

YOUTH NARRATIVES

Youth Narrative One (Gail)

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

A: As an African American woman. I was never asked that question when I was in foster care.

Q: What did you see/experience that did or did not take your identity into account while you were in foster care?

A: Nothing took my identity into account – not in a positive way anyway. I had a bunch of county social workers. Many of them were also Black. One of the Black social workers told me “you won’t amount to anything, gonna end up pregnant and with kids and no daddy,” and other negative, demeaning things.

Q: What is your experience related to race in the foster care system?

A: I believe I was treated like I was “ghetto” and like I had a bad attitude, which at times I did have. I even had a therapist that said, “As a Black girl from Richmond, I know you are angry and have anger management problems.” She made that assumption about me and then verbalized it. How likely do you think I was to share, confide and work with this therapist?

Another example of my experience related to race in foster care had to do with relative caretakers. Many Black families see it as their duty and responsibility to step in and help raise a relative’s children even when not paid to do so but relative caregivers also try to “keep a low profile” because they don’t want to make waves and ask too many questions with the risk that social workers will take the children away from them. My own relative caretaker never got paid and was shocked and afraid to cash any of the checks that did eventually start to come to support my care.

Q: Do you currently have a role in supporting child clients in the system?

A: Yes, I work in a law firm, and I see my role as very important. I try to be kind and patient when people call, ask questions, and are frustrated and confused about their cases, especially caretakers who are calling to get phone numbers and directions. When I can, I let people know that they can get through this. I let them know that as a former foster youth, I really do understand. I also see myself as a mentor for youth. I got my BA degree and I am in school getting my master’s degree. I would love to open a homeless shelter for youth.

Q: Do you believe your experience was different from that of your white peers in foster care? Why or why not?

A: Yes. Black families are not given grace whereas white families are seen as “just having a bad time of it.” I believe my white peers and their white families got the “benefit of the doubt” on how complex and

detailed their care plans were, if they completed them or not, more liberal visitation, etc. There was not a narrative put on them, such as “angry Black girl or family” the way that Black families have. Think about how “crack moms” were demonized and slandered, even to this day, while parents on opioids are viewed as “sick” and in need of therapy or compassion for their disease.

Q: What are some barriers people may not be thinking about that you experienced?

A: Several.

1. Communication with Counsel: The entire time I was in foster care (five years) I only spoke with my lawyer once. He handled my case pro bono. I spoke with the social workers and investigators in his office three times total and the questions they asked were generic like “How are you? How is school? Everything ok?” I did not get notice of court hearings and when I did attend with my adult sister the case was always continued. The lawyer never came out and explained anything about what had happened or why it was continued again.
2. Parent representation: My parents had to pay for an attorney to represent them or go pro se.
3. Timing of court jurisdiction closing: My case closed under guardianship before I aged out which meant I was not eligible for IEP services. I question why the case was not kept open since the point at which it was closed was extremely close to when I would have aged out anyway and I could have used those supports.
4. Lack of family finding: After my case closed I was introduced to various family members and I found out that during one of my foster placements I had lived on the same block as a relative that I never knew until after I had exited foster care.
5. Identity and Community: Before being removed from my parents I had attended a school in my neighborhood where there were kids like me, “Black and Brown kids.” I felt well-adjusted and included. With the help of my mom I then transitioned to a private school on scholarship because I was smart. It was here that racial and socio-economic issues became more pronounced because I was one of only four African American students at the school. The parents of the other three were well off or at least able to pay the tuition. Then, after I was removed from my mother’s care the teachers and kids began identifying me as a “foster child” and saying things like “of course, we should have known.” It was decided that I should be placed with a white family in a white neighborhood so that I could continue in the same school. The foster parent “dropped me off” at a bus stop and said to take the bus to school which I did not know how to do. I felt very isolated and alone but when I would talk to the foster caregiver or county social worker about these challenges they “scoffed” and had the attitude that I should “figure it out because you are smart and at least getting to stay in your same school.”

Youth Narrative Two: (Gia)

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

A: As a Chinese American. I was never asked that question when I was in foster care.

