



# *Shining a light*

ON GOOD PRACTICE IN NSW 2016

# Acknowledgements

The Department of Family & Community Services gratefully acknowledges the practitioners who feature in these good practice stories and the children, young people and families who bravely shared their lives with us.

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

- Marist Youth Care
- Mission Australia
- Taronga Zoo

The fabulous photos you see throughout the report are the work of photographer Alex Vaughan. The hope and light captured in the photographs are a testimony to Alex's talent, passion and vision. The only exception is 'Shoulder to Shoulder' which have been supplied by Rick Stevens and Taronga Zoo.

The photos feature the children, young people, foster carers, parents and practitioners whose stories appear in this report. The names of the practitioners are real but the names of the children, young people, parents and carers have been changed to protect their identity. The exceptions are Lynelle in 'A safe house', Belinda in 'Now look where we are', Sam in 'Standing on my own', Muriel in 'Staying connected' who each chose to use their real names.

Photos ©Alex Vaughan

# Minister's foreword



The stories in the 2016 Shining a Light on Good Practice in NSW report show the very real work of child protection – its complexities, its challenges and also its rewards.

Each story is a reminder of the strength that exists within every child, within every family and within practitioners. The strength to ask for help, receive help and give help.

The stories challenge us to see children and families in a different way; to set aside any preconceived ideas; listen to the needs of all concerned and develop a plan which will ultimately be in the best interest of the child.

In so many of the stories practitioners questioned assumptions, created connections and persevered tenaciously.

The children, young people and families featured in this report show what is possible when someone believes in you and what can be achieved when everyone involved wants the same outcome.

I thank the families involved for having the bravery to share their story in the hope it will make a difference in how practitioners approach future casework.

## **Brad Hazzard**

Minister for Family and Community Services  
and Minister for Social Housing

# Introduction

## *from the Office of the Senior Practitioner*



As always I am thrilled to introduce the stories in this report - stories that are about child protection practice. While child protection is what we do, practice is how we do it. Practice is the relationships, the conversations, the thinking and the care. When it works, practice is the magic that keeps children with family, connected to culture and cherished by those who love them best.

One of our jobs in the OSP is to “promote evidence based practice”. What better evidence than the stories in this collection. Families who stood willingly beside our practitioners to have their photos in a public report; who have chosen their own words to tell their stories and who speak frankly about relationships that got them on their feet. Eighteen pieces of beautiful evidence that skilful practitioners can forge genuine partnerships with people who have good reason to have lost hope. And that those partnerships can make a difference that can last a lifetime.

As much as these stories are about exceptional practitioners, the steadfast support of their managers stood out. I was particularly moved by Jackie in ‘The Mantra’ when she stood alone in the hospital car park at night talking to her manager Sally. Jackie had just had a tough encounter with a vulnerable young woman. Sally listened and said “you need to go back”. It became their mantra, just going back and turning up. Simple dedication that meant safety for a young woman who was being exploited.

I hope you love this report as much as we do in the OSP. May it remind you how profound this work can be and warm your heart. May it inspire a different approach or celebrate a colleague. Most of all may it fill you with hope for the power of helping relationships and admiration for the honourable work of child protection.

**Kate Alexander**  
Executive Director  
Office of the Senior Practitioner

# Contents

	Standing on my own	6		Digging deep	52
	Shoulder to shoulder	11		Goosebumps	57
	Fierce love	16		Seen and heard	61
	The mantra	21		Now look where we are	66
	Breathing space	26		Building dignity	71
	World at her feet	31		Finding missing pieces	76
	Gratitude	36		Dreams can come true	81
	My life now has freedom	41		A safe house	86
	Staying connected	46		Quietly confident	91

# Standing on my own

## Kylie, FACS Caseworker

You can learn a lot from seeing things through other people's eyes. Sam has had to deal with too much pain. Her partner Mark was very violent and using drugs. Sam felt she couldn't leave the relationship.

While pregnant with her third child, her 18-month-old daughter was seriously injured. We were told it wasn't an accident, but no-one could explain how it happened. Sam was at hospital caring for her injured daughter when she went into labour. With no safety for the children at home, her two daughters and newborn son were taken into care.

After the children were taken, Mark assaulted Sam again. We got a report she was pregnant with her fourth child, homeless, and we believed she was using drugs. She was only 25 and her life had spiralled out of control.

Sam didn't want to know me at first. She was about five months pregnant when we met. We spoke briefly about what was happening for her and her unborn baby, and she agreed to what she could, but it was fleeting. I tried very hard to connect with Sam, but she avoided all contact with me. I was worried. I put out what we call a high-risk birth alert on our system, which informed all the hospitals about my worries. It all seemed so risky. Sam hadn't worked with us and we hadn't been able to see any change. What was most worrying was that we never got to the bottom of how her little girl had been injured. Everything was pointing to the likelihood that this new baby would need to come into care too.

I really wanted to get to know Sam, to find out what her life was like. I knew the research about outcomes for kids who enter care, and it wasn't sitting well with me. I didn't want to bring another baby into care, but I also didn't know if we

could be sure it would be safe not to. And then our legal advisor threw me a lifeline. He said we couldn't just rely on history to take this baby – I needed to look at all options. I needed to give this mother a go.

Within a week or so, I got a phone call from a hospital to say that Sam had booked in to deliver her baby the next day. I had finally found a way to speak to her.

When I arrived at the hospital Sam was in the labour ward. She burst into tears when she saw me. It seemed like a mixture of relief and worry. Her third baby had been taken from her at birth, and of course she was scared the same thing would happen. But I think she was also relieved she could stop running. After months of avoiding me, we finally had the chance to talk about her baby. With the legal 'okay' to reassess Sam's situation, I reassured her that we were going to start fresh, that she would be given a chance. That was the first step for Sam and me to begin this journey and make changes to keep this baby safe.

Later that night I got a message that Sam had a healthy baby boy. His name was Karym.

I went back the next day and we had a really honest chat about my worries. I was still wrestling with uncertainty about how Sam's daughter had been so badly injured, whether she and Mark were really over, whether she understood that her kids were at risk before and whether she was serious about working with me.

But I knew that at some point Sam had been able to look after her kids. There had been a relatively long time when she'd been doing okay. It was something to work with.



Karym and Sam

I couldn't discount the history, but I also couldn't let it define my assessment of Karym's safety now. Together, Sam and I made a safety plan for baby Karym. We talked about her relationship with Mark, and what his violence would mean for Karym and her. She was adamant it was over, she had an AVO. Our safety plan was that she had to enforce it. Sam left the hospital with her brand new baby. I was hopeful, really hopeful, but goodness I was nervous.

I've reflected on that meeting a lot. Sam was alone at the hospital. She'd been dropped there by someone else, to bring a baby into an uncertain world. She'd had another baby taken in similar circumstances. As a mum myself, I've tried to imagine what it must have been like for her. I realised it's a privilege to be able to take your baby home from hospital to a safe, supportive place.

From that meeting at the hospital, I worked hard to build trust with Sam. I tried not to judge and encouraged her to let me know how I could help. Initially she reached out just for a few little things for her and the baby, but I think even asking for that little bit of support was a huge thing for her.

Sam and baby Karym needed somewhere to live. I asked her to come up with some ideas and together we negotiated what would be safe and suitable. They went to stay with Karym's paternal grandmother on her property. Mark was not welcome there, but the property was isolated and out of town, and Sam didn't have a licence or a car. I was reluctant, but there were no other options, so we put plans in place to make it safe enough.

Over the course of the next few months, I visited a lot. With the Early Childhood Nurse, we shared visits two or three times a week. I talked a lot with Sam about our worries, about her, about the drugs, about the violence from Mark. The violence was probably the biggest issue. I needed to listen more than I talked. It was hard to hear how awful it had been. It made me admire her courage – how she had managed to get up every day, and how much it took for her to leave the relationship. Going back through her history, the violence and abuse increased dramatically each time she was pregnant.

This time Sam was sure the relationship with Mark was over, but she seemed resigned to the violence. This type of relationship had become 'normal' for her. She didn't seem to know it could be different. She found it hard to believe that she deserved better.

**“ I needed to listen more than I talked. It was hard to hear how awful it had been. ”**

With Mark out of the picture I worked hard to build Sam's confidence and self esteem. I knew Sam couldn't stay at the property indefinitely, so we got working on more permanent housing plans. We have a housing officer at our office, so I advocated for Sam every day. Literally I was stalking that worker, in the hallway, even in the kitchen.

When Karym was about 12 weeks old, Sam was offered a house of her own. It was the first real test of whether she could manage by herself. She picked up the keys and I helped her make some arrangements. When I visited her a few days later it looked like Sam had lived there for years. She was unpacked and, despite being a woman who kept her feelings tightly checked, beaming from ear to ear. It was the biggest smile I've seen.

Sam has had challenges since Karym was born but she faces them every time. One day Mark broke into her house while she was out. He left her a note on the table to make sure she knew he had been there. I think she'd had enough. She was determined to keep Karym safe and she wasn't going to let Mark risk that. She called the police and enforced the AVO. He was charged, and this time, for the first time, she went to court and gave evidence against him. Mark was convicted and sent to gaol. Talk about courage – she has it in spades.

I've had to work through a lot of uncertainty and worry about this mum and baby. At first, I spent a lot of time wondering about how Sam's little girl got injured – it's always easier to work with the risk if we understand what's happened. But over time, I realised I was never going to know that story. That child was hurt in a family led by a very violent man, and where drugs were a way for Sam to cope. So I moved my focus to the here and now – to give Sam the chance to be able to love this baby in a home of safety.



Karym is now 18 months old and Sam is doing really well. She's a great mum to him and he's thriving. He's a beautiful, happy, energetic little boy who busily explores his world from the safety of his mum's side. For him to grow up with his mum is such a huge reward, and I'm proud I was able to help foster that.

For Sam, I'm most proud of what she's been able to do. I'm amazed at her strength, how her confidence has grown, and her determination to be the best mum she can for Karym. I don't know if Sam sees herself as brave and courageous for making these changes. I hope she does. And I hope that one day Karym will be able to understand how hard she fought to be his mum.

Being a good mother to Karym is now the driving force for Sam to get her other three kids returned to her care. This is another big challenge, but with her new sense of confidence and the determination she has shown so far, I'm really hopeful.

## **Sam, mum**

I didn't trust Kylie at the beginning. I'd had a lot of caseworkers already, and in my mind, she wasn't going to be any different. After that first meeting at the office, I just stopped talking to her. When she walked into the hospital four months later, I was worried; really worried.

When she told me that I'd get a chance to take Karym home, I was surprised and relieved. It felt like a miracle. I knew I'd have to work with her if I was going to get to keep Karym with me, so I tried to be open minded.

Kylie showed me time and again she would do what she said. She didn't beat around the bush, if she had something to say, she said it. She doesn't just talk in words that are 'up there', she talks about what it means to me. And she listened. She spent time getting to know me. She's been there for support and encouraged me when I needed it. She's told me I need to get it right for Karym. For me, he's the key to getting my other three kids back. That's been a big motivator.

I'm proud of being able to keep Karym with me. I've made decisions that show I can keep him safe, but it's hard to not have my other three kids. Ending the relationship with Mark and standing on my own has been the biggest change, but being able to meet Karym's needs, and give him a place that is his home is really special. I've learnt that I'm stronger than I thought.

## *Reflection*

There are so many wonderful parts to this story and to me it is fundamentally about two things - persistence and optimism. Two of the best attributes you can have when working with vulnerable children and families.

Without Kylie's persistence in engaging Sam, I doubt we would have seen Karym be able to stay in Sam's care.

And the same goes for her optimism. Too often we think we need to understand the past before we can move into future work with our clients. While the past is often the prelude, Kylie's ability to let go of the past (about what happened to Sam's older daughter) meant that she was able to move on and work with Sam in the here and now.

Kylie's persistence with Sam and her optimism and belief that people can and do change meant that she was able to unlock Sam's courage, so she could stand up to her violent partner, change her life circumstances and be able to care for Karym full time. It is a wonderful outcome for all and here's hoping that Kylie's work will continue with Sam in having all her four children together, with her.

Well done Kylie, there is nothing better in our work than to build relationships with our clients and walk alongside them as we create hope and help build a better future for children and families – together.

**Clare Donnellan**  
**Executive Director, Community Services Statewide Services**

# Shoulder to Shoulder

## **Nardi Simpson, Aboriginal Education Officer, Taronga Zoo**

This is a story about a big walk, 21 kids, four women, an eagle and a whale. It's about the trees that hold our memories and the steps that connected us to ancestors. It happened on the stretch of country between the zoos at Dubbo and Sydney – nearly 500 kilometres in all – and was brought to life by remarkable children. It will always be their story.

It starts eight years ago when I saw a job in the Koori Mail. It was for someone to work at Taronga Zoo in a new program for Aboriginal kids. The idea was to get the kids in regularly to help with the animals. I threw my hat in. Back then you wouldn't have called Taronga a place for black kids. The chance to change that appealed to me.

I started working with the team at Taronga, including Lucinda. They quickly understood what this program could do for young people and how those young ones could help the zoo. We called it Burbangana. It means “take my hand and help me up”. We got very busy.

Then I met Janice and her people from FACS. They brought the young people to us. We said yes to them all. It didn't matter what they brought with them, their history, stories or problems, they were all welcome. We gave them uniforms, an important job and believed in them. And they stepped up – every single time. I am talking about kids who have been hurt or afraid because of adults who have let them down. To see them come through the doors, proud to be a part of us, made me happy. Watching their gentle care with the animals blew my mind.

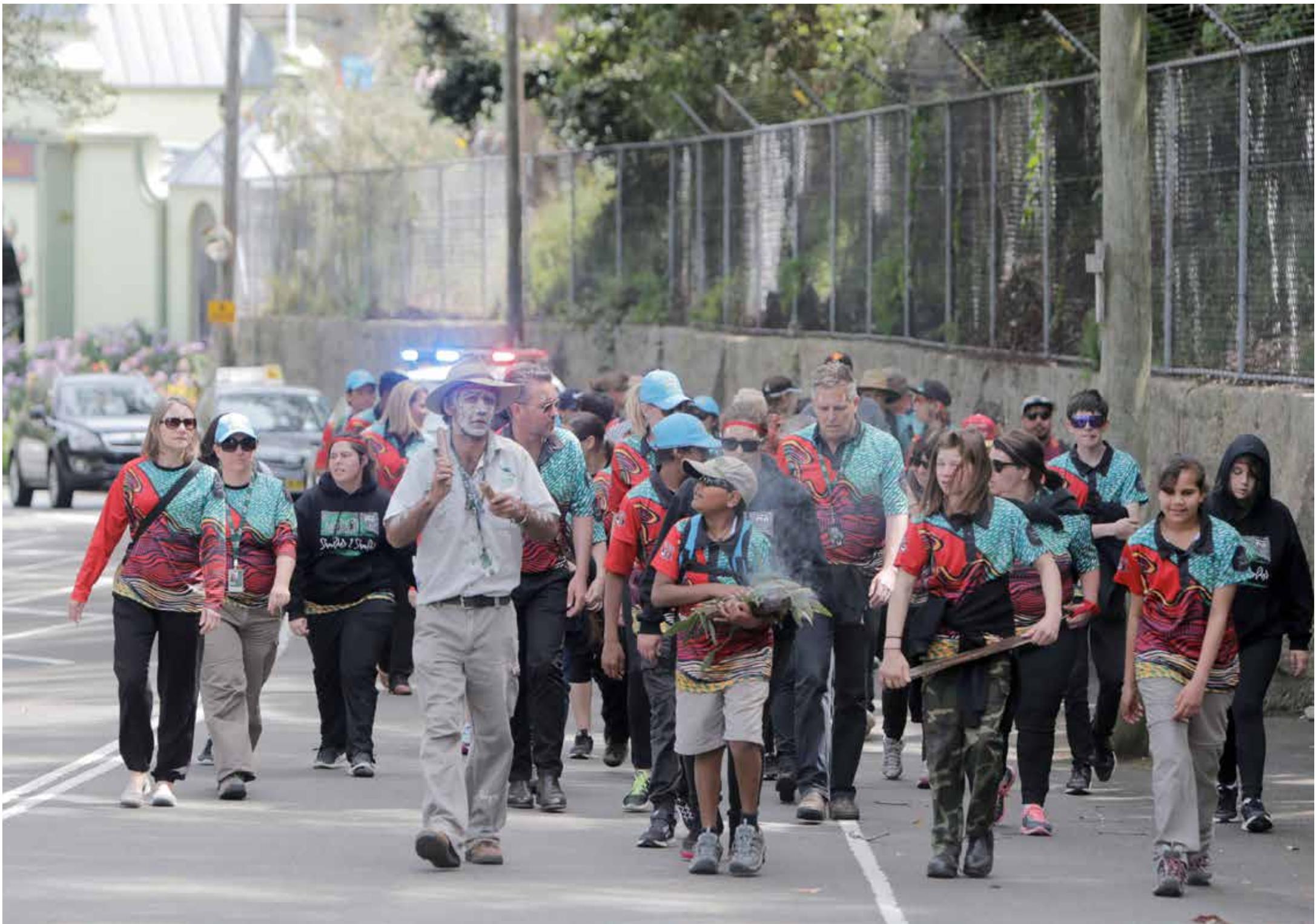
The program was such a success that we started another one at the Western Plains Zoo in Dubbo. We called it Walanmarra – it means “to make strong now”. It was pretty soon after that I started thinking about a big walk. I wanted to give these young people a chance to understand country, to know Mother Earth, to take safety from nature and to continue a tradition of walking that's been around since the first sunrise. Our people have always walked to celebrations.

