Shining a light on good practice in NSW 2017
The NSW Department of Family and Community Services (FACS) gratefully acknowledges the practitioners and the wonderful children, young people and families who shared their stories so courageously.

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

- Barnardos Australia
- Biripi Aboriginal Corporation
- Burrun Dalai Aboriginal Corporation Inc
- Uniting Burnside

Thank you to the photographer Alex Vaughan who captured the beautiful images in the report.

The photos feature the children, young people, foster carers, families and practitioners whose stories appear in this report. The names of the practitioners are real but some of the names of the children, young people, parents and relatives have been changed to protect their identities. The exceptions are the families in ‘One brave girl’, ‘Young hearts’, ‘Shammurri means strong woman’, ‘Trust and acceptance’, ‘The best use of me’, ‘Fresh start’ and Amanda and Emily in ‘The best teacher of all’, who all chose to use their real names.

This report was produced by the Office of the Senior Practitioner.

Photos © Alex Vaughan
What a privilege it is to write the foreword for this year’s Shining a light on good practice. When I read the stories, I am proud of the great work that our caseworkers are doing.

Sharing their work is important – it is a reminder that people can change and of the resilience of our children, young people and families.

The stories in Shining a light are all different, but are united by the power of the human spirit in overcoming challenges. The healing that can take place, the power of a child’s love and the hope that things can and will get better.

The story of young mum Alison in ‘Home by the sea’, shows how important our role is in the lives of our clients. Alison describes her caseworker Bec as a ‘force of nature’ – a great metaphor for the power of caseworkers to achieve change for the children and families they support.

Each of the stories show the unique impact that a skilful, empathetic and optimistic practitioner can have in a family’s life and that genuine relationships really can move mountains and forge new paths.

My heartfelt thanks to the children, young people and families who chose to share their personal stories so that others may learn from their experiences. It is generosity of the most valuable kind.

I know you will be touched by the people you encounter in these pages. My hope is that they stay with you and inspire life changing practice with the families you meet along your journey. You have the honour of being able to change people’s lives for the better. May it drive you every day.

Pru Goward
Minister for Family and Community Services
Minister for Social Housing
Minister for the Prevention of Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault
It is with great pride that we introduce the 2017 Shining a light on good practice report. Like earlier editions, it is filled with stories that bring to life the real work of child protection in its most raw, rewarding and honest form. We give sincere thanks to the families who have shared their experiences so courageously and to the practitioners who worked with them to help turn lives around.

To mark the milestone of our fifth report, and to align with the newly released NSW Practice Framework, we have chosen to depart from a standard ‘foreword’ this year. Instead we use this space to draw attention to the importance of our words. The Framework includes five principles to unite our work – one of which asks us to ‘speak to families with respect, and about them as if they were in the room.’ The stories in this report do just that. They have been written in very plain language – avoiding jargon and bureaucratic speak that can be alienating. Using respectful language does not mean glossing over descriptions of problems or risks; quite the contrary. Proven to be the most effective approach to keeping children safe is the quality of the relationship between the family and the practitioner. That quality only comes when the inherent power difference is known and honesty and transparency are our stock in trade, guiding every single conversation. There is no better time to consider our words; there is no better time for us to come out from behind them.

I know nothing in the world that has as much power as a word –  Emily Dickinson 1870

Words have lasting impact. They influence how we understand and how we make decisions. They show compassion, uphold dignity, give hope and inspire change. Our power for good is conveyed through our words, setting the tone that starts a relationship. Consider the difference between, ‘I am here because we have received a risk of significant harm report about your children’ and ‘I am here to see what help you might need so that you and your children are safe.’ Or how a simple change gives different emphasis – ‘my caseload’ becomes ‘the families I work with’ or how common words may help a child feel less alone – ‘an unsupervised contact visit’ becomes ‘time with dad’ or a ‘placement’ becomes a ‘family’ or a ‘home’.

Words that do most harm come in the form of labels that take away hope. We use power when our words pathologise others. Such words can last a lifetime. Hearing or reading that a child is ‘damaged’, a father is ‘resistant’, a young person is ‘hostile’ or a mother is a ‘victim’ paints negative views. Replacing those words with ‘traumatised’, ‘hurt’, ‘reluctant’, ‘fearful’ and ‘survivor’ alters those views and strengthens the foundations of the relationship invested in helping.
Last year’s words belong to last year’s language –

T.S. Eliot 1942

Accepting that language is constantly evolving is not about political correctness or choosing words that are ‘on trend.’ Rather it’s being open to a regular stocktake of our language, questioning whether the words we rely on are still fit for the purpose. It was not so long ago that we described children in care as ‘wards of the state’ yet others are stuck stubbornly in our professional vernacular.

A current example is the commonly used phrase ‘the frontline in the field’ to describe the people and place of child protection. There are obvious militaristic origins with ‘frontline’ meaning a wall of defence and ‘field’ a place for battle. While the association is indeed unintentional, a deliberate word change invokes a more aspirational image, ‘practitioners in the community’. There are many phrases that need to be retired – to ‘sight the child’ becomes ‘speak with and watch’, shifting the emphasis from children as objects; we ‘intervened’ becomes ‘partnered with’, shifting the weight of expertise.

No language is neutral. Each sentence realised or dreamed jumps like a pulse with history and takes a side – Dionne Brand 1991

The way we talk about violence matters. Sentences like ‘the children were exposed to a domestic violence incident between their parents’ litter child protection files. Such language fails children. The words ‘exposed to’ downplay hurt whereas ‘living in fear of’ does not; an ‘incident’ implies a beginning and an end whereas an ‘episode’ more accurately positions violence in a chronic pattern; and ‘between’ implies equal responsibility when violence is about one person’s deliberate actions to hurt another. If we know who did what to whom and we know its impact we need to say so; and the words might more usefully become, ‘The children saw their father hit their mother, they heard her crying and they were frightened.’

The function some words serve and who they protect also must be considered. ‘Child rape’ is a phrase made of two words that don’t belong together. It is hard to say and blunt to write. ‘Sexual intercourse with a child under ten’ is a more common but far less fair or accurate description. To do well for children we must not hold ourselves apart from their experiences. They need us to use our authority to attribute responsibility and to show we can hear and believe them, however awful the detail.

