Acknowledgements

The Department of Family and Community Services (FACS) gratefully acknowledges the practitioners who shared their stories of good practice and the wonderful children, young people and families featured in these pages.

The report recognises the work of many practitioners from the NSW Government and non-government organisations including:

- Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care State Secretariat (AbSec)
- Life Without Barriers
- MacKillop Family Services
- SDN Children’s Services

Thank you to photographer Alex Vaughan, who captured all of the beautiful images in the report. Her vision, talent and passion truly brought the stories to life.

The photos feature the children, young people, foster carers, parents and practitioners whose stories are depicted. While the practitioners have used their own names, the names of children, young people, parents and carers have been changed to protect their identities. The exceptions are Ann Marie in ‘Second chance’, Rachael in ‘Keeping my promise’, Kate in ‘Safe hands’ and Brittany in ‘Beautiful’, who each chose to use their real names.

Photos © Alex Vaughan
As I read the stories in the 2015 *Shining a light on good practice in NSW* report I feel an incredible sense of optimism that families can overcome challenges – and create safe and loving homes for their children – when supported by creative and courageous casework.

The journeys of the children and families in these stories left their mark on me. Whether it’s the father that stepped up to take care of his adolescent daughter after years apart; the teenage mum who did everything she could to keep her baby; or the young boy who found a new forever family after missing out on far too much, for far too long, you too cannot fail to be moved by the stories in these pages.

The dedication demonstrated in the good casework that fills this report, together with the stunning photographs; vividly capture the relationships that form the beating heart of all good practice. It also reminds us of the humanity of child protection work and the beauty and joy created from it.

Finally, to the families, children and young people who gave such raw and honest accounts of their lives, I cannot thank you enough. Your voices help the Department in its endeavours to ensure all children have a safe home.

**Brad Hazzard**

Minister for Family and Community Services
and Minister for Social Housing
Writing this report is one of our favourite jobs in the OSP. This is our third Good Practice report and we think it’s our best yet - the photos are great and we have more voices from the families our good people have helped. As always it has been a privilege to tell these stories because they showcase everything that makes good child protection work so powerful and so essential.

Our intention is that every one of the 16 stories in the following pages is free from the jargon, labels, acronyms and professional language that can alienate the very families and communities we want to help. It can also distance practitioners from the reality of life for vulnerable children and give weight to the expertise of tools and models over the skills of people and the strength of relationships. We hope that the very plain words in the stories draws the focus squarely on the power of real people, doing the most real of work.

I am proud to work for a Department that celebrates its people and our partners making a difference and I am inspired by the passion and dedication that shines through in these stories. May they influence that one extra step, spark an idea and renew hope. Most importantly may they make you proud of the profession of child protection and serve as a reminder that people, the relationships they form and the conversations they have, are the best we have to offer the children who need us.

Thank you to all who have contributed their stories and to my dear colleagues in the OSP. Most particular thanks to Megan O’Neill who knows and cares about every word in this report. Over to you our loyal readers, let these stories be proof that your efforts are valued and your work makes the best difference.

Kate Alexander
Executive Director
Office of the Senior Practitioner
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Second chance

ANN MARIE, MOTHER

My life with Peter was a nightmare. He could be so sweet and kind, and then the littlest thing would set him off. He’d slap and punch me every day. Over a year, he broke my jaw and ribs, and he punched my face so many times it would swell up like a balloon. One time he punched my eyes so badly I couldn’t see for days.

I didn’t realise he used drugs when we met, but I soon found out. Ice, alcohol – whatever he could get his hands on. When he was coming down it was the worst – his temper was out of control. I thought about leaving every day, but he’d threaten to kill me if I did. I felt trapped.

After hitting me, he’d tell me he was sorry and that he loved me. He was so convincing that I would believe the lies. Later I learnt from my counsellors that this is a classic domestic violence cycle.

When Chloe was removed, my life was not worth living. I contemplated suicide as a way of dealing with the numbness, self-loathing and shock. I felt like I’d screwed up everything and I just couldn’t live with myself.

I have close family members who are victims of the Stolen Generation. Because of their experience – no courts, no appeals, no second opinions – I thought Chloe was taken and that was that. For the first three months, I lived in a blur of hopelessness. I didn’t understand I had the right to fight for her.

Once I learned I could seek to have Chloe back, I did everything FACS asked of me. There were times I lost heart and thought Chloe may be better off without me. Some days it felt like the goalposts kept moving and nothing I did was good enough. But things changed when I met a group of friends at my church. It was the first time in my life I was surrounded by good people, and their support gave me strength.

Then Emily came along. Emily is a fantastic caseworker with an open heart and mind. She never judged me like some of the other caseworkers I’ve known. Trust me, I was my own toughest critic – I didn’t need someone else looking down on me. Emily was different; she saw my potential even after I’d hit rock bottom. I’ll never forget the day when she rang and said, ‘Let’s get Chloe home to you’. I know she had some battles along the way, but she got my baby back.

Words cannot describe how I feel now Chloe and I are a family again. It’s just everything really. It’s the small things, like watching her dressing up as a teacher and playing schools, seeing her lose her baby teeth, and giving her hugs whenever I want. We still have lots of work to do together. Chloe has nightmares and flashbacks about what we both lived through, but even though it can be hard, I love being the person who can help her heal.

I’m now studying for my diploma in counselling so I can help other women living with violence. I know I’ll be able to help, because
I understand how hard it is to walk away. I want to tell every woman trapped in a violent relationship that you are not a punching bag – you are so much better than that. You can rise up if you have the faith to reach out for help.

**EMILY, FACS CASEWORKER**

‘Mum’s eyes were always black. She tried to hide them with sunglasses, but I knew’. I will always remember Chloe telling me this. She was very protective of her mum and fretted when they weren’t together. Chloe had deep worries because Ann Marie’s ex-partner, Peter, used drugs, drank too much and would beat Ann Marie brutally almost daily. Ann Marie told me later that she was too terrified to leave him as he’d threaten to hunt her down and kill her. She was living with incredible stress, and life became so unsafe for Chloe that she came into care at age four.

Having Chloe taken was dreadful for Ann Marie. How she then found the courage to leave Peter and make a statement to police that led to his arrest and time in prison was amazing. Things were going so well that Chloe’s caseworkers at the time started the process of returning her to Ann Marie’s care. Then Peter got out of prison and Ann Marie went into hiding, fearing for her safety. Because they didn’t hear from Ann Marie for weeks, the caseworkers decided Chloe needed to stay in foster care.

Two years later, Chloe was unravelling. Her foster carers reached out to us for help, as she was highly anxious, emotionally withdrawn and refusing to eat or speak. This is when I met Chloe. She was so guarded and seemed to be telling me what I wanted to hear, rather than what was really in her heart. Because she didn’t trust adults and was so shy, I needed to prove to her that I cared, if she was ever going to tell me how she was feeling. I started spending time with her at home and school. Chloe loves art so we’d draw pictures together and talk about school. It was slow, but Chloe started to trust me.

Over the coming weeks and months, Chloe opened up and told me how desperately sad she was without her mum and how she wanted to live with her again. She was terrified her mum would be hurt again and was worried she wasn’t there to protect her. As I began to understand Chloe, I knew she needed a network she could trust when she was feeling worried and frightened. I held meetings with Chloe’s foster carers and teachers, as well as Ann Marie, so we could support Chloe to feel safe.

Ann Marie had changed a lot since Chloe came into care and hadn’t seen Peter in more than two years. She saw a counsellor, had found stable housing, was working two jobs, and had made new friends through her local church. Seeing the dramatic changes in Ann Marie gave me hope that we could increase her visits with Chloe and once again create a loving bond between them. To help them repair their relationship, I referred them to a family counselling service. I felt it was important that Ann Marie got some help in finding the right words and actions to help Chloe heal. I went along to some of the early sessions to help Chloe feel comfortable and trust the counsellor enough to open up.

Everything was going so well that I started to explore the possibility of Chloe going home. We talked to the main people in Chloe’s life and there was a lot of nervousness. Everyone cared so much about her that they were frightened she’d be exposed to more trauma if it broke down. Chloe’s solicitor told me straight out, ‘We’ve been here before and it didn’t work’.

I had to balance these concerns with Chloe’s clear wish to live with her mum, and Ann Marie’s incredible transformation. A major turning point was when the counsellor told me that Ann Marie and Chloe’s relationship was blossoming and they ‘experienced great joy in one another’. Chloe’s foster carers were very protective of her but told me they knew ‘she needs to be with her mother’. I continued to speak to the other services supporting the family and regularly visited Ann Marie at home. I had to make sure the changes that she’d made were long term and that, even if she found a new partner, or something stressful came up in the future, she’d be able to stay on her current path.
There were some hard days. I needed to have the courage to fight for what I thought was best for Chloe and remain hopeful that this time Ann Marie had really changed. This little family has shown me that the road to change is not always a straight one. People need to make decisions in their own time, and just because they’ve failed in the past doesn’t mean they aren’t capable of great change in the future. As caseworkers, we must keep an open mind and be willing to carry the risk of failure if we believe it’s the right outcome for a child.

When the Children’s Court magistrate supported our recommendation, we all stood on the court steps, hugging each other – even the solicitors! It was incredibly emotional. To help Chloe prepare for the move home, we created a calendar that counted down the days. It started with weekend visits, then sleepovers, then eventually the big day arrived. Chloe’s foster carers hosted a party and gave her a photo album of their time together. She was home with her mum on 23 December – just in time for Christmas.

Ann Marie hosted a thank you celebration and invited everyone who’d supported her. She kept hugging me and thanking me for giving her a second chance. ‘Things are just beautiful now; Chloe and I couldn’t be happier’, she said.

Since going home, Chloe has completely come out of her shell – she dances around, sings and smiles all the time. She hopes to go on The Voice one day! The other day I asked her how everything was going. She said, ‘Emily, I feel 10 out of 10 for happiness. I wouldn’t change anything in the whole world’.

Ann Marie is such a strong, amazing woman, she’s even started speaking publically about her experience so she can help other women living with violence. I know Ann Marie’s courage to speak out will help lots of other women and children, and I really admire her.

Reflection

This story is a beautiful example of courageous practice and a moving story of a family reunited against all odds. Emily showed great belief in Ann Marie and built a relationship of mutual trust and respect. Emily could see the possibility of Chloe returning home to her mum but was clear about what needed to happen to make this a reality. Emily did not judge Ann Marie and demonstrated true empathy while being realistic and attuned to the risks. It was clear her aim was to get the very best outcome for Chloe, and I loved the care and thought that went into making their reunion so successful.

There is no doubt that the empathy, courage and skills of this caseworker have changed the course of Ann Marie and Chloe’s lives forever. Emily should also take great pride that Ann Marie will now go on to change the lives of other women trapped in violent relationships and give hope to others that their lives too can be different – a true gift to ‘pay forward’ the support and compassion Ann Marie received from Emily.

It cannot help but make us all smile just thinking of Chloe as the happy little girl playing with her mum and auditioning for The Voice in the living room. This was a second chance when all was lost – a second chance nothing short of a miracle for this courageous mum and daughter.

I am so very proud of the inspirational work that happens in Family and Community Services and, just like Chloe, when reading this I feel 10 out of 10 for happiness!

Christine Callaghan, District Director Nepean Blue Mountains, Department of Family and Community Services
BELINDA, FACS CASEWORKER

There are some things kids say that stick with you. You’d think the stories about the really awful stuff that’s happened to them would be the hardest to hear, but often it’s the simplest of lines that get you the most. For me, those lines are why I really love my work. They are an invitation to make a difference.

With Harry it was when he told me that what he wanted, more than anything in the world, was for someone to pick him up from school. And he didn’t mean every day. He wanted to come out of class one day and see someone who was there waiting just for him. It was about mattering enough to someone that they are there just because. It said a lot about what he hadn’t had.

At FACS we first heard about Harry when he was a baby and was moved to his uncle and aunt’s to live. His parents said they didn’t really want him and they weren’t coping. The next time we heard anything about Harry, he was eight and sadder than any boy should be. He was with his parents again – it hadn’t worked out with his uncle and aunt and they’d given him back. His teacher was worried about him because he was coming to school with a bleeding nose or bad bruises, was causing havoc and was easily upset. He’d told her that his parents called him a ‘spastic’ and an ‘Indian dog’.

So I went out to the school to meet Harry and talk to him. His teacher, Mrs Chaulk, sat in. Harry didn’t hold back – telling me how he had been hit and hurt and how his family didn’t like him. He was brave, and what he said was so raw and so real. When he finished and left the classroom we sat together, Mrs Chaulk and me, one of those moments you share with good people who do this work – where there’s not much to say but so much to do.

I rang Harry’s parents and told them I was really worried about him. They said ‘don’t bring him home’. Just like that. They really meant it – his stuff was left at their door that night and they wouldn’t see him. I rang his aunt and they didn’t want him either. My next job was to talk to Harry and tell him he wasn’t going home that day. I was pretty worried about how he would react. I started by saying that we cared about him and that it wasn’t okay that he’d been hurt. It was a ‘spiel’ I’d said before – one that stays with children for the rest of their lives, however well you say it. I was going on and I was getting nervous about the next part but I didn’t finish because Harry jumped up and threw his arms around me. ‘Thank you, thank you’, he kept saying. ‘Thank you that I don’t have to go home’.

It was the first time I have ever had a child thank me for taking them from their family. I hope it’s the last. And it was the first time parents have told me to take their child. It’s pretty rare actually – however hard it is for most of our families, they really want to be together. It’s what
I work for and it’s what I tried to do with Harry’s family. In the end, though, he taught me that there are some families that just should not stay together.

The only carer I could find that first day was a woman who could only have Harry for one night – she needed to leave for work by 7am the next morning. It would have to do. When I told Mrs Chaulk she said, ‘I’ll just get my bag’. I shouldn’t have been surprised – she is the real deal when it comes to her students. So we set off – me driving and Harry and Mrs Chaulk in the back. They held hands the whole way there. The way she keeps Harry calm is something to see.