Q: What did you see/experience that did or did not take your identity into account while you were in foster care?

A: My parents were immigrants and spoke very little English. English was our second language. My parents did not know enough English to understand the court system. When in court, my parents had interpreters and when at home, the two county social works on our case spoke Mandarin.

My sisters and I grew up eating only Chinese food at home and school. When I was taken out of my home, none of the caretakers asked me about my eating preferences. I had to learn to eat the foods they served. In one placement, I was in a mixed neighborhood. Otherwise, I was the only Asian child in most of the homes I was placed in and most of the schools as well. This caused me to go through a great identity crisis. For a while, I identified as white. I was in foster care for about six years and lived in multiple homes during that time. I also experienced 2-3 emergency care/respite placements and I was in one residential placement for a month. I stay in contact still with one family of all the placements.

Q: What is your experience related to race in the foster care system?

A: I was identified as the “quiet Asian kid.” But I remember in one foster home I was close to and made friends with my Black foster brother (who is a lawyer now and has horrible memories of being in foster care). We both did something wrong one time. The foster mother knew we had both done the same thing wrong but he got in trouble and I did not.

I was called racial slurs by my foster siblings in the foster home. I heard racial slurs made about my Black and Brown foster siblings too. We each experienced micro and outright aggressions.

I was severely physically abused in my home with my parents. My sisters were too. We had to be removed for sure. But I wonder if my parents got help along the way to deal with their stressors and learn better ways to parent. With someone closely watching and helping, would we have had to be removed?

When I was in foster care I lived with other kids whose parents were poor and had to steal or work to put food on the table. Was it really best for those kids (mostly Black) to be removed from people who love them and were doing the best they could? And those separations lasted a long time and caused a lot of damage to the children. That does not seem fair.

Q: Do you currently have a role in supporting child clients in the system?

A: I do not consider myself a mentor. I currently work in a position where I write policy for an agency that works with parents re-entering the community after jail. From what I have seen myself, and from hearing their stories, I truly believe that the child welfare system and the criminal justice system are racist!

Q: Do you believe your experience was different from that of your white peers in foster care? Why or why not?

A: I benefitted from the “model minority” myth in school and in foster homes. I was treated like my white peers and was aligned with them in others’ eyes. For example, I received the benefit of the doubt when things happened. I was also considered a “good kid” because I was quiet.

Q: What are some barriers people may not be thinking about that you experienced?

A: I have begun questioning whether biracial adoptions are really a good thing.

Youth Narrative Three: “Mark”

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

A: African American

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

I’m not sure, but I think I was treated like I did something wrong because I was housed with probation youths. I had not committed any crimes, but some in probation were gang bangers. This is where Mexican and Blacks clashed- right in group homes. It seemed like “Hispanics” seems to get more than me (computers and iPad) or got them quicker. Except for clothing allowances, the disbursement of extra things/ items did not seem uniform.

Q: What is your experience related to race in the foster care system?

A: I think the fights that I would get into with probation youth were race based. I was harassed and bullied.

Q: Do you believe your experience as a person of color was different from that of your white peers in the system? If yes, why do you think that?

A: Of all the years I was in group homes, there was only one white kid (male) among all the black and brown kids. At the end of the day, it is about race.

Q: Do you currently have a role in supporting child clients in the system? If yes, how? If not, what would you like to do?

A: I like the place I live right now [SILP extended care housing]. Everyone has a voice. I am respected. It would be my honor to help others in foster care.

Q: What are some barriers people may not be thinking about that you experienced?

A: To Social workers, lawyers, and judges I would say, in my first foster home, I wish I would have been able to take part in after school and community activities, but I could not because of gang activity. After my first foster home placement, I was always put in groups homes, such as Penny Lane; Children’s Home; Children are our future group home. I got a mental health diagnosis and have been on meds since I was little.

Youth Narrative Four (Yolanda)

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

A: Hispanic

Q: What did you see/experience that did or did not take your identity into account while you were in foster care?