Further, the difference between saying the ‘young person committed suicide’ and the ‘young person died from suicide’ may seem a semantic nuance –unless you are the parent of that young person struggling to uphold their dignity while dealing with your grief. To describe a child with sexually ‘harmful’ rather than ‘predatory’ behaviour gives more hope and the term a ‘parentified’ child has been used in a negative way when it may well be describing a child who has shown great care towards their brothers and sisters.

Doublespeak uses language to smuggle uncomfortable ideas into comfortable minds – Julian Burnside 2013

Jargon and acronyms are often used as shorthand but can distance us from the real meaning of what is being described; for instance a ‘DV case’ or a ‘family hurt by violence’. It is also about not always using the same words – mixing it up can evoke different responses. ‘He was removed’, ‘she was assumed into care’ and ‘he entered out of home care’ are dominant ways to talk about life-changing, painful and at times necessary events. They are formal and legal terms which have their place but are not likely to be the ones most real to parents and children in the same way as, ‘she had to be taken from her family because she was not safe at that time’.

For those whose appetite for a language overhaul has been whetted, see the back pages of this report for more detail about how our new Framework tackles vocabulary.

Families who implore us to think differently about who they are and where they have been make us aware of the power and impact of our words. The stories in this report are shining examples of the sadness, joy, anxiety and struggles that define child protection and we share them with you in the hope that they may encourage such talking and writing in practice and in turn strengthen more helpful relationships.
Come to the river

Kristy, FACS caseworker

It was hard moving Chloe, 11 and Sam, nine from their nan, Barb. They had lived with her for nine years, but she was having some health problems and wasn’t able to care for them anymore. Her health issues had meant the kids had lost contact with their dad’s side of the family, and with it, their Aboriginal culture. Coming in new to the family, I could see what needed to change.

The kids went to stay with a lovely foster carer while I started finding family. I asked Chloe and Sam about who they loved and wanted to live with and they begged me to call their parents. I reached out to their mum Rochelle and organised to meet her. I was hopeful that in the years the kids had been with their nan, Rochelle may have got to a better place. Rochelle managed one visit with her children, but sadly she wasn’t able to commit to anything further. This was a blow to Chloe and Sam, but at least they felt like they had been listened to and I’d tried. I told them that it didn’t mean their mum didn’t love them and the door would always been open for her when she is ready.

At the same time I was looking for their dad and his family, but I kept hitting dead ends. As an Aboriginal person, I found it strange I couldn’t find anyone in their family willing to even have a chat. If something happened with my kids, I just know there would be an aunty or an uncle, or someone who would take them in. I had to keep looking.

Often the best way to find people is to keep talking to everyone in your network. Someone may know someone, who knows someone, who knows just who you are looking for! One of my Aboriginal colleagues, Kylie, had a cousin who worked at Burrun Dalai – an Aboriginal out-of-home care service in the area where the children were born. Kylie made some calls for me and from this connection, Burrun Dalai told us they knew the kids’ dad Ray and their other grandma, Patty and put us in touch. Ray and Patty were so excited to hear from me; they hadn’t seen the kids in years. Ray now had six more children with a new partner. We talked about Chloe and Sam coming to live with him. It wasn’t an option for now, but he wanted to see them so we made a plan to travel north to get them together.

Kylie and I drove the kids up and on the way Chloe got pretty upset. She was worried about not fitting in. I remember her saying, ‘I just don’t know how to be Aboriginal.’ I told her that we were going to her family and she only had to be herself. But I also gave her a few suggestions to help ease her worries. Simple things like how in Aboriginal culture it’s best not to interrupt or talk over Elders. As we entered Dunghutti land, Sam and Chloe started to get more energised. I know whenever I am On Country I feel more alive and I could see it in them; they seemed liked different kids to the ones that got in the car a few hours earlier.

The original plan was to meet Ray and Patty at the Aboriginal Medical Service, so we were taken aback when 10 people showed up to welcome the children. There were lots of tears and hugs and I just stood back and cried alongside them all, thrilled to see how many relatives had come to show their support for Chloe and Sam. There were so many people that we decided to move down to the Macleay River. The river weaves through the country of the Dunghutti people, so it was symbolic that the kids reconnected with their family on its banks. I couldn’t believe it when five more car loads of family arrived to join in. Everyone was thanking Kylie and me for returning their children, and I knew right then that they would find love and a good home here.

I spoke with some of the family off to the side about how Chloe was nervous on the drive up. Her Aunty Nadia said, ‘She doesn’t have to worry with us, we’ll teach her everything she needs to know.’ I said that I thought she needed to hear this from her, and Nadia went straight over and gave Chloe a hug. I could
hear her tell Chloe that she never needed to worry with family by her side. It was a special moment.

I sat back and watched Chloe and Sam carefully to make sure they felt safe – it was obvious they loved every minute of it. As a small thank you to the family for making such an effort to welcome the kids, we organised lunch for everyone. Chloe and Sam are such great kids, and I was so happy to see them smiling and laughing for the first time in so long. It was the best day of my career.

Throughout the day I chatted to the family and asked them to have a think overnight about who would be able to care for Chloe and Sam. After having no say for many years, I wanted them to have a voice about what happened next for the children. We had a good yarn about how the assessment process worked and I took them through the types of questions we’d cover. I wanted them to feel prepared and relaxed about the next steps and why it was important we made sure the children lived with the best possible family.

The following day the whole family gathered at the beach and Aunty Nadia and Uncle Michael said they would be honoured to take in Chloe and Sam. I had asked them to choose the family that could give the best home for the children. And they did.

So we sat there by the waves and the sand and did the assessment together. The family really opened up and were completely honest, all chiming in on how they could each help the children and what their worries were. This wasn’t the typical way I’d do an assessment, but it was the right way for this family. Making everyone feel comfortable created the space to get our relationship off to a strong start. Being in the fresh air with the kids running around and laughing helped the family let their guard down and gave us time to have a proper chat. I was able to answer all their questions, calm their worries and speed up the process to get Chloe and Sam out of foster care and back to family quickly. There was no time to lose.

Norma and Dana from Burrun Dalai were so helpful with the paperwork and checks and immediately offered to take over supporting the children when they moved north. Everything was falling into place.

When we left, I looked back and all the family were in tears waving at the kids. We started crying too as it felt wrong to be taking them away from their family again. I promised Chloe and Sam that even though last time they said goodbye they hadn’t seen their family in years, this time it wouldn’t be long at all. And thankfully I could stick to my word.