When I heard that Taronga was having its 100th birthday it seemed the perfect chance – what better present could we give! To connect the two zoos by having young people come together to walk the land with different communities offering them safety along the way.

I heard later that some people thought we were mad. Others doubted the kids could do it. The hard bit was never about getting the kids across the line - it was about taking the adults there with us.

The four of us started the planning in earnest. We all had our part to play. Lucinda had to think about the zoos. Janice and her people were tireless on the detail; they had to plan for every young person. Kirsty and I had to think about the country and finding the communities and elders who could welcome us and strengthen our journey. It went on forever - we wanted to be prepared for everything, from hunger to blisters to snake bites. The idea to involve schools along the way was a good one. It meant connection to communities, giving our young people a chance to be celebrated. We loved the thought of all of us sleeping in rows, for safety and togetherness, in little country school halls. It just felt right.

Then it was time to start. Leaving Dubbo was emotional. We were restless the night before, weighted with the burden of being strong for everyone. And then at



our send off one of the local Elders came to welcome us. She only had eyes for the young ones; she was giving them her blessing to walk on her land, strong women's country. She entrusted her hopes into them and her protection. I could feel her belief in those children. It was then I knew everything would be alright.

And the walking began. We walked and we walked. We walked in silence, we walked with chatter, and we walked close together or spread far apart. We all agree that we were at our best when we were walking. We found our rhythm and it was an amazing feeling. Everyone was equal on the road.

There were so many memorable moments – the day it rained for hours and we arrived drenched at one little school. It was the first and only night that those mats on the floor didn't seem so good. We turned around, dripped our way back to town and booked every room in the local motel on Janice's FACS account. Never has it been so easy to get kids to take a hot shower!

Then there was the day a local farmer helped us across some flooded areas by stacking kids in the back of his ute, and that break from sausages on the night Lucinda's family met us with big bowls of spaghetti bolognese and pavlova. There were the dances around the fire at dusk and the talk of young people who had time and space to tell their stories or just the sounds of the bush and the quiet solidarity of tired walkers which brought its own form of healing.

One of the Elders we met along the way taught us about those in the animal world who would look out for us - especially the animals we call creator beings. He told us we would be taken care of by the eagle as we came from the west and the whale when we hit Sydney harbour in the east. Of course we saw them – it was meant to be. No one was surprised when that big wedgie spread his wings as he flew overhead. We adults sat in silence and wonder. Then there was that mother whale when we hit the beach. She flapped her big tail at us and blew her spout, saying welcome to Sydney. The kids waved back and kept walking, taking it in their stride, forming their own meanings. It's got to be personal, what you take from nature. For me that whale was a moment that will never leave me. I stayed back for a bit to take it in on my own.

How those kids changed as we clocked up those steps. On the last day of the walk and on the day of the zoo's birthday they all got up at 5am for the sunrise. They did it themselves – some came running out in pyjamas but they were there in line without being asked. We said thank you to grandfather sun that morning

**“ We all agree that we were at our best when we were walking. We found our rhythm and it was an amazing feeling. Everyone was equal on the road. ”**

– one after the other down the line. Everyone said different things, some chose not to talk, and that was okay. But those voices, the respect and the thanks, I won't forget in a hurry. We got some hugging going on in that line. It wasn't planned, it just happened - everyone hugging each other down the row, our time together before we headed off up that hill to the finish line at Taronga.

The best thing for me was that ending. The ones who had nothing gave the ones with everything something they have never had. Just before we arrived, the zoo put out a call on the loudspeaker for everyone to hear. It was packed that day because it was school holidays and the announcement invited all to come out and cheer us as we arrived. Those onlookers saw something too great for words, they saw something of themselves in our kids and they knew something had been done on their behalf. No wonder we were crying.

I miss the bush already. Every one of those young people is still in my mind. I am thinking about what's next and I know Lucinda, Kirsty and Janice are too. We had our different roles before we started – the walk changed all that. We are the best sort of team now. We have done earth and now I am thinking about water – maybe a canoe trip on the Murray to Adelaide. I know the kids could do it.

### **Janice Carroll, FACS Director, Intensive Support Services**

I don't think I will ever be the same. I feel so very privileged to have been part of it. The kids we took were a diverse bunch. They have all had the rough end of the stick – some kids' experiences have been so hard, their resilience is inspiring. The little ones who started at Dubbo were amazing, their carers were there waving them off, proud as punch. They didn't walk the whole way but they

---

“ The ones who had nothing gave the ones with everything something they have never had.”

met us at the end to walk Sydney harbour - they were with us to thank grandfather sun and they were welcomed by the mother whale. Some of those kids had never seen the sea before. Their eyes just popped. I have never seen Sydney as beautiful as it was that day - it gave the backdrop for those memories.

The older kids who joined us along the way proved our belief in them. We saw kids transform and achieve more than they thought possible. We had kids who had had recent police involvement, kids who had been recently hurt and kids without permanent homes. We saw those children connect with themselves and with others. They faced their fears and excelled. Their bravery knows no bounds. What a foundation for them to build on! Some of the kid's experiences will stay with me forever.

When we finished the CEO of Taronga welcomed the young people. He gathered everyone up and told them that they will always be safe at Taronga. I know he meant it.

You can't really find the words to describe the gift of connection and culture - especially for children who have had their stores of trust eroded by hurt. For them to have an experience to connect to country, to give over to something strong and protective and to feel safe is the best we can do. It's a gift that will last a lifetime.

I have no doubt that there will be more journeys. We have so much to learn from the land and the kids who belong on it. And yes of course I'll get in a canoe.

## Reflection

When people hear the phrase “public sector innovation” if they don't draw a blank entirely they tend to think about things that are big and complex.

Our partnership with Taronga is a brilliant example of public sector innovation.

Think about it. Scientists, conservationists, social workers and youth workers combining in a completely novel way to give something wonderful to kids in care.

The walk from Dubbo to Taronga is just the latest – but definitely the most bodacious – opportunity for our youngsters to emerge from the partnership.

A statement of belief by the dedicated people who organised it in the young people who took part, in each other and in the warmth of the reception the kids would receive along the way.

Belief fully justified. But belief backed by careful planning, incredible attention to detail and plain hard work.

It showed what kids in care can achieve and just how many people want them to do well.

**Michael Coutts-Trotter**  
**Secretary**  
**NSW Department of Family and Community Services**

Photo credits for this story Rick Stevens and Taronga Zoo



# Fierce love

## Lisa, FACS Caseworker

When I first met Kate in 2013, she was quiet and shy and relied on others to speak for her. But one thing was clear, Kate loved her girls and was fierce in her determination to have them back with her.

Her children, Cara and Beth, came into care in 2010. Cara was two and Beth was a newborn. Kate had a difficult childhood and she became a parent in early adulthood. Her partner was violent and controlling, and Kate seemed to have no supports outside the relationship. The girls were taken into care by FACS because of Kate's drug use and their father's violence.

Cara and Beth were living with kinship carers, Becky and Tom. They had put their lives on hold to care for the girls and loved them dearly. Cara and Beth were thriving and seemed happy and secure. When I spoke with Becky and Tom about the possibility of them returning to their mum, they were supportive, even though it would mean the girls not being with them every day.

In the meantime Kate had made significant changes in her life, on her own, and without any involvement from FACS. She ended the relationship with the girls' father, saw a psychologist, and went to counselling. She stopped using drugs and she attended a few different parenting programs.

When I met Kate she was in a new relationship with James. This relationship seemed different, more mutual and came with a support network of family. James was also supportive of Kate's efforts to get her girls back.

When Kate got pregnant with her third child she was proactive with FACS. She asked to meet and told us about all the things she had done to improve her parenting. Baby Laura was born safe. She was well cared for and loved by both her parents. There was no need for FACS involvement with Laura.

I knew the family history from the file and what Kate told me. I saw evidence of the real changes Kate had made in her life. There had been no further worries about drug use and Kate had been proactive with prenatal care. Kate and James had been ready for Laura's birth. I also saw the way they worked together to care for this new baby. Kate was doing so well that I came to think she was right. The best place for Cara and Beth was with their mum, James and their baby sister.

The Children's Court process began. It was a big decision, to move two young children who were doing well and appeared to have a warm and loving relationship with their carers. For this reason we asked for a court clinician to assess the girls' attachment to their carers. We wanted the clinician to consider what it would mean for the girls to return to their mum's care. The clinician's assessment wasn't negative about Kate and James, but it was in favour of the girls remaining with Becky and Tom. I was disappointed and frustrated. I felt the girls' best interests were not being considered. Kate was devastated.

My manager and I consulted every professional we could about whether or not to keep going. Could we go against the recommendation of a court clinician? Were Cara and Beth better off staying with Becky and Tom? The girls did have a secure attachment to them, so would it be harmful for the girls to return to their mum's care? We really struggled with this decision.

Ultimately, the changes Kate had made, Cara and Beth's warm and positive relationship with her and Kate's determination to get her girls back was enough evidence for us to support them returning to live with mum. Baby Laura was thriving with Kate and James. Cara and Beth now had a baby sister so why couldn't the whole family be together?



Beth, Kate and Cara

**“ Restorations are hard. I had built a good relationship with the family, the girls and their carers. I wanted to give them all the support they needed during that incredibly important transition. ”**

When we told Kate that our decision was to support the girls living with her she was shocked. As part of the process, and with Kate's agreement, we referred her to an intensive restoration program. This required Kate to travel with baby Laura by train three days a week for a period of 18 months. It was a massive commitment, but it paid off. The Children's Court agreed that the girls should live with Kate, Laura and James.

During this time I became a prenatal caseworker. All the children and families I had been working with were reallocated to other caseworkers. I argued strongly with management to continue my work with Kate, Cara and Beth. Thankfully this was supported. I wanted to stick with this family and see the restoration through.

Restorations are hard. I had built a good relationship with the family, the girls and their carers. I wanted to give them all the support they needed during that incredibly important transition.

In order to make the restoration as smooth as possible we agreed to a planned transition for the girls to return home. Cara and Beth went from spending the day with Kate, to overnight sleepovers, then weekend sleepovers before the final move to full time care with Kate and James. Over the next 12 months I continued to visit once a month, but towards the end there really was no need because Kate and James were doing such a fantastic job. Cara and Beth continue to see Becky and Tom regularly, and still have that strong relationship. Kate, Becky and Tom worked out the arrangements between them.

The day FACS supervision order for the girls expired was very emotional. I went with a worker from one of the support services to Kate's house for a final visit. To celebrate we took a cake. It was such a happy moment. Kate and I had a big cry. Kate gave us each a bunch of flowers and a card. I had brought two small canvases with me. We all put our handprint on each canvas. One canvas was for Kate and the girls, and the other for me. I keep mine on my desk at work.

I am so proud of Kate; all she has achieved and the difficulties she has overcome. Kate has blossomed into a confident woman who is able to stand up for both herself and her girls. Kate loves those girls. Her strength, hard work, determination and courage is an inspiration for other mums.

### **Kate, mum**

When my girls were taken by FACS, it was like my heart was ripped out. I had nothing left. But I knew that I had to keep going, because I couldn't live a life without my kids. I was motivated from the very beginning. I was busy all the time, going to programs and mothers' groups. I was working so hard to get my girls home. Sometimes I didn't think I would make it. But my kids and supports at home kept me motivated.

I was worried I wouldn't have a chance at getting the girls back. I didn't know if I would get anywhere; but once I applied, I told myself this was it. I was going to get my girls back! That is when Lisa became my caseworker.

The girls had been in care for three years and during that time we had lots of different caseworkers. I was nervous about having another one, but Lisa turned out to be different. She made me feel like she believed in me. For a long time no one did. With Lisa it was a good relationship. We communicated honestly. It made it so much easier.

When the court clinician's assessment report came back saying the girls should stay with Becky and Tom I was shattered. I thought I had no hope of getting my girls back. But Lisa believed in me and trusted me. FACS was going to support the restoration anyway.



There are no words to describe how it felt when the court said my girls could come home to me. It was the best day of my life. I didn't think I was good enough. I didn't think I was going to be able to prove I could do it. But I did.

I feel free now. It was a long journey, and I didn't think I would ever get there. But it's a new beginning for my family. Every day I wake up and see my beautiful kids and I am the proudest mother in the world. I don't need anything else. I've got everything I need right here in front of me.



## Reflection

Restoration is hard work. This story reminds us just how hard that work is for everyone involved. Lisa, Kate, James, Becky and Tom all had important roles to play. It was also asking a lot of Cara, Beth and Laura to get used to a different family life.

For Lisa some of the hard work was having to hold together her obvious compassion for Kate with the need to make sure that decisions are in the best interests of Cara and Beth. I see in Lisa the cool head and warm heart that is so important when working with families.

To her credit, Kate has done the hardest work of all. Personal change takes enormous strength. Kate needed to keep up her own self belief and then convince others that she was ready. As I read this story, I kept returning to the image of Kate and baby Laura travelling on a train three days a week for 18 months to attend a restoration program. I wondered how far she had to travel and if the system could have been designed to provide support in ways that might have made Kate's work just a bit easier.

What I like most about this story is the relationships. Kate and Lisa clearly worked as a team and have a great deal of respect for one another. The adults in Cara, Beth and Laura's lives clearly love them and work together. That is the fierce love that creates a family.

**Michael Woodhouse**  
**Executive Director, Strategic Policy**

# The mantra

## Jackie, FACS caseworker

I first met Alison at a bus stop. She was 13 and homeless. It was my job to get her to safety. I had been told to expect a fair bit of yelling and swearing and possible violence. I was ready for it. Instead what I got was a chatty, giggly girl.

The picture that you develop about someone by reading their file or hearing from someone else is always interesting. The labels that are so easily given. You can't help developing a picture but so often it just doesn't fit.

I was told that Alison would be violent, but in all of my years of working with her I only saw it once.

She didn't mean to hurt me. She was angry because I had made her 'boyfriend' leave the hospital where she had been admitted to keep her safe. 'Boyfriend' was her label for him; to me he was a predatory adult who was taking advantage of her. One of the hardest jobs of my career so far was to help Alison see this man, and the others like him, for what he really was. And the most important job. But it is a sad lesson to have to teach a 13 year old.

It was hard to keep Alison safe, really hard. She was desperate for a connection with someone who cared for her. Because she had not experienced safe relationships, she sought connection through sex. Sadly it seemed there was always someone willing. Alison didn't see this as abuse. She called it love.

The first conversations I had with Alison were hard for us both, but soon enough 'sex talks' became our everyday experience. I had to talk to her about everything – I had to help her see that she was being abused. It was really important to me that I build her self-esteem. I wanted her to respect herself, to know that she didn't have to have sex to feel loved. Self respect was the key to safety. But it was hard. From a very little girl, people who she should have been able to trust

had hurt Alison. It's hard work to get a child's trust when other adults have betrayed them.

I'd like to say it turned around quickly but it didn't. Life just got more and more dangerous for Alison. She craved connection so much that she would leave where she was staying, a safe residential place, and within an hour she had been abused. She would tell me she 'had sex with her new boyfriend.'

Language became really important to us. I had to be really clear with her that she was being abused and exploited. I told her the men she met were paedophiles, not boyfriends. And I repeated these words over and over. It wasn't what Alison wanted to hear, but I had to keep explaining to her that she was being abused and that she couldn't consent to sex because it wasn't sex - it was sexual assault quite frankly. There was no other word for it.

