

PARENT NARRATIVES

Parent Narrative One “Cheri”

Q: May I ask, how you identify racially and/or ethnically?

A: Hispanic, though most people assume I am mixed race. I only met my father once so I’m not sure what I am.

Q: What did you see or experience that did or did not take your identity into account?

A: When they ask, people asked me like this, “You’re Hispanic, right?” I don’t speak Spanish but people are always talking to be in Spanish.

Q: What is your experience related to race as a parent involved with the child welfare system?

A: I heard side conversations among caseworkers and social workers who would say, “She’s not going to make it, she’s one of them.” Hearing that made me want to try harder. I see this all the time as a mentor parent. You can tell which CPS workers are there just because it’s their job. They treat people differently. For example, one of my clients is Caucasian, but she has a criminal record. They wanted to terminate her parental rights. She never had a chance.

Q: Do you believe your experience was different from that of white parents involved with the system? Why or why not?

A: Yes. My son’s father is Caucasian and in our case I felt like I had to do everything and he did not. They automatically believed him because he’s white but he’s a drug dealer. They gave us 50/50 custody. What saved me was that they ended up drug testing my son’s father and found that he had been on heroin the whole time. That out of the blue drug test is what saved me. Why didn’t we get the same treatment?

Q: Do you currently have a role in in the system? As someone who was impacted by the system personally, now on a professional basis how do you see yourself fitting in?

A: I feel extremely privileged and blessed. Until recently, I felt like I was just this “tweaker” because I was an addict. But I don’t feel that way anymore. I see my value and I see how I fit into this organization of legal professionals, what I’m doing for the community, and for the organization. As a staff, we’re all from different backgrounds. We’re all so different ,but we are one. That’s what we need for our community and the only way we are going to get that is from people like us with lived experience.

Q: What do you see as your role in improving race equity outcomes for people in the child welfare system?

A: I see how much of a change we are making as an organization. The bond we have with our clients is amazing. When I was in the system, there is no way I would talk to anyone the way our parent clients speak with us. I am still learning every day through connecting with and mentoring my clients. They bring resources to the table and that is amazing. My journey is not over. Our clients are able to connect with us and feel that our understanding of them and their situation is genuine because we lived it ourselves.

One of my clients is a domestic violence survivor. She was kicked out of a shelter because she shared with the shelter that her abuser said he knew she was staying in a shelter, though he did not know which one. She had to sleep in her car with her son. One of the only shelters that had openings was a men and women's shelter. Most people with a history of domestic violence won't stay in a shelter with men, ever. Right away, I jumped on the phone with her and went through a resource list to find her a place to stay. We also reached out to the supervisor of the shelter that had kicked her out. That supervisor ended up connecting her with a program that allows her to stay in a hotel with her son for six months. She was able to get a job and is doing really well. I have been walking her through her options and assuring her that she has options and does not have to take the first thing that is offered to her.

Parent Narrative Two “Bay”

Q: May I ask, how you identify racially and/or ethnically?

A: I am Black.

Q: What did you see or experience that did or did not take your identity into account?

A: When my case was open, I don't remember feeling like I was helped or treated differently because of my race. I was on drugs in those first years.

Q: Do you believe race or racism plays a part in the child welfare system?

A: Yes. It appears that Black people are expected to “follow the rules,” rules we don't even know about such as spanking which is considered emotional abuse. It also happens when racism and bias with my own people against other Blacks, including how parents are treated. For example, I have seen workers doing things in a biased way. Also, there were staff in the department who tried to hold me down or hold me back when I was a parent partner. “Hurt people, hurt people”.

Q: Do you believe your experience was different from that of white parents involved with the system? Why or why not?

A: Absolutely! Because white folks feel privileged. I have an example, just last week a judge picked up the phone and called CPS when a white mom missed getting two visits with her children. I see it all the time that Black and Brown parents don't get visits for one reason or another and no one makes a fuss.

Q: Do you currently have a role in the child welfare system? As someone who was impacted by the system personally, now on a professional basis how do you see yourself fitting in?

A: I am now a cultural broker and I started my own nonprofit to work with families. I use my knowledge and experiences to change a broken system. I want to make a difference.

Q: What do you see as your role in improving race equity outcomes for people in the current system?

A: One barrier to keep addressing is knowledge of the laws. People can't comply with laws if they don't know them. We have to find a way to teach people the consequences of some of their behaviors, which are often steeped in how they were raised.