A: That I had to disown my own ethnicity when I changed foster homes and I had to be in their religion and culture. That was difficult. I didn't know who I was, and I had to try and fit into many different ethnicities while in foster care between ages 5 through 21. My culture was Hispanic and being in African American and white homes made me question why my skin is different.

In every home I was in, I had to change my identity to match theirs. Being in non-Hispanic homes made me question my language as well and I did not speak Spanish. I wasn't allowed to express my Mexican heritage in my clothes. I wasn't taught a lot about my culture and I lost my Spanish for a time. It was different when I was in a Mexican home that was open. I felt like me.

In white homes, I questioned the way I talked, dressed, etc. A lot of how we are raised holds us. I didn't want to be forced to be what others wanted but it was hard because I felt like when I finally started accepting myself then I would be replaced and have to start again.

Q: What is your experience related to race in the foster care system?

A: I kept asking the courts to let me communicate with my dad even though he was in prison because phone calls with him kept me connected to my Hispanic culture and that bond helped me stay connected to my roots. I will always be Hispanic and have an undocumented parent. That history will always be in me. My relationship with my family even though we didn't live together helped me come back to learn about my culture. You can get lost and lost your connection to your roots. I already lost my parents, I can't lose when I'm from.

I see a lot of other foster youth who don't know about their history and they fall into culture that they are taught but are then missing the connection to their heritage. It is so easy to just follow the traditions of the family you are living with instead of maintaining your own.

Q: Do you currently have a role in supporting child clients in the system?

A: I see myself as a support for clients as a peer mentor. I can be the person they talk to without worrying that I will tell the social worker.

Q: Do you believe your experience was different from that of your white peers in foster care? Why or why not?

A: When I lived in white homes people were open and never saw me as a “Brown girl,” they saw me as an individual but other people outside the family saw me as a “little Brown girl.” When I was in court I never felt like I had a say in where I would be placed and what home I wanted to be in. It felt like the white kids in foster care were in homes with families that looked like them. I wanted to be in a Mexican home so that I could feel like I could blend in. When I was in a white or African American home it felt like people outside the families judged me. They questioned why I didn’t look like my parents. It was obvious that I wasn’t with my family. I felt like my white peers didn’t have to deal with that, people assumed they were with their real parents because they looked alike. I’m not sure if the white kids had more privileges or had a say in where they lived but it felt like to me they had a say because they were always placed in white homes. Other kids would point out the color and question why I didn’t look like the family I was living with. Then I also questioned why I was in a white home and I felt embarrassed and its so obvious. Asian kids in foster care also always seemed to be in placements with their own race.

When I was living in white homes they were not always understanding about my heritage. I was very emotional about holidays that I liked to celebrate but they were like “we don’t celebrate that holiday so it’s not a big deal.” I had to celebrate their holidays and be a part of their family. I felt like my culture and heritage were never brought up. No one asked me about what I celebrated it was just assumed that I would celebrate what they did. Some homes even express “my way or the highway when it comes to holidays and religion.”

I wonder if there are classes that could be taught about holidays and what it is like to show an interest in understanding a child’s background and heritage. A lot of foster caregivers I was with didn’t know how to talk with me about anything like that.

Q: What are some barriers people may not be thinking about that you experienced?

A: Seeking youth input about placements – Social workers need to ask clients about who they want to live with and how they would feel about living in a home and family with a different ethnicity. It’s ok to acknowledge that there are a shortage of foster homes but still make an effort in asking a client their preference and making an effort to continue to find a home where they feel comfortable.

Youth Narrative Five (Emma)

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

A: Hispanic

Q: What did you see/experience that did or did not take your identity into account while you were in foster care?

A: That I had to disown my own ethnicity when I changed foster homes and I had to be in their religion and culture. That was difficult. I didn’t know who I was, and I had to try and fit into many different ethnicities while in foster homes between ages 5 through 8. My culture was Hispanic and being in African American and White homes made me question why my skin is different.

In every home I was in, I had to change my identity to match theirs. Being in non-Hispanic homes made me question my language as well, as I had a heavy accent as a youth. I wasn't taught to express my Mexican heritage in my clothes. I wasn't taught a lot about my culture, and when I moved to a remote county where the primary language was English, I lost my Spanish for a time. It was different when I was in a Mexican home that was open. I felt like me.