So we got to the carer’s and there was Mrs Chaulk taking the lead – she wanted to show Harry where he’d be sleeping and I think she wanted to see it for herself too. She also wanted the carer to know how to help Harry feel safe. You see, Harry has microdeletion syndrome – it’s to do with his genetics and it means he has some problems with learning and how he manages emotions. Certain things set him off and send him spinning – like the word ‘mum’ – and Mrs Chaulk wanted to prepare the carer.

The next morning I picked Harry up so the carer could go to work. I took him out to breakfast and we went and bought playdough – lots of it – because when Harry gets anxious he likes something to occupy his hands with. I then handed him over to Mrs Chaulk. When I saw her take him in her arms and heard her ask him how his night had been, I felt grateful and so relieved. Harry didn’t have much, and I didn’t know where he’d be sleeping that night, but he did have the two of us and he was front and centre in both our minds.

Then it all started again. While Harry was at school that day I managed to find him another carer, and when I picked him up and set off to his next home, Mrs Chaulk was back there again in the car with him. She told Harry she wanted to meet his new family. I’d been to Harry’s parents’ place and collected all his belongings. It was interesting how he dealt with that. When I went to unpack the boxes from the car he said not to, that he wanted them to stay with me. Over the coming weeks, every time I visited Harry he’d check that his things were still in the car. It meant a bit of organising back at my office, but my colleagues understood. I always had to drive the same car and Harry’s stuff always had to be in it. It was as simple as that.

One day when he’d been at the new carer’s house for a couple of months, Harry suddenly said he wanted to unpack the car and get his stuff. I didn’t push him to tell me why, but I think it was his way of making me stay connected to him. Or maybe it was about keeping his options open.

There were some rough days ahead, but why wouldn’t there be? You don’t get rejected and moved and hurt and not try and test adults to see if they’ll let you down like others before. There was the day Harry bit a boy’s ear at school and I dropped everything to go and sit with him. Or the days he’d get angry and Mrs Chaulk would take him to her reading corner to work with his playdough (what he can do with his hands is amazing). Little by little we – his carer, Mrs Chaulk and me – saw signs of Harry starting to believe he was loved.

Harry stayed with that family for eight months. You can’t believe the change in him – he just blossomed. You show a kid that you care and he’ll let you down like others before. There was the day Harry bit a boy’s ear at school and I dropped everything to go and sit with him. Or the days he’d get angry and Mrs Chaulk would take him to her reading corner to work with his playdough (what he can do with his hands is amazing). Little by little we – his carer, Mrs Chaulk and me – saw signs of Harry starting to believe he was loved.

Harry stayed with that family for eight months. You can’t believe the change in him – he just blossomed. You show a kid that you care and you make them feel safe, and it usually works. We often talk about how complex it can be, the job of protecting children, but when it works it’s actually pretty basic.

The hard bit was finding Harry a family for life. I was like a dog with a bone because I just would not let go of one thing – he could not change schools. Come hell or high water I was not compromising. School had been the one place where he felt safe, and Mrs Chaulk had been the one person who’d stuck with him and not let him down. Bloody hell, she’d even moved classes with him – teaching him in kindy and then right through to Year 3!

At last, perseverance paid off. Mackillop Family Services came through with a carer. And better still, Harry didn’t have to leave good relationships behind – we had a plan that he’d go back to his first foster family for respite and they’d always keep in touch with him. For one last
time we made that journey – the mighty trio of Harry, Mrs Chaulk and me – and we settled Harry in for the last time. They wait for him in the playground and they think he’s wonderful.

Harry didn’t have to change schools, but how he has changed at school. He used to be in the principal’s office daily and on every medication under the sun – he had as many pills as he had labels. But now he’s learning, he’s calm, he stays in the classroom all lesson and doesn’t need his pills. And for the first time Mrs Chaulk doesn’t need to teach him anymore – she went back to the kindy kids.

Some days you need to shed tears in this job, but not always sad ones. The other day Harry dropped in at the office to see me. He’s 10 years old now and pretty chuffed. He wanted me to see his new haircut and his new clothes. He looked so good! I got a glimpse of confidence breaking through, and it filled my heart. Recently he got an award in assembly. Mrs Chaulk and I were there bursting with pride, and the best thing is that Harry knew it. He was beaming at us and we were beaming right back at him.

Harry is the bravest person I know. His joy is contagious and his warmth is so genuine. It’s been an honour to have listened to him and a privilege to have fought for him. I’m proud that I didn’t give up. And I am lucky to have worked alongside a fantastic teacher and amazing foster carers. It’s pretty straightforward when we all care about the same thing.

Reflection

This story brings to life that abstract and bloodless phrase ‘cross-agency collaboration’. It shows what can be achieved for children when great people in government and beyond come together to work to a common goal.

At the centre of the story, with Harry every step of the way, are his teacher, Mrs Chaulk, and his caseworker Belinda.

They resolutely create as much predictability and continuity for Harry as possible, amid the destructive volatility created by the problems in his family.

Whether it’s Mrs Chaulk changing classes each year so she can keep on teaching Harry as he moved from Kindy through to Year Three. Or her insisting on travelling with Harry and Belinda to two over-night placements, holding his hand, checking out his new bedroom with him and helping the carers to understand Harry and how to soothe him.

Or Belinda doggedly waiting for a permanent family for Harry to make sure he could stay at school with Mrs Chaulk, and then ensuring that Harry’s first foster family stayed in his life by providing respite care.

And despite the many things happening in Harry’s life that he couldn’t control, Belinda found ways to give him some control.

Harry wanted Belinda to hold on to his things, and keep them packed up in their boxes. And he wanted to see those boxes every time Belinda visited him in his foster placement. It would have been easy – and convenient – to say no but Belinda’s empathy and insight compelled her to do what Harry needed.

This is such an uplifting story and an example of the power of great collaboration – cracking child protection casework, brilliant teaching and wonderful care-giving.

Michael Coutts-Trotter, Secretary, Department of Family and Community Services
Keeping my promise

ROBYN, FACS CASEWORKER

When I first met Rachael, she said ‘Who are you and how fucking long are you gonna be around for?’ Straightaway I knew I had my work cut out for me! Rachael was a 16 year old Aboriginal girl living with her baby boy, Tre, in foster care. She was so angry when we met and had no trust in FACS whatsoever.

I started to get to know Rachael and very quickly saw that Tre was attached to his foster carer more than to her. Rachael felt the carer had taken over and was trying to be Tre’s mum, so there were lots of arguments. When Tre turned one, this placement broke down and, sadly, he was removed from Rachael. The carer said she wouldn’t have Rachael live with her anymore and Rachael told me she couldn’t look after Tre because she’d ‘never been allowed to care for him’. But from the moment I put Tre in the car to take him away, something flicked inside Rachael – she screamed ‘No, no you can’t take him, please’. It was as if she went into mum mode.

Tre was placed with new Life Without Barriers foster carers Lorraine and Jeff, while Rachael decided to live with Isobel, one of her former carers. The next morning, before our office even opened, Rachael was there waiting. She looked me in the eye and said ‘What do I need to do to get my baby back?’ She had a determination about her as she told me she didn’t want Tre to become the third generation of her family in care.

Rachael was brave and honest when she told me she didn’t know how to look after Tre but wanted to learn. To build her confidence, I connected her to an Aboriginal mums and bubs playgroup, and to a solicitor. I also encouraged her to start swimming classes with Tre during their visits.

Sally, a manager from Life Without Barriers, supported Tre’s placement and was so important in helping Rachael learn how to be a mum, like how to play with her baby and get him in a routine. Sally never lost sight of Tre and came to every case plan meeting like a force to be reckoned with! She was also a big softie who had a lot of empathy for Rachael. Together we were a team on a mission.

It was tricky being the caseworker for both Tre and Rachael. I had to keep reminding myself that she was not only a mother but a young person in care. It’s not a conflict, but a balancing act. I asked what she needed and she said braces for her teeth, something she’d been asking about for years. I didn’t promise Rachael the braces, but did promise I’d try my best to get them.

I feel that working in a Practice First team helped me understand the importance of spending time with families and putting myself in their shoes. I now know you can’t do this if you only casework from your desk. You need to be there to watch the laughs, cries and fiery moments. I observed the bond and attachment between Rachael and
Tre grow in front of my eyes. Rachael saw that I was sticking around, and this helped us lay down the bricks for a good relationship.

I knew I needed to learn about Rachael’s past to understand how heartbroken she was when Tre was removed. It was history repeating itself, and I had to show Rachael her story wasn’t just buried in a file somewhere. I remember apologising, saying ‘I’m so sorry for what’s happened to you and your brothers and sisters’.

This restoration could not have been possible without the passionate support of foster carers Isobel, Lorraine and Jeff. They are strong, courageous carers who have advocated for Rachael and Tre all along. They’re not just foster carers, they are grandparents to Tre, and he and Rachael are lucky to have people in their lives who love them.

From that time – with much support from Sally, Lorraine, Jeff and me – the changes in Rachael were dramatic. She used to be a young girl who threw punches first and asked questions later; Isobel would call her a ‘wild child’. But from the moment Tre went into care, she put that fighting spirit to better use. She used to run away from every placement, but now she’d stopped running. This showed me that Rachael was putting her baby first, and what more could you ask of a parent?

In the end the Children’s Court restored Tre to Rachael. He has blossomed, and the bond between them is beautiful. You have to watch Rachael laughing at Tre when he’s cheeky – it’s pretty special. Seeing Rachael laugh in itself is amazing, given everything she’s been through. Rachael and I sit back on her lounge with Tre in the middle watching Thomas the Tank Engine. We crack up laughing, thinking back to the first day we met. I honestly didn’t think I’d ever hear Rachael laugh. I’m amazed at how happy and vibrant this young woman has become, and I’m so proud of her.

The lesson I’ll carry with me from working with Rachael and Tre is that young people need us to believe in them. Just because there have been other people who didn’t believe in them doesn’t mean we can’t. It’s never too late to create positive change.

RACHAEL, MOTHER

I’ve been in care since I was eight years old, and I am nearly 18 now. I’ve lived all over and had lots of carers. I had Tre when I was 16, and he was removed from me when he was one.

I’ll never forget that night. I ran to Isobel’s house because she’d been my carer before and had always been my support. We sat down and talked about what had happened. I knew I just wanted my baby back. The next morning I went to the FACS office to meet with my caseworker, Robyn. I don’t normally go well with caseworkers, so I snubbed her at first. I thought, ‘Here we go again, just another caseworker’.

But Robyn was different. She told me what I needed to do to get Tre back, and I started that same afternoon by going to a mums and bubs group and getting a solicitor. Robyn was going to be both Tre’s caseworker and mine, which was good because I knew she wouldn’t let me down. Out of all my caseworkers I have ever had (we once tried to count how many!), Robyn is the only one who’s proved me wrong. I’d been waiting ages for braces and I was told so many times I would get them, but Robyn is the one who said she’d try – and now I have new braces!

Robyn is even working on getting me to Western Australia for a holiday so I can see my birth family. I miss my mum. I talk to her on the phone all the time, especially when I’m scared. Tre will soon meet his grandmother for the first time.

Getting Tre back hasn’t always been easy. When he was first removed, I had nightmares and would call out his name in my sleep. The first night without Tre was the hardest. My sister Chloe was sleeping with me – I cuddled her all night with her head on my chest, and I called her ‘Tre’, thinking it was my baby. I now know what my mum went through when I was removed, and I’m not angry at her anymore.

I think I got Tre back because we all had the same goal – it’s so much easier than working against each other. Robyn, Sally, Isobel, Lorraine and Jeff worked together to help me get Tre back. I saw Tre every day.
because I was breast feeding. Lorraine always wrote in our communication book and Isobel taught me how to cook, get my licence, stay in school and do all the things I needed to do to get Tre back. They all believed in me, which made it easier to believe in myself.

Tre’s been restored to my care full time now. We live in a private rental and I’m so excited to be on my own with my baby. I have to admit, when he first came home I was shitting myself. But now I’m slowly learning that I can do it on my own. Isobel jokes with me about the time I served boiled eggs and they were raw. But I really wanted to learn, and now I can cook butter chicken, roasts and spaghetti bolognaise. Isobel’s a regular at my place for Sunday night roast.

I have lots to do. There’s always cleaning or cooking – or my favourite, playing with Tre. He loves Thomas the Tank Engine and Fireman Sam. He goes to daycare Thursdays and Fridays, and the staff are bright and happy. I want to do a first aid course for babies and I’m finishing Year 10.

The one thing I would tell caseworkers working with young mums is, ‘Don’t make promises you can’t keep’. That goes for me too. I promised myself I’d do everything to get Tre back, and I did!

Reflection

Well, Rachael certainly didn’t mince words when she first met Robyn, but is it any wonder when we think about how much she had been through? This is a story about Rachael’s unwavering determination to be the best mum she could for Tre, so that he would not become the third generation of her family in care.

Rachael has been on a tough journey but she hasn’t been alone. She has had the support of carers Lorraine, Jeff and Isobel, of Life Without Barriers manager Sally and of FACS caseworker Robyn. With the help of this formidable team, Rachael has learnt how to look after Tre’s physical and emotional needs and to live independently. She is building a future for herself and for Tre.

Robyn demonstrated great casework practice when she recognised the importance of learning about Rachael’s past and of spending lots of time with Rachael and Tre. And her reward? She saw Rachael’s parenting skills develop and her bond with Tre grow to the point where restoration became a reality.

So, as well as being a story about a young woman’s incredible determination to turn her life around, this is also a story about the strength and positive change that can come from being supported by a team of people who believe in you. As Rachael says, this ‘made it easier to believe in myself’.

Helen Rogers, Executive Director, Participation and Inclusion, Department of Family and Community Services
At their first Aboriginal Family Planning Circle, Dorothy, four months pregnant, and her husband, Simon, stood together cradling a baby doll. We gathered around, showing our support at the start of their journey. It was so powerful looking around at all the faces in the room. We were a team, all of us together looking out for their baby due in five short months.

A few weeks earlier, when I was given the child protection report, it was hard to find any hope. Dorothy and Simon already had five children in care, and she was pregnant with her sixth. The couple had been drinking and it had turned violent – both attacking each other. It was around that time that their local community referred them to the Circle.