Parent Narrative Three “Tirana”

Q: May I ask, how you identify racially and/or ethnically?

A: I am Hispanic.

Q: What did you see or experience that did or did not take your identity into account?

A: I don't remember anyone asking me whether I was Hispanic or how I identify. Maybe they just assumed I was Hispanic.

Q: Do you believe race or racism plays a part in the child welfare system?

A: So much depends on the social worker, what background they come from, and whether they are there to help the parent. My first social worker did not help me. She threw everything at me and told me to go do my case plan. My kids were all under three years old, so California fast-tracks the case giving parents only six months to get better. It was a domestic violence case. Six months was not enough for me. I lost my parental rights and my kids were adopted out. That was hard for me. Social workers don't need to come from our exact background, but they need to care and want to make a change.

Q: Do you believe your experience was different from that of white parents involved with the system? Why or why not?

A: Yes. I felt like the system is harder on people who are Hispanic or African American. They put more pressure on you. I didn't get the right treatment throughout my case. I was undocumented at that time and being undocumented made it harder for me to get services. Very few resources were available for undocumented people. That was one of the hardest parts for me. So many of the case plan tasks required having a social security number, which I think was a form of discrimination. Now I'm documented, but back then I felt like they were harder on people who were undocumented and Hispanic.

Q: Do you currently have a role in the child welfare system? As someone who was impacted by the system personally, now on a professional basis how do you see yourself fitting in?

A: Advocating for parents and making sure that their voices are heard is my role. Many times, parents don't know their rights or what their responsibilities are when they become involved with the system or have a case plan. Sharing my story and experience with them has really made a difference. They know that I am one of them, come from where they come from, and that I truly understand their experience. It opens up a whole world for our clients. Once they open up to us and trust us with their stories, we rope them into our team with the attorneys and all of us become a team.

One of my clients was referred to us because she was a victim of physical abuse herself. When we met, she was homeless and had many other things she was going through. I was able to find her a place to

live, a job, and connect her to various resources. Now she is great. She has been able to turn her life around and make good decisions. Connecting her to the community and resources like child care have made all the difference.

Q: What do you see as your role in improving race equity outcomes for people in the current system?

A: Most of my clients don't speak English or speak very limited English so I join them for appointments and other things to serve as a translator for them. I'm just really happy to be able to do this. I came up on eight years of sobriety last month. I'm just so grateful to be where I am at now because I was homeless and living in my care at one point.

Parent Narrative Four “Lannie’

Q: May I ask, how you identify racially and/or ethnically?

A: I’m Black all the way through.

Q: What did you see or experience that did or did not take your identity into account?

A: That’s loaded. For me, it’s the removal that did not take my identity into account at all. The majority of my identity was being a mother but that’s not recognized as an identity in the child welfare system. The removal took everything from me. Not having those say so’s and going through that traumatic process without your identity being recognized and without it being recognized as a positive or as proof of connection to your children, but instead it’s recognized as a deficit, it’s demonized. Having that identity, as a mother, so many people will never know that pain and how wrapped up my identity – who I was and who I still am today – was with my identity of being a mother. That is not something that is recognized. The grief, loss, and trauma of losing that part of your identity is not recognized either. You have to fight to be considered human. You have to fight even harder if you’re a mother, if you’re Black, if you abuse substances.

Q: Do you believe race or racism plays a part in the child welfare system?

A: My race was taken into account but it was heavily stigmatized. I see that stigma in my professional life as well. I see the difference in services offered to parents depending on the zip code or the parent’s class. We’re less likely to be believed. We’re less likely to be deemed credible on the witness stand. We’re automatically guilty until we prove ourselves innocent or to be a “good” person or a “good mother.” The negative stereotypes and stigma surrounding what is Black plays a lot into certain parts of the system.

The entire system needs to acknowledge the data. The disproportionality in the child welfare, juvenile justice, and criminal justice system – the data is there. The outcomes are there. As a system, we need to say we were going the wrong way and stop going full throttle. In the future, the system will be looked at as completely racist. Regardless of whether you have Black people at the helm and Black professionals in the system, you’re still perpetuating this racism. When are we going to get to the point of just stopping? Just stop. We don’t have to crash. We don’t have to destroy thousands more individual lives. Just stop.

Q: Do you believe your experience was different from that of white parents involved with the system? Why or why not?