Chloe and Sam have now been living with their Aunty Nadia and Uncle Michael for most of the year and they are there to stay. When I explained this to the kids, they told me, ‘Kristy, this is where we want to be now.’

Chloe and Sam are thriving. Sam is school captain and into lots of sports; Chloe loves art and spending time with her brothers and sisters. They have loads of friends already and there is always something going on.

Chloe created an amazing Aboriginal painting and got the highest marks in her class. She was so proud and told me, ‘Uncle Michael taught me how to do this.’ Michael also taught the kids about their family’s symbols and the Dunghuti totem, which is the praying mantis. Chloe is now painting an artwork for my office. I can’t wait to hang it on the wall.

Barb isn’t able to see Chloe and Sam at the moment, but I took photos of them and showed her. She could see the smiles on their faces and I think it helped her to see they are safe and happy. I hope it gave her some comfort. The family have told me if Barb wants to move closer they would welcome her into their mob.

Nadia, aunty

When Kristy asked our family if there was anyone who could take care of Chloe and Sam, Michael and I jumped on it. We knew straight away we could give them the life they deserved. We don’t have children of our own and we were over the moon that the kids were back home; we couldn’t think of a better opportunity.

It has been a big change for us – we all had to adjust – but we it did together. Watching Chloe and Sam reconnect with their brothers and sisters has been amazing. There are eight of them here now and the older ones all go to school...
together. Chloe is particularly close to her little sister Nadine; they even like to
dress the same!

Chloe still misses her nan and there have been times when I’ve had to lie with
her in bed to help her get to sleep. We talk about her nan and I tell her that I’m
always here if she needs to talk, and not to keep things bottled up. We have girl
time together, shopping or painting our nails.

I know Chloe was a bit nervous at first because she didn’t know much about
her Aboriginal culture. But I told her, you don’t need to know anything, being
Aboriginal is inside of you, it is just who you are.

Michael, uncle

I was a bit freaked out at first, having an instant family, but now I’m so happy.
Chloe and Sam are the best kids. Sam and I have really bonded. He is a magnet
to me; I can’t get him off my side! He’s always asking, ‘What are you doing,
Uncle Michael?’ Wherever I’m going he jumps in the car with me. He is like
my battery – he gives me energy. I have a mate for life.

When he first came, he was straight up with me; he told me he needed man
time. So now we play golf every Saturday. We say we are going to do nine holes
and then Sam says, ‘C’mon uncle, let’s do 18!’ After golf he plays football – he
never slows down. We just got him a cut-down set of golf clubs for his birthday;
it was his favourite present.

Sam and I are making an Aboriginal spear together, shaving it down and I’m
teaching him how to throw it. He also helps me make didgeridoos – this is our
special men’s business.

To be honest, before the kids, I would spend a lot of time playing video games,
just hanging around. But now my life has completely changed. Me and the kids
go downtown, for a run with the dog or practice golf in the yard. All their energy
makes me feel more alive and want to get out and do more too. Everything is
better now.

Reflection

After I read this beautiful story, I kept imagining the line of cars
arriving at the river – each one filled with family – running out to see
Sam and Chloe. What a graphic picture of unconditional love as these
children were literally welcomed with open arms by their family.

Sadly, we now know that loneliness is lethal. It can ravage the
physical and emotional wellbeing, self worth, happiness and
stability of children in care. Children need the emotional security,
sense of identity and belonging that family can bring. Kristy knew
this and acted with the urgency and energy that all children in care
need from us. In her own words – ‘There was no time to lose.’

Kristy searched for family and when she hit road blocks, she
looked for a new path. She creatively used networks to find family
connections that changed the course of the children’s lives forever.
Great practice is never one size-fits-all and Kristy’s commitment to
finding family and her agility in tailoring the assessment process
Teaches us all the power of being flexible and intuitive in our work
with families.

But the real heroes in this story are the family who were there
all along and in particular Uncle Michael and Aunty Nadia, who
embraced and welcomed Sam and Chloe with such love. It was
wonderful to hear how much the children have enriched their lives.
The children are obviously flourishing and I will leave the last word
to Sam, who tells us everything we need to know, ‘Kirsty, this is
where we want to be now.’

Pam Swinfield
Director Practice Support Northern Cluster
Office of the Senior Practitioner
NSW Department of Family and Community Services
Shammurri means strong woman

Brian, caseworker, Birripi Aboriginal Service

I’d been warned about Shammurri. I think the words were, ‘She is a very angry young lady.’ She’d been in too many foster homes, given labels that were not hopeful and pills that were not helping. I was a new graduate and had just started a job at the Birripi Aboriginal Service. Shammurri was my first responsibility.

I was nervous as I knocked on the door of Shammurri’s foster home the day we first met. And there she was – seven years old and four foot nothing. What I saw just didn’t fit with what I had heard. She spoke as a very little girl, showing me lizards in the garden and telling me stories about those lizards and their families. It felt like a good start.

Later that week came the call from school. It was a Friday. When I got there Shammurri was sitting on top of a high cupboard in her classroom and hurling things at teachers – stationery, books, toys, anything she could get her hands on. They had called the police because they didn’t know what else to do. She seemed frightened and was fighting so hard. I got her down but not without a struggle. I barely felt the kicks and bites. They were nothing compared with that raw distress.

As I drove home that night I felt overwhelming despair. There is no other way to describe it. We had let Shammurri down – all of us. I kept turning it over in my mind, wondering how things could have become so bad for one little Aboriginal girl that the police had to be called. Nothing about it made sense, whatever way I looked at it. I walked in the door, burst into tears and told my wife I didn’t think I could stay in the job because I didn’t know how to help. While I was new to the work, I was far from fresh faced. For more than 20 years I had been a full-time foster parent of children with serious disabilities, and we had brought up a few children of our own as well. I thought I knew a thing or two. Shammurri made me question whether I knew anything at all.

I spent the weekend with my wife and our three foster kids. Shammurri was never far from my mind. By Monday morning I had made the single best and most defining decision of my career. I made a promise to work with Shammurri; that I was going to give everything I had to understand why such a little girl was so distressed. That is how I understood her behaviour, right from the beginning. Feisty like you wouldn’t believe, hurting like I have never seen. Not everyone shared that view. The words rage and anger might fit what others saw, but not me. I saw a little girl lost.