The men abusing her were persistent. The night that I dropped into the hospital and found one of them visiting her was a turning point in our relationship. Not just because Alison had lashed out at me, but because it was the first time she told me that she couldn't keep herself safe, that she couldn't stop having sex with people, and that she needed my help to stop. The containment of a mental health unit was a safe option for her that night. That was a hard night for me. I remember standing in the hospital car park after visiting Alison. It was late and dark. I spoke to my manager Sally that night. I let out all my emotions: my sadness, my shock, my fear. That made all the difference – you need good support in tough times. The next day I went back to the hospital. I didn't know if I could but Sally said, 'Alison needs to see that you will be back again, she needs to know that you will keep coming back.' That became my mantra with Alison - no matter what she said or did, I just needed to keep turning up. I could not give up on her even when she pushed me away, literally.



Jackie

Keeping Alison safe meant going to the Supreme Court. She was in the most intensive setting our system offered but it wasn't enough. We had a choice to make - we could either accept that this was as safe as we could keep her, or we could stand up and say 'this isn't good enough, she deserves better.' We knew she needed more to keep her safe and start to heal, so we developed our own program and placement for Alison that included physical containment.

My entire work with Alison has been filled with ethical dilemmas. The use of physical containment was one of the big ones. I knew she needed this but that didn't mean I liked it. And Alison didn't like it either. I knew I had to keep her safe but wasn't I supposed to be her advocate, her voice? It challenged what I thought my role was when I had to do things she didn't want, but I just kept bringing it back to safety and healing. My role made sense when I brought it back to this.

We knew the program ran the risk of increasing Alison's level of isolation. So we used this time to engage in family finding and therapeutic life story work to help her healing and create connections to safe adults. We constantly reviewed the program, continued to seek opinions from those around us and made hard choices for Alison.

We had a 'reflections day' when Alison graduated from the program. It was amazing to think back to the girl I first met, and then to see the girl I know today. She is so different, so mature. I'm so proud of Alison and I'm glad I got to be her caseworker. We had a disagreement once, and she made a power point presentation to say sorry. That just sums up the sweet and caring girl I know. I am happy to say she now has great self respect.

## Alison

I don't remember meeting Jackie but I'm pretty sure I won't forget her. I was cutting myself quite a bit and hanging out with dangerous people when I met her. People used to tell me I was lost. I used to think I was useless and had nothing going on, but now I feel like I can achieve anything. I'm applying for jobs and starting a beauty course soon. That is something I always wanted to do - to make people feel good about themselves and understand their natural beauty.

I didn't like being locked up. At the start I felt trapped but now I know it saved me. It's pretty much a blessing that I came into care. I was in a shitty situation. Now I've learnt how to be safe and how to look after myself. I know what safe

---

**“ I just kept bringing it back to safety and healing. My role made sense when I brought it back to this.”**

looks like. This morning I saw this old guy staring and whistling at a young girl. I was like, 'That kid has feelings. Why would you want to take advantage of her?'

Court was a pretty big deal for me. I'd never spoken to a judge before but I got up and spoke to a high judge and put my voice across. It felt good to say what I needed to say. I'm glad I got to do that.

Jackie has a strong personality like me. She's bossy like me but I like that. She told me the truth all the time, even when I didn't like it, and she put my thoughts and opinions forward when I couldn't. When I was in the program she would tell me to stick it out, it will all be over soon. She reassured me that I could succeed ... and I did. She is a really good woman.

I used to tell Jackie she was only in the job for the money. Now I know that you don't put up with kids like me just for the money. Trust me I made it hard for Jackie! I regret the stuff I used to say to her. I can see now that she never gave up on me. She stuck by my side and was there for me everyday. You don't do that if you're just in it for the money. She really cares about me, it really shows.

From who I was before to who I am now is a big achievement. I know that the rules and restrictions, and Jackie's bossiness, made me who I am today. Without her and Sally, people would still be disrespecting me. Lots of people treated me with disrespect before. I've now got self respect. No one will get to disrespect me again. Life is actually looking good for me. I'm pretty happy.

## Sally, FACS Manager, Casework

There was never the perfect solution for Alison. Every decision we made felt like the lesser of two evils. Building a program that restricted her in a house was our last resort. We did it because the risk to Alison's safety was too frightening and too real. She could not heal while men kept hurting her. We needed to keep her still to take care of her.

We were creating something new for Alison so we had no road map to follow – we were driving blind. I often asked myself what would happen if it didn't work? Would we have done more harm than good? Having the oversight of the Supreme Court offered some comfort. Its approval and understanding of Alison's needs reassured me in those difficult times.

The program wasn't just about containment. We developed a really strong therapeutic plan. Day by day Alison started to see what we could see – that she had been sexually abused and it was not okay. Over time, Alison's self esteem blossomed. The final day in the Supreme Court she stood up and spoke directly to the judge. It was such a proud moment.

Taking care of Jackie was so important to helping Alison. Jackie was having tough conversations on a daily basis, and I needed to help her deal with them. Often that was just about letting Jackie explore her feelings about how worried she was. One day she came in and said, 'Can we just have one day where we don't talk about sex. I just want a day of 'normal' talk.' So we did, not a word about sexual abuse was spoken. We had a one day break from it in the many years we worked with Alison.

There was one time, and only one time, when Alison hit Jackie. Jackie rang me; she was so upset and completely exhausted. I just listened while she let it all out. In these moments the best you can do is be a compassionate ear and a caring confidant. The next day Jackie was still shaky but I talked with her about how much Alison needed her, now more than ever. And Jackie is strong. No matter what Alison threw at her she kept going back, and it's made all the difference for this young woman.

We fought hard for Alison. We are now working with her to build safe connections that will stay with her when we are no longer around. Alison didn't have many people in her corner when we met her. We tried to reconnect her with her mum and nan, but for all sort of reasons that just led to disappointment.

One of our goals for Alison was for her to get a birthday card from someone who wasn't a professional. And so we set about to find someone who could send that card. We mapped out all the people she knew who were safe and supportive, but all we came across were workers. It was so sad.

Alison just turned 16. And at last she got a birthday card from someone that wasn't a professional. It is nice to see her making safe connections. I have no doubt she'll make friends at her beauty course – she is so easy to like.

## Reflection

This is what extraordinary practice looks like. It shows us how lives can be turned around with tenacious casework and a caseworker who never gives up.

Jackie was there to guide Alison through the tough times, sit with her through the sad times and now, to celebrate with her through the good times. Sally shows us the critical role managers play in keeping good caseworkers strong – she trusts in her staff, gives them autonomy, but stands up as a leader, helper and defender of both her caseworkers and children. Together Jackie and Sally worked as a team. They looked past the destructive labels our young people can carry with them to see a vulnerable young girl who desperately needed help, safety and connection.

It took remarkable courage for Jackie and Sally to create the type of safety that Alison needed. And it took so much more than courage for Alison to see that she was being hurt by people she thought cared for her.

Alison sounds like an incredible young woman. 'Bossy' or not, Jackie has helped Alison to learn how to make respectful connections with safe people, and start the journey of healing. She has transformed from within – her sense of new found self respect fills my heart.

**Deidre Mulkerin**  
**Deputy Secretary, Northern Cluster Operations**



Jackie and Allison

# Breathing space

## Michael, dad

Drugs changed everything in my life. I'd been using since I was a teenager, and I had a big habit. They made me spiral out of control. I mixed with the wrong people, sold drugs and did other criminal stuff. I was really violent, especially to my partner Sally. I wasn't a nice person to be around.

I used to think FACS had it in for me. They looked at my history and judged before they knew me. They took away our kids, and didn't help us get them back. They didn't work with us, so we didn't want to work with them.

After the kids were taken, things got a lot worse for both of us. The older kids knew about the drugs. They looked at us like we were nothing. They would cry after visits, and stopped wanting to see us.

I started to realise I needed to make some changes, or I'd be dead in a year. So I put myself into rehab. That was 16 months ago and I haven't used since.

We were so worried about FACS taking Blake and thought about doing a runner to Queensland. I'm glad we didn't. We needed to stay and face our problems. If we had left, Blake would have been taken, and I would have fallen back into old habits.

I remember when our caseworker Narelle first came over. I was thinking 'here we go again.' It was an emotional meeting and to be honest, I had no hope we could keep Blake. But we were so lucky to have Narelle. There was no sugar coating, only the truth. It was exactly what we needed, and it meant we could also be honest. We knew what we needed to do, that this was our chance to keep Blake. Over time, I started to trust Narelle.

I see things differently now I'm not using drugs. I'm enjoying being a parent to Blake in a way that I couldn't enjoy with the other kids. I wasn't there for them – I wasn't a dad. I'm doing the 'Taking Responsibility' program and am starting to admit to myself what I've done to Sal and the kids. I can't blame anyone else.

I never thought it was possible to change my life. It was filled with drugs, violence and criminals. I didn't know another life was possible. There are still hard days, but I'm learning and growing. I now have my driver's licence and I work two jobs. This brings me pride. I want all my kids to see the man I am now. I want to be a good role model, for them to be proud of me.

## Sally, mum

I didn't know about Michael's drug use for a long time. Michael was hardly around but when he was, it was awful. I felt trapped – I couldn't leave because I had no where to go with eight kids.

The kids saw so much bad stuff. I sent them to live with my sister just after I started to use ice. I hadn't used drugs before but my depression was getting worse. I thought I was doing the right thing by sending them there but FACS didn't see it that way. They thought my sister's house wasn't safe, so they took all the kids. I didn't get the kids back because I stayed with Michael. But I wasn't choosing him, I was choosing the drugs. I now know I put my kids in a bad situation. I wish we'd done things differently.

I stopped using before I found out I was pregnant with Blake. When the midwife told me FACS would be involved we were really scared we would lose this baby too. There was still so much work to do. But I had hope after meeting Narelle. I saw that if I worked with her, we might just have a chance.



Michael, Blake and Sally

I remember going to all these medical appointments, groups, courses and counselling - all while heavily pregnant. It was really hot weather and Narelle drove me around. It was hard, but worth it. I came back from domestic violence courses telling Michael that he needed to change. I said to him, 'If you go back to the way you were, I'm gone. I can't deal with that anymore'. I don't feel stuck anymore, and Michael's a completely different person - I'm still getting used to it!

About a month before Blake was born, we had a meeting and FACS said they were going to let us keep the baby. I was cheering, we were so excited! I remember looking around the room and seeing this big team of different services. They were all there for us, going out of their way to keep our family together. This made all the difference to our family.

## **Narelle, FACS Prenatal Caseworker**

On the surface, things didn't look good for Michael and Sally. There were so many risks. The family had been involved with FACS for years, they both had a drug history, eight kids had been removed and on paper, Michael was a scary guy. He had a long history of violence, and had threatened other caseworkers. But I wanted to see beyond this, to where the family was at that moment. I wanted them to believe they could be a success, and that the past didn't have to be their future

I started working with them when Sally was 25 weeks pregnant. I knew that Michael and Sally hated having FACS in their lives, and their experiences with us were not great. They would deny everything and avoid us. I needed to understand why. If I didn't do things differently, the trajectory wouldn't change. Michael and Sally told me FACS always told them what to do, but never helped them to do it. This was always in the back of my mind. I remember thinking that I needed to be really careful to not boss them around. I needed to respect them.

Michael and Sally were really nervous when we first met. I was sitting at their kitchen table and telling them I wouldn't read their file until they told me their story, in their own words. They really liked this, and were completely honest with me. I asked them what was happening in their lives, and what they were worried

**“ I wanted them to believe they could be a success, and that the past didn't have to be their future. ”**

about. We were worried about the same things. That helped us to start planning for their baby's safety.

Sally and Michael's file said they both had an intellectual disability, but I couldn't find any evidence to support that. It really bothered me. They had both been labelled but no one had offered to help them. Michael and Sally agreed to get a formal assessment to see if they needed extra support. It turns out they don't have a disability. It was like they were set free by this news. When I think back to why we got this wrong, I think we assumed they had a disability, maybe because Michael couldn't read or write very well. But this is so explainable when you talk to him. He left school early, experienced a lot of trauma and started using drugs and alcohol as a teenager.

We also worked out a plan to build on the work they had already started. Michael had been to rehab, but we were all worried about him relapsing – he had such a long history of drug use and it was a daily struggle for him. I gave him a list of relapse prevention services and suggested he should try one. We agreed if he didn't like it, he could try another service. He ended up trying four services, and staying with the fifth. I could have seen him as being avoidant – to be honest, I was starting to wonder myself – but he explained to me that some services had clients who were still using, and he had been trying so hard to stay away from drugs. It was fair enough. By giving him the autonomy he made the best choice. It was a choice I couldn't make for him.



We were planning for three possibilities – the best one was the family staying together. I also needed to build Sally up enough, so if Michael couldn't do it, she would be strong enough to tell him to go. Michael was completely on board with this. He told me he didn't want to be the reason Blake came into care. This was our third possibility, but we didn't need to go down that road. Sally and Michael have worked really hard to stay clean. They're doing a great job with Blake, he is healthy and happy and their relationship is good.

If I hadn't worked with this family while Sally was pregnant I truly think Blake would've come into care. It gave us breathing space to work on what needed to change.

## Reflection

It can be challenging to read the story of Sally and Michael and to not make the same judgements that it seems others had made before Narelle became involved with the family. Michael's honesty in talking about his addiction, the risk he had posed to Sally in the past and the difficulty he had in parenting his children is sobering to read. The important step he took to seek help and to be able to stay clean demonstrates the capacity of individuals to make a change in their lives.

Sally also made decisions that she acknowledges were about drug use – she wasn't able to prioritise the needs of her children. When Sally gave up drugs it showed there was a real possibility that the outcome for this child could be different.

Both Sally and Michael had been labelled as having an intellectual disability. It seems it was a label that may have served to further disadvantage them rather than being used as an opportunity to structure some assistance. Following assessments it became clear that they did not have a disability. They had been labelled at some point in the past and that label had stayed with them. The critical action should have been to work with them to enable support to be effective rather than a focus on a label.

Narelle's approach to the family has made such an amazing difference. I was moved by the approach she took in not reading the file but wanting to hear from Michael and Sally directly their story. That ability to build up trust and rapport has been so critical. I am so impressed that as an organisation we are able to support families through casework such as Narelle's. We remain optimistic about the ability of people to change even when the facts may suggest there is no hope. Thankfully for Blake he is living with his parents and being well cared for. His father has a job and that will provide an important structure for the house and set expectations for Blake about the value of employment. He has the opportunity to grow and develop in a family environment.

**Jim Longley**  
**Deputy Secretary, Ageing Disability and Home Care**

# World at her feet

## Natasha, young woman

I heard about leaving care planning last year. At first I shoved it off, but as I got closer to turning 18, I got scared. I thought 'oh shit' I really have to grow up. I really have to be an adult. I hadn't even mastered being a teenager! It wasn't that long ago that I was using drugs and with a violent boyfriend. I got clean and got out of that relationship but it wasn't easy. I had kidney failure due to the alcohol and drugs and I truly thought I was going to die. It was a scary time, but looking back it was the wake up call I needed. It was like I just woke up in my head. I needed to change. So I did.

Being clean and getting my life back on track was one thing. Thinking about leaving care was a whole other thing. I wasn't ready to be left on my own. I wasn't ready to be responsible for everything. I met Jacqui and Michele when it was time to start planning to leave care, and they brought a friend, Scout. They walked into the room and just put this little puppy on my lap. I wasn't expecting that. It was good though. Scout was so cute and just wanted to play. They let me play with him. They didn't push me to make life-long plans straight away. They just sat with me. I kind of liked that. It wasn't so scary. So I agreed to let them come back to see me, but only if Scout came along too.

I had a lot more meetings with them after that. Scout was there for every visit. He always seemed so happy to see me. It's nice to have that kind of feeling, that feeling that someone, something is so happy to see you. It wasn't just about Scout though. I have a team around me. I have back up now. I can call on Michele if I'm in trouble. I rely on her. She's helped with a lot. You can tell she loves her work and that she loves making kids smile. It shows. Kids can always tell.

## Jacqui, FACS Manager, Casework

It can be hard to get older kids to talk to you. They so desperately want to stand on their own two feet. Their youthful naivety about all the good things that adulthood has to offer often plays out as them resisting us. But then as they get closer to that age, the fear sets in. The reality of independence dawns on them. It's scary, lonely and filled with unknowns.

That's how it was for Natasha. She was 17 and had just moved in with her aunt and uncle when we met her. She wasn't too keen to open up to us. Why would she want to? Here we were coming into her life at the end of her time in care saying 'we're here to help.' She had every right to hold us at a distance. To her we were just the next workers in her long list of workers. We were just more people that she had to tell her story to. It's hard to bust through those initial visits. And it's hard to get a young person to feel safe enough to tell you their story. They need to know you're worthy of hearing it, that you're going to listen and then do something to help them.