In White homes, even though I was only in them for short periods of time, I questioned the way I talked, dressed, etc. Even now, a lot of how we are raised holds us. I didn't want to be forced to be what others wanted but it was hard because I felt like when I finally started accepting myself then I would be replaced and have to start again.

Q: What is your experience related to race in the foster care system?

A: I will always be Hispanic and have an undocumented parent. That history will always be in me. My relationship with my family helped me come back to learn about my culture. You can get lost and lose your connection to your roots. It's important to ask questions and find those that can help you reconnect if that is what you wish.

I see a lot of other foster youth who don't know about their history, and they fall into culture that they are taught but are then missing the connection to their heritage. It is so easy to just follow the traditions of the family you are living with instead of maintaining your own. This carries over to adulthood and without the proper support and connections, too often that identity is lost.

Q: Do you currently have a role in supporting child clients in the system?

A: I see myself as a support for clients. I can be the person they talk to without worrying that I will tell the social worker.

Q: Do you believe your experience was different from that of your white peers in foster care? Why or why not?

A: Sometimes, not always. Mainly thought of it as I grew older but as a child, I guess I didn't pay much attention to it unless insults/looks were directed at me. However, when I was in court, I never felt like I had a say in where I would be placed and what home I wanted to be in. It felt like the white kids in foster care were in homes with families that looked like them, but I couldn't really know that. I wanted to be in a Mexican home so that I could feel like I could blend in. When I was in a white or African American home it felt like people outside the families judged me. They questioned why I didn't look like my "parents". It was obvious that I wasn't with my family. Although since we usually moved within a couple of weeks and was only in a handful of foster homes before being placed with my aunt, I tried to not pay it any mind. When I was living in white homes they were not always understanding about my heritage. I was very emotional about holidays that I liked to celebrate but they were like "we don't celebrate that

holiday so it's not a big deal." I had to celebrate their holidays and be a part of their family. I felt like my culture and heritage were never brought up. No one asked me about what I celebrated it was just assumed that I would celebrate what they did.

Q: What are some barriers people may not be thinking about that you experienced?

A: Seeking youth input about placements – Social workers need to ask clients about who they want to live with and how they would feel about living in a home and family with a different ethnicity. It's ok to acknowledge that there is a shortage of foster homes but still make an effort in asking a client their preference and making an effort to continue to find a home where they feel comfortable.

Youth Narrative Six (Edith)

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

A: Black

Q: What did you see/experience that did or did not take your identity into account while you were in foster care?

A: There were certainly no cultural events that I was told about to support my identity while I was in foster care from age 3-15. When I was about 7 or 8 years old, a white social worker told me I was "not going to amount to anything." That was hateful and I still remember it. That social worker was moody and I never knew what I was going to experience in my interactions with her as a child. Being in foster also creates its own identity as a "foster youth". That is bad enough.

Q: What is your experience related to race in the foster care system?

A: I was placed with a Filipino family for about three years. They had trouble understanding some of my clothing choices and how to care for my hair. I did not like the food when I first moved there, but I learned to like it and love Filipino food to this day. They are very caring and very family oriented. I felt included. Everyone is family to them and I can still call or go by and they are welcoming of me. I was also placed in a few Hispanic homes for respite care. They were all English-speaking homes but were quite different from my culture and what I was used to. Other than that, I was mostly placed in African American homes.

Q: Do you currently have a role in supporting child clients in the system?

A: I work at a nonprofit with former foster youth and former probation youth. I have delivered speeches at schools and I let kids know that I am someone who has overcome the challenges I faced so I can give all kids (foster and non-foster youth) hope. My lawyer and her social worker were great and that made me want to become a lawyer someday too.

Q: Do you believe your experience was different from that of your white peers in foster care? Why or why not?

A: I can't say. I never lived with white foster youths and I was never in activities with them.

Q: What are some barriers people may not be thinking about that you experienced?

A: Several.