My boss asked me if I wanted someone else in the team to work with Shammurri. I told her about the commitment I had made. Saying it out loud was my first step. My second was to get in the car and get back to the school. Shammurri looked surprised to see me; I think she expected me to move on. I told her I wanted to understand what she needed me to do to help her. She looked me in the eye in her matter-of-fact way and said one thing and one thing only. It was the only thing she ever asked and it was always the same. She said she wanted her mum.

So I went looking. I read Shammurri’s story in the records we had. I found out that her mum Sheridan was only 15 when she had her first baby, a boy. A year later another boy and then she’d had Shammurri two years after that. And then the tragedy of a house fire and the middle boy, three years old, got caught in it and died. It was a story of poverty, loss and despair, with the odds stacked against her. Sheridan was full up with grief and being badly hurt by the children’s father. The words jarred as they told the stories about the violence Sheridan had survived. I felt sick reading those words and I knew what was coming next without having to turn the page. Shammurri and her brother were taken by FACS.
when she was only two. Then, a couple of years later their new little sister was taken straight from hospital. Those pages described a broken up family – three children growing up in three different homes, away from each other and their mum. I knew what I had to do.

My first thought when I met Sheridan was that it wasn’t hard to see where Shammurri got her determination. Sheridan had somehow managed to leave her partner and he was in prison. Once she was safe she was working with everything she had to get her children back. Sheridan had already done so much. She was healthy and strong, living on her own with an all-consuming longing for her children. I was bowled over by her courage.

Sheridan needed someone to believe in her, show her the way and break down the steps. It was good work; I respected her, was honest with her and I always asked her what she needed from me. We worked on her confidence and the case she wanted to put before the Children’s Court – to show all that had changed since she was a very young mother living in poverty and an unsafe relationship. Sheridan and I agreed that we would start on getting the girls home first. Shammurri and her four year old sister Ainslie were in the long-term care of FACS; they were in separate foster homes and neither was settled. Shammurri especially had been with too many families – it never worked because she was not where she wanted to be.

I remember saying to Sheridan that I was sorry she had to jump through so many hoops. She said, ‘Show me some more and I’ll jump through them too.’ She was incredible. One parenting course she did three times over – the exact same course with three of the exact same certificates stuck on her wall. No one asked her to do that, she was just determined to prove she could. I wanted to shout to the world to give this mother a second chance.

At the same time, I was spending more and more time with Shammurri. I used to joke that the school should have me on the payroll – there were patches where I was there every day, usually sitting in the corridor with Shammurri after she had been sent out of class. We also spent a lot of time in the car together, driving from school to her foster home or to visit her mum. I stuck by her no matter what she threw at me. Talking like that really helped – she started to trust me.

There were plenty of hard days. I was supporting Sheridan to get both girls back. Shammurri found this difficult and there were many times when she was very angry with her sister. It made sense – she had desperately wanted her mother for so long that she didn’t want to share. There were long car trips with her screaming at Ainslie the whole way. One time it got so bad that I pulled over at McDonald’s for a break. We went inside but then something set Shammurri off again. It was all too much for her. She kicked up an almighty storm right in the middle of the joint with everyone watching. There was a woman working there who came and helped me calm her down. She said her grandson is autistic; she had the skills to help and the compassion to not turn away from a distressed child. I don’t know what would have happened if she hadn’t been there.

We did a lot of talking on visits with Sheridan – her relationship with the girls was lovely to watch and we would sit together and chat about what everyone thought it would be like when they moved home. I was always struck by the difference in Shammurri when she saw her mum – the tension and distress in those car trips just disappeared when they were together. It was the only evidence I needed.

In the end it wasn’t hard to convince the Children’s Court – everyone could see how far Sheridan had come and how much her daughters needed her. The worries about the children in the past were just not relevant anymore. The best day was when I picked Shammurri up from school and told her she was going home for good. She absolutely squealed and a grin took over her whole face. There was no turning back.

Getting the girls home, taking them up to their front door and then leaving them there – that’s not a day I’ll forget in a hurry. They are the best type of sisters now; they don’t have to compete because there is plenty of love to go round. Shammurri has stepped up as a big sister with grace. I see it in the way she looks out for Ainslie, and in her maturity. Sheridan told me once that she knew nothing about mother–daughter relationships because she hadn’t had one. I know it will be different for her girls. There will be bumps in the road ahead but I am hopeful they’ll face them together. The next generation of women in their family will reap the rewards.
We are now working with FACS to better connect Sheridan’s oldest boy with her and his sisters. They haven’t seen enough of each other over the years and that needs to change. I am confident it will and that Sheridan can be the mother she wants to be for him and the girls.

Shammurri has just turned 10 and we had a big cake to celebrate that she and Ainslie have been home for a year. No legal orders left, no calls from school, no need for my service to be involved. You cannot believe the difference in Shammurri. She is completely transformed. She goes to school every day and she is whip-smart. She is off all the pills and we’ve discarded all the labels. We have new ones now – like clever and safe and loved. Sheridan did all that and so much more. She knew her girl and she did not accept that she needed medicine to get better.

I asked Sheridan if it would be okay if I kept in touch with them now that our work has finished. She said, ‘Shammurri will be very cranky if you don’t.’ I knew that getting her home was the right thing to do but not in my best hopes could I have seen such a change. She taught me the most real lesson about understanding that grief and loneliness can make children behave in ways that frighten others. Shammurri showed us the way to the most obvious answer – she needed to be with the person who loves her best in the world. My job was just to make that happen. The rest is their story; the healing is in mother love and daughter need. It’s been an honour to watch.

I am a team leader now – the first white person to ever work at Birripi. They took a vote on me and said I work the way they like. I no longer doubt my career choice. I have Shammurri to thank for that. Sometimes on long drives I stop at the same McDonald’s, and that woman who works there always asks after the ‘beautiful little girl’. She could see through the behaviour to the girl beneath. I’m glad I could too.

**Sheridan, mother**

The first night the girls came home I let them sleep in the lounge room on the couches. I sat up all night and watched them. I couldn’t stop watching them. Their beds were ready and made but we stayed that first night together, the three of us on the couches. The next night they went to their beds and I was in and out every 10 minutes, checking them, not able to believe I had them back.