---

**“ Michele is a master at keeping doors open. She has a lovely gentle nature but at the same time is a fierce advocate for the kids she works with. ”**



Michele, Jacqui, Scout and Natasha

Scout doesn't have the same challenge as us in getting to know kids. He's our secret weapon. I haven't met anyone yet that can resist that little fur ball. When we met Natasha we placed Scout straight on her lap – no introductions, no forced 'getting to know you' talk. We just walked into the room and put this eight week old puppy on her lap. The smile on her face just lit up the room. We were in. It was the beginning of a great relationship.

But of course Scout only gets us in the door. It is up to us to keep that door open. Michele is a master at keeping doors open. She has a lovely gentle nature but at the same time is a fierce advocate for the kids she works with. She made sure Natasha had a voice in the leaving care process. At times she was Natasha's voice, and at other times she helped Natasha raise her voice loud. She really cares about the kids she works with, and it shows.

I think Natasha has learnt to trust us. I think she knows that she can rely on us. I even reckon she would let us in the door now without Scout! We have told Natasha our door is always open. When you raise your own kids and watch them leave to build their own life you make sure they know that your door is always open. Why should it be any different for Natasha? Our door will always be open to her.

## **Michele, FACS Caseworker**

It was important to me that Natasha saw that I was going to be one of those people that follow through. When kids have been let down all their life they just expect further let down. It's the little things that make a difference – keeping appointments, returning calls, doing what you said you would do. These are the things that matter to them. After that first meeting I made a list of things that I needed to do. And I stuck to it. The next time I met Natasha she could see that I had done what I said I would. It was only one set of tasks though. I knew it would take more than that to prove that I deserved her time, so I just kept making lists and sticking to them. Maybe, just maybe, Natasha would see that I might be able to help, and believe that I actually cared about her.

Leaving care planning is a process not an event. It is built over time. I had to develop a picture of what was important to Natasha. Understand her hopes and dreams, help her put them in the words of goals, and then help her realise them. My job was to figure out what she needed, and then plan for all that life will throw

“ And it's hard to get a young person to feel safe enough to tell you their story. They need to know you're worthy of hearing it, that you're going to listen and then do something to help them. ”

at her in the first few years of independence. All the time I was balancing the practical tasks with the emotional toll that Natasha was facing, and that leaving care brings. It's a big life event for the young people we work with. It can open up a flood of past memories and past hurt. It is a stark reminder that they lost their childhood, or don't have the life long attachments or security that others take for granted.

It's not just about helping with the necessities. Young people in care have a right to more than the basics. Natasha wanted to be an actor or a model, so I organised acting and modelling classes for her. She just loved those classes. She's a real natural. It was a positive experience for her amongst a life time of many negative ones. Finding those opportunities is gold for the kids we work with. Natasha finally got to do something that she had always wanted to do. Something she had dreamed of. It was a nice gift to give. It's one of the most important bits of this job – taking care where care hasn't been taken.

Natasha is now finding her way in the world as a young adult. She still lives with her aunt and uncle, and with their support is dipping her feet into the world of adulthood. She is applying for jobs while she figures out if she wants to do more study. If she does, her plan is set up for it. She knows this and she knows how to access support if she ever wants to go back to school.

Natasha has so much potential. She is courageous and I have no doubt she will mature into a strong independent woman. The world is at her feet.



## Reflection

Leaving care is an incredibly important but sometimes daunting time for young people in care. Practitioners must not underestimate the potential impact, both positive and negative in undertaking leaving care casework with young people. As Natasha recounted, she had not yet mastered being a teenager before being thrust into adulthood!

What struck me about this story was not only the way that Michelle took a genuine interest in Natasha's future but how she thought about engaging Natasha in an innovative way. Michelle knew it would be a challenge but had a creative, effective and well thought out plan. She listened openly to Natasha's dreams and worries but was also focused on Natasha fulfilling those dreams. What also impressed me was Michelle's ability and tenaciousness in building trust and developing a positive and healthy relationship with Natasha.

This story demonstrates how dreams can become reality when young people like Natasha have positive and healthy support from the adults in their life. Make no mistake, dreams can become reality for all young people in OOHHC. I hope this story encourages other caseworkers to think 'outside the box' and always keep the young person at the centre of their work. Let's hope one day you see Natasha or other young people who have been in care on the Silver Screen!

**Simone Czech**  
Executive Director, Design, Innovation, Safety and Permanency



# Gratitude

## Deborah, mother

Every time I go out I see a version of the sort of mum I could have been. Those women walking along pushing their prams, with a cigarette or beer in hand. The babies not covered up properly in winter.

I don't miss that life. If I was still with Teresa's dad, James, I would be using and just trying to keep up the appearances of being a mum. There was something powerful about James. I know now he was harming me. In his mind he was doing me a favour. I was living on the street when we met. He believed that he saved me; that he owned me and I owed him. James had complete control over my thinking.

The drugs stopped me from feeling. At first I would feel the intensity of it all, I'd feel super. But then I would feel numb, nothing. I would stop using and then go back to it, but when I was off them, I couldn't function.

And then everything changed. I found out I was four months pregnant. I stopped using. I was scared my baby would be deformed. I went through this spiritual phase. I started going to church and prayed for help, and I had faith God would send help. Then all of a sudden two caseworkers, Sara and Belinda, showed up.

I remember I was home. I was pregnant, in pain and could not get comfortable. I was stressing out about my baby, and her father was giving me a hard time.

Knock knock on the door. I came out and there were the two of them.

I thought, 'Here we go again. They have each other. They will back each other up. I am all on my own. They are going to get me. They are going to take my baby away.'

There was a moment though when I looked Sara in the eyes. Sara has these amazing eyes and a compassionate face. I said, 'Why are there two of you? And why are you taking notes?' She answered all my questions.

I had this overwhelming sense of surety with both of them – it was their assertiveness, their voices. They listened. They were honest and clear about why they were there. I felt I could work with them.

I trod carefully with Sara and Belinda at first, but then I started to open up. I revealed my darkest secrets; where I had been and where I wanted to go, and they heard me.

The first case plan meeting was pretty overwhelming. I didn't expect there to be five people. I felt I was in a courtroom or the naughty corner. The only good thing was that Sara and Belinda were both there. I couldn't keep myself together but they kept reassuring me it was all going to come good.

In those early days James was going to be part of the case plan, and I was hoping I could help him be a better parent, but he wasn't ready – he let me down.

---

**“ Without taking the time to understand Deborah's story and experiences, I couldn't help her build safety that would last. ”**



Sara and Belinda

One time after a fight with James I went into a women's refuge. In the refuge the situations do not seem real. It felt like it was designed to see how I coped. It was weird and left me baffled. There were so many other women doing it tough. I remember thinking, 'how can a woman leaving domestic violence end up in a place like this?'

When I was five months pregnant and the doctor said congratulations you have a healthy baby, my heart nearly popped out of my chest. I got to a point where I thought 'Sara and Belinda are like the baby angels. They come in to make sure all the babies are safe.'

I had been struggling for so long fighting for my sanity to prove I am not a basket case. I was critical of myself. I never felt I fitted in. I felt I was judged and spoken down to and I was not thinking straight. I have always known I was just as normal as everyone else. I haven't totally overcome it, but I'm feeling so much more human. I am stronger and can just live and not have my day ruined from getting cursed at all the time. Instead I look forward to the days of hearing giggles and little baby noises.

It all started with Sara. I had to do my bit, but now I am in a good place. I am still learning. I am still healing and working on my weaknesses, but my world has now come to a calm place with the birth of my baby.

This baby saved me. When your love is there, being a mum is easy. You love doing it and you want the best for them.

## Sara, FACS Prenatal Caseworker

We had a lot of history with Deborah - serious drug use, homelessness, two children being raised by extended family, she'd been hurt by violence; and there were big questions about her mental health. When I started working with Deborah there was a no contact AVO protecting her from James. But he was always breeching it, calling her and sending her text messages, telling her she was under surveillance. Deborah was about to be evicted from the crisis housing she was staying in. I felt overwhelmed with worry for this woman and her baby.

When you are about to become homeless it would be easy to miss your antenatal appointments. Not Deborah - she was on top of it all. It made me realise just how hard she was working for this baby.

She agreed to drug screens, getting mental health support and family violence counselling. She needed help – the violence she lived with had been so awful. I wanted to help her understand why it would harm her baby but it was so important to do it in a way that didn't make her feel blamed.

Things were going well until the case plan meeting. There was this long table and Deborah walked in to us all sitting down, Belinda, me, our managers and a student. I saw her distress. Belinda and I both realised straight away we had got it wrong, and it was too hard for Deborah meeting in such a formal way. The set up was very clinical and so oppositional. We both got up and moved. I got her some water.

I asked Deborah what she would do if James turned up at her door. She said she would ask him to go. I said we would want her to call the police. She said no. Afterwards I read Deborah's criminal history and discovered that on the many times police were called for domestic violence she had been scheduled under the mental health act. When police got there she was still really upset and he would be calm. James would tell police she was crazy and she had assaulted him. This happened about five times. It was a hard lesson for me, but an important one. Without taking the time to understand Deborah's story and experiences, I couldn't help her build safety that would last.

After Deborah had her baby, she went straight into being a protective mum. She was staying at a place which helped her with being a mum and was doing great. She didn't need us anymore. It was always about her taking little steps. She set the boundaries. She had the control.

“ I wanted to help her understand why it would harm her baby but it was so important to do it in a way that didn't make her feel blamed. ”



## **Belinda, FACS Aboriginal Caseworker, Domestic Violence Team**

Deborah is very well read and articulate. When we first met she seemed to have no positive relationships, even with the crisis housing she was in. She was pregnant, perhaps withdrawing from drugs, and felt really let down by the eviction. We validated what she was feeling and just included her every step of the way.

I went on leave straight after our first case planning meeting. It didn't go so well for a while after that. I had arranged for Deborah to work with another caseworker, but she just withdrew. When I came back Deborah would not take my calls. I decided to give her a bit of space. We needed to give her back some control, and let her make as many choices as she could. Stepping back for that short time worked. Deborah stepped forward and we got back to the job of ensuring she could take her baby home.

I remember the day Deborah came home from the hospital. I went to visit and brought some tea. She showed off bub and was full of love and happiness. Then Sara showed up with this pram. It was the only thing she needed.

The baby has been Deborah's new beginning. She would often say, 'The baby is my second chance'.

## *Reflection*

As I read this story I am reminded of the importance of getting that first meeting right. Deborah brings to light what it is like to be on the other end of that knock on the door - the fear, the belief that we are only there to take children, that it's 'us against them.' It is only when she got to see some compassion beaming back at her during that first visit that Deborah started to think Sara and Belinda might just be there to help.

The power of relationships is evident when Deborah had to walk into a meeting room filled with power and authority. Sara and Belinda recognised Deborah's discomfort straight away and tried to make the meeting more relaxed, but they couldn't undo what had already been done. Deborah retreated. It would have been easy to interpret and label this as resistance but they sat patiently and let Deborah come back in her own time. They trusted that the foundation of the relationship was strong enough – that Deborah would come back to them when she was ready. And she did. Allowing Deborah to be in the driving seat was key to all that they did.

Deborah's pregnancy was the opportunity for change and everyone harnessed this. Sara and Belinda got in early and in doing so gave Deborah the time she needed to create the life she wanted. How lovely it is to see Deborah being the mum she wants to be. I have no doubt that she would have got there on her own, but how much easier was it for her with Sara and Belinda by her side, supporting and encouraging her through honest conversations sprinkled with big doses of compassion and care.

**Elaine Thomson**  
**Director, Practice Quality and Clinical Support**

# My life now has freedom

## **Liana, Mission Australia, Playgroup Facilitator**

I first saw Aisha in the school yard. She was sitting on a bench with her young son and daughter. I noticed that they were sitting alone and not joining in any activities or talking with anyone. She looked sad, lost and scared. I walked over to say hello and let her know about the playgroup I was running nearby. Without really looking at me, Aisha simply said, 'I don't speak English'. Over the coming weeks I kept an eye out for Aisha and her children, and each time I saw them I would make eye contact and wave hello.

At about the fifth week Aisha smiled back at me and I thought, 'Here's my chance'. I walked over and said hello and then crouched down and asked her son Hammad if he wanted to come and play in my playgroup. He didn't answer me and looked over at his mum for an answer. They did come to playgroup that day, Aisha in front with Hammad hiding behind her. And that's where he stayed for the rest of the session – only occasionally peeking out from behind his mother to see what was going on. The next week Aisha and Hammad were sitting in the corner. Hammad wasn't hiding this time. I walked over and asked him if he wanted to help me set up a train track and to my surprise he did. Soon enough he was in there playing with the other children. Because there was a language barrier I wasn't sure what I could and couldn't say to Aisha. I didn't want to put her off so I thought it best that I play with Hammad and try to build up a relationship that way. I noticed that seemed easier for Aisha.

As the weeks passed, Aisha seemed more relaxed and gradually became more involved in the activities – but I noticed if others approached her, she would say 'no speak English' and move away. Slowly she began to open up to me about her life before she and the children arrived in Sydney.

I learned that she was a single mum who had bravely left her husband because of his controlling and punishing ways. His behaviour had clearly left a mark on the family. As she talked more, I began to understand that her reluctance to meet new people came from years of forced isolation. She was fearful of doing so because her husband had forbidden it. Since coming to Sydney she'd been all alone. She had no friends, was in a new city, and with her mother overseas, she had no family around her for support. She was worried that the children didn't have a father figure, and she struggled thinking about how she could manage it all on her own.

I remember one really hot summer day I said I couldn't wait to go home for an ice block, Aisha told me she couldn't do that because she didn't have a fridge. After she left that afternoon, I wondered what else Aisha and the children were living without, so I called her. She told me she and the children were sleeping on the floor with one blanket between them and that she washed all their clothes by hand because she didn't have a washing machine. As she spoke, I was reminded of my own experience. It wasn't the same, but I know what it is like to be new to Australia and how hard it is to start out with nothing. I was determined to do something and asked my manager what we could do to help. Over the coming weeks we bought beds and bedding, a fridge, and a washing machine – we were even able to get a computer for the family.

Aisha was worried about Fazia, her daughter, and the way she was behaving. Since the move, Fazia had begun to play up a bit – she didn't understand why she couldn't see her dad and why Aisha left him. I helped Aisha connect with teachers at Fazia's school, and they were able to organise for a therapist to work with the family. Since then, things have really improved. Fazia is now quite the star, a confident girl who is top of her class; she has friends and this year won



Julie-Anne (Manager), Liana, Aisha, Hammed and Faiza

four school awards. Hammad is a terrific kid too; he is already writing his name and is really excited about going to preschool.

As time went on, I watched Aisha's confidence grow. She joined a couple of our groups while I kept an eye on Hammad. She studied some English courses and her language skills grew. I always had tables of food in the middle of the room so that parents could gather and get to know one another – it stopped people from sitting alone in the corner. I was so happy when Aisha started to make some friends with some of the other mums at the table. Her world is bigger now than she was ever allowed to have before.

Money remains a stress for Aisha. Last year Kmart donated Christmas presents to Mission Australia, and we made up packs for Aisha and her children. Because of those gifts she was able to put aside a little bit of money. She used this to take the kids to the movies for the very first time. I remember how excited she was about this. It may seem a small thing – but small things matter.

I am really proud of Aisha, she has started studying child care part time. She helps me now. If I am running late, she sets up the playgroup and confidently chats to other parents until I arrive. Aisha is always thinking of new ideas for what we could do. We are planning on hiring her when she's finished her course.

When I look at Aisha now, she is not even close to the woman I met three years ago. Although she still owns almost nothing she smiles all the time. Aisha doesn't need our help anymore, she's doing so well. I always thought Aisha was brave, but now she radiates happiness and confidence.

## Aisha, mum

I was scared when I moved to Sydney. I lived in Brisbane for five years but I was always at home and didn't see other people. Then my husband told me to get out of the house. The police arranged for me to go to a shelter.

My daughter was crying all the time because she missed her father. In our culture if you aren't living with your husband they think you are not a good lady. People talked about me, my family talked about me. I had no-one. No-one to live with or to talk to. My mum was in Pakistan, so she couldn't help me.