Seeking youth input about placements – If youth tell you something, listen the first time, especially about placements. Make sure you understand what they need and what they want.

Connection to family – As a person now out of foster care, I know very little to nothing about my family. I could go out there right now and get involved with a man that could be my brother or relative and I would not know. When I had my baby, the doctors and nurses asked me all kinds of health questions and I would have to say “I don't know that” and “I don't know that either.” That makes no sense. I once tried to get my court file but I was told at the time that it “cost too much to copy.” I would still like to know my family's names and what happened to my cousins. I would like to know my family medical history.

Youth Narrative Seven (Jasmine)

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

A: Chinese American

Q: What did you see/experience that did or did not take your identity into account while you were in foster care?

A: I felt very singular because there were only a handful of Asian children, workers and practitioners in the system. As an Asian, I was in a privileged position because I was perceived as “better behaved” than other kids. I was not viewed as a negative person, delinquent or dangerous.

I entered foster care in my teen years and experienced two foster home placements, one with a Pacific Islander family from Guam and the other with a single white woman. I felt more cultural familiarity with my first foster family and they looked more like me. However, their food, traditions and values were still inherently different from what I had grown up with. I only spent five months with them. In my second foster home, my sister and I lived with a single white woman who suffered from mental and emotional problems and had a completely different set of values and ideals from us. This disconnect caused extreme tension in my relationship with her. My mental and emotional health suffered as well. I stayed in this placement for two years until moving out at 16 to live independently in a transitional housing program. My first roommate in the transitional housing program was half Filipino. I had not expected to be placed with an Asian roommate but it was an identity that brought us together.

To survive in foster care, I learned to adapt to reflect the expectations and values of the home or environments I was placed in. For the most part, this meant adapting to white American culture and losing my own. I no longer spoke Chinese at home and lost a lot of my language ability. Being in foster care also distanced me from other Asian-American kids and from the Chinese American community my family used to be a part of.

Q: What is your experience related to race in the foster care system?

A: The child welfare system has little visibility into the experiences of Asian communities. That underrepresentation could mean a failure to engage with the community, to understand the challenges they face, and to intervene when necessary. Our child welfare system is failing to protect and serve Asian children because of a failure to identify and report child abuse and neglect in Asian families, a lack of community relationships to better serve Asian Americans and limited cultural understanding of Asian identities and experiences. For example, anyone working with “Asian” populations needs to understand that Asians have different languages, cultures, practices, traditions, etc. I did some research on whether the underrepresentation of Asian children in foster care is a good or bad thing. In some ways if Asian communities became more visible to the child welfare system they could be helped. But in other ways, if the system is going to treat Asians like poor Black and Brown people then it’s not something that would be welcome because it is not a “system designed to help.”

I was ordered into therapy pretty much from the beginning based on what had happened to my family. I did not open up with my white therapist and it was not helpful. It was not until I sought out counseling in college with a Black counselor who I connected with that I began to get something out of therapy. I was older, more ready, and felt more of a connection with the Black therapist. With the white therapist, I felt like I had to explain norms. With the Black therapist, she just got it.

Q: Do you currently have a role in supporting child clients in the system?

A: I have been involved a bit with California Youth Authority. I would like to do more to support youth currently in foster care. I would also like to consider becoming a lawyer and working in this space.

Q: Do you believe your experience was different from that of your white peers in foster care? Why or why not?

A: I believe there is more bias against Black and Brown people according to the numbers and people I have spoken to. They tend to be talked about more negatively and talked down to. When I was in foster care I was given the benefit of the doubt by caretakers as the “model minority.”

Q: What are some barriers people may not be thinking about that you experienced?

A: Engaging with immigrant and first generation populations – There is this weird balance that people have to understand when working with Asian families. It is a balance between asking more questions so as not to gloss over anything and allowing the family autonomy. Quietness does not mean everything is ok. Timing is important. Often families need time to reflect on the questions and feel they can trust the social worker, lawyer or judge before responding.