I have had four kids taken. It’s the hardest thing in the world. With Ainslie I knew the deal – they said they would take her when she was three days old. I walked out the door of that hospital the night before and didn’t say goodbye to anyone. I left my baby there because I could not watch another one carried away. My mum was no mum to me; their dad was no dad to them. I’ve had to work it out myself.

That’s where Brian came in. He believed in me right from the beginning. He saw my girl was hurting and he was open to the idea that I could be the answer. We talked a lot and he was always straight with me. I respected that and him. And that went both ways. If he didn’t respect me it would not have worked.

When I got her back, Shammurri was often afraid; she needed all the lights on and she would get very upset. But now every day I see her getting more secure. She loves school – she is up with the sun and dressed in her uniform, neat as neat, waiting hours before we have to leave. She can read like a champion and she is a good sister. I am the proudest mum in town. She is where she belongs and I am not letting her go.
Reflection

This is a painful story to read. As Brian said, we had let Shammurri down – all of us.

The image of Sheridan sitting up all the first night her girls came home, just watching them in awe, disbelief and fear, couldn’t communicate more powerfully the grief of losing your children to care.

Her strength, determination and patience to leave her partner and negotiate the child protection system to get her girls back, all the while carrying that grief is extraordinary.

And the fact that Shammurri, now safe with her mum and her sister, doesn’t need medication and is thriving at school is almost shocking in what it has to say about the importance of really listening to children and understanding what’s happened to them.

Brian did, and it helped to change Shammurri’s life.

Michael Coutts-Trotter
Secretary
NSW Department of Family and Community Services
Tiffany, 15 year old

No child should ever have to go to a FACS office to say that their mum and dad are using drugs and shouldn’t be caring for them. But that’s what I had to do. I was only 14. I was scared and confused and needed help.

I grew up in a happy home. We were a tight family that did everything together. We spent our weekends fishing, hanging out and just doing family stuff. Life was pretty normal and easy. But last year it got hard. I couldn’t make sense of things at the start. Mum and dad started to change and I didn’t understand why. I soon realised that they were using drugs. My life started to unravel as theirs started to spiral out of control. Before I knew it we were homeless and dad was in jail.

I had a new baby brother just about to come into the world. I already worried so much for my little sister Alicia and brother Daniel Jnr. I couldn’t imagine how we would care for a baby! I was the oldest in the family so I felt I had to take care of the little ones. I didn’t mind, but I couldn’t always be around to make sure they were okay. I worried about them all the time. And I worried about my parents. I couldn’t stop worrying.

So I went to a FACS office. I walked up to the counter and said I needed help. I didn’t know what I would say next or what help I would get. Eventually I found my words and started talking about what was going on at home, hoping, praying that someone could fix mum and dad. I said I was scared to be at home and that I wanted to stay somewhere else. When my parents used drugs it turned them into different people. Scary people – not the people I knew. So when Emma told me the only way to keep me safe was to take me away from them, I wasn’t surprised. Emma arranged for us kids to stay with our grandparents. That mattered because they love us. We were all together and were later joined by our new baby brother John – he is super cute!

I can’t put into words just how much I love my parents. Telling Emma about the bad things they were doing broke my heart. I felt so torn for ‘dobbing’ on them and I felt selfish for wanting to live somewhere else. I can’t think about it now without crying. It was the hardest thing I have ever had to do.

What I told Emma ended up in writing and before a court – the secrets of my family life splashed across papers for others to see. My words screaming back at me. It was awful. I had torn my family apart. Mum and dad keep telling me that it was the best and bravest thing I have ever done and that they are grateful. Emma tells me that too. But I still feel bad.

Emma listened to me, included me in everything and fought for me. When mum and dad got better I told Emma that I wanted to go back home. I told her about all of the good changes I could see and my hopes of returning to our old life. At first Emma and the court didn’t see the changes that I saw. But then Emma told me that she had listened to what I had to say and was going to try to get us all back home.

I can’t wait to go home. Mum and dad have a new house and they have asked me how I want my room decorated and what else I might need. I told them I want two llamas – you need two because if you just had one it would be lonely. I’m not sure if I will get the llamas, but I know I will be home soon and that’s all that really matters to me.

Last year was the worst year of my life but I just know that next year is going to be the best.

Emma, FACS caseworker

I’m not special; I’m a social worker who is just trying to do the right thing. My job is to advocate for kids and that’s just what I did.
Daniel Jr., Megan, baby John, Alicia, Daniel, Tiffany
I was impressed by Tiffany from the first time I met her. She was only 14 and full of courage. She did what lots of kids wouldn’t be able to do. Tiffany knew what safe parenting looked like – after all, she had a good upbringing – so when things changed at home she noticed and she didn’t like it. I could tell that Tiffany loved her parents, so it was hard for her to tell me that they were not looking after her and her brother and sister the way they once had. I remind her every chance I get how brave she was to tell me things, and how proud I am of her. I’m not sure she believes me yet, but I hope one day she will.

I listened to everything that Tiffany had to say. When she told me that she didn’t feel safe at home I found her somewhere safe to stay. So when she told me that she thought it was safe to go back home I had to hear that and I had to find a way to make it happen. That part wasn’t easy but I couldn’t just listen and react to her worries, I had to listen and honour her by working towards her hopes too.

Tiffany has always wanted to be with her mum and dad so she was on the look out for signs that this might be possible. But I couldn’t see what Tiffany saw straight away – I needed her help to see clearly.

For Daniel and Megan, like most parents in their position, the first month after taking their kids was a write-off. Their anger and grief was too raw. Expecting them to show signs so early on that they could turn their lives around seemed too big an ask. So initially I told the court that I didn’t think restoration was possible. It’s never easy telling a parent that you don’t think they have what it takes to get their kids back. But for Megan and Daniel it was a conversation we needed to have. They now had a choice to make – the drugs or losing their kids forever. In the end the choice was simple. They were going to get their family back together again! By this time there was a new bundle of joy for Daniel and Megan to fight for – John, who had been born shortly after Tiffany, Daniel Jnr and Alicia had been taken. Daniel had got out of jail and it was like the penny had dropped – they started the hard work to get the kids back home. They stopped using drugs, found a new family home, and attended every course possible. But the real signs of change came in how they interacted with the kids during family visits. When Megan started bringing homemade cakes Tiffany knew that her caring, nurturing mum was back. When Daniel started playing rough and tumble games with the kids, Tiffany knew that her playful, loving dad was back. And when Daniel and Megan were brave enough to talk to Tiffany about how they had let her down, and apologise for it, Tiffany knew that it was time to start planning to go home.