Getting the groceries was hard because I had no car. We had to do everything daily because I also had no fridge. There was no bus stop near my place and it

“ As she spoke, I was reminded of my own experience. It wasn't the same, but I know what it is like to be new to Australia and how hard it is to start out with nothing. ”

was the start of summer. Once I bought a little bit of groceries for the week and was taking it home in the stroller with my son and daughter. He got out and the groceries went all over the main road. The bus came and the driver said he had no space for a stroller, so I had to wait another hour for the next bus. I was crying, crying, crying, 'Why am I here, I am alone, my family is there, I can't survive here alone.'

Then God gave me the gift of the best lady - Liana. At first I was reserved, I didn't want to talk about my past. After going to the playgroup a few times I got to know her. I could ask her anything, anytime and she would be there for me. At first it was very hard to talk, but when I did I felt a big release. Liana helped me understand I didn't do bad for my children.

Liana has helped me with everything. She is a support, a friend, a confidant. Everything I need. When I talk to my mum, she will ask about Liana. Every time she says, 'Tell her I am praying for her'. My children they love Liana too.

I am very thankful for Australia, Mission Australia and Liana. In my life now is freedom. I can buy things for my children. Before, if I liked something I can't speak to ask. Before I couldn't tell my mum what was happening because she would be sad. Now my mum is proud of me.

My children are happy. I am happy. I want to be like Liana so I can help other people. I want to be an inspiration for them.



## Reflection

As I was reading Aisha's story, a song started playing in my head and wouldn't go away: Paul Kelly's 'From little things, big things grow' (which is not about superannuation, but about Vincent Lingiari's fight for land rights for his people in the 1960s and 1970s). Reading this story brought to mind the image of a wonderful, beautiful tree, blooming with colourful flowers, a place where other life also flourishes, that started out from something almost unnoticed and insignificant: Aisha sitting alone on a bench. I say she was 'almost unnoticed', but Liana noticed her.

The wonderfully full life that Aisha now lives, and gives to others, was nurtured into existence with a small, everyday gesture, a smile. Liana's smile was the first drop of water that Aisha's soul had received for years, and with more drops like that over time, that seed started to grow.

With each new shoot of possibility and hope, more life-giving water, in the form of friends for Hammad at play group, who gave his mother his own smiles, Aisha's soul would stretch further towards the light and grow stronger and more confident. When Liana wrote, 'she slowly began to open up to me', it was like a flower opening to the touch of the sun that Liana had brought to her life. And as their mother has grown, her children have grown as well. 'Her world is bigger now than she was ever allowed to have before.'

When Aisha tells her version of the story, it is in two halves: before she met Liana, and after she met Liana. 'The God gave me the gift of the best lady - Liana.' And the greatest praise of all: 'I want to be like Liana so I can help other people. I want to be an inspiration for them.'

All that from a smile.

**David de Carvalho**  
Deputy Secretary, Strategic Reform and Policy



# Staying connected

## Joyce and Elaine, Caseworkers and Klarika, Manager Casework

Our first memories of Muriel are of driving the six children back from Wilcannia. We had the heater up high as it was freezing and the children only had shorts and t-shirts on. It was very emotional, we were all crying - caseworkers and children. We'd just taken the children from their family and community. Muriel was the second eldest child. She was seven years old.

One of us was from Wilcannia and knew the children from around the community, not just through work. It was awful, taking children from your own land.

We knew they had to come into care. Muriel's mum and dad loved the kids but their problems overwhelmed them and the children were not safe. We had been working with them for a long time but it wasn't getting better.

At first the community was really angry. But having local caseworkers helped them understand it's what we had to do. It was the only way we could keep the children safe.

We desperately wanted to keep the children together. At first they were with one carer but there were just too many of them to get the care they needed. We had to split them up. Muriel and her brother Edward went to one carer and her four other siblings went to another. They had been there for ten years but Muriel and Edward's carers couldn't look after them anymore.

Muriel's always been really determined. She knows what she wants and tells it to you straight. One time when she was ten she came to our office to speak with her caseworker. She had a little backpack filled up with clothes and her toothbrush. She had a map in the front pocket. She said she wanted a new carer

and if we didn't give her one she'd run away. She opened her backpack, unfolded the map and showed the caseworker all her plans for running away.

We've tried so hard to find the right place for Muriel to live, her caseworker and all of us together. She had lots of different carers while we fought and fought to get it right.

Five years ago we found Coralie. Coralie was supposed to be a respite carer. Muriel's short stay has turned into five years and she is not moving out anytime soon. They have a great relationship. She's not Aboriginal but Muriel's on country. And Coralie loves her.

We've kept the siblings connected – even if they can't live together. The children live locally so they see each other at school and on weekends. It's not a strict regime. We make sure there's lots of informal contact. We work hard at keeping good connections with the extended family. It's not just a few visits each year – we regularly take them back and keep the relationship going.

Lots of us are Aboriginal. We were distressed we couldn't find a suitable Aboriginal carer, but we made it through together. We've all worked with Coralie and Muriel so that she grows up knowing where she comes from and who she belongs to. She's got good routines and Coralie's helped her learn to fit in and commit to school.

We've been helping Muriel to leave care. We went with her to get her driver's licence and we held a leaving care night for her. She made up a dream board of what she will be doing in three years' time. It said she wanted to go to university.

Muriel doesn't have many people in her family who got the opportunity to finish school and get a job. She is so bright. She's finishing school. She's going to be a nurse someday. Her parents are proud of Muriel. We're all proud of Muriel.



Muriel





## Muriel, young woman

I was born in Broken Hill but lived in Wilcannia. I come from a large family with roots in the Barkindji and Wonkamarra tribes from Wilcannia and Bourke areas. I was taken into foster care along with five of my seven siblings.

I had about six carers all up in the 12 or 13 years of my foster care. My brother Edward and I would muck up so we would get moved all the time. Eventually, after the fifth carer, Edward and I got split up. I moved in with Coralie. I'm 18 now and still there.

I enjoyed being like an only child with Coralie, but I missed my brother and sisters. We all get together as a family about once a fortnight. We'd go to the park with Mum and family. We had so much fun; being rowdy, wrestling, climbing trees, fighting over everything.

I look back now and can see that after these visits I would come back to Coralie in a mood. I'd be upset about leaving and would be grumpy or sad and crying. I'd either not talk to her or yell at her. Especially if mum didn't turn up for the visit. She wasn't really reliable.

On Wednesdays after school, our local Thankakali Group would pick us all up to go and do painting, learn Aboriginal dancing and just do fun stuff.

I was a bit below average at primary school although eventually I tried harder and even did homework. And then I moved on to high school. The transition was hard. Coralie and FACS organised a private tutor for me. She contacted my teachers and found out what I needed to learn. Eventually she caught me up and helped me develop study skills.

As part of my HSC I'm studying to be a trainee nurse. Each Wednesday I actually get paid work at the hospital in the wards doing hands on training. I'll finish Year 12 this year and hopefully I'll already be a qualified Assistant in Nursing. Then I plan to become a Registered Nurse and eventually a Midwife. Last year I received an award for the best school based trainee.

I recently turned 18 so I'm out of care now. It's quite scary. Although I have a good relationship with my mum and family, my home is with Coralie. It's where I'll stay.

## Reflection

I am so inspired by Muriel, her carer, Joyce and Elaine and Klarika. They describe complex relationships, hard decisions, tough situations – pain, joy, love and loss – for Muriel, her brothers and sisters, her parents, her community and her carer.

How well they have negotiated these issues. Muriel also gives us her gift of honesty – she tells us that she and Edward would muck up so they would get moved, she packed her bags and plotted her escape routes to get moved – wanting to be involved in the decisions made about her and demanding to have a say.

How pleasing then they found someone – not someone they thought would suit, but someone who sounds just right for Muriel. So Muriel gets to thrive, and we can feel this young woman's hard work, resilience and life force already at only 18.

The caseworkers and the family have been working together for a long time – they have seen the results of decisions they've made – sometimes good and bad, and it seems have never given up. They have critiqued and explained their decisions – to the children, the family and the community. It sounds also if they have made errors, they have gone back and fixed them. That's courageous casework too.

Muriel's story also defies the statistics – the number of placements, or her non-Aboriginal care experience – the unique and inspiring story of her and Coralie reminds us to be open to all kinds of outcomes.

### Maree Walk

#### Deputy Secretary, Program and Service Design



# Digging deep

## Julie, FACS Caseworker

The first words I heard about Amelia were all bad ones. It was in a handover meeting from another office. I had been given the job of writing a report for court to keep her baby son Oliver in the care of his paternal grandmother, Mary. The thing is Amelia was only 17 years old. She was in FACS care and she had done it tough.

Parenting is hard even when you are an adult who has had great family support, so it was no surprise Amelia struggled to parent. She was given so many labels in that meeting it made me uneasy. One was that she had no 'parenting capacity', another was that she had 'an intellectual delay'. The problem was I didn't think we really knew enough about Amelia as a mum, and why Oliver wasn't with her.

I didn't know Amelia at this point, but I had read her file before the meeting. Everything in me said we weren't giving Oliver a chance to be with his mum. I felt like decisions had been made about Amelia's ability to parent based on the suffering she herself had experienced as a child. It seemed as if assumptions were made that her trauma meant she couldn't be a good enough parent. I felt so opposed to what was planned. I even thought I would rather leave my job than lodge that care application. I was just hoping there was another way.

Oliver had been separated from Amelia for seven months, and they hadn't seen each other nearly enough. I was determined to put this right, and to make the best possible decisions for this family.

Thankfully my manager Vicky, backed me. She was open to looking at Oliver and Amelia with fresh eyes.

We met Amelia a week later. I was told she wouldn't turn up. But she did and she was early. She had travelled four hours on public transport to meet me. She was done up very smartly and was taking the meeting seriously. She talked about Oliver and was really open. She looked me in the eye when she spoke, and I was left with no doubt that this young woman was going to put up the fight of her life to get her baby back.

Amelia has an amazing ability to come through tough situations. Her parents were both heavy drug users and she had lived with really awful violence. Amelia didn't remember this so when FACS said to her she wasn't protecting Oliver because she was living with her mum, she didn't understand.

The first time we saw Amelia with Oliver it was just amazing. Oliver went straight to her without hesitation and sat on her lap. They sat on the floor playing a clapping game. There were lots of cuddles and tickling and crawling around the floor. They were really connected. During their time together Amelia would ask us if what she was doing was okay. She was just great with him. If she was my daughter I would be really proud.

Working with Amelia reinforced what I always believed, to not let something sit unquestioned if you feel something is wrong. You always have to make sure your voice is heard. I think that if you're going to do this job, you have to have that strength. You just have to dig deep.

## Vicky, FACS Manager, Casework

Before the handover meeting I read every single one of Amelia's records. The assessments were a mess. When we had the meeting two things struck me. The manager said, 'Because of her trauma history there is no way she could



Amelia and Oliver

parent'. The other was that Amelia had a history of violence which we needed to understand. We found out that when she was 12 she had run away from residential care. When they tried to get her back she had kicked a staff member. That was her history of violence.

Early on I told Amelia I didn't think the past assessment was fair. I said sorry for what FACS had done. I felt I needed to be honest with her. I told her I was going to review everything. I explained the whole process very clearly. I said sorry again.

We talked about Amelia and Oliver a lot. We looked at it from so many angles and got legal advice, always trying to keep Oliver at the centre of our thinking and decisions. Each time we kept coming back to the same conclusion – Oliver should be with Amelia. We knew we needed to back Amelia, so she could be the parent we knew she could be.

Amelia filed a recovery order with the Family Court to get Oliver back. The day of the hearing I picked her up early. She got in the car and the first thing she said was, 'Are you sure what I am wearing is okay, are they going to think I look stupid?' She looked fabulous and I told her.

On the way up she asked about why she was in care. She told me she felt she needed to know so that if the court asked her about it she wouldn't look like an idiot. Even though my instinct was to tell her later, I felt I had to share it in that moment. When I told her about her past she said, 'Okay, now I know why people thought I would be a bad parent.'

As soon as we went into the court the judge said, 'I have read everything and this mum will be getting her child back today.' Just like that. I have never heard of a judge making a decision so quickly. Amelia was over the moon. She was the happiest person in the world when she heard those words.

Amelia now has a job cleaning hotels. She also got her licence and her own car. She has moved into her own place with her new partner, who is really good to her and Oliver. They are doing so well. It's about Amelia's resilience more than anything. After everything she has been through the way she loves that little boy is so beautiful.

**“ You always have to make sure your voice is heard. I think that if you're going to do this job, you have to have that strength. You just have to dig deep. ”**

### **Amelia, mum**

When I first got pregnant I had lots of emotions; I cried and I was really scared. Once I had him it was amazing. Mum came and stayed for two weeks and we would be up together at night, feeding him and helping him settle.

Oliver's dad Tyrone treated me like garbage. If I asked him to change a nappy because I was exhausted it was a no. If I asked Mary, his mum, it was a no. After about two months he threw all my stuff out on the lawn. I waited until he went to his friend's house and went down to the shop. The lady working at the shop gave me \$20. She knew what I was going through because I used to go down there with black eyes and a bleeding nose after he bashed me. I got on the bus, didn't look back and Oliver and me went to live with mum.

Oliver was taken one night when my sister was looking after him – when I was visiting my mum in hospital. It was the worst thing in the world. I had no idea who had taken him or where he was. I called the police to get help finding Oliver. I was freaking out. It turned out one of Tyrone's relatives was hiding him at their house. He was there for three nights, then Tyrone's mum Mary came and got him.

A couple of days later FACS told me I couldn't get Oliver back, that he would be staying with Tyrone and Mary. They told me where I was living wasn't safe. I tried to convince them everything was fine but they weren't budging. I got a bad vibe; they didn't seem to want to help. FACS, Tyrone and Mary seemed to be on the one side, and then there was me.



---

“ They fought for me, they got to know me and saw me for me, and not just a file of sad stories.”

I moved into my new boyfriend's home. His mum used to work with foster kids, and she said we could move into the bottom half of her house and try and get Oliver back.

When I lived there I would go to Mary's to try and see Oliver. But she would make any excuse under the sun for me not to see him. I would get the train for four hours and I would be told, 'Can you come back tomorrow morning?' All I wanted to do was see him for half an hour. I had no right to him, no right at all. It was her decision, she had all the rights.

The day of court I was so nervous. I was shaking, my heart was pounding out of my chest. I was excited, I was scared. I didn't know what was going to happen. I went to sleep about 3.00am in the morning and woke well before sun up. I had everything ready for him to come home; I had clothes and toys. When the judge said he was coming back that day I couldn't believe it. It was the best thing ever. I couldn't thank Vicky enough; I was hugging her and telling her I loved her.

Oliver is a great kid, he is so well behaved. I love doing everything with him. He makes everything fun, even just eating dinner is fun. I love giving him a bath, he loves baths. It's just fun to go out the back and play. He's a very good boy.

I can't thank Julie and Vicky enough. They fought for me, they got to know me and saw me for me, and not just a file of sad stories. I know without them my life wouldn't be as good. They brought Oliver back to me.

## Reflection

The grit and commitment shown by Julie is exhilarating to me, I literally wanted to applaud the final outcome!

When the right thing to do is really hard the personal and professional challenge is huge. Julie was ready for the challenge and used the support of Vicky, her manager, to really create life long change for Oliver and Amelia.

Huge credit to Vicky, in the face of labels, assumptions and judgements she challenged the myths that had evolved about Amelia's abilities. Vicky showed amazing accountability and responsibility.

'I said sorry.... I said sorry again'.

The power of the apology and the leadership demonstrated by Vicky is the type of tenacity our staff need to make child protection practice meaningful.

This story about the courage to challenge the system makes me think about what else we can do in FACS to support staff personally and professionally when they need to take a stand.

**Simone Walker**  
**Executive Director, Service System Reform**

# Goosebumps

## Daniela, FACS Caseworker

I met Elly early in her pregnancy. She's a young Cook Islander woman with a positive outlook and a big happy smile that she flashes often. She had come to our attention because she was pregnant and had been stopped by police for drink driving.

Elly was a heavy drinker, sometimes three bottles of wine at a time, and she was also using ice. At that stage Elly wasn't sure if she wanted to go ahead with the pregnancy. I explained to her if she wanted to keep the baby we could work together to make sure it would be safe.

I get goosebumps when I remember Elly's reaction the day I told her how drinking and drugs could affect her baby. I gave it to her straight. As I talked about foetal alcohol syndrome, tears streamed down her face. She looked at me and said, 'Oh my God, I don't want to do that to my baby.' Elly knew the alcohol and drugs weren't good for her but until that moment she hadn't realised what they could do to her baby. It shows we shouldn't assume parents make choices with the same knowledge of risk we have. It's an important part of our role to guide and to educate, while also knowing when to let them take the lead. I think this conversation was one of the big steps in her recovery, it was at that moment I thought, 'We can make this work'.