My own parents came to America for graduate school and I was their first child. They loved me and worked hard to give me and my sibling the best opportunities possible. My parents also had a very tumultuous relationship, and our home was often a violent environment. They fought verbally and

physically, and the police were called several times for domestic violence. My father went to jail and we entered foster care.

I had an aunt who could have cared for us but she did not have appropriate space in her residence and so was not able to become our caregiver. She was also a recent immigrant and spoke little English which limited her work options. She was a nanny and her income was very low. Throughout the process of trying to qualify for kinship care licensing she struggled to understand how the system worked and did not have access to any social workers that spoke her language. As a result, she became less and less involved with us and ultimately resigned from her efforts to try to become licensed and allowed the system to “take us” instead.

Youth Narrative Eight (Katie)

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

A: I am a Black, African American woman.

Q: What did you see/experience that did or did not take your identity into account while you were in foster care?

A: I don't think I really thought about my identity because the system and being so young and growing up in it, with all that chaos going on in my life I didn't think about my identity within the system. I have always been a self-conscious person so in learning and going to school and different things that we learned about I thought about race and my place in this world, but I've always been, you know, proud to be a Black person in America.

Q: What is your experience related to race in the foster care system?

A: Two parts – as a child in foster care and as a professional working in this area.

Youth perspective:

As I was going through the system, between age 4 and 18, this thought wasn't on my mind. As I got older and began to learn, especially now, and I do some reflections on certain experiences that I have, I can make that correlation now. I have the knowledge to make that correlation and really look at things.

Really the substance of the foster care system is just societal issues that drive everything. For example: rent. The foster care system doesn't determine rent, it doesn't determine where you live, it doesn't determine wages. But those are all the factors that we use to examine people. Reflecting on those things helps me think about broader laws, broader systems, broader rules and regulations and practices of society and how that drives us in the system. If I'm looking back on my experience with the knowledge I have now, I realize that my mother only made \$1900 a month and was living paycheck to paycheck, which caused a lot of stressors. Our main home was in a remote part of Florida. We didn't have a car. So what services were even available to my mother, including sufficient transportation to get where she needed to go for appropriate services? When I read my file, I read that services were not put in place

“officially” for me, my mother, or my siblings. Or it wasn’t documented correctly. But the rule of thumb in foster care is that if it’s not documented, it didn’t happen.

Professional perspective: My first internship in the child welfare system was with a Black-owned company so every day I saw people who look like me. I saw professionals who look like me and race was not on the forefront of my mind. As I began to practice the higher up I went, the more people did not look like me. I also saw that I am not considered a decision maker. I get to make recommendations and the decisionmaker either agrees and rules in my favor or they make their own decisions. Sometimes defending my recommendations for clients was more challenging when the client looked like me. I became an advocate through having to advocate for myself. Once you know how to do that you can do it for other people. I challenge my leadership in decisions that they place upon me. I won’t go along with a decision that is being made that is unreasonable for a family or their situation.

I have learned about history and the Willie Lynch concept of pitting enslaved people against each other by highlighting our differences. I truly believe that is a real thing and I’ve seen so many situations where people choose their livelihood over what is right. People don’t want to step out of line and lose their contract from going against the powers that be. In individual cases, I have seen situations where the facts did not meet the criteria of abuse, abandonment or neglect but the powers that be say “put this” even if it doesn’t fit the criteria.

We have discernment when we go to people’s homes. You can make decisions based on what you see, and your recommendations are largely based on your own experiences, biases, and how you grew up. Just because you turned out to be this way, if culturally that is not for me that doesn’t make me a bad parent or a bad person.

Q: Do you currently have a role in supporting child clients in the system?

A: I am currently in a peer support role. The role is fairly new but I continue to sit on permanency roundtables that brainstorm challenges of a case and create action steps to get to permanency and stabilize day-to-day wellbeing.

In my role as a peer mentor, I’m underwater trying to swim and hold the job. I deal with racism in this job. My other colleague who was the only Black man in the organization has been let go because they created this space for diversity and inclusion and when he and I began to speak up they eliminated our position because they didn’t want to deal with the things he was raising so they exercised their power by eliminating his role and offering me a different role as a peer mentor. I feel like I am being tokenized and it doesn’t fit within the organization because peer support cannot be very helpful from where I sit but I accepted the role because my livelihood was on the line. Either I accept the role as offered or need to live off savings until I find a new job.