Tiffany helped me see that their change was real. With her guidance I started to think that it just might be possible for all the kids to go back home.

It wasn’t a view that was shared by others – I had to convince my manager Tracey and the court that there was hope. You start to doubt your judgement when the people around you see something different. I took one of my colleagues out with me – another set of eyes to help me see clearly. Just like me, she could see that Daniel and Megan had changed. Knowing this made it easier for me to stand strong and advocate for the kids to go home. So off I went into Tracey’s office to state my case.

I understood why Tracey wasn’t sure straight away – she had seen what had been written about the family. Unlike me though, she hadn’t spent time with Daniel and Megan to see how far they had come. It’s hard to capture in writing all of the little things, the things your instinct tells you. Tracey is a good manager; she encourages debate and is open to us having different views. It is these different views that help us make the best decisions for children. They need us to consider everything from every angle, and if it takes a good tussle behind the scenes to give them what they need then so be it. I’m up for that!

Tracey was easier to convince than the court. But with a lot of persistence and a change of tack in how I put my evidence forward, everyone agreed that the best place for the kids was back at home. They will all soon be together again, back where they belong with their mum and dad, under the one roof. Forever.

Tiffany will be 18 when I stop working with her. I am full of hope when I imagine what she can do as a young adult. She guided her family through really tough times and she guided me to make the best decision for her and her family. What an inspiring young woman!
Daniel, father

I don’t think I would be alive if Tiffany hadn’t gone to FACS. That’s the honest truth. She saved me. I can’t even bear to think what life would be like today if Tiffany hadn’t been so brave. I am so proud of her for doing what she did.

I was a good dad before the drugs. I’m a good dad now that I’m off them, but I wasn’t a good dad while I was using. I feel ashamed for what I have put Tiffany and the other kids through. Megan and I were supposed to be the adults, the ones looking after everyone, but it took a teenager to keep our family safe.

Drugs totally change who you are. I became so selfish. Everything that really mattered to me – Megan, our children, our home – they just weren’t as important as the drugs. It wasn’t until the kids were taken and we were homeless that I realised things had to change. Once I realised this there was no stopping me. When the love of your kids is your driving force, you can do anything. I’ll never touch drugs again.

I’m on the right track now. I have lots of good people around me, including Emma. She has helped me understand that it is okay to ask for help. I hope to be able to help others in the future by being a mentor at our local church. I can’t undo the mistakes I’ve made, but maybe, just maybe, I can share the lessons I’ve learnt to help someone else.

I’ll be thankful to Tiffany for the rest of my life. I’ve been to a few parenting courses now but none of them taught me as much as Tiffany did, and none of them teach you how to say thank you to your kid for saving your life. I’ll never touch drugs again.

Life got out of control so quickly. If you had told me a year ago that my kids would be taken from me I wouldn’t have believed you. Daniel and I have been together since I was 15. He’s the love of my life, my best friend, and together we had a great life. We didn’t always have much but we had a close family and a lot of love to give.

My heart broke every time I saw my children. I got to see them a fair bit, thanks to them being with family, but no amount of visits can make up for not having them by your side all the time. We cried so much at the end of our time together and my littlest one thought I had abandoned her, that I had a choice in not seeing her every day. That crushed me. Seeing the hurt in them made me determined to get my life back and with that, my kids. Tiffany made the wake-up call that I needed. I’ve never been more proud of her. She fought harder than all of us to get our family back on track. I’ll be thankful to her for the rest of my life.

I know that I also have Emma to thank for how things turned out. I feel bad that I gave her a mouthful on more than one occasion at the start. How quickly things change – now she is on my speed dial, my go-to-person for help. I feel comforted knowing that Emma is looking over my children, keeping them safe until they are back home. I’m not scared to tell her anything, I know she will help, she has proven that to me in spades.

Emma fought really hard for us when no one else was fighting. Court was tough and I could see that she was standing on her own. She was Tiffany’s voice at court, so when Tiffany started to see a change in us and wanted to come home, Emma told the court and did all that she could to get them to listen. It took a while for them to hear and Daniel and I didn’t always make it easy. When Emma called us in for a meeting one day and pulled us into line it was a bit of a surprise. She basically told us off! I remember walking out of that meeting with a smile on my face. It was exactly what I needed from her. I did as I was told after that!

My kids had to be taken from me. I wouldn’t be where I am today if that hadn’t happened. Emma and Tiffany were smart enough to know that long before I did, I am so lucky to have them in my life.

Megan, mother

I shook the children’s solicitor’s hand on the day the magistrate told us that the kids could come home. She had fought us most of the way. At court we sat on opposite sides – me asking for my kids to come home and her telling the court that our home wasn’t good enough. I’m thankful to her now. She really pushed us to step up and do the right thing. The day I stopped fighting her and just said ‘Tell me what I have to do to bring my kids home’ was the day we started to be on the same side.

No one ever intends to get addicted to drugs. You think you’re just trying something out and then boom, before you know it, they have a grip on you.
Reflection

I needed to read Tiffany’s story more than once, just to take in how momentous it was. Tiffany, at 14, showed more courage and tenacity that most of us might show across a lifetime.

For me it was hard not to ask the question, ‘Would I have been that brave?’

Through Tiffany’s eyes, you experience the weight of the world, but also the love, the care and the concern for the parents she needed and the family she needed to protect.

But there is ever-present hope shown by Tiffany, her caseworker – Emma and her parents – Megan and Daniel.

The hope is real and palpable; you can feel everyone physically grabbing hold of it, using it to bring them back together.

Tiffany stood on the doorstep of FACS and the statutory child protection system did what it is there to do, to make Tiffany and her sister and her brothers safe. But it is the relationships that Emma fostered with this family and then the skills she used to support and encourage change that are the real deal.

In the NSW Practice Framework the principle of Ethics and Values recognises our ability to form authentic relationships and demonstrate skilful practice is as useful to children as our statutory powers.

This principle has never been more important than in Tiffany’s story.