I believed in Elly. I could see she had the potential to do whatever it was she wanted. She was open, honest, smart and insightful. She really wanted to do the right thing by her baby. This was what motivated her, and I used it as our focus.

Reflecting back on all those wonderful qualities and strengths was really important in building Elly's confidence, her sense of mastery and our relationship.

I think she also appreciated me being honest and transparent. I couldn't tell her what the outcome would be but I could tell her I would do everything to support her. I said, 'There will be hard times but I'll always be here to listen to you and support you.' I would give her the different options but it was always up to Elly which option she chose.

We used Pregnancy Family Conferencing to help Elly. At the conference we would highlight all her strengths. Elly had heaps. She had maintained work, she had been clean for a long period of time, she had positive relationships with her aunty, some friends and cousins and she was very connected to her lands and culture. We spoke with her about our worries, past experiences of domestic violence, housing problems and of course, her drug and alcohol use.

Her aunt was a big part of our case plan and helped Elly a lot. Elly moved into her aunt's home for some time and became part of her knitting group. That was a huge support for her because the women fussed over her pregnancy and how well Elly was doing. She had knitted a gorgeous pink blanket for the baby, and the other women made lots of baby clothes.

Robert, her partner, didn't come to the first conference. Elly was so disappointed because she'd really been expecting he would. She was very emotional, but said she felt empowered. She felt the support services at the conference wanted her to do well.

Not long after the conference Elly relapsed. It was after an argument with Robert. She really wanted their relationship to work and he wasn't so sure. It triggered Elly going to the pub. What she thought was a little drink turned into many, and then she used ice again.



Daniela

---

**“ I think she also appreciated me being honest and transparent. I couldn't tell her what the outcome would be but I could tell her I would do everything to support her. ”**

That happened on a weekend and when I spoke with her during the week she was completely honest with me. She told me what she had done and that she was really scared. I asked what she thought that meant for her, was it going back to using regularly or a one off? She said she was really disappointed and wanted to continue with her treatment.

I didn't give up on her, because even though I wasn't sure if she could stay clean, I knew she would try really hard, and I knew that a relapse was common. I didn't want to punish her. I talked to her about the process of recovery, and tried to normalise what had happened. I reminded her about all the time she had stayed clean, and all the positive things that were happening to her. I used her baby to motivate her once again. Together we talked about ways she could manage distress and sadness, and the people she could trust.

Soon after, I visited Elly at home and told her about another mother I worked with, who had relapsed but had then stopped using drugs. She smiled and cried at the same time and thanked me for sharing that story. She said she was going to change.

I was also working with Robert. He is a young, hard-working Cook Islander man. When I first met him, I wanted to learn about who he was, include him, explain our worries and hear his views. I told him I would respect whatever decision he made but that whatever happened to Elly, I wanted him to be involved in planning. Part of working with Robert was giving him space, he was younger

than Elly and he really needed to decide for himself if he was ready for such a commitment.

When they first found out about the pregnancy, Robert would often stay late at work and go out with his friends. After our meeting he decided to be there for this baby and Elly. He would come home earlier, bring home dinner, things like that. They also saw a counsellor together. Robert was really worried that if he argued with Elly she would start using again. We worked on ways to talk to each other without using blaming language, and how to take the heat out of the moment.

Both Robert and Elly have worked really hard and Elly's continued to stay clean. At the third Family Conference we told Elly and Robert the baby was safe to go home with them. It wasn't a surprise, because we had been talking with them throughout this time, but they were really relieved when this became our final decision.

I came to the hospital shortly after Rose was born. Robert was holding her and it was just magic, this massive guy with this tiny little baby in a little pink hat. He was staring into her eyes with such love and had a big smile all over his face. Elly was next to him, looking exhausted but happy. Rose was a bouncing well baby. It was wonderful.

When I visited them the first time after they went home, Elly was breastfeeding and she was a natural. You could see the love. I just looked at her and felt so proud of all the things she had done for this baby. She has this smile and the baby was almost kissing her with her eyes, it was beautiful.



## *Reflection*

What most struck me about Daniela's work with this family was that from the outset, her assumption was that we could help this family stay together. It seems to me that Daniela looked at the subsequent incidents through that lens. I think it is right to have a starting point that we should be keeping a family together unless the risks are so clear or immediate that we have to remove children for reasons of immediate safety.

I was also struck by the way Daniela recognised Elly's strengths, and that seems to have been an important factor in both Elly and Daniela's relationship. But Daniela was also not naïve about Elly's weaknesses – she pulled no punches in outlining the risks of excessive alcohol and drug intake.

I haven't had the pleasure of meeting Daniela, but I bet she is a really positive person and how great it is that she brings that part of herself to her work.

**Paul Vevers**

**Deputy Secretary, Southern and Western Cluster of Districts  
and Housing Statewide Services**

# Seen and heard

## Peta, FACS Caseworker

Tammy was described to me as this really 'awful' teenager. How wrong can people be? A lot had happened to Tammy. She couldn't always find the words to talk about it but her behaviour let us know that she was distressed.

Tammy came into care as a baby and had lived with Aboriginal kinship carers, Kath and David. They love her and their relationships with Tammy were strong but over time it didn't work and Tammy moved out when she was 13. More and more Tammy was behaving in a way that was difficult for others to understand. Everyone was really worried about what was happening for her.

I first met Tammy when she was 16. She was in hospital because she had tried to hurt herself. It was not what I would have wanted for her. As it turns out though, being in hospital, still and safe, meant that the staff were able to see that she really was unwell.

I had read some worrying stuff about Tammy and didn't know if I had what it would take to make the difference she needed. I wasn't sure how our first meeting would go. I sat quietly during that meeting and just let Tammy talk. I could sense she was sussing me out. She asked me a lot of questions about myself and I answered each one – just honest and straight. I wanted her to know it was alright. To be honest I was pretty worried as to whether she would let me help her. I wanted to be able to begin to sort out all the things that were troubling her – like why things had got so bad, and where and how to start putting things back together.

It was obvious on reading about Tammy that there had been lots of attempts to understand what was going on for her. What stood out was that most of the

assessments had happened during crisis admissions to hospital. At those times she had been so unsettled. No one really got the chance to get to know her or see beyond her presenting behaviour. But this time the question was raised about the possibility of a neurodegenerative disease. A disease that early on might be mistaken for a mental illness. It affects your emotions, physical abilities and cognition. Aggression and a lack of impulse control are part of the disease. I read up on it. It made sense. The hard bit was knowing that if the diagnosis turned out to be correct then Tammy would not be okay. The disease is always fatal.

Prior to Tammy's discharge from hospital the team there recommended further testing. Tammy was very keen to be tested for the disease. At first I wasn't sure – onset in childhood is rare. Testing is not usually done before adulthood and Tammy was only sixteen and a half at the time. On the other hand, knowing what her future might look like was really important in terms of her leaving care. If Tammy did have the condition I wanted to make sure services were on board before she left care.

I did plenty of research and talked with lots of people, including my managers and health practitioners before everyone agreed that Tammy should be tested. I supported her to meet the staff from the clinic and have pre testing support. She wanted to go through with it.

Tammy was really nervous the day of the test. I sat beside her the whole time saying, 'You don't have to do this. You can stop at any point. This up to you. This is your choice.' I wanted to hug her and reassure her. She was just really scared. It was full on but she did really well.



---

**“ She asked me a lot of questions about myself and I answered each one – just honest and straight. ”**

It was months before we got the results. In that time I was getting the hospital social worker on board, talking to support agencies and reading as much as I could about the disease. Tammy kept asking about the test results. We rehearsed what would happen when she got the results. I would try to reassure her and talk about, if it's positive this and if it's negative that.

I did lots of planning for that day. I asked Tammy who she wanted to come to the appointment. She picked who came. That was really important. When the doctor told Tammy her test result was positive, she sat for a while in disbelief. She started to cry. I just sat there holding her hand. We left the room like that, holding each other's hands, squeezing them really tight. She whispered to me, 'I never thought it would be positive. I don't want to die.' I said, 'I know'. I struggled to hold back my tears.

Tammy needed some time alone to process the news. I visited her again later that same afternoon. We tried to distract ourselves from the reality of the diagnosis by decorating her room. But then we had to talk about it. She told me all of her fears. We just sat there; hugged and cried.

The diagnosis has helped Tammy make sense of what was happening. She knows now that there was a reason for her behaviour and that accepting treatment can help her manage that. It means we have been able to repair relationships that had broken down. We go for lots of walks together now because she needs to keep active. On those walks we talk about family. And we talk about her disease a lot. Tammy says she is frightened. I let her know it's

okay to feel like that, but also try to help her think about the things to look forward to and getting the most out of every moment.

I am so impressed by how Tammy has handled her diagnosis. She is tackling life head on. Her words are full of life and living. Tammy does not want to waste one moment on this earth. She often says she would like to 'experience anything and everything before she dies'. I hope she does.

I've made a 'Tammy Book' because she is starting to forget things. The book has all these positive affirmations and pictures of her favourite band on it. Whenever Tammy has a question she can write it down in the book so she can show me when we meet up again. If I don't know the answer to something she asks me to go away and find it.

Tammy has a really great support team. We're all constantly sharing information. She has a strong relationship with the hospital social worker and an Aboriginal worker. We're helping her put together a really beautiful family tree and scrapbook. It has photos of all the family members we can find because Tammy has told me how important family is to her. In the future it will become hard for her to remember so a visual reference is crucial.

I found one of Tammy's uncles and he is helping us connect her with other family and her culture. He's been really great, sharing funny stories about her dad and letting her know he is proud of how well she is doing.

Tammy's now in the Burbangana Taronga Zoo program. It helps connect Tammy with her culture and learn about looking after animals. The rats and mice are her favourites. She loves taking long walks around the zoo but it's getting hard for her now because her legs ache.

Tammy has regained a sense of self. Her eyes are bright and she is confident. She has incredible strength. Tammy is a beautiful girl with a heart of gold.





## *Reflection*

Even in the face of such adversity Tammy has regained her dignity and is rebuilding her connection to family and culture. Largely due to the empathy and care Peta has given Tammy. This is how it must be for all children we work with. The single story that is told by others about children and their families must not be tolerated. The first thing Peta heard of Tammy was that she was an 'awful' teenager. How can there be a meaningful and effective relationship with Tammy if Peta was to hold on to this single story? With an open heart and mind Peta uncovered that this single story of Tammy is not true at all. Through empathy Peta truly saw Tammy and her real potential regardless of her past and the road that lies ahead.

**Kylie Jackie**  
**Director, Review of Aboriginal children and young people project**

# Now look where we are

## Mum, Belinda

When my daughter Tanya was born I had been clean for about four years. But her father was still a very heavy pot smoker, with huge mood swings. He was very violent. The violence got worse when I was pregnant. We were together another six years after that, on and off. We came on the child protection radar when I ended up in hospital. I was in hospital for weeks because he shattered my elbow and broke my arm in six places. All up I think I had seven operations.

The pain and recovery took its toll. I got addicted to OxyContin. All day, every day I would abuse drugs. The doctors stopped giving them to me and I started shoplifting and buying them off other people. In 2011 I went to gaol. Tanya was seven and Mum and Dad took her for me.

I went to rehab and after I came out I met Tim. He wasn't at his best at that time. I thought I could save him too, but instead I joined him.

I was devastated when FACS took Tanya. I hated Jess then. Of course you're going to hate the person who takes your child. I was looking for someone to blame, and I wasn't going to look in the mirror and blame the person who was really responsible.

Tanya was taken just before Christmas, 2011. Once she was taken I thought there was no point anymore. I went downhill real quick. My relationship with Tim wasn't good, I didn't want to talk to anyone, didn't want to talk to him, to me it was his fault because I was alright until he came along.

Then Tim said, 'What are we going to do? We can sit here and wallow or we do something and get her back.' So we decided that's it, we went and got stable on methadone, and then I found out I was pregnant. That's when we really

knuckled down, we both did relapse prevention courses and other addiction programs. We had drug and alcohol counselling separately and together. I did urines every week.

And then when Jack was five months old I ran into Tanya's father and flipped out. I was scared and went back to what I knew would make me feel good. It turned into a four day binge. Tim stood by me but after the fourth day he said, 'Either pack your bags and get out or it stops now'. So I stopped and we've had nothing since.

After I had my third child, we focused on living closer to Tanya. She was coming up for weekends. At the end of every weekend I would be in tears, she would be in tears. She didn't want to go, I didn't want her to go, but neither of us wanted her to move back to where we were. There were alcoholics, drug addicts, drug dealers, criminals - that's all we lived around and all we knew. We had people knocking on the door offering us free drugs, to try and get us back in. People say you need to cut yourself off from those people but if you are ready to do it you can do it anywhere. I didn't want Tanya in that sort of place. So we kept plugging away until we got a good rental.

FACS told the court that Tanya should live with us. I was told, 'From where you were to where you are now, is like night and day.'

The court process went on forever. Every time we went, we were told next time would be it, and sure enough we went back and it wasn't. Tanya was worried. The judge assured her, 'Don't be upset, I promise I will have a present for you in the next month.' We went back and the judge said 'We will rescind all orders'. I thought it would be more gradual. It was surreal. It was like, what do we do now, do we go home? We were smiling and cuddling and crying - it was weird.



Belinda and Tanya

As for our caseworker Jess, I love her now. Once she realised we were both changing our lives, she couldn't do enough for me. Our life is normal. We have three children and a dog in a four bedroom house. We were living in Housou, doing nothing, using drugs. Now look where we are.

### **Tracey, FACS Manager, Casework**

Tanya is a total crack up. At first she was a bit shy but she became personality plus. She has such confidence and loves singing. We would visit and after the talking was done she would stand up and sing enthusiastically. She wants to go on 'The Voice' and has a good voice, so we supported her to have singing lessons. It was important for her confidence and sense of self-worth. And it was another way for us to connect with Tanya, and build a relationship of trust and respect.

At the same time it was obvious she had experienced quite significant neglect, she was hoarding food - stuff like that. Tanya had obvious signs of trauma, but in the time with her grandparents she started to heal. She is very resilient, and opinionated, but that was good because she would tell you what she wanted.

We did lots of work with Belinda to get Tanya home. But we didn't forget about her dad. It was important for her to have a relationship with both her parents. Her dad really wanted to have a relationship with her, and so he met with Jess and me. But then he went to gaol. He would often write her heartfelt letters. Jess would take them to her and ask if she wanted to read or keep them. She said she didn't want to reply but did want him to keep sending them. It was important to follow Tanya's lead on how she wanted to connect with her dad. Tanya and her dad now have a connection that we will continue to build, at her pace.

Today Tanya is a beautiful, intelligent young woman with a bright future. She has shown Jess and me that kids have an important voice, if only we listen.

### **Jessica, FACS Caseworker**

Tanya was the first child I ever interviewed, the first child I brought into care and so many more firsts. I remember being scared and upset for her.

It was a Friday afternoon and we received a report about Tanya, in a car with her mum Belinda and mum's partner Tim, driving all over the road. Tanya was described as being terrified. She was eight years old. I was worried sick.

**“ Belinda's taught me that no matter how bad it looks in the beginning, people can change. You just have to give them a chance.”**

Nobody knew where they were. I wondered, 'How much worse will it get?'

We had been receiving lots of reports about Tanya and they were becoming more serious. Mum struggled with an addiction and so did her partner. They weren't looking after Tanya properly and there were lots of fights.

Being a relatively new caseworker I was like, 'Let's go, get in the car and look for her.' My manager helped calm me down. We got the police to do a check on them and called the grandparents, Pam and Peter, to check they were okay for Tanya to go to them.

Over the weekend the police took Tanya to her grandparents. They had found her wandering a large housing complex, wearing somebody else's undies and a t-shirt. She had been locked in her bedroom because Belinda didn't want her to see them using, and she hadn't been able to wait for the toilet. They passed out, so Tanya went looking for something to eat. She was hungry and there was no food in the house.

When I talked to Tanya she wanted to protect her mum. I asked her about what she ate at home and I'll never forget what she said. Breakfast was 'very nice toast'. Lunch was 'a very nice salad sandwich'. I just listened – I wasn't going to say I knew she hadn't eaten. It would have felt like I was asking her to betray her loyalty to her mum.

When I spoke to Belinda she was really angry and very loud on the phone. It was my first conversation with a parent after taking their child. There was lots of swearing and she said her piece and hung up. I was a bit scared of her. I also felt frustrated. She didn't understand why Tanya wasn't safe.