The idea of the Circle was developed by a group of family support workers in the South Western Sydney area to help Aboriginal families with complex problems get support from a range of services. Its aim was to empower families to become safer and stronger for their children.

The facilitator, Cheryl, invited me, as a representative of FACS, to be a part of the Circle. The facilitator decides who needs to be there, and people must be invited to participate. Also in the Circle were representatives from Relationships Australia and the Marrin Weejali Aboriginal drug and alcohol service, as well as an Aboriginal Health Nurse, an Aboriginal elder from the local community, and Dorothy’s mother.

I remember thinking how brave Dorothy and Simon were at that first meeting. Dorothy was strong, determined and proud, while Simon was quiet and calm. They spoke truthfully about their lives, the heartbreak of losing their children, and their own child protection history. It was an incredibly hard story to hear. What struck me was how loving and kind they were to one another despite everything. For the first time, I felt hopeful for their baby.

The Circle’s safe environment gave Dorothy and Simon, and in fact all of us, the space to talk. It meant we could acknowledge the past and agree on future goals without blame or defensiveness. Everyone has a story if we take the time to listen.

Cheryl asked Dorothy and Simon why they thought FACS was worried about their unborn baby. They were upfront about it, speaking of their troubles with alcohol and the physical violence between them when they drink. They knew this was not safe for their baby.

Together the Circle developed an Action Plan. Dorothy and Simon agreed to give drug and alcohol counselling and AA a go. This was a huge step, as they’d rejected help many times before. Relationship counselling was also critical because they needed help to stop being violent.
To show Simon and Dorothy I was just as accountable to them as they were to the Circle, I made sure to follow through on everything I said I’d do. I attended every meeting of the Circle so they didn’t have to see a new face from FACS each time or have to retell their story and experience the grief over and over again. The Circle was built on trust and shared responsibility, and I needed to be trustworthy to be a part of it. I wanted them to believe I was the real deal.

The Circle met each month and everyone would update each other on what was happening. The Action Plan evolved as Dorothy and Simon’s needs changed.

Every step of the way, they did everything the Circle asked of them. In fact, even before the first meeting they’d stopped drinking, which was incredible given how long it had been an ongoing part of their lives. It’s hard to know what the catalyst was – the Circle, the new baby, or it being the right time in their lives. But from that first meeting we checked regularly with police, Circle members and Dorothy and Simon themselves, and there were no reports of drinking or violence. It was looking more and more likely they’d be able to give their baby safety.

Just before bubs was born, the beautiful Baabayan women from our area hosted a baby shower, with all the Circle members invited. I loved being part of an event that celebrated this much wanted baby. We’d all been on the journey with Dorothy and Simon, and it seemed fitting that we’d come together for the baby shower too.

A few days later, a healthy baby boy – Noah – arrived. I felt deep sadness when Dorothy told me how she cried after Noah was born, terrified we were going to take him away. Her last baby had been removed from the same hospital a few years before, and the overwhelming grief of that moment bubbled up for her now. It reminded me that FACS has so much power in people’s lives – we should never forget this.

On the way home from the hospital, Dorothy drove 40km an hour while Simon sat in the back seat to make sure Noah was okay. Even now, Simon still sits in the back whenever they go out!

Yet it hasn’t been easy for Dorothy and Simon and they have made brave choices. They choose to avoid get togethers if they know people will be drinking, and have said no relatives can drink when they come over. They’re able to make their own decisions about what is safe for their son.

Noah is now a healthy seven month old boy. He recently spent time with his brothers and sisters in regional NSW, where they are in kinship care. We did some work to make sure this would be a good time for everyone, and Noah’s brothers and sisters understood why he was with their parents and they were not. I really hope that, now Simon and Dorothy are in a better place, they’ll be able to play a bigger role in their other children’s lives as well.

When I picture Noah happy, safe and loved at home, I think about why it was so different this time around. For me, it was because the motivation for change came from Simon and Dorothy themselves, not from us telling them what to do. It was also about everyone in the Circle having the courage to be honest and to have those hard conversations and then following up with help and support.

One of the great things about the Circle is that it’s still going even though there’s no longer any involvement from me or other FACS representatives. My last Circle meeting was when Noah was five months old, and I’m happy to say I’m no longer needed. FACS was always just one part of the collective, and it’s wonderful the family has such support without our involvement.

I’ve worked in child protection for many years and being part of Noah’s life has filled me with optimism. It’s been an honour to share the journey with Dorothy, Simon and Noah, and I now share their story with expectant mums who are losing hope, terrified they lack the strength to be the parent their baby needs.

I tell them it is possible – you can change. This story is proof.
DOROTHY, MOTHER

When I became pregnant with Noah, I knew I had to keep this baby. My heart was gone from when my other children were taken from me, and I couldn’t live through that again.

I didn’t have any support with my other children, so I was shocked when I walked into the Aboriginal Family Planning Circle and saw that so many people cared enough to turn up. The difference with Noah was I had a whole team of people around me and I wanted to show them I could be a good mum. I was still nervous they were going to take him; it took me a long time to realise they actually wanted to help. Now Simon and I wish we’d had this opportunity a long time ago, and we hope other families get the same support we did.

Having Noah at home with me is everything. I just want to get my other kids back now and be a good mum to them and Noah.

Reflection

This is a story of strength and determination. Dorothy and Simon made a decision to make a change and did the hard work that was required.

It is a story that reminds me that for so many of our clients we can’t begin to talk about the future without understanding the past. Aboriginal people have talked about the need for healing for many years. Healing is a process, not a one-off event, and it includes recognising how past trauma and loss continue to have an impact today. For government workers, I think healing includes changing the relationship between government and Aboriginal people.

To me, this story is a concrete example of how good practice can be a step in the healing process: Elizabeth participated in the Circle because she was invited; the Circle actively listened to stories that were hard to hear; Dorothy and Simon were asked for their views about why they were there. Only then did the group develop actions.

Quite rightly, this piece is the story of Dorothy, Simon and Noah. Elizabeth has written herself in the background, probably understating her work supporting, listening and following through. When I read her final paragraph, I smiled as her satisfaction shone through. I am delighted that good casework feels good too.

Michael Woodhouse, Executive Director, Strategic Policy, Department of Family and Community Services

Group photo on right page: Megan, NSW Health; Elizabeth, FACS manager; Kim, FACS Caseworker; Lesley, Marrin-Weejali; Cheryl, FACS manager; Narelle, Anglicare
SKYE, FACS CASEWORKER

I’ve known Carrie as long as I’ve been a caseworker at FACS. I’ve watched her grow from a sweet 10 year old girl into the lovely 18 year old woman she is today – a smart, strong, caring person with a fighting spirit. This is Carrie’s story, and I feel privileged to have been a part of it.

Carrie is the eldest of seven kids. They’ve lived through more trauma together than you’d want to imagine. Because their mum and dad had troubled childhoods, they weren’t up for the job of caring for so many kids. Carrie and her siblings had been neglected and badly hurt – hurt she won’t get over quickly.

Carrie and four of her younger siblings went to live with their great aunty and uncle, Maureen and Bob. They ran a tight ship, and the children thrived. Despite all she’d been through, Carrie was cheerful and full of energy, and always excited when I went to visit her.

Almost overnight things changed when Carrie turned 13. She started acting out and testing the boundaries, as teenagers like to do. She snuck out at night and hung out with older kids. Then she stayed out for a whole night and Bob and Maureen were at their wits’ end. They also had to worry about the other kids and how it affected them. Carrie decided she couldn’t live there anymore. Leaving her brothers and sisters was really hard – she’d cared for them when her parents could not, and in many ways she was their ‘other mother’.

Carrie moved into residential care but it soon became clear it wasn’t a great fit. She was so young and impressionable that she learnt a lot of tricks from the older girls that made her unsafe. She started stealing and staying out way too late, and was constantly in trouble with the police. I was really worried because she was so vulnerable.

During this time I worked with Carrie trying to lead her onto another path. I organised counselling, tried to get her back to school, and linked her to social groups in the hope she wouldn’t spend as much time with the kids who were getting her into trouble. I had to get real with her and have hard talks about hard stuff. You have to be comfortable with teenagers to talk about everything – they can see through you if you’re not. We’d talk about how her mum had Carrie when she was only 17 and that Carrie may now be heading down a similar path. I had to make her think about whether she wanted the same life, or something better.

I myself was eight months pregnant and completely exhausted when I found out that Carrie was at the Children’s Court, again. I went to pick her up and she jumped in the car, grinning from ear to ear. She wasn’t paying me any attention as I tried to read her the riot act, so I asked her what was she so happy about. She replied, ‘Skye, I’ve had the best night – the cop bought me a hamburger and I got to watch a movie’.

I’ve never forgotten that. I felt so sad – here was this young girl, thrilled to be arrested and to spend the night in jail because it meant a safe
bed and a hot meal. It brought me back to earth with a thud and helped me understand what Carrie had lived through and where she was at.

Carrie’s mum was now separated from her dad and living in Queensland. Carrie decided to try living with her mum again. My manager, Andy, and I organised for her to have a caseworker with Queensland Child Safety Services on an informal basis. The two state systems are very different and, despite our best efforts, we weren’t able to transfer her case formally. So, with Andy’s support, I continued to work with Carrie as though she was still in NSW. I couldn’t leave her without support, no matter how far away she was.

Carrie would ring Andy and me all the time, asking ‘Why can’t you just come up here and help me?’ We’d hold teleconferences with her Queensland caseworker, and Carrie would sometimes yell and cry and storm out of the room. Andy and I would be sitting miles away and not be able to go to her. It was heart wrenching. Afterwards, Carrie, always a sweetheart, would call us and say ‘I’m really sorry about that’. It was turbulent, but Andy and I had a sense we were holding Carrie from a distance and helping her keep it together. We’d call and text all the time and send her little gifts so she knew we still cared.

Although some days I wondered how we’d get through, Andy kept me going, saying ‘years from now, Carrie will be speaking at a conference about how well she was supported to leave care, about the way we never gave up’.

Last year, I flew up to Queensland to spend time with Carrie. She was sitting on the front porch waiting, and she burst into tears when she saw me. She ran to the car and hugged me for about two minutes. It was amazing to see her. She showed me her room, and her Year 12 formal dress, and caught me up on everything that was happening.

I always knew Carrie to be fiercely independent and determined, but her achievements blew me away. At just 17 she was working two jobs, studying for her final year exams and paying her own way. When she graduated from Year 12, she received a Principal’s Award in recognition of how much she’d achieved. Only one student receives the award each year, so Andy and I were like proud parents. Carrie is the first person in her extended family to graduate from high school, and she hopes her brothers and sisters can do the same.

After graduation, Carrie wanted to move back to NSW, but before she could do that she had to deal with a list of outstanding police warrants, so she could start again with a clean slate. Carrie always meant to address the charges, but she was busy finishing her schooling in another state and it took longer than we all wanted. I sought legal advice and wrote a letter of support outlining her achievements, and helped her prepare a résumé. Carries flew down to Sydney and together we went to the police station. She walked up to the front counter and told them she was there to hand herself in.

The magistrate at the Children’s Court remembered Carrie from years before, and he said ‘I told you last time I didn’t ever want to see you again’. Carrie spoke bravely and directly to the magistrate. She told him what she’d done since she last saw him. He was impressed and told her how wonderful it was to see a young person turn their life around. He then dismissed all of Carrie’s outstanding charges.

Earlier this year, we found out that Carrie didn’t have any plans for her 18th birthday, so our office hosted a party for her. All of the caseworkers who’d known her from over the years came and told funny stories about her life. Andy gave the ‘daggy dad’ speech, letting Carrie know how proud we all were of her. We had cake and presents and it was a lovely afternoon. We bought Carrie a computer to help with the business diploma she’d started studying.

Over the last eight years, I’ve had time off to have my two children, but each time I returned from maternity leave I’d ask to work with Carrie again. I really missed her. Last Mother’s Day I got a text from her thanking me for everything and wishing me a lovely day, which made me burst into tears. It just goes to show how important what we do is, sometimes we’re the closest thing to a mum a young person has.
Reflection

We often hear from children and young people in care that what they really want is for their caseworker to be their friend, and not to feel like they are a task on their caseworker's to-do list. Well, Skye goes even further than being a good friend, taking on the role of champion, confidant and support person over eight years.

I love the gentleness and affection of their relationship, particularly when Skye has the urge to jump through the phone to comfort Carrie when she is upset but too far away to visit.

Andy's unwavering support of Skye's need to return to Carrie when she came back from maternity leave shows strong leadership and insight into how important Skye was to Carrie's wellbeing and sense of self.

Carrie is a young woman with enormous potential and has overcome much to achieve her many successes so far; the future looks so bright for her. Much of it can be achieved by strong determination and will, as displayed by Carrie. However, the support, commitment and belief from Skye has clearly contributed.

I hope this story encourages practitioners working with young people to stay hopeful and hang in there through the tough times. We owe it to all the children we support to want for them nothing more, and nothing less, than what we want for our own children.

Mychelle Curran, Executive Director, Community, Homes and Place, Department of Family and Community Services
MICHELLE, FACS CASEWORKER

When I first met Rose’s dad, Jerry, he was too scared to talk. He couldn’t make eye contact and hardly said a word. To be fair, it was a big ask of anyone – taking full parental responsibility for his teenage daughter, Rose, after many years of being separated from her. But just 12 months later, there was Jerry, standing in the Children’s Court addressing the magistrate clearly about how he’d turned his life around and was now ready to be a father again.

The separation had happened 10 years before, when Rose was only four. From that time, she and her three older brothers and little sister had lived with their Aunty Pearl. Over the years, Rose kept seeing Jerry but had always stayed with Pearl. Suddenly, last year, Pearl’s own child died in a tragic accident and she was too sad to support her other children, let alone her five nieces and nephews. It was a horrible time for everyone when it became clear they had to leave Pearl’s home.