A: Absolutely. I still see that. There is a different tone of voice. There are different resources offered to White parents. There is more patience and willingness to figure out the issues *together*. On the other end, I have had cases that look exactly like mine with a mother who is abusing drugs and I have seen the difference. One [white] parent is able to leave the hospital with their child and the other [Black] parent has to leave the hospital without their child. You see the difference in treatment so clearly when it comes to drug use. With white parents, you see the patience from case managers offering safety plans

and doctors offering to help them stop their drug use. On the other hand, Black moms who smoke marijuana end up having their children removed and placed in foster care.

If you look at the available drug treatments, it is different by drug and therefore by race. If you smoke crack, you are not going to have the same access as you would if you did heroin. You see that disconnect. I'm in a tough position sometimes as a peer parent advocate because I'm going to advocate for my client regardless of race, regardless of where you come from or what you're walking out of. I don't care. But internally, sometimes it's frustrating because I know if my client had been Black, we wouldn't have been able to get this child back home, or the case would have been drawn out for years. Resources given to parents in my neighborhood are going to be really different from those given in the white neighborhoods, depending on those zip codes.

Another stereotype is that we are Black people don't feel as deeply as our white counterparts. We are expected not to feel. There are studies that show Black children above the age of five are perceived to not need nurturing. We are perceived to not have the exact same emotions and needs as our white counterparts. That is crazy to me. We are in 2022, and people are still going off this false narrative and you can see it at almost every level.

We need zealous advocacy. If I'd had our social workers or one of our attorneys when I was going through the system, it wouldn't have taken me five years to get all my children back home. Holistic representation makes such a difference.

Q: Do you currently have a role in the child welfare system? As someone who was impacted by the system personally, now on a professional basis how do you see yourself fitting in?

A: Yes. I walk with people. I tell all our parent clients that I will walk with them and that means something different to each person. I meet them at the level of their needs. I tell them that I won't judge them. I don't care about what they did. I don't care about what they didn't do. I don't care about how you got here. Here are the problems, let's figure out some solutions. Let's walk to that point. Having that real space of non-judgment makes such a difference. I'm not a mandated reporter. I don't have to tell the judge if you relapse. I can just help you get back into treatment. I'm really solution and common sense-based. You would be surprised how complicated professionals in the child welfare system can make a situation when the solution would have been just giving the parent \$100 to help mom pay the rent. The kids don't have beds? Let's get them some beds, not put them in foster care. This solution and common sense-based approach really works.

I'm big on cultural relevance. How I live, my gut or my feelings may not be the same as you. As human beings, we have our own experiences and biases. I don't care what color you are. When you tell people to "go off their guts," that is room for bias. When you tell people to "practice in the best interests," that is room for bias. You don't know what is best for me if you have never walked in my shoes. You can't tell me how to properly live in the ghetto if you have never lived in a ghetto. You can't tell me to overcome poverty when there are systemic forces that have led to this poverty. You don't know what it is to take care of three children on \$7.25 and being told to maintain a home, keep a job, all these extra things that might not be feasible given the position I'm in. As a peer parent advocate, part of my role is to advocate for the plans that are realistic and feasible. No, my client's not going to do A, B or C. I will advocate for

things that are tangible solutions, not all these hoops that my client has to jump through *or else* her children will be taken away.

Q: What do you see as your role in improving race equity outcomes for people in the current system?

A: That is my role in a nutshell. I'm big on policy and seeing that policy in *practice*. First and foremost, we [parents with lived experience] have to be at these tables. I sit at quite a few of those tables but I fought to sit at those tables because they generally are not open to us. So, first you have to fight to sit at these tables, then you have to deal with a whole bunch of racist shit while you're sitting at these tables. More than anything, I wholeheartedly believe that my job – outside handling cases – is to who the system that: I am not the only one. We are human and I'm going to be a voice for anyone who can't speak up because of their fear, that retaliation and stigma. I share so much of myself openly and freely to pretty much anybody because of that. I want people to know that we're human beings too. People change and make mistakes. The same shit that is going on in these families' lives is going on in your family. Let's get this straight. No family is untouched by mental illness, substance abuse, or other struggles. I share so much of myself so that one day we can get to the point where parents are seen as human. As it is now, parents are held to a higher standard – they are supposed to walk taller, be stronger, be smarter, work harder – but they should be accepted. For me, it's exhausting. I shouldn't be the only peer parent advocate in my state. We have to open those doors to value other people's experiences.