Thank you Tiffany for your bravery, thank you Emma for doing the work that only you could do.

Simone Walker
Deputy Secretary Operations, Northern Cluster
NSW Department of Family and Community Services
Rebecca, FACS caseworker

Alison's first words to me were ‘Oh why can’t you just leave me alone?’ She was standing at the door of her caravan and made it very clear I was the last person she wanted to see.

Alison looked bedraggled and I could see straight away that she had been using drugs. She was fired up and all over the place. She was yelling at Jane, who was three at the time, and feeding eight month old Josie sunshine milk powder because she had run out of formula.

It was our first meeting, but my colleagues had been working with Alison for a while. Our team knew about her ice habit, and we were really concerned that she couldn’t take care of the girls when she was using. My visit was to check in on the family and sadly things weren’t going well. I talked to Alison for a little while and then rang my manager to tell her my worries. My manager and I agreed it was just too unsafe to leave the girls there with Alison behaving so erratically.

Alison really lost it when I told her I had to take the girls away. The police came down, and Alison asked them if she could have five minutes alone with me. You can imagine what she had in mind! I totally understood her reaction. She was hurting and helpless and terrified that this was it – she would never have Jane and Josie home again. I had a social work student with me that day, and I told her, ‘When we write down what happened here this morning, put it into context – we can’t use labels or hold it against Alison later on.’

So this is how our story begins. There’s me, a complete stranger, wrenching her daughters away – and there is Alison – a young Aboriginal woman, crying on the steps of her caravan. You never get used to these moments, but Jane and Josie needed to be somewhere safe, and sadly on this day, it wasn’t with their mum.

I told Alison that while it may feel like the end, it could also be a new beginning. I promised she would see her daughters soon and I would call her the next day. I doubt she heard me, but it was important I said the words, and even more important that I stuck to them.

I had trouble finding family for the girls. Alison’s mum lives in another state and I knew getting the girls back home would be much harder if they settled so far away, and couldn’t see their mum easily. I took Jane and Josie to the doctor for a check-up and found a local foster carer, Joanna, to take good care of them, so that Alison had the space to take care of herself. I always start from the belief that children belong with their parents. My job is to help find the right path home.

The early days were hard. What I had to say was difficult to hear, and Alison wasn’t ready to listen. Our worries were clear; she had to stop using ice, or her daughters couldn’t be safe with her. She was so caught up raging against me and the system that she couldn’t get in to the headspace to take in what I was saying. She asked for a new caseworker every time we spoke, but every day I’d still call. The first challenge was, how do I work with someone who won’t stop yelling at me?

As I waited for Alison to be ready, I took the time to read all the information we had on her life so far. As is often the case, she’d had her own experiences with us as a child. It was easy to see why Alison had tried to escape her sadness by using drugs. But I’d already caught glimpses of her true character shining out of all her bravado – I knew she had it in her to stop history repeating itself. She was strong and resilient, and I could hear in her voice how much she loved her girls and yearned for them.

There were no light bulb moments, but slowly over time, Alison realised that every decision I made, every action I took, was aimed at bringing her girls home and that my belief in her never wavered. I stayed optimistic that Alison could get
clean, even if she kept telling me she wasn’t sure she could. I wanted to be a positive voice in her head to help drown out her own doubts.

Finding the right rehab was tricky. Together we made a list of places that might suit and I helped her ring them, go through the assessment processes, visit doctors and fill out forms. It was an emotional time for her. A big part of my role was to hold her hand through this period; it was Alison who had to do all the hard work. There is no quick fix to long-term drug use.

It was frustrating for Alison to have to wait for a spot in rehab, so I decided to use this time in limbo to simply talk and listen to whatever she needed to say. It took a long time for her to share with me moments from her life. We would talk a little bit and she would get really upset, so I’d say, let’s park that over there for now. She had lived with a lot of sadness and hard times, and I learned more and more about her, not just what was in our notes. I made sure Jane and Josie saw Alison all the time. We should never underestimate how distressing it is for children to be apart from their parents, even when it’s for a short time. This little family needed one another and I needed to stick to my word that Alison would see them; it was a way to help her start to trust the process. Josie was at a crucial time in her attachment to her mum and Jane was old enough to really pine for Alison. Seeing her mum a lot helped Jane to stay connected and be at peace with their time apart. Returning children to their families means we need to make sure their attachment never breaks.

It wasn’t all smooth sailing. There was the day Alison called me, breathless and upset. ‘I’ve run away with the girls,’ she told me. Alison was having a visit with Jane and Josie under the supervision of an NGO worker. She told me the worker kept telling her what to do, so she ‘got the shits and bolted’. But she didn’t really run. She just went to the end of the street and called me. I ran out of the office and met her just as the police arrived. The NGO had called them after Alison took off. Thankfully I was able to diffuse the situation. It would have been devastating for the girls if Alison ended up in trouble. She could have done a lot of things that day, but she didn’t. The fact she called me straight away showed me how far we’d come.

The whole experience made me reflect on the way we manage visits between parents and their children. Families need to feel trusted with their kids, or else how can they step up when they get them home? Alison felt the arrangements were unnatural and she was being watched. Is it any wonder she ran when she got the chance?

In the end, Alison did many months in rehab. This time apart was tough on Josie and Jane, but together with their carer, we worked hard to keep the family connected. Every week I would visit the girls at Joanna’s home and we would ring their mum together. Joanna was amazing and so respectful of the girl’s bond with their mum. She kept photos of Alison in their room and each night they would ‘blow kisses to mummy’ before going to bed. Alison sent the girls little presents, and in return, I made sure that she had plenty of photos and posted bundles of their drawings and paintings to help keep her spirit strong.

Sadly the first rehab centre didn’t work out. Alison was doing really well, but the workers weren’t able to support her with some of the pain that came up during therapy and group work. Her final rehab centre allowed the girls to come and stay a few nights and that was a huge deal in her recovery. Having them with her was the best form of medicine. I learnt a lot about making sure parents find a place that fits their clinical needs, as well as their cultural and emotional ones. You can’t have one without the other.

Alison’s true character shone through when she got clean; she had always been smart and kind and a great mum, but now it wasn’t hidden by the drugs. It was time Jane and Josie went home for good.