Rose was 13 when we first met. She struck me as funky, smart, creative and strong. I began my relationship with her being curious about her life and respecting her opinion. We chatted about everything, including where she wanted to live. Without hesitating, she said she wanted to live with her dad. I wasn’t so sure – I knew from reading Rose’s family history that Jerry used to drink and take drugs. I was totally open with Rose as I asked her about Jerry, and her face lit up when she spoke about him. She described a quiet, calm man who’d quit drinking and drugs years ago. The affection she had for her dad was obvious.

I promised I would call Jerry, but in the meantime Rose had to stay with a foster carer so she would be safe. I got in touch with Jerry and, come Monday morning 9 am, he was on the steps of our office waiting for the doors to open. As I said, he was too scared to talk, so I had to do all I could to make him feel safe. I asked his permission to share my opinion and let him know he could correct me at any time. I was mindful not to use caseworker jargon when we spoke and was completely up-front about what was happening.

Over the next few weeks, Jerry opened up and told me that he’d become a dad at 15 – just a kid himself really. He admitted, looking back, that he had no idea how to be a father and spent all his time with mates, drinking and taking drugs. Then, eight years ago, he put himself through rehab and has been clean ever since. He’d never dreamed he could live with his children again, but he was determined to take that chance, even if he wasn’t sure he could trust us.

The first step was to assess whether Rose would be safe in Jerry’s care. I spoke with lots of people in the Aboriginal community, explored what family support there was, started him on regular drug and alcohol tests, and linked him to our Intensive Family Based Service to help him
learn about parenting. I also contacted Rose’s mum, who wasn’t in a position to care for her but supported her living with Jerry if that was what Rose wanted. Rose and Jerry are Aboriginal and so am I, but I wasn’t working on my own land, so I had to walk with great gentleness through their community. I made an effort to include the extended family in decisions and build relationships within Jerry’s local Aboriginal network.

For six months I worked as part of a team – with FACS child protection workers, NGO housing and the Education Department – to restore Rose to Jerry’s care. Jerry needed support to make a home for Rose and set boundaries so she’d have a sense of security. We worked to return Rose to a school she liked and engage her in regular learning again, and empowered Jerry to express himself in meetings and advocate on his daughter’s behalf.

At every step I worked hard at showing empathy for Rose and Jerry and acknowledge their past trauma. I explained the ‘what, why and how’ of all decisions made. Jerry would get frustrated when I would overload him with information, so I had to keep reminding myself to put down my pen, close my mouth and open my ears.

I rang Rose to tell her the exciting news that she could move in with her dad. She was completely shocked. I didn’t understand why, as we’d been talking about it for weeks, but then she said, ‘I didn’t believe it was actually going to happen’. You see, Rose had had so many false promises in her life, so why should this one be any different? Well, it was, and soon Rose was living with her father again. When I visited her in her new home, I gave her a little guardian angel to place on her dressing table. I wanted her to remember her first day at home with her dad whenever she looked at it.

Jerry had come a long way, but wasn’t always sure what was expected of him as a dad after Rose moved in. He was terrified of doing something wrong, of being a ‘bad dad’, and going through the whole horror of failing as a parent again. In many ways, he and I co-parented Rose in the early days of the restoration. I was gradually helping him to grow into being a parent. Anyone can be a father – you just need to have a baby – but loving and caring for your child every day was a new experience for Jerry, and he was starting with a teenager!

One day Rose didn’t turn up at school and Jerry rang to talk through what to do. He said ‘Michelle, Rose is going to ruin it for us! I’ve done all the right things, you’ve done all the right things, and now she’s ruining it!’ To hear him talk about ‘we’ and ‘us’ was huge. It showed that he saw us as a team and we were in this together.

So it hasn’t all been smooth sailing. Rose is still a teenager with typical teenage behaviours, but she’s doing it from a space of love and support with family and community around her. School is still an issue. I was so frustrated she’d stopped attending that I had to ‘go all aunty’ on her – this is the Aboriginal way of saying ‘telling it how it is’. She burst into tears. This turned out to be a good thing, as it made her see how much I cared and wanted it to work out with her dad. Jerry took a different approach – he started walking Rose to the bus stop every morning and waited until she got on the bus. It worked!

When the case went to the Children’s Court, Jerry addressed the magistrate confidently about all the changes he’d made. He then proudly accepted the return of parental responsibility for his daughter. Given the formality of the court, this was unbelievable for a man who’d had trouble looking me in the eyes when we first met just 12 months before.

Jerry’s not content to stop there – he’s now working to reconnect with his other four children as well. I’ve built a relationship with Jerry based on honest, non-judgmental, open communication, and it’s wonderful to see him mirror this in his interactions with FACS and other government agencies. To be honest, in the beginning I just wanted to take Rose under my wing and make it all better. But the truth is I’ve had to let her go, and doing this has been easier knowing that Jerry can stand on his own two feet and be the dad Rose has always needed.
Recently, I reconnected with the family to develop this story. Rose was just as delightful as I remembered her to be, and Jerry enjoyed the catch-up – he said he felt special being chosen to tell his family’s story. They’d settled since the restoration and Rose is calmer and more comfortable within herself. Their loving bond is still evident, and I was reminded how privileged I am to walk beside families as they move towards change. Their connectedness to each other means we do not give up on those in our family who have lost their way – we have an obligation and desire to promote healing and recovery.
Red flags

CASEY, 11 YEAR OLD GIRL IN FOSTER CARE

I didn’t want my baby brother to be in danger, but I didn’t want to hurt my mum either. Daniel’s only a baby – he can’t tell mum he’s hungry and has to eat every day. Mum needs help because she can’t look after herself.

Our caseworker, Tara, told us she was going to write down everything we said. We like that she knows how important our brother is to us. Tara didn’t think we were being stupid. She made us feel we could tell her the truth because she cares what happens to us.

The Red Flag Meeting made us realise we did the right thing for our brother. It was very sad to tell Tara the awful things that happened to us growing up, but she said that it was not our fault and that we’d looked after Mum as best we could.

It was good talking about the awful stuff. It does make you feel better, and it makes you feel stronger. Now Daniel will have a real chance to go to school so he can learn to read and write, and he’ll be fed properly.

TARA, MACKILLOP FAMILY SERVICES CASEWORKER

When they found out that their mum, Lucy, was pregnant again, Casey (11), Hamish (13) and Hayley (15) were incredibly worried. They’d been in care for a few years and told their foster carer, Nicole, how fearful they were. Nicole called me straightaway to pass on their concerns. I wanted to support her in managing the children’s worries and better understanding them, so I called a Red Flag Meeting for the next day for the three children, Nicole and me.

We have Red Flag Meetings when children are not safe and something needs to happen quickly; it is one way we pull together plans. Anybody can call one – young people, foster carers, birth families, caseworkers. It is powerful for children in care, as it gives them some control and a safe place to talk and they know they’ll be heard.

At the start of our meeting, I explained how it would work – one-third of our time would involve talking about the problem and two-thirds about the solution, and everyone would get their say. Then we got talking. For the children it was like opening an old wound – the pain and anguish just gushed out. Nicole and I heard things we hadn’t known about and realised just how bad it had been.

All of the children were upset, so the start of the meeting was distressing for everyone. Nicole and I were struck by how frightened, yet determined they were. In the past, they’d been super protective of...
their mum. It was so brave of them to recognise that to protect the baby they had to say things that had previously been guarded by loyalty. Hamish told us, ‘The baby can’t speak for itself, so we have to’.

Their mum, Lucy, has mental health problems that left her bedridden for days on end. The children described how they were left to fend for themselves, and how hungry they got when the food ran out. They said they couldn’t imagine what this would be like for a tiny baby, who wouldn’t be able to scavenge around for a meal like they had.

The kids are wise beyond their years. Hearing them talk made me appreciate the huge sense of responsibility they were carrying for their new brother or sister. They love their mum, but they were adamant this new little bub would be protected from the kinds of experiences they had as small children. Even through all this trauma, their resilience is something that stands out to me. They are connected to Lucy, Nicole and each other with such a sense of genuine love; it’s a credit to who they are at their core. It inspires me that they’ve been through so much and still have these amazing qualities.

Once their worries were out on the table, we worked through them together. We talked about every worry, the grief and loss of their own childhoods and their hopes for their unborn sibling. I wrote everything down as the children talked honestly about their experiences. This took a lot of courage on their part, as they understood that their mum may read what they said when it went to court. I was so proud of them.

At the end of the meeting, I explained that I’d talk to FACS about their worries. They came up with such thoughtful ideas about how they could support their mum and care for the baby if they couldn’t live with her. Children and young people really respond when their ideas are taken seriously and they get to be a part of the problem solving.

Nicole told me afterwards that she hadn’t expected so much to happen, but that it helped her to understand the children’s history and better support them. ‘Central to everything’, she said, ‘was that what had happened to them in the past would not happen to their sibling.

They couldn’t change what had happened to them, but they had a choice to make sure it didn’t happen again.’

The FACS caseworker sent the children a letter, thanking them for all they’d shared and telling them how the Department would work to keep the baby safe. The children were so relieved to get that letter; it told them that someone was listening.

The children were so excited when they were told they had a baby brother called Daniel. The Children’s Court determined he could not stay with Lucy and placed him in the next best place – with his sisters and brother. They were over the moon. Nicole is just the best – she and her husband, William, welcomed Daniel unconditionally. He’s definitely the favourite of the family – everyone dotes on this happy, cheeky, little fellow.

The kids have come so far since that Red Flag Meeting. The experience seems to have empowered them to stand up for themselves, and they now advocate for each other constantly, telling me what’s working or what isn’t. They make my job quite hard! They are completely honest about how they feel about me, so I have my hands full – but in a good way. It’s been lovely to see their confidence grow and to see them be more open to our support.

The children are so amazing. Casey always has such a huge grin on her face that you can’t help but smile back. She’s been the most vocal about her baby brother, and wants him to have all the opportunities Nicole has given her. I love hearing about her big plans for the future. Hamish is very protective of his brother and sisters and takes care of everyone around him. He loves cooking – he brought in homemade muffins to the office the other day and shared them. Hayley is very nurturing and wants to pursue childcare when she leaves school, which is perfect for her. She is beautiful with children.
I continue to give the kids the opportunity to have a voice and to share their thoughts and dreams about what they want for their lives. We’re still going through court for Daniel to determine where he will live long term, so none of us are sure if he’ll eventually go home with Lucy or stay with Nicole. Whatever happens, the children are prepared, and they’ll always be in little Dan’s life. He doesn’t realise it yet, but he has three amazing siblings who will always have his back.

Reflection

This story is a testament to the resourcefulness, insight and resilience of young people in the most difficult of circumstances. Not only did Casey, Hamish and Hayley display incredible empathy for both their mother and their new brother, they also had the bravery to seek help and take action to protect their family.

It is also a great example of adults recognising children’s wisdom and their solutions to the challenges they face. In this case, MacKillop Family Services found innovative and sensitive ways to empower young people to have a voice through the Red Flag Meeting and letter writing. Rather than being tokenistic, Tara took steps to ensure the three siblings understood the process, were heard and received feedback on what was happening. By taking young people’s feelings, thoughts and suggestions seriously, she showed the courage to give up some of her power and respect young people as experts on their own lives.

Finally, it is inspiring to see the effort made to keep the siblings together and the incredible role the foster carer, Nicole, played in honouring the importance of sibling relationships to young people in care.

Maria Chan, NSW State Coordinator (Acting), CREATE Foundation
SONJA, MOTHER

I’ve had a pretty tough life. When I was a kid we lived in a tent, then upgraded to a caravan. I still remember when my nan took me into town – I couldn’t stop staring at the lights because I’d never seen electricity before.

When I was five years old, my mum met my stepfather. He started to sexually assault me soon after. I tried telling my mum about it but she didn’t believe me. She’s still with him now.

When I was nine, I decided to tell my nan. She did the right thing and told the police. When I told my mum about the statement I made to the police, she said that if I didn’t go back and tell the police I’d lied, my little brother and sister would never see their father again. So I went back and changed my story. My stepfather eventually went to prison and the whole family blamed me – and still do. Not long ago, Mum told me they would have been a happy family if I’d kept quiet. She’s always picked men over her children. I will never do that.

I met Peter and we had four children together. Peter was violent to the kids, verbally abused us all, and forced me to have sex with him. One day last year, I waited until he went out, then I packed the car, grabbed the kids and bolted. By then I was pregnant with my fifth child, Jordan.

Caseworkers got involved after I left Peter. Ever since I was a kid, I’d been taught that FACS is the enemy. In those days, FACS would turn up and my stepfather would tell them to bugger off, and they would – they never did anything to help me.

So when Norma came to my door last year, I immediately put my defences up. My family and friends told me the only way to get rid of FACS is to ‘tell them what they want to hear’. So I tried that at first. I didn’t say I was having a hard time or on the verge of a breakdown. But Norma and Karen, the FACS psychologist, could see straight through it.

I was so angry with Norma for months. I’d swear at her and tell her to bugger off. I didn’t answer her calls. I knew that if FACS was in my life, my kids might be taken off me, but this couldn’t happen – I love them so much. But no matter how many doors I slammed in her face, Norma would come back. My family kept telling me I had to get rid of her, but they were never there to back me up. It took a long time for Norma to break down the barriers I put up. They’re gone now, but there’s still the fear that my kids could be taken away. It’s like a little rock that’s stuck in my head.

I’d heard all the bad stories about FACS, but never the good ones. My story is different. It has a lot to do with finding the right worker for the right person. Norma works on the positives in my life instead of pointing out the negatives. Norma has always been there when I need her. She’s walked beside me every step of the way, saying ‘you can do it’. I’d never been told that by anyone in my life.
One time I was trying to get the kids off to school but I couldn’t find my keys. I completely lost it and tore the house apart trying to find them. I ended up ringing Norma. I was freaking out, and when Norma and Karen arrived, I was sitting in the corner with my head in my hands crying. Norma took the kids to school and then came back and helped me get sorted for the day. I didn’t feel in the right headspace to do anything, but Norma and Karen turned me around. Funny thing is, we achieved so much – I met with a new service, saw a mental health worker, made referrals for the kids and took them to the doctor. If I hadn’t picked up the phone to Norma that day, I wouldn’t have even got the kids out the front door.