My current position wasn’t well thought out though and it doesn’t fit well in this organization because they are so worried about the clients that we serve that they forget how they are treating me. I’m still a Black woman with lived experience in the system. Even after you age out, this will always be my experience. I can be homeless tomorrow. Yes, I have a support system, but I can’t call any of those people to help me with rent if I lose my job tomorrow.

In meetings I am treated like a secretary by those who lead the meeting which makes it difficult to be “impactful,” especially when my suggestions are skipped over. What is the purpose of you knowing my lived experience if you are not going to implement it? If you are just going to go with what the system says? If you really understand systemic racism then you will understand that what is in the “white books” doesn’t work with how real people operate. Trainings and textbooks aren’t reality. It sounds good but it just isn’t reality. When I was a case manager, one of the biggest threats to reunification on my cases was housing. So I became interested in the housing market, and what was happening with affordable housing programs in our area. I advocated and showed examples of how you can reach the same destination a few different ways. If the agency told me to terminate parental rights instead of reunification for a recommendation I never did it. I always told the agency they had to sign it themselves.

I became an author and wrote about my experience as a child in foster care, aging out of foster care, becoming a professional in foster care. I wrote about being on my own and fending for myself, what that means, and all the mental struggles and barriers that a person fights with internally that others don’t see or understand unless you’re able to communicate with them.

I tell my story because it highlights a lot of things that reflect back on the reality of diversity, equity and inclusion efforts. I have a friend right now who has been in prison for twelve years in South Carolina. That would have been me too if not for my option to go to college instead. She didn’t have that option. When I am at work and I explain these things to people, I get so frustrated because the same people who were clapping for me at a presentation about my lived experiences in the system seem to forget when I tell them what my clients are going through and they demonize them. How is it switched so on and off?

These last couple months, I’ve felt confused and defeated. Working in this system, you have to challenge everything. You have to hold people accountable in their positions. Even if I’m asked if “I’m angry” or “why I’m angry” – which is a microaggression itself – I don’t allow that to deflect the conversation and take me away from the issue. I’ve learned to continue the conversation about the client.

Q: What are some barriers people may not be thinking about that you experienced?

A: Several.

1. Financial – We need to be more mindful of people’s financial situation and how that should not be a barrier to reunification. I had a case where the Guardian ad Litem said that the mother should take her kid to Disney World. Going to Disney World is a privilege, it is not a necessity. To live, I don’t need to go to Disney. I want to go, but as a system, that’s not a criteria we should use to judge parents or to say when they are ready for reunification. People who make these recommendations mostly don’t look like me. That case ended in TPR. I was no longer on the case but the mother’s attorney called me to say I was the only person who ever fought for the child’s mom.
2. Social work is not social control – I try to instill in my colleagues that social work is not social control. Our job is to empower people to believe in their thoughts and what they believe for themselves. If I believe that I don’t want to get a GED then encourage me and empower me to

go to school and give me the tools to do that versus trying to turn me somewhere else just because it is whatever narrative you have about me.

3. Diversity and inclusion – people need to understand their goals around diversity and inclusion. Are you learning about diversity and inclusion only to better serve the clients but at the same time disregard the employees. If I'm your colleague, and you want to learn about my culture or ask me a question about my culture, you will go pay somebody to tell you about it. Why don't you believe in what I believe in my brain or what I know in my brain about my own culture? I'm still baffled by that. I don't feel like a trusted colleague when it comes to people who don't look like me.
4. Workforce – Back when I was a child in foster care, caseworkers were quitting just as fast as they were getting hired. Some people were just never coming back which meant that the written case files were unattended, and supervisors had to scramble to figure out what was going on. That was a massive failure of the system. Now, because of high turnover rates that have still been times where I'm really just working do to home visits and make sure everyone is alive. Court documents are not getting done by the deadline and there is no time for children's doctors' appointments.