, parental rights, survival, strength, respectability, and family values emphasize our responsibility to change the essence of the Administration for Children’s Services into the Administration for Family Services; to embrace and better support our families in the child welfare system.

We are here to represent an expression of concern, compassion, determination, guidance, generosity, and hope by and for the many people who have supported CWOP. You have demonstrated a significant influence, proving we have the power of persuasion.

Assembly Member Green and Sania Metzger, we admire you for your vision that has become a reality. We honor you for your courage, inspiration, and ambition to help parents, children, families, communities, and organizations. You are the mirror that reflects into our future generation.

**Brainstorm**

By Valerie Dawson, CWOP Parent Leadership Trainee

How do needy families acquire the help they need? Many kinds of family services are available and within the reach and knowledge of the Administration for Children’s Services. Why is this information not being more persistently made available? Why aren’t these services being brought to disadvantaged NYC neighborhoods with the same urgency as if all the children were in danger? Services within the communities most impacted by ACS should be strongly made present. Establish an understanding within the community that will be self-sustaining, using people from the community as the messengers. I believe this would begin to educate and make available an understanding within these vulnerable, undereducated communities that these services do exist. With the same urgency and concern directed towards sending ACS investigators out on calls made to the State Central Register for child abuse, this urgency should be constantly applied to these same high-risk communities and neighborhoods to educate and provide services that will eventually decrease the mistrust about ACS. Also, there is a good chance that there will be people who will volunteer their services toward the betterment of their neighborhoods and communities, and maybe even ACS.

**So what else has CWOP been up to? In the past six months alone, CWOP parents have:**

- Joined the ACS Parent Advisory Work-Group, the NY State Office of Child & Family Services Program Improvement Plan / Parent Engagement work group, and ACS Commissioner Bell’s Advisory Board
- Given testimony at a NY State Assembly hearing on “Problems Facing Immigrant Families in the Child Welfare System”
- Had “Parent’s Perspective” stories published in three issues of *Foster Care Youth United*, and drawn positive media attention from *NY Newsday*, *The Nation*, Court TV, the *NY Times*, *Noticias*, the *NY Law Journal*, and PBS Frontline
- Helped plan and participated in the first-ever ACS Parent Advocates’ Consortium, bringing together parents employed by ACS foster care and preventive contractors for an afternoon of dialogue and strategizing in the interests of improving and creating more roles for peer advocates in the child welfare system
- Given guest presentations at the Center for Family Representation Columbia-Fordham-NYU Law School Collaborative, the Hunter College School of Social Work, the Brecht Forum, the College of New Rochelle human rights education conference, and the Columbia School of Law (the last two in partnership with Voices of Youth)
- Met with the Special Child Welfare Advisory Panel, the Children’s Brain Trust, and Agenda for Children Tomorrow
- Helped plan and present the Child Welfare Fund Best Practice Awards and Family Unity Awards, in cooperation with the Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies and People United for Children.

**CWOP’s PARENT SUPPORT / SELF-HELP GROUP**

**Meets every Wednesday from 11 AM—1 PM at  
NY Foundling’s East Harlem Neighborhood Center  
80 East 110th Street, 1E  
(between Park and Madison Avenues,  
#2,3, or 6 Train to 110th Street)**

*“We are sharing our knowledge, our experience, supporting one another,  
and organizing for change”*

**We suggest calling ahead to confirm your attendance:  
(212) 348-3000**

Free, confidential, supportive counseling for children & families involved with the NYC child welfare system, at flexible times & locations, is available through

**PROJECT LIBERTY**

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NYSPCC (Manhattan & Brooklyn):  
(212) 233-5500 Ext. 220 or 229

Puerto Rican Family Institute (Manhattan,  
Brooklyn, & Bronx): (718) 387-5200

Queens Child Guidance Center:  
(718) 591-6750

SCAN—NY (Bronx): (718) 683-2522

Staten Island MH: (718) 442-2225 Ext. 120

## QUOTES OF NOTE

“Aside from any custody issues, I would like to be a positive influence in my children’s lives. I would like to continue to repair my relationship with them, and for them to understand that my addiction had nothing to do with their value as human beings, or how much love I feel for them. I would like some support from the foster care agency in this, but when I ask for increased visitation, or for family counseling or therapy, I am treated like a nuisance or a distraction. Instead of saying ‘it seems like she may be ready to be more of a resource to her children,’ they seem to wish I would just disappear. It would make their jobs simpler. It is hard for me to understand how refusing to help a mother struggling towards health and sobriety serves the best interests of her children, yet I see this happening not only in my case but in many cases.”

*Sweetie Blake, NY City Council Hearing, February 1999*

“I came to understand that the fight I was fighting was not strictly personal. It didn’t just have to do with me as a parent or an individual. I was fighting a system that touched the lives of thousands...It made me want to fight harder when I realized I wasn’t fighting only for myself but for all these shattered lives. I had to succeed. Now my family is back together...I work... counseling women who have been incarcerated and are trying to reintegrate into society and family life, ...showing...the women...that they too can stand up in the face of adversity...”

*Sweetie Blake, Winner of the Child Welfare Fund 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Family Unity Award, December 2002*

### 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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