I’m slowly learning to listen to Norma’s advice. I’m so stubborn but usually I realise she’s right, eventually. I think I need to start doing what she says straightaway, but she’d probably fall off her chair if I did!

Norma and Karen have helped me think differently about my kids. A few weeks ago, my two year old, Becky, burned her foot and I took her straight to the hospital. This is a big change for me – I didn’t always get them to the doctor when they needed it. I guess I was embarrassed that I’d be seen as a bad mum. But now, if my kids need help, they get it!

I know I still have a lot of work to do with my kids and myself, but I have big goals. Norma once told me that I had pretty unstable foundations growing up but that I had the chance to build my own foundations for the kids. Norma and Karen are now bricks in this foundation.

I don’t want my kids growing up like I did. I want them to look back and know that their mum was strong and that she tried her hardest with them. I want them to feel loved and be proud of me. I’m going to build my own foundations for a happy, loving family.

NORMA, FACS CASEWORKER

I started working with Sonja and her children last year. At the start I was really worried about the kids. I had so many chats with Sonja about the kids going to school in dirty, smelly clothes. There was a report that Becky, just two years old, was wandering around on a busy road. She also fell and hit her head but wasn’t taken to the doctor.

The house was hectic during my first visit – the four older kids were running around tearing into each other. Jordan was a newborn and was lying in a car seat in front of the television, toys flying around his head. He was crying and Sonja didn’t respond. We got our psychologist, Karen, to start working with Sonja on her attachment to the children. Karen also worked with Sonja to help her make changes to the way she was when the children needed her to mother them.

Sonja had so much fear and hatred for FACS. In the first months of our work together, she swung like a pendulum from angry to cut off. I never understood why she would spin out of control. Then one day Sonja drew a circle for me and said, ‘This is me and my kids’. She drew another circle and said, ‘This is you and other workers. When you come into my circle, I have no control in my life. By walking into my house, you take away my control.’ That really stuck with me. It helped me understand what intervention means in her life. Instead of seeing her as resistant or hostile, I realised she reacts to people when she’s scared – and it works because they go away. But it hasn’t worked with me.

Sonja has come to trust me because, no matter what she says, I just go back and treat her the same. I try hard to be consistent, and, because of this, Karen and I have been able to help Sonja make so many changes. She now responds to the children when they’re upset, acknowledges how they’re feeling, and praises them when they’re good. Karen has also done a lot of work with Sonja and baby Jordan – we wanted to make sure he could develop a bit of ‘bounce’ in life. Sonja is now so much more responsive to Jordan; he goes to her for comfort and there are more and more signs of a secure attachment.
Karen and I ask ourselves regularly whether we’ve become desensitised to what’s happening for the kids. It’s important to do this to make sure we’re not letting any dangers or risks slip by just because we’ve got a good relationship with Sonja. My team challenge me as well – they regularly check in with me about my judgments of the children’s safety.

I really admire Sonja. I truly don’t know how she does it – she’s a single mother with five kids, and they all have their needs. The level of change Sonja has achieved in her parenting wouldn’t have been possible if I hadn’t committed to working with her over the long term. Sonja has come so far. Best of all, the five children are together with their mum and she has fought hard to be what they need.

Reflection

The only way to get rid of FACS is to tell them what they want to hear... Sonja describes really well the work Norma had to do – to get past the ‘say yes but do no’ or the ‘swearing and slamming doors’ from Sonja and get to the working together and helping her change, and make a difference to the children.

How hard they both have worked – brave Sonja whose trust has been breached since she was a child by her step-father, her mother and then her partner, and Norma who stayed on it and never gave up. There is such a purity in the honesty between the Sonja and Norma. I like how Sonja was so brave calling Norma at one of her darkest times asking for help. And Norma for working out how to help, not assuming that she knew how to help, or as she puts it learning ‘what intervention’ meant for Sonja, and adjusting what she (and Karen) could do to be effective.

There is a real sense that everybody here has their sleeves rolled up, and they are working on very concrete and important issues. They have also stuck with it, not settling for a superficial change but one related to how the children are developing and how Sonja is faring in her parenting.

Finally, I can’t help but agree with Norma’s admiration – how much she has changed, when she was dealt such a difficult hand in life. What a powerful and strong woman she is! And of course I really admire Norma - she committed and listened and really sought to understand Sonja, come what may. Jordan and Becky and the other children have had the experience of hard work and love of two very powerful women to keep them safe – that is good child protection casework.

Maree Walk, Deputy Secretary, Programs and Service Design, Department of Family and Community Services
GLADYS, FACS, INTENSIVE SUPPORT SERVICE CASEWORKER

When I started working with Brittany, I was constantly terrified I’d get a call from the emergency department telling me she was badly hurt. She was 15 and was always running away, hanging out with a bad crowd and taking terrible risks. Brittany didn’t believe her life was of any value, so she’d hurt herself and allow people to treat her horribly – it was heartbreaking to see.

Brittany had come into care at the age of 12, and over the years had lived with foster carers and extended family. When we met, she was living in a residential placement with other young people and was pretty miserable about it. I knew I had to build a genuine relationship with her if I was ever going to help her find a safe path out of this life.

Kids in care have a lot of change to deal with, so as a caseworker I work hard to be consistent and reliable. I always make a special day for each of the young people I work with, and Brittany and I agreed that Fridays would be just for her. I took her all over Sydney so she could see that the world was a much bigger place than the suburbs where she usually hung out. I also wanted her to have fun, just like any other teenager.

Brittany loves Home and Away, so we drove to Palm Beach to see where the show is filmed. Another time we spent the afternoon at Darling Harbour and visited a wildlife park. This gave me precious time to build our relationship so she could trust me, see me as an ally and start to have the real conversations that were so needed. I knew she was enjoying our time together, as every single Friday there she was, ready and waiting for me to pick her up. On these days everything would be great, but then I’d get a call from her carers to tell me she was missing again. I’d jump straight in my car to try to find her, follow any leads I had, ring her friends and knock on so many doors I’d lose count.

The funny thing is that each time I eventually found Brittany she wouldn’t be angry that I’d tracked her down. I believe that, deep down, she just wanted someone to care enough about her to keep looking. I’d tell her that I’d always come for her, not only that day but every day until she was safe back at home.

Brittany’s family live miles away in regional NSW and she was missing them terribly. This sadness was having a big impact on how she saw herself and, I believe, was at the heart of why she put herself at such risk. I made it my mission to search out relatives who lived closer to home, and I discovered that her great-grandmother, Dawn, was living on the Central Coast. I drove Brittany up to visit Dawn most weeks and loved watching them rekindle their relationship and talk about old times. She was warm and caring towards her great-grandmother, and on the way there she’d pick up any groceries Dawn needed.
It was healing for Brittany to spend time with someone who loved her unconditionally. There’s nothing worse than when children leave care at 18 and have no family connections – they’re just lost. As I watched this relationship flourish, I thought ‘fantastic, finally here is something I can work with’.

Dawn became a strong advocate for Brittany and helped heal old wounds between her and her mum, Paula. Dawn told Paula about how Brittany had changed and that she missed Paula and her little brothers and sisters terribly. To help mend these fences, a counsellor worked with both Brittany and Paula, and I spoke with Paula regularly to work through how she could support her daughter at this critical point in her life.

One of the great things about our long drives was that I’d learn a lot about how she was feeling. I knew when she didn’t want to talk – she’d say, ‘Gladys turn this song up, I love this one’, and we’d just listen to the music. One of the saddest things that stuck in my mind about our chats was how often she’d tell me that she believed she was fat and ugly, no matter how many times I tried to tell her otherwise. I spoke to my colleagues, and using our contacts we organised for a professional photographer to take pictures of Brittany at Centennial Park. It was the best day, and when she looked at the photos she was shocked at how good she looked. I held the photos in my hand and said to her, ‘this is what I see every time I look at you – you are beautiful’.

Despite this progress, it was obvious Brittany’s residential placement still wasn’t working out. In my mind I could hear a loud clock ticking. I needed to find her a safe place to live before she reached 16, because at this age young people in care can make choices for themselves. She needed a home, not just a house, with people who cared for her like family.

Luckily, I was able to find an Anglicare residential care home near Brittany’s family in regional NSW. This was perfect, as it meant she could spend more time with her mum and brothers and sisters, and be far away from the bad crowd she was hanging out with in Sydney.

I was nervous driving Brittany to her new home – this needed to be the right place for her to heal. Thankfully, the youth workers welcomed her warmly and proudly showed her the room they’d made up for her. It made her feel at home almost immediately.

After a nervous start, Brittany is doing amazingly. The Anglicare youth workers are wonderful and care for her like a daughter, keeping her busy with activities and creating a family environment – exactly what she needs. Brittany is studying to be a beautician at TAFE, is learning to drive and is going to the gym. She continues to reconnect with her family and spend more time with them, which she just loves.

Most incredibly, she has not run away once in the seven months she’s been there. I’m so happy that she’s safe – and that I’m no longer knocking on strangers’ doors trying to find her! Brittany has a new caseworker now, as I’m too far away, but I love getting her text messages telling me what’s happening in her life. The other day her carers sent me a photo of Brittany all dressed up for her 16th birthday dinner, and, of course, she looked beautiful.
Reflection

I found this story heart-warming, and it was uplifting to see the results of Gladys working persistently and cleverly with Brittany. Her attention to using every opportunity in creating a safe path out of the risky teenage life Brittany was living gives hope in a space where it can be hard to find.

I loved how Gladys worked with Brittany’s strengths and captured the opportunities that made it possible to connect. She balanced being there for her when she needed and staying committed to the path despite the hiccups on the journey. Gladys and Brittany found the ‘magic’ that allowed a relationship to build, one in which Brittany could rely on Gladys.

Responding to the right issues at the right time and using the ‘hooks’ that Gladys had recognised early on played a big part in this story. So did Gladys’s commitment to helping Brittany build relationships and set up places she could move to safely. This meant that Gladys could then let Brittany go at a gentle pace so she could enter her new life. Drives, talks, music, fun and photos all contributed to assisting Brittany to find her beauty and a ‘sweet spot’ in life as she begins a new chapter.

Marie New, District Director Hunter New England, Department of Family and Community Services
Easter baby

KIM, FACS CASEWORKER

Amy was born just before the Easter long weekend. Her mother, Angela, had been in relationships where her partners were violent towards her. She used drugs, probably to cope with all the hurt. All of this meant she hadn’t been able to care for her other eight children. They had all been taken from her and were living with other families.

At the time I received the report about Amy’s birth, there were a lot of negative attitudes and judgments about Angela from my colleagues who’d worked with her before. I was told caseworkers wouldn’t visit Angela without police by their side because she was so aggressive. My colleagues thought she’d never change. Someone even said to me, ‘Surely you’re not going to let her keep the baby?’

To be honest, I thought it was highly likely Amy wouldn’t be able to stay with Angela. But I kept an open mind and, before going to the hospital to see them, I dropped into her home to see if it was ready to welcome a newborn home from hospital. Her two adult children (who were now living back with Angela) were cleaning the place and getting everything ready for their new baby sister. They showed me a little bedroom that was really well stocked. There was a bassinet, clothes, nappies – everything was ready.

When I visited Angela in hospital, the nurses told me she’d been really committed to going to the antenatal clinic and had attended all her appointments – and her urinalysis showed she was drug free. The specialist high-risk social worker was also very supportive and told me Angela had done everything right to look after this pregnancy and now the baby. In fact she said that although she had only had sketchy information about Angela’s past, she felt Angela was a very connected and bonded mother.

I met Angela on the maternity ward. I was up front about my worries, and she spoke honestly and from the heart about her life. Her story was horrific, and she admitted she hadn’t been a great parent in the past. I asked her what had changed for her? What in her life was different now from when her children were removed from her care? She said she knew FACS would be coming to take Amy, so when she fell pregnant she got proactive and started arranging to get clean. She worked with a community outreach service for women who use drugs, attended lots of courses and did urine tests.

The Easter weekend was coming, and it was a hard decision to leave Amy with her mother over those four days now they were heading home and sit with all the risk. However, I knew the importance of the bond between a mother and her baby from birth and wanted to make sure this could continue. The first step was to be sure that Amy would be safe over Easter; after that we could start working to address the long-term issues.
I put together a safety plan that allowed Angela to go home with Amy. The plan included Angela taking Amy to the hospital every day to see the baby health nurse and making sure she had enough people around her to provide support if she was struggling.

When all the information was put together, I realised how important it was not to judge Angela on her history alone but also on what I could see now. It was a profound moment for Angela when I told her she could go home with Amy. She didn’t believe it for days. Then, when she began to realise all her hard work was being recognised, it was empowering. She said ‘I’ll do anything’, and she did.

From the outset, Angela was working with us, not against us. She told me how grateful she was that I came to the hospital that day, for giving her a chance. She wonders what may have happened if someone else had walked in the door.

After working with Angela and Amy for almost a year, I was able to see the safety and the love and we didn’t need to be involved anymore. Amy is now about 18 months old and thriving. The opportunity to parent Amy has given Angela insights into what she missed with her other children. This has brought sadness and regret, but also a resolve to do things differently this time.

Towards the end of our work together, I was able to work with Angela to identify how the trauma of the past violence had hurt her other children. She was really open to thinking about this and is now talking to all her children about how they coped. It’s only the beginning and the wounds are deep, but the conversations are being had little by little. The two eldest girls have lived with Angela for the past five years, and her eldest son lives with friends. The other five children are still in care, but all are having regular contact with her. To top it off, the children are all starting to see each other, which hasn’t occurred for many years.

Angela is a great mum and is continuing to grow. Her love for her new daughter is amazing, and this has allowed a lot of healing to occur. I believe her mothering of Amy is allowing the other children to begin to trust her again. These are small but valuable steps for this family.

Angela is now a role model to her older children and can show them what good parenting looks like, hopefully breaking the generational cycle of abuse.

**ANGELA, MOTHER**

I can’t believe it took me all this time to snap out of it and see what I was doing to my poor kids. My partners were dominating and forceful, and I was pleasing them so I wouldn’t cop it. There was no food in the house and all my money was spent on drugs. I was begging for help; I had six children under five. When I’d get bashed, my only option was to ring the police. The kids would be upset and I’d be upset, and when I rang the police that would mean another report to FACS, so it was a ‘Catch 22’ situation.

