

Reunification Heroes



Ebony Porter

Ebony connects so well with our parenting youth in extended foster care and offers compassion and trauma-informed support during, arguably, the most difficult period in the lives of these young parents. The only complaint I have ever received regarding Ebony is that she was not assigned to their cases sooner.

— Ebony's Nominator

For every new parent, but especially youth still in foster care themselves, entry into parenthood can be a tremendously daunting task. Fortunately, Ebony Porter and her team at the Children's Law Center of California (CLC) stand alongside newly parenting foster youth with patience, love, and encouragement every step of the way. As a case manager with the CLC's pre-filing intervention (PFI) program, Ebony provides pregnant and parenting youth in care the support they need to lead safe, joyful lives with their children. Driven by her own lived experience in the child welfare system, Ebony brings an exceptional depth of compassion and understanding to every client she serves.

Ebony joined the CLC six years ago as a peer advocate, a role focused on assisting transition aged youth navigate their paths to adulthood. After working as a social work investigator with children removed from their homes, Ebony was ultimately drawn back to serving older youth when she and her colleague Kaveh Landsverk were asked to help develop the PFI unit. Though in its first few years of operation, the program has already proven to be an innovative and highly effective model in disrupting recurring patterns of child welfare involvement. Ebony and her colleagues have presented their efforts to national audiences and hope the approach will gain further traction in jurisdictions across the country.

With the PFI team, Ebony is fiercely committed to helping young parents overcome every barrier in their paths to success. She possesses an unwavering faith in their strength, resilience, and determination, and strives every day to help them grow into the best parents they can be.

By Claire Choi, B.A. Candidate at Columbia University in the City of New York



Tell me something interesting about yourself.

I am a mother, which has been just the most amazing experience ever. I have a four-year-old son, and he's my whole world. While motherhood has been a journey, I really do feel like I've found a new purpose in my life; not the only one, but a new one. And I am stepping into the role fully fledged and giving it everything I've got. I love to see him experience the world in a different way than I did. It just makes all the hard days worth it. I still can't believe I get to raise the most genuine, loving, coolest kid, and I'm feeling really blessed.



Other things about me: I'm a big foodie. I love to eat, I love to cook. Honestly, if I wasn't doing this, I'd definitely be dabbling in the food industry in some shape or form. I really like outdoorsy stuff, too. But more like, being still in nature—please don't ask me to hike or climb anything. I love going to new places, trying new things, I'm always down for a new experience. I'm really an open book.

Tell me about the work that you do. In what ways do you support families involved in the child welfare system?

I work at the Children's Law Center, a legal services organization that advocates for youth and young adults in the foster care system. I've been at CLC for almost six years, and I'm currently a case manager with our pre-filing intervention (PFI) unit.

The pre-filing unit is a fairly new program, which came about because of the staggering statistics around parenting youth in the system and their need for more support. The pre-filing unit was the vision of our former director, Lucia Murillo, who's now been appointed as a dependency court judge. She had previously represented parents and children in the community for years, and she saw in real time what was missing and where this type of work would be most effective. She saw so many foster youth exiting care, becoming parents, and repeating a cycle that they never intended to. She selected my colleague Kaveh and me to help develop the program from the ground up, and now we're two and a half years in, running strong. We've actually just expanded our team and added another parenting case manager, Sarah Flores, who is a strong mom and an amazing example of our clients. So, we are now a team of three, and I feel very honored to have been trusted with Lucia's vision and to work alongside such amazing people.

While working with our young adult population of 18- to 21-year-olds in extended foster care, we found that a lot of our clients who became parents were being filed on at alarming rates and becoming involved with the child welfare system. For many of our clients, you would see that most of the risks that led to a filing or removal really stemmed from a lack of support and unaddressed trauma they had experienced during their time in the foster care system. This, in turn, became a



repeated cycle of generational trauma and DCFS involvement. It became our goal to help break that cycle of dependency and help set our parenting clients up for success. And so we built the pre-filing intervention program.

In our PFI program, we surround our young pregnant and parenting clients with the support needed to ensure they have a chance at a successful parenting journey. We hope to nurture the essence of parenting within them and empower them to build the lives they want for themselves and their families. And most importantly, we work together to address any risks in their lives that could potentially lead to a filing or DCFS involvement. For many of our young parenting clients, “risks” can look like domestic violence or intimate partner violence, substance abuse, and mental health issues. So many of our clients are in need of support and resources to be able to provide for themselves and feel empowered enough to disrupt a cycle that's been present in their lives for generations.