For a long time, Belinda didn't see Tanya and avoided us. But when she fell pregnant she called us and said, 'I'm pregnant, what's going to happen?' Here was the opportunity to do some very real work.



Jessica



Tracey



Belinda started seeing Tanya and it was really good. I remember when they started spending time together on their own. I stayed with them at the beginning of one visit at a park so I could see everything was okay. Even though she had a new baby, Belinda made Tanya the focus of the day. It was like she had thought about it beforehand and prepared for what she was going to say. 'Remember when we used to go and do this and this was your favourite? Let's go and do that.' When they walked past some older ladies, they all peered into the pram and made a fuss of the baby. But Belinda diverted them back to Tanya, and Tanya loved that. It made her feel special. Loved.

Belinda wanted Tanya to start staying overnight. Belinda and Tim were still living in the same house Tanya had been taken from, so I went to make sure it was okay. Belinda took me in to the bedroom and told me what it looked like when Tanya was taken. She talked about broken glass, no curtains and just a mattress on the ground. I put myself in Tanya's shoes and realised it would have been really scary for her. Belinda had real insight and she didn't try and protect herself. She told me they had really tried to make it different, so it didn't feel like Tanya was coming back to the same place. I was pleased to see how much she was anticipating Tanya's needs.

Belinda is an intelligent, well-resourced woman. When she is clean she is a force to be reckoned with. She was really proactive in getting her life together and getting Tanya back. She had advice from us and she did it all.

Just before Christmas Tanya came to me and said, 'I might be going back to mum for Christmas.' Tanya was still living with her grandparents and was 12 by then. I asked her if that's what she wanted and she said it would be the best Christmas present in the world. After they got the final court orders they came in saying, 'Look what we have done! We did it!'

Belinda's taught me that no matter how bad it looks in the beginning, people can change. You just have to give them a chance. She has worked so hard and she and Tim have really done it on their own. I'm so proud of her and I'm so proud of Tanya.

I keep a message from Belinda. She wrote it at Christmas, just after Tanya came back to live with her. 'Thank you so much for all your support and everything you have done because if it wasn't for you and what you did I wouldn't be here where I am now.' I've kept it because sometimes you just need to remember that.

## Reflection

This is a story about relationships.

Relationships are where caseworkers do their heart work.

Jess building a relationship with Tanya, gave her 'an important voice'. I loved how Tracey talked about following Tanya's lead in building connection with her dad, at her pace.

Jess also waited for that perfect moment when Belinda was ready to not 'protect herself' and was able to engage. Trust takes time, especially when people have experienced trauma. People need to be 'ready for perfect'.

Tim and Jess 'sticking by' Belinda, allowed her relapse to not be seen as an irreversible failure. Relapse is a normal part of the rehabilitation process – plan for it.

This story is also about feelings. Expect a whole lot of uncomfortable feelings when you're walking on the sacred ground of working with vulnerable families. Jess spoke of feeling scared, proud, worried, upset, frustrated - big feelings. With the support of Tracey, Jess was able to 'calm down' and manage these so she could be fully present with this family's needs.

Moving from 'all we knew' to 'life is normal' sometimes just takes one present caseworker and a determined parent 'plugging away'.

### Julisa Russell

**Caseworker**, Excellence in Practice award winner (Making a difference with children, young people and families)

# Building dignity

## **Megan, Casework Manager, Mission Australia**

One thing I learned from working with Sam is that when you find a child falling through the cracks you just have to stand up.

Two years ago, Mission Australia was asked to attend a custodial case conference for a boy who had remained in a Juvenile Justice facility until somewhere was found for him to live. That's when I met Sam. The meeting was in a big room with loads of people and there was Sam, sitting in this giant chair. He was 15 years old, but he looked so small and vulnerable. I could tell that he was terrified.

Sam was with Juvenile Justice because he had sexually harmed his younger sister. Although his time with Juvenile Justice had finished, he was still there because his family couldn't take him back. He wasn't in out-of-home care, so it was my job to be creative about finding him a home.

There were lots of services involved with Sam but it didn't seem like any were making a real difference for him. Mission doesn't usually take on the full case coordination of children, but I was really worried Sam wouldn't get the help he needed unless we did. I spoke with my manager and we decided that we would step up and take the lead.

I wanted to understand more about Sam, his family and what had led him to this point. I searched out as much information as I could find about Sam's history. I spoke with a FACS caseworker who worked with Sam when he was much younger. I learned about the abuse, cruelty and trauma Sam had suffered as a child. What Sam had experienced was torture. It was his mum, dad and uncle who had hurt him, even locking him in a cage. And here he was now, locked up again.

Often kids who have sexually harmed other children are put into a 'too hard' box. But they need our compassion and energy as much as any other child. It is so important to understand who they are and what they have experienced. See them as a full person, not just their behaviour.

I was determined to find Sam somewhere safe to live, and to help him have an opportunity to live the life that he aspired to and deserved. We quickly arranged somewhere for Sam to live, and he was able to be released from Juvenile Justice.

For a long time I thought he didn't remember, or had chosen not to acknowledge, his past. He used to make up information about his dad and uncle, like saying his dad was a police officer. It was sad and confusing, but it was his way of dealing with it all. One day, having built trust with Sam, he told me that he remembered everything. Remembered what his dad had done to him. I think it was even harder to hear that he remembered.

Sam has a mild intellectual disability and he suffers from depression. He has attempted suicide and also self-harmed. These moments have given us a clear understanding of the impact Sam's past continues to have on him. We have been with him every step of the way. Showing him that we will be consistently there for him has helped him learn that he does matter and he can rely on other people.

Sam is a very generous and open boy, but this also makes him vulnerable. Through a lot of listening, mentoring and guidance we have helped Sam to better understand how to protect himself and how to keep himself and others safe.



---

**“ By building a strong, reliable relationship with Sam it has allowed him to open up and start to work through the impact of what he has suffered. ”**

Intensive and collaborative work with other services has been key to meeting Sam's complex needs, and closing any gaps in services. It can be hard to do that in regional NSW. We have designed a support framework tailored to him. At each step we have picked up on different challenges and helped him build skills - from education and social skills to intensive living skills support. He has also completed specialised treatment for sexually harmful behaviours.

As a group we meet fortnightly with Sam. Regular meetings have been important to keep things on track and to create new plans when we face challenges. It's been hard to find stable housing that fits Sam's needs, but we didn't give up, and he is now doing well living independently with extra support from us. And despite all Sam has faced, he's still in school. He has been so committed to stay in school, and I am so proud about that.

I believe that including young people in decisions about their lives, really listening to them and taking on board what they want makes a big difference. This is just basic respect. With Sam, this has been even more important. I imagine throughout Sam's life he has always been told what to do, and been made to feel like he is not important and he has no control. We never took it upon ourselves to make the decisions. We always included him and encouraged him to be part of the process. This was about empowering Sam, and building his dignity. He's developed confidence over the last couple of years. He used to be submissive. He now pushes back.

By building a strong, reliable relationship with Sam it has allowed him to open up and start to work through the impact of what he has suffered. He still struggles with his past, of course. A while ago we found him unconscious after he overdosed on medication. A few of us went to the hospital to be with him in that moment. We wanted him to see that we care. I felt so sad that I was his emergency contact and that he had no one else. We are working hard to change that. We are helping him to navigate the relationships in his life, develop safe and positive friendships, and we let him know when we are worried about any of the people in his life.

Sam isn't ready to be back in contact with his mum and younger sister, though I hope that one day he will be, and we will support him when he is ready. He has a lovely relationship with his nan, and we encourage him to see her. Last Christmas we helped him save money to buy her a present. He was so proud when he was able to do this for her.

Sam knows that we are here for him when he needs help. In fact he knows every person who works in this building. While I've been his key contact Sam has built good relationships with a number of the workers here. It's like his home base. Emily has now come on board as his caseworker and she's doing a great job supporting him. He is comfortable to go to Emily when something has gone wrong and she supports him without judgement. Sam knows that we have his back.

---

**“ I believe that including young people in decisions about their lives, really listening to them and taking on board what they want makes a big difference. This is just basic respect. ”**

I often reflect back on my time working with Sam and how far he has come. He's a typical 17-year old boy now. Every day he changes and we always adapt to reflect his changing needs and dreams. I think it's natural for him to start to separate himself from Mission, and that's a good thing because we want him to gain independence.

Working with Sam has been a great test in being creative and persistent. It's been a good learning experience for all of us. By showing empathy, and trying to understand Sam's world, we learned how to hold back our judgement and create a life with a safer and happier future.

## Reflection

What a great example of the good work of practitioners who go the extra mile. Megan saw Sam's need and stepped up. I can only imagine what that moment meant for Sam.

The story speaks to all the qualities of great casework – really listening, understanding what's happened, establishing safety and building hope. Living in the moment, planning for the future and integrating the past.

Long-term casework with kids with complex needs is hard work. But we know that healthy relationships and interactions with safe and familiar people can heal trauma related problems. The importance of an enduring casework relationship should never be underestimated.

Megan and the team at Mission Australia show just how effective casework can be when you hang in there and never give up.

**Janice Carroll**  
**Director, Intensive Support Services**



# Finding missing pieces

## Shannon, FACS Caseworker

Madeline and Jessica are twin girls who have had some big challenges in their lives. Their mum had significant mental health problems, she and their dad were both drug users and he was in and out of gaol. Madeline and Jessica came into care as tiny babies and had to be moved a bit before they went to live with Debbie, a wonderful carer who loved them to bits. She was happy to keep the girls for life but the plan was to find care with someone in their family.

When Jessica and Madeline were almost two they went to live with their aunt Rosemary, who put up her hand to care for them. It was going well until Rosemary had a stroke. After that, her son Charles, who was already living in the home, took over looking after Madeline and Jessica. They all lived together and made it work but then Rosemary developed brain cancer. It was horrible when she died. The girls were only nine years old. It was such a tough time for them all. Charles was grieving for his mother. He struggled to give the girls what they needed.

I started working with the family around this time. My first job was to help Charles get back on his feet. We had a really frank talk and agreed on a plan so he could be there in a true sense for the girls – he was their only parent figure now and they needed him. Because there was so much for Charles to do we organised for the girls to stay with another family member for a short time, and we told them it was to get Charles strong so he could be strong for the girls. We gave Charles a lot of help and he really did step up. He wanted the girls back, and they were adamant that they belonged with him – he was their family. I could see there was a really genuine and natural bond. After a couple of months of living away, they moved back in.

Madeline and Jessica have lovely gentle natures, although in the beginning it was hard to get to know them. They were reserved and quite closed off when we first met. Earning their trust and building a connection has really been about just constantly plugging away at it. Turning up when I said I was going to, taking them out, following up when I said I would.

As the girls got older, I started to worry about them not having a strong mother figure. They had recently turned 12, and I felt sad to be taking them shopping for personal girl things instead of someone in their family. I tried different approaches, like setting them up with an aunt, but she just had too much on her plate. I also found them a female counsellor, but it wasn't the same.

When we were doing life story work they wanted to know who their early carers were. I got a list of all the different carers' names and where they had lived when the girls stayed with them. They specifically asked about Debbie but I thought

“ Earning their trust and building a connection has really been about just constantly plugging away at it. Turning up when I said I was going to, taking them out, following up when I said I would. ”



Jessica, Shannon and Madeline

---

**“ To come back to all that early love and safety – to be back in the heart of someone who had loved them as her own and who could show them that they had never been forgotten. ”**

they just remembered her name. Later, they said they wanted to know where she was. They said she used to sometimes visit and send Christmas cards, but they hadn't heard from her since Rosemary died.

Once I realised how important Debbie was to them, I tracked her down. I kept going back through all her different addresses. It took a bit of digging but eventually I found a number. It didn't turn out to be the right one, she didn't live there anymore but the person gave me what they thought was her number. I tried quite a few different combinations but eventually I got lucky and found out she was a carer in Queensland.

When I rang Debbie she was so happy to hear from me. She had lost touch with the girls when Charles moved house. She said she always knew they would come back into her life. She told me she had pictures of them on her wall and was delighted that I contacted her. After checking with Charles, I passed on Debbie's number. The girls were so excited. It was the most animated I had ever seen them. They would tell me about the conversations they had with Debbie – like one of her daughters having a baby. Debbie was connecting the girls back to her family, it was wonderful to see them coming to life.

We organised for Charles to take the girls up to see Debbie during the school holidays. They stayed for a week. It was a time for the girls to reconnect to someone who loved and had cared for them – their first secure relationship. Debbie had kept some of their cute little baby clothes and gave them to the girls. It was a precious gift, to get back a bit of their history, and the clothes are now beautifully framed on the girl's bedroom walls. We're organising another trip with Debbie for the next school holidays – everyone is excited about it.

I really believe that filling in those missing pieces was so important in helping Jessica and Madeline come into their own. Charles said the school called him to say how much Jessica has changed after the holiday and was doing so well. The teacher was curious about what had made such a big difference. I think it's all about the connection and identity the girls needed. To come back to all that early love and safety – to be back in the heart of someone who had loved them as her own and who could show them that they had never been forgotten. Debbie has stepped straight back into that role of giving mother love, and the timing couldn't be better. It has also been a wonderful support for Charles – and

---

**“ I really believe that filling in those missing pieces was so important in helping Jessica and Madeline come into their own. ”**



he could see what it meant to the girls. In Charles they have deep family love and care and in Debbie a cherished connection with their earliest memories.

I think back to how hard it was for the girls to talk and the things I worried about for them. They have moved into high school seamlessly, and are both getting some great marks for their work. They know they are loved. Charles is so proud of them, and I have such hope for the young women they will become. It's pretty hard to think of work that could be more rewarding.

## Reflection

How powerfully does this story remind us of the importance of attachment? However, it also illustrates that with the loss of the attachment figures there is sadness and grief. What does this mean for our practice as children move from one placement to another?

Congratulations to Shannon for her persistence in seeking to find Jessica and Madeline's early carer. The story highlights the sadness that must have been compounded for the twins with the death of their aunt Rosemary and the joy that has come back into Jessica and Madeline's lives with their re-connection to Debbie, their early carer.

Reflecting on the out-of-home care standards reminds us that children and young people must be supported to maintain family and other important relationships, that case plans should include strategies to maintain meaningful connections and that active life story work (as was the case in this story) is the means by which this can be achieved.

**Jill Herbert**

**Executive Director, Illawarra Shoalhaven and Southern NSW Districts**

# Dreams can come true

## Serah, Marist Youth Care Family Preservation Service Caseworker

Karly married her high school sweetheart Leon and they had two gorgeous children. Leon had a good job and the family owned a home in a Sydney suburb. This wasn't a family that I would have expected to work with, but when Leon's company restructured, they cut back his shifts and their life as they knew it changed. Leon couldn't pay the mortgage, lost his job, his house and turned to drugs to mask the shame. He ended up in gaol, and lost his family. Karly also started using drugs. It had all unravelled so quickly. FACS stepped in and placed their two children with Karly's mother, Rose.

Shortly after, Karly became pregnant and stopped using drugs. I came into her life when this baby, Adam, was a toddler. My job was to return the older children, Tom, 13 and Katlyn, 9 to their mum.

Karly was living with her mother at the time. Altogether there were three adults and six children in the house. At our first meeting there were groceries all over the kitchen bench, Adam was running around the house, Katlyn was home sick, and the dryer was on because one of the kids had wet the bed the night before. Karly was a busy mum in a busy house. She was focused, but at the same time anxious about all that was going on. I could see she loved her children and there was a strong bond, but boy their life was chaotic.

I noticed that Rose was exhausted. Her home was crowded and she wanted it back to normal. I waited around one afternoon so I could talk to Rose. I acknowledged just how hard she was working to keep everything together. I said to her, 'You must be really proud of Karly and how far she's come.'

I wanted her to know how important she was in Karly and the kids' lives, and just how much Karly was achieving with her support.

The next day Karly contacted me in disbelief, her mother had hugged her after I left and said, 'I am proud of you.' Karly's mum had not hugged her in a long time.

I used to talk to Karly about what her family was like before Leon lost his job. We also talked about her hopes for the future. I think it really helped our relationship having those talks – it was like it gave her dignity to describe herself in a better place and a better time. Leon was always a part of those discussions. She wanted him back with her, to be there for the kids, and to have a relationship with Adam that wasn't one built in a prison. The kids missed him too. Tom told me he missed hugging his dad and Katlyn chimed in that she missed the wrestles. That tugged at my heart.

After I had spoken to Leon on the phone a few times I arranged to go and see him. There were lots of approvals from Corrective Services before we could meet him in person. I just called the prison and started from there. I wasn't sure if they would let me see him but I was going to see how far I could get. I made my first call and just kept following up with the next thing and the next.