Don’t get me wrong – I take the blame for everything I’ve done and for the kids being removed. I have a lot of guilt. I feel for the other kids; I don’t think I’ll ever shake the bad feeling that I failed them. It’s devastating to have your kids taken from you, and when I fell pregnant with Amy I thought I just can’t go through this again, I really, really can’t. There was a power inside me and I knew I needed to change. So when Amy was born I had clean urines, I’d done my antenatal care, I was not with a violent partner, I had stable housing and I was attending lots of support services.

In the past, I was caught in a rut and I needed someone to help me get out. I had a lot of confrontations with caseworkers, there was a lot of tension, and I often slammed the door and told them to get out of my face. With Kim it’s been different – she believes in me. Nothing is ever a barrier and she’s always got a plan. Ever since I’ve had Kim in my life, I’ve felt supported and rewarded for what I’ve done.

I’m wiser with age. I’m still doing courses and groups, not because I’m trying to prove anything to anyone but because I want to keep improving as a person.
Reflection

The key word that jumped out at me when I read Angela and Amy’s story is courage – Angela’s courage to be honest with herself about her past and her courage to make a change. We all know how difficult it is to change our patterns of behaviour, yet Angela was not only able to say she was committed to change, but then she did the hard work to turn her intentions into action.

Courage is also the word to describe Kim’s approach to working with Angela. Kim started her working relationship with Angela mindful of her past parenting history but also open to the idea that Angela could change. Kim showed that hopeful and respectful relationships are powerful forces for change.

Courage has created hope for a different future for Angela, Amy and her siblings.

Deidre Mulkerin, Deputy Secretary Western Cluster, Operations, Department of Family and Community Services
Taking flight

MICHELE, FACS CASEWORKER

One of my proudest moments as a caseworker was when Tom stood before his school assembly and delivered a speech he’d prepared for National Autism Week. I still smile when I think about him saying ‘I am autistic and I am proud’. Tom brims with optimism and ambition, and his energy fills me with hope, because I know how far he’s come.

Only 18 months earlier, age 16, Tom was in hospital and in a bad way – he was almost six feet tall yet weighted only 41 kilograms. Tom’s success since that terrible time has been built on the work of many people – an extended ‘care team’ that I have become part of only quite recently. His story speaks to the power of lots of good people working together and one very strong, smart young man.

Tom first came into the picture when the police visited his home after friends and neighbours became worried. No one had seen him for almost a year, and his mum, Lisa, had been behaving very strangely. The police found all the windows covered up, lavender crucifixes on the door, and a line of salt across the doorway. Officers became concerned when Lisa told them it was ‘to keep bad things away’.

Tom was found in a room lying on a mattress. It seemed he’d been living in that room for a long time. He was very thin and couldn’t stand or walk without help. Lisa had taped ‘protective objects’ onto Tom, and the skin underneath had become inflamed and sore. He was admitted to hospital to treat his weight loss, which was extreme, and for further health assessments. Lisa was hospitalised under the Mental Health Act.

The Joint Investigation Response Team (JIRT) started the work with Tom and Lisa, but it soon passed to the child protection team. The early work by JIRT and our colleagues in NSW Health and Redbank House, provided a terrific foundation for working with Tom. To keep him firmly at the centre of everything, a care team was created, drawing on the strengths and expertise of various professionals.

Over the following days, there were meetings with the medical team to plan for Tom leaving hospital. Discussions revolved around his medical problems, his autism, his social difficulties and the fact that he shared some of Lisa’s delusional beliefs. He hadn’t been to school and didn’t know how to be with other young people. Also, it came out that he hadn’t had any contact with his dad, Paul, for four years. There was a lot to put right.

The first thing Tom needed was to connect with family. Putting on her best investigator’s hat, the manager casework, Leonie, was able to find Paul, who was working in a remote area of another state. Paul was shocked when he heard about what had happened to Tom and had raw guilt about not having been there. Leonie was excellent – she delicately helped him focus less on the past and more on what he could do for Tom now.
Some of Tom’s care team: Nabil, Leonie, Stephen, Celine
At first, Tom didn’t want anything to do with his dad. He was angry because he believed Paul had abandoned him when he was little. To help, Paul wrote him a letter apologising for not being there. It worked, as not long after reading this letter Tom agreed to give his dad a chance. When Paul arrived at the hospital he walked straight over to Tom and gave him the biggest bear hug.

Over the coming days talks continued with Paul about what Tom needed for his health and schooling. Paul said that where he lived was about 500 kilometres from any of the services that Tom would need and this was one of several complex reasons it was agreed that he would come into care. Plans were put in place to keep up contact between Tom and his dad, now that their relationship had been rekindled. The team felt sad about this but knew it was the right decision – and so it proved to be. After two months, Tom’s health improved dramatically. He’d put on weight, he was no longer gripped by phobias and anxieties, and the medical team was confident he was ready to leave the hospital.

With not much time to act and many people already working with Tom, it was important to be clear what each would do. FACS needed to do the legal work required to bring him into care and find Tom a place to live that would meet his needs, strengthen his relationships with his family, and help develop his social skills. Work was also needed to support Tom to complete his schooling and to keep in close contact with Health, ADHC and Education about their work with him.

When Celine, one of the team members, met Tom, she came back saying, ‘He was so caring … he told me about his high IQ, which I never doubted. He had no difficulty talking with the medical staff about his treatment.’ At every step, Celine involved Tom and his parents in the Children’s Court process. Tom found it hard that he wasn’t able to live with his mum, so Celine made sure he was involved in all the planning decisions about what would happen to him. This approach was perfect for Tom – he became part of the team, calling Celine every day to check how things were going.

Stephen, another team member, helped Tom with his social skills – how to live in the world outside his hospital room. As with most 16-year-old boys, food proved to be a strong motivator. Their trips to the canteen for a muffin slowly introduced Tom to new faces and new conversations, and his confidence gradually grew. Stephen recalls, ‘there was never a dull moment with Tom. His knowledge is amazing, from how aerfoils assist flight, turning potatoes into vodka … you ask him, he has an insight on most things.’

Deciding on where Tom should live was one of our biggest challenges. Nabil from the Western Sydney Child and Family District Unit helped enormously. He met with Tom at the hospital and asked him what he wanted. Nabil remembers, ‘Tom broke every stereotype I had – he draws everyone in; you just have to be involved.’ Until the decision was made that Tom would live in a residential home with three other young people, Nabil and other members of the unit attended the care planning meetings to better understand his needs. Within weeks, plans were underway to move Tom from hospital to his new home.

The team soon learnt that Tom was ambitious – he wanted to do his HSC. The out-of-home care Education Coordinator found him the ideal school to support his strengths in science and maths. Although he’d missed a lot of school, after a few short months he impressed all his teachers with his academic abilities, and he’s now in mainstream classes.

After Tom had settled, it was agreed he should move to a caseworker in the District’s specialist adolescent team, and in early 2015 that’s where I came in. I soon learnt that Tom was ambitious. Now with only a few months until Tom’s 18th birthday, he and I are busy planning for when he formally leaves care, completes his HSC and starts university.

It’s never been difficult to measure success with Tom. He’s no longer the fragile boy from 18 months ago – he’s back at school and succeeding. He’s developed good friends (and a girlfriend he’s proud of), he’s reconnected with his dad who he talks to on the phone all the time and he sees his mum every week.
Tom has a quiet confidence, a strong sense of justice, respect for others and ambition. I believe in him and I know he will succeed. It has been an absolute joy to have played a part in his life.

Reflection

I have a young nephew with autism, so Tom’s story really resonated with me. The importance of family relationships comes through so strongly. When those relationships have broken down or are dysfunctional, life can be grim. But when damaged relationships are repaired, so much is possible. This story is as much about Tom’s mum and dad as it is about Tom. When I read that Paul gave Tom a huge bear hug in the hospital, I knew this was going to turn out well.

What is wonderful about this story is the multifaceted role our people played in supporting Tom and his family. Leonie’s role in working with Paul was crucial to the outcome. The potential for Paul to react negatively to news of Tom’s situation was high, but Leonie was able to get him to focus on what he could do in the future.

The work Celine did with Tom and his parents to get agreement to go into care, and in the preparation of the care application, was another vital step in the process. Stephen helped Tom come out of himself and connect with others, and Nabil found the right residential care setting for Tom to live in. Michele was instrumental in the seamless transition from the child protection environment to adolescent specialist services.

I feel very privileged to be part of an organisation that is so committed to serving our most disadvantaged and vulnerable citizens.

David de Carvalho, Deputy Secretary, Strategic Reform and Policy, Department of Family and Community Services
BEV, ABSEC FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCE FACILITATOR

Betty is a beautiful four year old Aboriginal girl. The first time I met her, she thought I was an aunty she’d never met. She just took to me and we yarrow away. Betty’s family comes from a strong and proud Aboriginal nation. Like many others, her parents had alcohol and drug issues and could not care for her. Betty had been living with her Aunt Jo since she was one, but could no longer stay there due to problems in Jo’s home.

When I first met Betty’s family, I introduced myself as an Aboriginal woman and shared my story. This allowed them to understand my connections within their community. The first meeting was an introduction – ‘Here I am and this is what I look like’. I explained the Aboriginal Family Group Conferencing program and my role as a facilitator – that I was independent from FACS. Going to see each of the family members gave them a chance to ‘eye me and hear me’. Aboriginal people know if you’re genuine. I told them I wanted to hear their stories. That’s the heart of Family Group Conferencing – to make sure every person is heard.

My Aboriginality was a real strength. It allowed me to connect and made the family open to working with me. Betty has a large family made up of many aunties, uncles, cousins and extended family members. FACS hadn’t known about all these relatives until I went and spoke to them – but once I did, they all wanted to be involved in the conference!

The preparation work before a Family Group Conference is so important – you keep going back, once, twice, whatever is needed. As I started to meet and talk to Betty’s family, it became clear there was a lot of pain. The family didn’t know why Betty was taken from Aunt Jo and were scared she’d be sent to live with non-Aboriginal carers. To make the situation worse, the family was grieving the loss of Betty’s father and grandfather.

The family lived all over the place, so I did a lot of travelling to make sure that everyone could participate. I showed respect by reflecting back the family members’ ideas to them in my own words, so they knew I was listening and understood. I was able to get them to air their grievances and talk about what mattered, from most to least. This helped show them that they were anxious about issues that had nothing to do with Betty. I also asked the family members what place and time they would prefer for the conference. This was important to help them feel empowered.

On the day of the conference there were 10 direct family members (including Aunt Jo) from three locations, plus three services (including the Aboriginal OOHC agency) and Robyn from FACS. Seeing 20 people sitting around the table was amazing. The family laughed, cried...
and sometimes left the room when they needed a breather. But at the end of the day they all showed their love for Betty and were united as a family.

Because there were so many people, it was important to have a second Aboriginal facilitator. Rod was amazing and able to relate to the men sitting at the table. He'd take them to one side and I’d take the women to the other – you can’t mix up men’s and women’s business. When the time came for the family to be by themselves, I stayed with them to write down their hopes for Betty in a family plan. When the whole group came back together, the plan was presented.

There had been such a big communication breakdown between this family and FACS before the conference. I negotiated for the family to read certain FACS reports so they’d have a better understanding of their worries. I took Jo aside and encouraged her to talk about what had gone wrong and supported her as she explained this to the family. This was a breakthrough and helped the family understand why Betty had to move to a new home. This information empowered the family to make informed decisions about who Betty could live with.

As the facilitator, you can’t let your own emotions out, but there were times where I could have cried for the family. I felt for the matriarch – the family had experienced a lot of trauma and she was hearing stuff she thought was done and buried. I also felt for the brother, who was now the leader of the family. My role as facilitator was to manage all of this – the family, the emotions, the group dynamics – and to make sure everyone was heard without being judged.

After several hours, the family had a plan that everyone liked. I saw the family move from being angry to genuinely happy to work with FACS and the other services. The meeting started with reservation and ended with unification. The group was optimistic about moving forward. The family was proud to have that plan and say to FACS, ‘this is what we want for Betty’.

ROBIN, FACS MANAGER CASEWORK

This Family Group Conference was a strong example of relationship-based practice and collaboration. I was impressed by Bev and Rod, how they managed the process and pulled everything together. At the start, discussion was stilted as we talked through the issues and got everything on the table. Then this amazing meal arrived! Eating together levelled the playing field, and from there things moved forward quickly.

The service providers and the family would separate to discuss issues and then come back together. This happened over and over until an agreement was reached. The bottom line was made clear from the start (that Betty needed to live with a carer approved by FACS), but other things were negotiable. Bev did a great job of mediating between the two groups and giving the family the freedom to be honest. The family owned all the decisions and made the best choices for this little girl.

At times, it was challenging and emotional. There were tears and banging of fists on tables. But everyone wanted the best for Betty and were committed to the process. I spoke to Aunt Jo and acknowledged the difficult job she’d had, and reassured her that being at this meeting showed how much she cared about Betty. This was so powerful. Jo told me I was the first person ever to say this to her and how guilty she felt about all the mistakes she’d made.

I’d never been part of a Family Group Conference before, but I left thinking ‘I hope we get more of this happening’. There are wonderful things happening in the Department at the moment, a real mindset change. We are working alongside families and respecting the role they have in decision-making.

As for Betty, she’s settling in well to her new home with her aunt and uncle. She had some catching up to do, and adjustments to make, but her family can see small steps in her development every day. She loves
going to childcare, especially when she gets to paint and draw. Betty enjoys being the centre of attention and telling stories to her little friends and family.

Best of all, she’s remained with family and in her community. She has a great relationship with her cousins and gets to see them all the time – in particular her older cousin Ruby who she follows around like a little shadow! Betty starts big school next year and is excited they will be there too. This continued connection to family, community and culture will set the foundations for her future as a strong Aboriginal woman who knows who she is, and where she belongs.