And so, we (PFI) choose to fight alongside our young parenting clients and help provide the resources needed, like legal advocacy, case management, and overall guidance in their parenting journeys. We help our clients create their village because no one does it alone, or at least shouldn't have to. And I'm happy to say it's been working. But it's really all the clients, they're the resilient ones who bring the fight. All of our clients want what's best for their children. They want to disrupt that cycle of dependency in their life. They want to keep their children safe. They just need support and a little grace while they do that.

Are there any personal experiences that reinforce your commitment to your work?



My lived experience is definitely what drives my work. It is the reason I do this. I entered the foster care system when I was three years old and emancipated when I was 19, so I spent all of my childhood and honestly most of my life in the system. Growing up, I always knew I'd be working in this field in some shape or form. Living in foster care, I saw ways the system could be different, ways I needed the system to be different. As a result of my own experiences and the experiences of my siblings and people that I've met along the way, it has always been a priority for me to help change and improve the system for youth and young adults.

Bringing my lived experience into my work comes naturally. It is my story and essentially who I am. It is what qualifies me as an expert in this field, and I do see the value that it brings. When we're working with clients, the rapport, the connection, it's all just a little bit more natural and makes things a bit easier for everyone involved. I own it, I love it, and I'm proud to be able to use it in this area of work.



I don't know if I would be in this field without my lived experience in the foster care system. Looking back, I have so many mixed feelings about my time in care, but one feeling in particular is gratitude. I'm honestly grateful for this experience (the good and the bad) because first, it's made me who I am, and I love me some ME! And secondly, being in the foster care system, I've met so many wonderful people who are the loves of my life, and I've formed this family that wouldn't have existed otherwise. When they say God has a plan for you, they ain't lying, and I wholeheartedly believe that! I now know not to question the path that unfolds before me; instead I walk it with faith, not by sight.

What was an experience that shaped the way you think about reunification?

My own experience definitely shaped my views on reunification. I never reunified with my parents, and after I emancipated from the foster care system, it was really challenging reconnecting with my family. I felt like we were all displaced and traumatized. Healing the hurt you never caused is a heavy assignment, but it's been my reality when it comes to my family. I lost so much time with my family that I can never get back, and that's what hurts the most. For our transition aged youth, transitioning into adulthood can be challenging if you never reunified because not only are you navigating the world as a new adult, which is already difficult in itself, you are also trying to figure out who you are, and so you find yourself returning to where you came from to find out. It's a messy, complex, emotional journey. Trust me, I know, because I've embarked on this journey myself.

Because of my own experience, I do understand that reunification may not ever happen for some. However, I don't think our efforts should stop there. While children and young adults navigate the foster care system, we need to do everything we can so that families are able to stay connected. Keeping families together is an essential part of this work and needs to be reinforced. Because at the end of the road in the foster care system, everyone returns home eventually. I tell the attorneys that are representing youth in the system and making these important decisions on their behalf that when these children become adults, the number one thing that they will do is go back home, no matter how many times a judge rules against it. And home isn't always a place, home oftentimes refers to your people, your loved ones. So, we can either help our clients pave their path home in a way that is safe, healthy, and appropriate, or we can continue to focus our energy on removal and perpetuating cycles of generational trauma. The choice is ours.

What are some of the strengths of the child welfare system in your area?

I think some of the strengths of our county's child welfare system involve the compassionate, hardworking people doing the work on the ground with the children and families. These are the social workers, attorneys, case managers, peer advocates, CASAs, mentors, etc. I want to believe



the system can achieve all that it was intended to do, but I know this is not the case. In fact, a lot of the responsibility of how impactful the system is relies heavily on those involved. But I believe in those of us who are fighting the good fight, day in and day out.

Another strength is exposure. During my time in care, I was exposed to many different things like diverse cultures, teachings, experiences, and ways of life. I do not know if I would have gotten any exposure, truthfully, had I never entered the foster care system, simply because those who are struggling cannot afford to experience the world the way others can. I can remember my first time going to summer camp and riding a horse. I had never even seen a horse before then. I also remember traveling with the college prep program I was involved with; that was the first time I got on a plane. For me, these experiences and opportunities changed my life, and may not have been accessible to me and my family had I not been in foster care. So, I am grateful for all the exposure I got while in the child welfare system.

What are some of the weaknesses of the child welfare system in your area?

There are many weaknesses in the child welfare system, but I'd say the most significant weakness is that sometimes it's not safe, which is a huge problem and unacceptable. Sometimes the child welfare system exposes our kids to tons of trauma that otherwise they would not have been exposed to. It is an irreparable trauma, honestly. That is a reality that I've seen for myself, that I've experienced for myself, that I've known people to experience. There are real life horror stories following DCFS involvement and entering the child welfare system, and sadly there's a lack of understanding and a lack of empathy around the trauma children and families experience.