I had never visited a prison before. It was pretty scary. There was barbed wire, security everywhere, and we had to wear security alarms. But Leon wasn't a scary guy. He was just a person, a dad, whose life had taken a very rough turn. He'd made mistakes but that didn't change how he felt about his family or they him.



It was tough trying to help the children have a relationship with their dad while he was behind bars. They were able to call him, but only saw him once a month, and even then they weren't allowed to touch him. I pushed really hard to let the kids and Leon have physical contact but the prison just wouldn't allow it.

Until I spoke to Leon myself, I didn't understand just how hard it was to build a relationship over the phone. No wonder they just said 'hi, okay, bye' when Leon called. It's difficult to have a conversation on a prison phone because every six seconds it beeps and it sounds like you are dropping out. The kids desperately needed more than a six second distant connection.

I thought about what would be meaningful for the kids and came up with the idea of daddy craft and diaries. Children could write or draw in a diary what they had got up to during the week. They could also express how much they missed their dad, and how sad it was that they couldn't cuddle him and wrestle with him.

Leon wasn't part of the plan to return the children to Karly. To me that wasn't okay because the prison was saying he was doing everything right, and the family were all telling me he was a wonderful father. I brought everyone together to talk about it, and then we all met at the prison. The wall was covered with butcher's paper of all the workshops Leon had completed. When we suggested he do a parenting course in prison he was a bit hesitant. I told him Karly was about to start a similar course, and we talked about how important it was for them to be on the same page with their parenting. He agreed to do the course.

But if Leon was going to end up living with his family there had to be a connection between him and the family's current life. And so with their permission I built a three way relationship through the prison psychologist. I would talk to the psychologist about some of the kids' behaviours Karly needed support with, stuff Leon couldn't understand in quick phone calls.

After that when Karly and Leon spoke on the phone he could help her with ideas, or speak to the children directly. He would say to them things like, 'hey mate, I know what you have been doing, I know things are tough but you need to help your mum.' Karly really appreciated this support. She felt like some of the discipline had been lifted from her shoulders.

---

**“ He'd made mistakes but that didn't change how he felt about his family or they him. ”**

One of the lovely moments of working with this family was Karly and Katlyn's entry into our art show. Katlyn painted all the family lying on a towel on the beach. There's a shovel and a bag and a sandcastle so it's a playful experience too. Mum and dad are holding hands and dad has these big biceps. Her painting won first prize and was snapped up before the show even opened. It was a memory she had but also a dream for the future. Karly's painting was full of her dreams too but she wanted to keep it for herself.

Leon is out of prison now. He stays overnight with his family and FACS has included him as part of the restoration plan. It's been a long road for them but this family is coming through together. I admire them and I have been reminded in the best way that if there is love and connection, with a bit of tenacious help, hope can flourish and dreams can become a reality.

## Reflection

This story demonstrates the power of families to make changes and overcome hardship. It highlights the important role staff play in supporting families in making these changes. Serah's belief in the family's ability is never faltering. Although the family had gone through tough times their strength, determination and support received from Serah assisted the family in working towards restoration. The support and determination that Serah provided in uniting the family is a testament of the great work of our NGO partners. Serah believed that the family had the capacity to rebuild their family and supported Karly in remaining focused on her hopes for the future.

Serah, advocated strongly for the children and the family to ensure relationships were maintained regardless of Leon's incarceration. She listened and heard the children's wishes to see their father and sought support to ensure that quality contact occurred between the children and their father. Serah supported Karly in engaging in activities to support her and enhance her self esteem. The long road the family had travelled was acknowledged by Serah and although Leon was not back with the family full time there was a plan around making this an eventuality and ensuring that dreams can come true.

**Gary Groves**

**Executive Director, South Eastern, Northern Sydney and Sydney Districts**



# A safe house

## Lynelle, young woman

I want to share my story. It is pretty horrible but important for other people to hear. When I was 14 my dad killed my mum.

FACS got involved and me and my sister went to live with a woman who had known mum, Karen. My sister got on well with Karen, but I didn't. Growing up I didn't trust any adults, and that was the same for Karen. Living with fear puts a stop to trust. I felt her heart wasn't in it, that she was always about the money. But from the start, my caseworker Andro was just great. He was always about me, and I felt it wasn't just a job. I could tell his heart was in it, and I think that's what made me trust him quickly.

It took me a long time to find my place in the world. When I was 16 I left Karen and my sister and moved around a fair bit, searching for somewhere to belong. I was certain I didn't want to be with Karen, or any other carer. Each time I moved Andro would come out and check that I was in a safe place. When I was 17, I decided I wanted to live on my own. I didn't know how to make this happen. I just knew I wanted it, that it was the right thing for me. Andro helped me get set up. I think he had to fight a bit to get me a special payment, but he did and I was able to get a home of my own.

Of course, I was only 17 and in my own house - no rules and no nagging adult telling me to turn the music down. Pretty much straight away my place became a party house. I learnt quickly that my friends were taking advantage of me. I was working two jobs to keep that house. None of my friends worked. They all had parents and safe homes. My safe home had become their party house. I didn't have any family around. At the end of the day Andro was the only person I could

rely on. He was always there for me. Andro always checked in on me, making sure I was okay, asking about my sister. And if he missed a call from me he would instantly return it. Andro helped me make my home safe again.

Fast forward a few years I am 25 and happily married with two little girls. A lot had happened and if it wasn't for Andro I wouldn't be who I am now. When I became pregnant at 19 I decided I did not want to drink or touch drugs again. I didn't want to be my parents. I wanted my kids to have the life I didn't have. After I had my daughter, I bumped into Andro at the shops. He held my daughter and said, 'I am so proud of you. She is perfect'.

Not long after my daughter was born, I got the courage to read my file. What would it say about me? Would it help me join the dots and make sense of my past? I called Andro and told him I wanted to read my file. He was very supportive, organised a counsellor and made sure I had good support around me. I got it and read it over a few days. It was weird. A lot of it was boring. Some of it hurt and made me angry. But when I read what Andro had written I realised he really cared right from the start. It was his job but his heart was in it. Andro always made FACS seem less scary. To this day he is one of the few adults I trust.

“ it wasn't just a job. I could tell his heart was in it, and I think that's what made me trust him quickly. ”



---

**“ Trust between a young person and a caseworker is critical to leaving care planning. ”**

### **Andro, FACS Caseworker**

I had just finished the Caseworker Development Program when I met Lynelle. One year earlier Lynelle's father had killed her mother. In the blink of an eye, Lynelle lost both her parents, and her life was never going to be the same again.

I remember being told that I would become Lynelle's caseworker. I wondered if I was the right person. Did I have the skills? Maybe someone else would be better? I guess it was time to really learn what it takes to be a good caseworker.

I was nervous when we first met. Pairing a big bloke like me with a teenage girl felt a bit like mixing oil and water. I knew some of Lynelle's story; what had happened to her mother; about her father's violence. I knew I would have to work hard to build a relationship and gain her trust. Even knowing her story I struggled to understand what life with her family must have been like. How could I make a difference? But from the very beginning, Lynelle was articulate and determined to succeed in life. She told me she was good at school and was going to be a lawyer. It became my job to get to know and understand Lynelle and help her realise her goals.

Finding a stable home is hard to achieve when you enter care as a teenager. Lynelle's time in care with Karen and her younger sister had been filled with challenges. Lynelle let me know pretty quickly that she wasn't happy. Lynelle left school in year 11, and moved in and out of Karen's care.

Building a relationship with Lynelle took time, as trusting adults in her life had not

been easy. I had been working with Lynelle on her leaving care planning, however for a period of time all I could do was stay in contact, keep checking she was safe, and advocate on her behalf when she needed a safe place to stay. By 17 Lynelle was certain she needed to live on her own. I had been Lynelle's caseworker long enough to know I needed to help her make this happen.

I advocated for Lynelle with Centrelink and housing and she got a home. It took some time and some challenging conversations before Lynelle found her feet. Together we set some boundaries for her and her friends. She came to see this new place as her home and not a party house for all her friends. Together we made it safe.

Trust between a young person and a caseworker is critical to leaving care planning. While it can be a task oriented process, it's really all about a relationship. You need to be open, and be there for someone while they explore who they are and who they want to be. With Lynelle, I spent a lot of time just listening to her talk about her life and what she wanted. Sometimes I would prompt her to think about different things or challenge her, in a respectful way. Because we had developed trust Lynelle would open up, share her ideas, and listen when I reflected on what she had said.

Seeing Lynelle through some tough times gave me confidence that I was helping to make a difference in her life, in a good way.

---

**“ Sometimes I would prompt her to think about different things or challenge her, in a respectful way. Because we had developed trust Lynelle would open up, share her ideas, and listen when I reflected on what she had said. ”**



Three years later when Lynelle asked to read her file, I made sure she had the support she needed. Afterwards she told me the case notes I had made captured everything she remembered feeling at the time. She said the notes were right, and she liked the way I had recorded some of her experiences.

As a caseworker you often hear about the importance of telling a child's story in their file. It's about how we need to capture their experiences, and the decisions that are made during their time in care. Hearing from Lynelle after she read her file really brought this message to life for me.

## Reflection

Everybody who works for Family and Community Services comes to work each day because they genuinely believe in the work they do. They have faith that with the right support, lives that have been disrupted and damaged by family violence, substance abuse or mental illness can be repaired.

Sometimes that means kids can stay with or go back home to their parents, and sometimes this is not possible and foster care is their only option. Whatever the outcome, kids tell us all the time that what makes the difference is the relationship they have with their caseworker.

Unconditional respect, honesty, good humour, warmth and genuine commitment to hang in there through all the ups and downs makes the difference. For Lynelle, Andro was all of that and more. Lynelle and Andro's story warms my heart.

This is just how it needs to be for any child that finds themselves, through no fault of their own, in the scary position of not being safe at home. For those of us who have not experienced abuse and neglect it is difficult to imagine the fear and uncertainty experienced by some children. To have a stable, reliable and compassionate worker to help you through is so very important.

I wish Lynelle nothing but good things. I wish her love that sustains her. I wish her safety and happiness.

**Janet Vickers**  
**Executive Director, Program and Service Improvement**

*This reflection has been adapted from an email Janet sent to Lynelle. It was in reply to an email Lynelle had written to FACS letting us know how much she appreciated the support of Andro.*

# Quietly confident

## Kristy, FACS Caseworker

I first met Rachel early in her third pregnancy. She was anxious we would take her baby.

Rachel has faced enormous adversity and suffering in her life. She has Spina Bifida and is in a wheelchair. She also has a congenital brain condition which includes a mild intellectual disability, and has a shunt in her head to alleviate swelling. When she was a child her dad was in gaol and her mother struggled to care for her. Sadly her relationship with her mum broke down when Rachel was a teenager.

As a young woman Rachel married Ben. He was violent and controlling. He would lock her in the house, imprisoning her. She was terribly isolated. Rachel told me that during this time she used drugs as a way of coping with Ben's violence.

Rachel and Ben had a little girl, Josie, who is now two years old. When Josie was still a baby she went to live with Ben's mum. Rachel's experience of this was that Ben's mum stole Josie from her. Rachel went on to become pregnant again soon after. Tragically she lost her son, Harry, late in her pregnancy after Ben assaulted her, pushing her from her wheelchair.

Soon after the loss of Harry, Rachel became pregnant again. Then Rachel did the bravest thing a mother can do and left Ben. She took out an AVO to protect herself and her unborn baby. She was so motivated by this new baby. Rachel was living with her mum and having difficulty finding stable housing. Ben had smashed up their property and she was trying to pay off the repairs.

When I started working with Rachel we decided that it would be best to help her build a safety and support network, recreating her connections with the community after being so isolated. I became a coordinator of all the different services that came on board to support Rachel, but I was guided by her thoughts about what she needed. We found a range of supports for her medical needs, prenatal care, housing, social support and disability.

Sadie arrived six weeks early. She was born with Spina Bifida and the same congenital brain condition as her mum. This meant that Sadie needed to stay in the Special Care Nursery. In the first two weeks, we were getting some worrying information from hospital staff about how Rachel interacted with Sadie. I tried to think what might be holding her back? I knew she was anxious and I understood why. The last time she was in hospital her son was stillborn and being back there magnified this pain. It was hard to assess bonding in the Special Care Nursery, but what I was seeing in the relationship between Rachel and Sadie was positive.

“ It was clear we needed a different approach. We persevered and thought creatively. We stopped trying to change Rachel to fit in with us. ”



The long stay in hospital gave us the space to get a picture of Rachel's strengths and worries for Sadie when they moved home. Although there were positives, at times I felt frustrated and very worried because I was not seeing much change. We would talk to Rachel about what needed to happen, but when next week arrived, nothing had changed. Rachel didn't remember what was agreed to or she would say that she had not agreed to it.

I spoke to my manager about my worries. We needed new ideas. At that time I felt like it was inevitable that Sadie would come into care. There were real risks for her. My manager suggested group supervision so I invited our psychologist, casework specialist, the Spina Bifida team, maternity social worker and the clinical nurse consultant to the meeting. This group of people meant we could share our variety of expertise and really get clear on what was happening for Rachel and Sadie. Group supervision really helped me to sit with the risk. When I was feeling stuck, together we were able to find new strategies to try. Our psychologist suggested that Rachel have a cognitive assessment, because of some of the challenges we were experiencing with her following through. This assessment turned out to be a real game changer. It helped us to understand Rachel's level of functioning. It was clear we needed a different approach. We persevered and thought creatively. We stopped trying to change Rachel to fit in with us.

Before this, I believed Rachel was being resistant. I realised we just hadn't helped her to really understand what we wanted. I got a better understanding of how to communicate with Rachel. I totally redesigned the assessment and case planning approach so that it met her needs. This change in approach kept Sadie safe with her mum, and we built in a plan for Rachel's mum to live upstairs as extra support. I simplified the case plan so it was a reminder of the tasks Rachel had agreed to follow up. I laminated the case plan and stuck it on the wall along with a calendar with tasks and responsibilities. Rachel gave me some lovely photos of Sadie to stick on it as a motivator and reminder. At first I wasn't sure if Rachel would use the calendar, but she did.

I came to appreciate just how hard it is for people with disabilities to navigate the service system and get real help. This was especially hard for Rachel because

she did not have stable housing. Once she was settled into housing, everything started to fall into place.

My work and perception shifted from what she was or was not doing, to what we were doing. What we needed to do differently. After I changed my approach I started to see Rachel follow through and make changes.

Sadie is now nine months old. Rachel and Sadie have a lovely relationship and Sadie is thriving. This change could not have happened without giving Rachel the opportunity to see that she could trust me and the other workers involved. With the support of her mum, Rachel is now exploring her legal rights to have Josie returned to her care.

I am so thankful that I have a supervisor who is quietly confident. Who can slow things down so we have time to try new ways. She models openness, thinking out loud and considers how she may have got it wrong. This really helped me to name what I was worried about and manage uncertainty. This, in the end, was a key to helping Rachel.

## **Lianne, FACS Manager Casework**

At different times we considered the need for Sadie to come into care. Rachel was so frightened of Sadie being taken that for considerable periods she avoided services. Rachel was also at high risk of post natal depression because she had suffered from depression in the past, and because of the deep loss and violence she had experienced. We were worried.

Being creative and tenacious was really important. A change in approach was needed and it was critical to keeping Sadie safe. And this is what we did, we changed our approach and it's working. There is always something more you can do before the next, more intrusive option.

**“ There is always something more you can do before the next, more intrusive option. ”**



## Reflection

Rachel's story is incredibly inspiring and I am in awe of her bravery! The challenges she has faced in her life are tragic and beyond the scope that many of us could even begin to understand. Kristy's work with Rachel is also inspiring and demonstrates so clearly how much can be achieved when caseworkers can help parents find hope, reflect on their own practice and their client's progress, and work creatively.

It is very clear that Rachel and Kristy worked as a team to address Rachel's capacity and needs and Kristy was able to change and adapt her practice as Rachel's needs changed. It is also clear that the relationship Kristy had with her Manager helped her to overcome challenges she faced in her practice and demonstrates the importance of great leadership and how it can help develop and support great practice.

This is a story I would love every new caseworker to read and to use as inspiration in their future work. Our clients need us to have hope for change, courage in managing risk and uncertainty and creativity in how we approach our casework.

**Lisa Charet**  
**Executive Director, Western Sydney and Nepean Blue Mountains Districts**



Kristy and Lianne





Copyright 2016  
Department of  
Family and Community Services



Family &  
Community  
Services