**Reflection**

The power of Betty’s story, as told by Bev and Robin, is in the great respect that the team, (both FGC and FACS staff) demonstrated towards the family. This respect took the form of sharing personal stories, going the extra mile in organising the family group conference, being conscious of how the family would hear and interpret information, and understanding how previous experiences with the Department need to be acknowledged and addressed.

This respectful practice is a strong example of the integrity and authenticity that makes the difference with families. This family’s positive experience gave them confidence in the service that will provide care for their child.

Family Group Conferencing is such an empowering framework for our families for problem solving, discussion and decision-making. But for it to work we need to be prepared to give that power to families. That is why the family’s declaration that ‘this is what we want for Betty’ is so meaningful. The care and love for Betty is sustained even though her care cannot be provided by her immediate family.

I find myself nodding in agreement with Robin – ‘I hope we get more of this happening’.

Simone Walker, Executive Director, Design, Innovation, Safety and Permanency, Department of Family and Community Services
JENNIFER, FACS CASEWORKER

The first time I visited Ron at his home, he placed a large cardboard box on the table. The box was filled with all the love and affection he hadn’t been able to share with his three granddaughters for many years. Jessie, Danielle and Katie were living with their nan from the other side of the family and, for her own complicated reasons, she had refused to let Ron see his much loved granddaughters.

Ron wrote birthday cards and letters to his granddaughters each year, but he’d lost confidence they’d ever reach them. Instead, he kept them safe in the box, hopeful that one day he’d be able to show his girls that he’d never forgotten them.

I was new to the family. Jessie, 15, a bright and positive teenager, was brought to our office by her exasperated nan with a suitcase full of clothes. After eight years together, their relationship had hit breaking point and we needed to find another home to keep Jessie safe. We moved her to an emergency refuge in the short term, but it was not a great fit. She pushed the boundaries of her newfound freedom, and I knew I had to find a better solution. From the beginning, I was curious about the other side of the family who hadn’t been able to see Jessie and her sisters for so long.

Reaching out to Ron and his wife, Sarah, and Jessie’s mum, Margie, opened up a lot of trauma for them about the lost years. I won’t forget the first phone call to Ron. After reading all our files, I was grateful that he would even take the time to talk to me, given everything he’d been through. Ron’s side of the family felt betrayed by FACS, and, as another caseworker new to their lives, I felt I needed to listen more than I spoke. It didn’t matter who was right or wrong – I had to respect the family’s experiences and hear about their hurt and anger. I needed to earn the right to speak and build trust, because Ron felt he’d been let down so many times before. I felt so sad that here was a man with so much to give but who didn’t believe I could help him build that bridge with his granddaughters.

During this process, I learnt that Jessie had an Aunt Kelly who was living in the country with her adult son, Jack. Aunty Kelly and Jack opened their home to Jessie graciously, and they turned out to be the perfect fit for her.

I spent a lot of time talking to Jessie about moving to Aunty Kelly’s to make sure she was comfortable with what was happening. Even still, she was very emotional on the drive up and nervous about all the changes. At the end of our five hour car trip, she would be starting a new life, including changing high schools and finding new friends. Thankfully, just after we got there, Jack helped to break the ice. He has a crazy sense of humour and soon we were all dressing up in his tradie gear – safety goggles and hard-hats, with shovels and Sanders in our hands. It was just what Jessie needed, and she hasn’t looked back.
since. I still have the photo on my desk at work of us on that day and I laugh when I look at us.

Meanwhile, I kept working with Nan and supporting Danielle (14) and Katie (12) to navigate the troubled waters swirling around them. The situation with Nan became increasingly complicated, and after six months a decision was made that Danielle would move to Aunty Kelly’s to be with Jessie. Then six months later, Katie joined them too, along with her dog, Ruffles. The three sisters were ecstatic to be living together again. Aunty Kelly’s family had grown quickly from two to five, so she needed support to find a home that would fit everyone. I worked with my Housing colleagues to secure a bigger house and we helped her financially with the big move.

During this time, Ron slowly started to build trust in me, and with FACS. I had so much joy sharing the progress of my relationship with Ron and his family with my team and manager. I was grateful that, at any time I was away, my colleagues were able to continue the positive relationship with him for me. Ron and I emailed and spoke on the phone a lot, and I worked hard to show him I had the girls’ best interest at heart and really valued his input. The trust this built up marked a turning point in our relationship, and I remember feeling thankful that after such a hard journey Ron had shared with me the hope, love and concern he felt for his granddaughters.

With the girls’ blessing, I assessed Ron and Sarah as respite carers, and their relationship blossomed. Ron lives several hours away from Aunty Kelly’s place but he often makes the long drive to spend time with the girls, or they come to stay with him. Ron is a character and he has the girls in stitches when they visit in the school holidays; he’s like a new man now. He eventually showed them the box of letters. I can only imagine how Ron felt that day and what that meant for the girls.

In the process of reconnecting the girls with their family, I reached out to their mother, Margie. She was not in a great place when we spoke and was trying bravely to leave a violent man. I listened to Margie, knowing she was on the path to leaving her marriage and gave her some advice and ideas on getting help – I really hoped that she would find a way out. A few months later, I was elated to hear Margie was safe, had left her marriage and she now sees her daughters regularly. The whole group – Jessie, Danielle, Katie, Aunty Kelly and Margie – just got back from a holiday together in Queensland, where they had a fantastic time. It’s hard to believe how much richer the girls’ lives now are, reunited with their mum and connected to so many people who love them.

Another type of box arrived in my office the other day – a tin of shortbread biscuits. Ron had dropped them off at the counter as a thank you for my work in bringing his family back together. It was just a small gesture, but it was a big step in our relationship. Those biscuits told me how grateful Ron was that I cared and had listened. Without Ron we wouldn’t have been able to make all the positive changes we did. He was unwavering in his commitment to making sure his granddaughters were happy and safe – and now they are.

RON’S STORY

The nightmare seemed dark and endless, then Jennifer came into our lives and the darkness lifted. Because of Jennifer, our first granddaughter, Jessie, was returned to us. All the pain and agony we’d endured for many years was starting to dissipate. And then, lo and behold, our second granddaughter rejoined our family and then our third! Jennifer has turned our lives around, reuniting the girls with us, their mum and their aunt.

We’ve had many meetings, conversations and emails over the past 12 months. We can always rely on Jennifer to follow up 100 per cent and be her usual fun, bright, bubbly self, while at the same time pushing unrelentingly for the right outcome.

I asked my granddaughters to tell me something about their relationship with Jennifer, and here’s what they said:
Katie: ‘Jennifer let me take Ruffles, my dog, to my new carer, Aunty Kelly.’

Danielle: ‘Jennifer is the best FACS officer I’ve met over the years, and brought my family back together again.’

Jessie: ‘Jennifer is always there for me in my times of need.’

Reflection

This story really resonated with me. Families are complex and can cause each other real hurt. This is especially terrible when the hurt is to innocent children.

We all want a happy ending, and the role Jennifer has played in getting a great outcome for these three children is truly inspirational. Jennifer was not prepared to accept a less-than-optimal solution. She actively listened to the children and to the people in their lives so she could broker a great outcome for the girls, and also where possible for other family members. She worked constructively across the Department and openly shared the learnings (and successes) with her manager and team. It is no wonder she has been able to build Ron’s trust. She did not judge but showed empathy and a single-minded focus on the girls’ best interest.

I was very moved by the image of Ron finally sharing the contents of that heart-shaped box with his granddaughters!

Margaret Crawford, Deputy Secretary, Corporate Services, Department of Family and Community Services
JANE, MOTHER

The biggest mistakes I’ve made in my life have been because I reacted out of anger. To help me with this, Melissa, my Brighter Futures caseworker, would talk about ‘mindfulness’. At first I thought to myself ‘what the hell is this shit?’, but then I went along to her Mindful Mondays group to check it out. I didn’t realise how important it is to take a breath and count. You think one, two, three – it isn’t very long, but it’s enough time to stop and think.

I also took my girls, Malika (five) and Addison (four), to the group and they responded to it straightaway. They loved the programs ‘Sitting Still Like a Frog’ and ‘Still, Quiet Place’. Watching how the simple meditations soothed my girls made me see how mindfulness actually works. Now they always say to me, ‘Mum, I want Still, Quiet Place, I want Still, Quiet Place’.

I feel like I’m giving my girls life skills I never had at their age. Growing up, I remember walking around on eggshells the whole time, worried my mum was going to snap. Now, if I ever speak to the girls like my mum spoke to me, I hate myself and feel so guilty. I have to remind myself that I am not my mum and I am doing everything I can to give them a better life.

I lived through some traumatic times as a kid. I was sexually abused by two people in my family and was terrified to tell anyone. When I finally got up the courage to tell Mum, she didn’t believe me. It was a kick in the guts. Then when I was 11 my dad was murdered and my mum was badly hurt in a car accident drink driving. After the accident, she thought it was normal to say, ‘go on, have a drink with me’. I remember the first time I got drunk. Mum was pouring me wine, after wine, after wine – and I was only 13 years old. I’ve now made a promise that I’ll never drink alcohol with my daughters; it’s not the message I want to send them.

I first met Mel when the girls’ childcare centre staff told me they were acting out there. The staff referred me to Brighter Futures, and I’m so glad they did. Mel has helped me get safe housing, counselling, and support with childcare costs. It’s reassuring to be able to give her a call and vent, because sometimes I feel I’m losing it. Having someone on the end of the line who actually cares makes a big difference.

I love learning new things, so I’ve been to different programs like Tuning into Kids and Circle of Security. It’s been a big thing for me to tap into Malika and Addison’s feelings and to nurture their love and affection. I’ve also learnt ways to calm myself down, so I can settle my daughters when they get upset. If you can’t regulate your emotions, you’re screwed. Learning about the brain, emotions and psychology has helped me understand why I was so miserable growing up. I already know things are going to be different for my girls.
I’ve started reading to Malika and Addison every night. My mum never read to me, so it wasn’t something I thought to do. Mel describes time together with the girls as ‘filling up their cups’. If they feel they have my undivided attention and love, it gives them what they need to be happy little people. I hope it means they’ll have the confidence to go out into the world, make friends and try new things, knowing I’ll always be here when they come back.

The girls still love going to Mindful Mondays – they always ask, ‘are we going to Mel’s today, Mum?’ The workers at SDN have noticed a big difference with them too since I’ve been with Brighter Futures. They listen and pay attention when adults are talking to them, and dinner and bedtime are getting easier.

I used to worry my daughters would be taken away from me, even though I was doing my best. I think it comes from being in the system so much – governments hold all the power. Now I feel at peace that this won’t happen. We’re a strong little family and we will always be together.

MELISSA, BRIGHTER FUTURES CASEWORKER, SDN CHILDREN’S SERVICES

My first impression of Jane was of her fierce love for her daughters, Malika and Addison. Her girls are beautiful and full of life. Jane had done a lot of hard work before we met – she’d left an abusive man and been through rehab for her addictions; both courageous steps to keep her girls safe. She was now ready to work on being the best mum she could be, and to do that she needed to face her past and all its sadness.

Spending time with Jane and the girls helped me understand how hard it was for her to cope with her emotions. When things got stressful, she went straight to angry. I knew she had to find a way to stay calm and deal with the stress of being a single mum. We talked a lot and I learnt that her family was volatile and that she’d been hurt badly as a girl. She knew the parenting she’d received had not made her feel safe, and that she needed to give her girls something different.

I felt that mindfulness would help Jane think before she acted, so I invited her and the girls to our Mindful Mondays group. On Mondays, I bring families together to help them connect in a safe, calm place. We worked on slowing Jane’s reactions down, and helping her not to react to dangers that didn’t exist. Together we created a ‘calm kit’ – tuning in on the five senses, learning simple meditations, and using colouring and stories to help the girls understand and engage with their emotions.

Teaching Jane tactics to set boundaries and introduce routines for Malika and Addison was important. I would watch how Jane would react erratically to the girls and they’d be confused about how to respond to their mum. That’s why a course called Circle of Security was so valuable for Jane; she learnt how to read her daughters’ emotions and respond to both their affection and their tantrums.

Spending this time together, watching the family and listening helped us build trust. I followed Jane’s lead in creating goals to work towards and negotiated lots of practical support so she felt like we were a team. I remember an ‘aha’ moment when my colleagues told me they heard Jane speak calmly to the girls and settle them quickly. In the beginning, the girls would run amok around the office, stressing her out. Over time she was able to set boundaries and give them praise when they did the right thing. It was a huge change and it showed how much Jane was putting into practice from our sessions.

Jane told me one day that she’d been sexually abused by two close relatives as a child but had never reported this to police. After all the years of silence, it was a real privilege to be by her side through three police interviews. Jane used to turn to drugs and alcohol to bury the pain, but this process was empowering for her. I also linked Jane to Bravehearts for therapy and to learn protective behaviours she could share with her girls. She carried with her a deep fear that someone would hurt her daughters, and this program helped her channel her anxiety differently.
I admire Jane’s insight and her determination to give her daughters all the opportunities she missed growing up. More than this, she advocates for her friends, family and community, and has a strong sense of social justice. I’m excited about her future.

Reflection

It takes such courage and determination to achieve what Jane did. Admitting that you need help, and that your parenting needs work is a confronting first step. In Jane’s case it opened the door to a flood of opportunities that will ensure that she is a better mum.

Jane’s own childhood experiences of repeated abuse and neglect was impacting on her own relationships with her children – so relearning how to listen to her own emotional reactions and to modulate them was critical in the journey that she travelled with her Caseworker Melissa.

Melissa’s skill in matching the services that fitted the needs of both Jane and her children is evident – these services were ‘just right’ for the developmental stage of the children and engaged Jane as their mother in listening and responding to her children so she can provide what they need – and support them to develop their own strategies to modulate their own emotions.

This story is a testament to a parent’s courage and determination to keep her children, and the skills and dedication of her caseworker. It is also a testament to the power of the translation of theory to practice – here we see the application at the micro level. Mindfulness, listening and setting routines for children don’t necessarily sound like they are potent strategies for change - but they are, and they emerge from our understanding of child development, attachment and the impact of trauma.

It takes a compassionate, skilled and well-supported workforce to accomplish such sensitive and life changing work. An amazing story – SDN, Jane and Melissa you all have my warm congratulations!