I think another weakness is that we do not think long term. Too often we only consider the short-term solutions, and we fail to consider how this may impact a person in the long term. By doing this, we ignore certain parts of the harm that the system has caused, and that is not okay. Our children and families do not have the luxury of doing that, so why should we? I know the goal is to keep children safe, but we cannot do that if we do not consider the fact that these children will one day become adults, and the decisions we make today will forever impact them and the adults they will grow into. So, I wish the system would think more about that when working with children and families.

We also need to slow down! There is no reason that we should be making these life-altering decisions in the span of five minutes and circulating cases through a courtroom with very little knowledge about these families. We have to slow it down, we have to know and consider all of the facts, and we have to take our time when making decisions that are going to change the course of someone's life. We have to do better.



In what specific ways has the pre-filing unit improved child welfare practice?

Relative family placement has been a significant effort in the pre-filing unit that has actively combated the harmful cycle of removal from being repeated. Seeking relatives is one way we've been able to help keep families together. Ensuring a child stays connected to their family and family lineage is really important to us, because it's important to them. I'd like to see this be more of a priority in our child welfare practice today. But I think because of how overwhelmed our child welfare system has become and how fast things move, we defer to the quickest solutions, which unfortunately are not always the best solutions. Nothing good comes from rushing; we need to slow it down. In our PFI unit, we are fortunate to be able spend the time needed on our cases and focus on the areas that are oftentimes overlooked but so important, like building rapport.

Taking the time to get to know our clients and their families has been a very simple strategy in our practice that I believe can improve child welfare practice over all. Building relationships and establishing trust has been such a significant piece in our work, probably the most important piece by far. This is step one in our process and has really allowed everything else to unfold in an authentic way. We learn so much after getting to know our clients, and it puts us in a much better position to serve them, which makes all the difference.



Would you say that there are any misconceptions about families who are impacted by the child welfare system?

The biggest misconception people have about families who are impacted by the child welfare system is that parents who find themselves involved with the child welfare system are bad parents, and if they don't reunify with their children, they didn't love them. That's a really unfair misconception because it couldn't be further from the truth. Becoming involved with the child welfare system can be for a number of different reasons, but it is almost never because parents did not love their children. The child welfare system is complex with super complicated processes, and as complicated as each phase of the system can be, one constant factor that remains the same throughout the entirety is a parent's love for their child. This is something that I have witnessed firsthand time and time again as my team and I have worked with young parents navigating the child welfare system. That it's a parents love for their child that keeps them going so that they make it out of the child welfare system. Working with our parenting clients has been such a humbling experience. I am constantly blown away by their resiliency and patience.



Another misconception is that if you are a youth or young adult that made it out of the child welfare system, you should be considered broken, a lost cause, or someone with all these issues. That is a huge misconception that is simply false. First, who doesn't have issues? And secondly, former foster youth and anyone who has survived the child welfare system are far from broken or lost causes. People who have survived the child welfare system are some of the most resilient people on the planet. Please put some respect on their names. And if you feel indifferent about those you consider "broken," just remember how we walk with the broken speaks louder than how we sit with the great.

What advice would you give to judges, agency directors, legislators, governors or the president about how to improve the system?

To judges, directors, legislators, governors, etc., we must do better! We can do better, and we can start by listening and learning from those directly impacted by the child welfare system. This is not a guessing game, there is no need to guess the ways in which we can improve the system. We have the key right in front of us, our clients, and their stories will provide us with the answers. We, the people with lived experience, are the experts in this case, and we wish to be heard. We ask that you humble yourselves and take direction from those who experienced the child welfare system. We would know better than anyone.

If you find any of this challenging, walk a mile in our shoes and see if you can live with the current state of the child welfare system. We are real people trying to live our best lives. We want the same opportunity at life that others have, but we won't be able to do that until the child welfare system provides an equitable chance. Many of us did not ask to be here, but here we are, moving forward because there's only one direction to go.

Are there any last things about your experiences or you that you wanted us to highlight?



As a former foster youth, I am trying my best to redefine my experience and defy the stigmas and stereotypes that come with my label. Surviving the system was not easy and it has been quite a journey, but I did not do it alone. I am thankful to everyone who helped me in my time of need while navigating the child welfare system. To all the advocates who zealously fought in my corner, to my therapists who truly listened, my mentors that never gave up on me, and to the directors who took a chance on me, thank you! It is because of people like you and your tireless commitment that I did not slip through the cracks, but instead grew from the concrete. Thank you for showering me with love and giving me hope.