Dr Wendy Foote, Deputy CEO, Association of Children’s Welfare Agencies
I never forgot you

BELINDA, FACS CASEWORKER

Kerrie and John came running out of their rooms yelling ‘Dad, Dad, all our old toys are here!’ They jumped into their father’s arms and all three of them started crying. Joe, their father, said ‘I told you guys I never forgot you …’ It was a moment of healing for the kids. They’d been told, over and over again until they believed it, that their dad had abandoned them and just didn’t care.

In the beginning, it seemed impossible that Kerrie (13), John (11) and their two younger siblings, Jen (nine) and Josh (four), could be reunited with their dad, Joe. They’d been living with their mum, Kelly, and stepdad, Chris. During this time, Joe desperately tried to see his kids, but the family moved so often he wasn’t able to find them. Kelly told the children their dad hated them; sadly, it eventually stuck.

The children had been placed in foster care after it came to light that Chris hurt them badly, both sexually and physically. Despite my manager and I trying persistently to support Kelly to understand what he’d done, and to help her believe and support the children, she stuck by Chris. Kelly couldn’t see that Chris was harmful, and sadly we knew then that the children wouldn’t be protected from him if they were in her care.

Joe was upset when he learnt his children were in foster care. He explained that after Kelly left with the kids, he’d constantly call and text her, search on Facebook and drive around searching for them. Every time Joe thought he found them, the family would move again. Joe told us that the heartbreak and exhaustion was making him depressed, and for his own wellbeing he’d decided he couldn’t keep up the search.

By this time, Joe was living on a property in country Victoria with his new partner, Lou, their baby daughter, Scarlett, and Lou’s three daughters. Joe desperately wanted to see his children. So, after all the necessary checks and assessments, I started the process of reconnecting the family. I listened to each of the children and acknowledged their views. At first Kerrie and Jen wanted nothing to do with their dad. John, on the other hand, wanted to see him but felt torn about what this would mean for his mum.

After a few tentative phone calls, I organised for Joe and his children to meet. It was the first time they’d seen each other in three years. Joe drove 12 hours on his motorbike through the most shocking storm – blowing a gale and pouring with rain. I couldn’t believe he made it, but from the beginning I felt he was dedicated to rebuilding his relationship with his children.

Lots of preparation went into the first meeting. I put myself in the kids’ shoes and thought about what it would be like for them. I also spoke to Joe at length, telling him that his children were hurt and angry and that
he had to be willing to hear whatever they might say. I also asked him to think about what they might need to start to trust him.

The first meeting was incredibly emotional. John was beside himself to see his dad, Jen was hiding in the corner, and Kerrie said straight up, ‘Where have you been? Why haven’t you been here for us?’ Joe handled it so well. He showed the kids all the text messages he’d sent, so they could see how hard he’d tried. He took their questions on board, listening to the hurt he’d caused and taking responsibility for his behaviour. It was a promising start.

This success and the children’s wishes to all live together helped my manager and me to see reuniting them as looking hopeful. Lots of time, thinking and talking went into the plans for each child, based on their individual needs. I was lucky to have great leadership from my managers, who shared my hopes for the children to be with Joe. At the end of the day, whether the Children’s Court recommended they live with Joe or not, it was still in the children’s best interests to have a relationship with their dad.

Collaboration with other agencies and services across NSW and Victoria was so important. Even though the children were beginning to heal their relationship with their dad, they were still dealing with lots of trauma. We linked the three eldest kids to counsellors, who they still see today, and we continued to keep a close eye on Joe.

My managers and I talked about ways to help this big blended family get to know one another. Because Joe lived in another state, one of our ideas was to book a holiday house near the homes of the foster carers so that Joe, Lou and the eight kids could spend a whole week together. We wanted them to have the space and time to be a normal family, share dinners, ride their scooters and get a feel for what it could be like, all together.

We staged the week carefully so no one felt overwhelmed. On the first day, the kids went to the holiday house after school for just a few hours. Then it progressed to whole days and sleepovers. I visited the family that first day and I’ll never forget when John came in from playing, sat on the arm of Lou’s chair and put his head on her shoulder. Lou reached out and put her arm around him and they sat like that for ages. Even though no words were spoken, it was a lovely moment between two people learning to be a family. Later that night I drove John back to his foster carers’ house and he turned to me and said, ‘Today was the first time I have ever felt loved in my whole life’. It was heart-breaking stuff. He had not wanted to leave.

This was also the first time the four kids met their baby sister, Scarlett, which was amazing for all of them. It was like Scarlett was a symbol of family connectedness, unblemished by the family’s grief and trauma. It gave permission for the children to feel love and to weave themselves into this new family. The kids doted on her – even Jen, who was still struggling to accept her dad back into her life.

At the end of the week, Joe and the family had to return to Victoria. John cried as his dad drove off, and he looked at me and said, ‘Belinda, you just tell that court to hurry up’. He was ready to be back with his dad. I had tears in my eyes too.

Many more months of visits, phone calls and casework were needed before the court date arrived. I was determined to make sure that the Court heard the children’s voices loud and clear in the affidavit. The evidence was compelling, and I believed the children should be with their father.

The Court agreed, deciding that the children should live with Joe and Lou in Victoria. Kelly originally challenged this plan, but after speaking to each of her children on the phone she realised it was where they wanted to be. Kelly is planning to move closer to the children so she can see them more often, and for now they chat all the time on the phone. She understands that the children don’t want to see Chris and she respects their feelings, which is a big step in our work with her.

Today, the kids are doing well. Kerrie continues to be confident, fiery and strong, and is settling in to her new high school. John is making new mates; I was talking to Joe the other day and he was telling me a few boys had knocked on the door looking for John so they could go
play together. Jen is whip-smart and resilient and loves her new life – all her niggling doubts about moving in with her dad have long gone. Little Josh loves running around the property and having so many brothers and sisters to play with.

For me, I learnt that time, distance and complexity are no barriers to doing our most important job of all – getting families back together.

Reflection

To me this story screams of all the key ingredients of good positive casework practice – empathy, commitment, respect, care, preparation and planning. The outcomes are uplifting and what we all hope for when working with children in our care. There were three things that really struck me.

First, putting yourself in the kids’ shoes – it is clear that the children always came first. Belinda thought about each child and their perspectives individually, while still keeping an eye on the family as a whole.

Second, taking the long road – complexity is common in our work, how we approach that is what matters. The commitment and perseverance of Belinda to come up with creative solutions to restore these children provide that little bit extra that made all the difference. The creativity of bringing the family up to rent a house near the foster carers, so the children could take the ‘space and time to be a normal family’, shows that planning and taking your time can lead to amazing outcomes.

And third, ‘R.E.S.P.E.C.T. – Find out what it means to me’, as Aretha Franklin sang! In demonstrating respect to everyone in the family, Belinda showed great insight and courage. In her practice it is clear that she was respectful and positive with the whole family. She listened and worked with each family member to understand them and work towards reunification. I agree with Belinda that time, distance and complexity should never be barriers to trying everything to keep families together.

Mandy Young, Acting Deputy Secretary, Southern Cluster, Housing Statewide Services, Department of Family and Community Services
It was Christmas Eve and we were the only two in the office – Joel, one of our ‘coppers’, and me. It had been a busy week for our JIRT team and we were writing up all our notes when the phone rang. It was Campbelltown Hospital and they wanted us to come straight away. They said they had a baby girl in intensive care and they thought she was dying.

I will never forget the first time I saw Jasmine. She was in a humidicrib and had tubes and monitors from head to toe. My own babies had been born prematurely so all this machinery was not unfamiliar to me. But Jasmine was not newborn – she was 10 months old. She looked like a very old person shrunken into the body of a tiny baby. She had no fat at all, her skin was shrivelled and she was as pale as a ghost. I put my hand into the crib and put it on her chest – I didn’t ask if I could touch her, I was doing it before I had time to think. She opened her eyes and her fingers wrapped around mine. It wasn’t a strong grip but it was a grip – unmistakably so – and it was a connection between her and me.

My job is all about these moments of connection with children who need help. And it’s more than a job – it’s what I do and it’s who I am. We all bring different qualities to our work. For me, it’s being able to be strong in the moment for children who need someone on their side, when they tell me something really awful has happened to them or when I see they’ve been hurt. It’s like kick starting an engine, the way those moments snap me into gear.

We got the story from the nurses. Jasmine had been brought to the hospital in an ambulance that had been called by her dad. He didn’t live with Jasmine and her mum and two young brothers, just visited them on and off. He said he’d found Jasmine in a bouncer on the floor, in the dark, in a room on her own. The medical term is that she was ‘unresponsive’ – not asleep but not really awake either. The nurses said her body was closing down because she was so malnourished that she literally had no energy to keep her alive.

We spoke to Jasmine’s parents. I’d heard stories about families where one child is treated very differently from the others, but I had never come across them. It was hard to understand. Jasmine weighed as much as a newborn; she had no muscles and had scrapes on her face. We worked out she had spent most of her time in a bouncer alone in a room. She hadn’t been fed for days and had not been washed or changed for a very long time. For whatever reason, Jasmine’s mum had just closed her out, literally.

Jasmine’s brothers may not have been thriving, but they’d never been reported to our Department. They went to preschool, they were growing normally and their mum had some connection to them.
Jasmine, on the other hand, had barely been seen. Some neighbours didn’t know she existed, others had never seen her out with the family. Both parents were strangely cut off from her; they didn’t seem able to understand just how ill she was, nor did they seem worried. Her dad said, ‘everything was fine until that girl came along’. That line really got to Joel. He kept coming back to it, shaking his head in wonder. It was a long day and when we finally headed home that Christmas Eve, I remember feeling grateful that I work alongside people who really cared and I could share hard days with.

A full 24 hours later, I had just finished Christmas lunch with my own family. It had been a great day and I was watching my children and all that they had around them and I found myself thinking about Jasmine. I told my family I would be back in an hour and I drove straight to the hospital and asked if Jasmine was well enough to be taken out of the humidicrib to be held. The difference in her in just one day was amazing – she had some colour in her cheeks and I knew then she was clearly a fighter! The nurses let me hold her for a short time and I sat with her before going back home to my family. It’s not often I visit children outside of work hours, but this little girl had no one. Lifesaving sustenance comes in many forms, and if Jasmine was going to pull through she needed connection with people every bit as much as she needed medical help.

In the following days Jasmine did so well. I worked with Kathryn at our local CSC to find a carer, and Joel got on with the police side of things. Jasmine’s parents were charged with medical neglect and her two brothers were brought into care. I thought a lot about what had gone wrong for this family and how it might have been different had we known about Jasmine soon after she was born. I wondered what might have happened had one of my skilled workmates been able to work with her mum early to help her attach to Jasmine – to see her and care for her. I suppose I’ll never know. That’s this work for you; we see things that just don’t make sense. The trick is to keep curious and to try to understand at the same time as being very clear about what is not okay for children.

The best news came on about the fifth day after Jasmine was admitted to hospital. Our local team had found her a fantastic carer, Kate, who cares for babies and small children short term. She told me that she’d worked overseas with children in developing countries and that one day she thought ‘why am I doing this when there are so many children back in my community who need someone to care for them?’ So she came home and became a foster carer. I am glad she made that choice – we can’t begin to do our job without people like Kate. I no longer needed to visit the hospital every day to hold Jasmine because Kate stepped straight in and straight up. She took over most of Jasmine’s care in hospital and didn’t leave her side.

It’s hard to describe what Jasmine was like in those early weeks. We held her like you hold a newborn because she was so fragile, but we knew she should have been up and moving and pointing and laughing and all the other things a nearly one year old baby should do. Quickly she turned into that little girl – the medical team were surprised at how fast she caught up and how she thrived on the contact with Kate. At last she had someone who was there just for her.

The job of bringing around a baby who has been on her own constantly – who doesn’t cry because no one comes and who has not seen delight in the faces of people who look at her – is all-consuming. Kate had to show Jasmine that people can be trusted to depend upon; she had to show her physical warmth and comfort. She did all of that and more, and Jasmine lapped it up. Within days, Kate was holding Jasmine close up, face to face. She’d talk to her constantly and calmly, and she’d smile with her eyes locked with Jasmine’s, and Jasmine would smile back. You cannot know how important this was.

Eventually Jasmine left hospital and stayed with Kate for more than a year. The decision was made that Jasmine and her brothers could not return to their parents’ care. Once the right family was found, Jasmine was moved to live with her brothers. As hard as it was, the move was right because she needs to be with her family. Kate gave her the best chance of thriving in her new home because she taught her to love and to be loved. I keep in touch with Kate and she tells me that saying
Kate with one of the babies in her care

Jasmine’s care team: Joel, Mariana, Kathryn, Kade
Reflection
This is a powerful story that highlights our responsibility to the most vulnerable children.

Jeannine’s description of why she does this work is inspiring. I particularly like how she describes being able to be ‘strong in the moment for children who need someone on their side’. What a great motivator when you encounter situations that are tough – that reminder that a vulnerable child needs someone strong just for them.

JIRT does difficult child protection work and it can be complicated by working and coordinating with Police and Health as well as other FACS units. Jeannine illustrates that by staying child focused and curious and by great collaborative work with CSC’s, parents, carers, Police and Health, we can achieve better outcomes for the very vulnerable.

This little baby was fortunate to have Jeannine and the team she mobilised to be strong for her when she so desperately needed it.

Myra Craig, Executive Director, Community Services Statewide Services, Department of Family and Community Services.

goodbye to Jasmine was one of the hardest goodbyes of her life. And believe me, she has said goodbye to a lot of precious children.

Jasmine now lives with her brothers in their new home with a foster family for life. She’s two years old and chubby and gorgeous. Best of all, she is cherished and has her brothers and her doting new parents wrapped around her fat little fingers.

JIRT work is not for everyone. We see and hear some pretty hard stuff. It’s all about teamwork. In our team the police respect us and we respect them. That’s how it’s got to be for us to do our best work for all the Jasmines who need us.
The very proud Office of the Senior Practitioner team who worked on this year's report

Jo, Sarah, Kate, Megan, Elaine, Sarah, Donna