Alison’s hard work saw her girls back where they belonged. And she was determined to not let old friends and habits derail her new life. So she has started afresh in a lovely town by the coast, far away from here. It took a lot of courage to go it alone and I admire her resolve.

After she moved, my manager and I made the decision not to tell Jane’s new school that she was still in care. There were only a few weeks left of the court orders and we made the call to not ‘tick the policy box’, and instead, restore Alison’s dignity and her right to be seen for the mother she is today. We knew it would be a big deal for Alison to hold her head high in the playground and be a ‘canteen mum’ just like everyone else.
I’d been involved in every aspect of her life for so long, it was time to let go. I still get texts from her now and then; I love to hear how they’re going. Jane started kinder this year and is loving it and Josie is now a little three year old dynamo, giggling and bouncing about.

On my final visit to the family, I joked with Alison that she better have a rainbow cake for me after my long drive over – just being cheeky you know. Well, when I got there she had actually made one! I said, ‘Alison, how did you know how to make this?’ And she said, ‘Oh, didn’t I tell you Bec, my nan used to make wedding cakes and I helped her.’ You see, she has all these hidden talents; she just got a bit lost for a while.

Alison, mother

I had been using ice for around five years when I started working with Rebecca. All of my family were on it too, so it was just normal to me. When I was in deep my partner left me; he didn’t take drugs and couldn’t stand me using anymore. I was always putting the girls in the car, driving around chasing ice; it was miserable.

When Rebecca took the girls, I lost it for a bit. I got worse actually. I was using drugs to try and not think about what was happening. I kept remembering Jane clinging to me and saying, ‘I don’t want to go, mummy.’ We’d never spent a single day apart and she couldn’t understand what was happening.

I didn’t have any family to care for the girls except my mum, who lived in another state. It was hard for me to accept when Rebecca told me they were going to foster care instead. She told me that if they were with my mum, the distance would mean I would never see them, and I might not work hard enough knowing they were okay with their grandma. This was really difficult to understand, but she was absolutely right. I’d seen it happen with my own sisters and they still don’t have their kids back. The fear gave me fight.

Bec just pushed and pushed me and I’m so grateful she did. I eventually opened up to her and I think she could see there was something good inside me that wanted to get my girls home. It took someone special like Bec to see past all the noise and fury to who I really was.

Something that really stuck with me was when Bec looked me straight in the eye and said, ‘Jane and Josie are your girls – they are your responsibility – and it isn’t anyone else’s job to raise them.’ I thought about this a lot when I was in rehab. It was a turning point for me. The other one was during a visit when Jane asked me, ‘Why don’t you love me anymore, mummy?’ It took my breath away, I literally couldn’t breathe. She thought the reason we weren’t living together was because I didn’t love her. It still makes me cry a year later. But it made me think that I can’t do this to her anymore, I can’t waste another day away. As hard as it was, and always will be, it was exactly what I needed to hear. I know that I will never touch drugs again.

Bec also made me laugh when I didn’t think it was possible. I remember she was driving me to my detox and said, ‘Don’t go stressing out and swearing at everyone or you will be kicked out. Just call me up and tell me I’m a fucking idiot instead, you can never be kicked out by me.’ That made me laugh, but it was true. She is so thick-skinned and strong, I felt like she was a force of nature by my side and she could handle me when everyone else couldn’t.

There are moments I will always be grateful for. Like on Jane’s fourth and Josie’s first birthdays, Bec went above and beyond to make sure they could sleep over with me at the rehab centre. I think it would have broken me to not have them near on their special days.

Bec also stuck by me when I did the wrong thing, like take the girls from our visit. I remember being so mad at the support worker. No one loves my kids like I do and it was just the worst feeling to have someone telling me how to be a mum to my own children. Bec calmed everyone down and even let me finish the visit with the girls. She understood how much it would break my heart if I lost my time with them, even though I’d messed up by running.

When I knew I was moving and had to change caseworker, I asked Bec if she could move here too! She is like a second mum to me. I don’t know if she realises that I’ve never even offered other caseworkers a cup of tea before, but she gets a whole rainbow cake. If it wasn’t for Rebecca I don’t think I would be where I am today. I can never thank her enough.

Life is beautiful now. We love fishing by the lake, swimming and playing at the park. All of the normal things we weren’t doing before. Right now I’m happy to just be a mum and make up for lost time, but I’ve always wanted to be a nurse and one day I will achieve that dream.
Reflection

This is a beautiful story of great practice that is embedded in deeply held and virtuous principles. The principle that family comes first, and when circumstances make this impossible, helping children return home safely, is at the heart of high-quality practice.

I was moved by Rebecca’s resolve to help Alison get her children back, her empathy for how Alison came to this dark period in her life and the conviction that she had the ability to stop history repeating itself.

It was wonderful to see Rebecca keeping the connection to family strong and ensuring the cultural and emotional needs were met, but also keep Alison motivated to achieve a better life for herself and little Josie and Jane.

What also shone through was Rebecca and Alison’s connection. Alison felt respected even when she made mistakes and at her lowest moments. She was buoyed by Rebecca’s unwavering faith in her to overcome great adversity and achieve amazing things now and have hope for a better future.

Braiden Abala
Director, Aboriginal Care Review Team
Office of the Senior Practitioner
NSW Department of Family and Community Services
The best teacher of all

Rebecca, FACS caseworker

There are some couples that turn up and say they want to look after children and you just want to snap them up. Right there and then you just know and you find yourself thinking about the children who would thrive in their care. You sing a quiet song of thanks as you step them through all that is ahead, because you know they don’t come along every day.

My job is to support people to be the best they can be to care for other people’s children. It’s not all about little babies in cute bundles leaving hospital with no past. It’s about children of all ages, brothers and sisters, maybe one, maybe five, sometimes frightened, often confused. But all needing someone to step up and open their arms to them at times and on days that are not neatly planned. It might be children we know very little about except that they can’t go home that day. And it only works if the people who open their doors to those children can also open their hearts. It’s the biggest of asks – when we say fostering is not for everyone, we mean it.

The first thing that struck me about Emily and Amanda was their competence. They are clearly organised, straight-talking and practical young women. Emily is a prenatal nurse and Amanda has been a nanny for years – now working from home doing insurance work. They said they planned to have a big family and were ready to start it by helping others get on their feet. Emily works at a nearby hospital in a busy maternity ward – she has been there when FACS has had to take babies from their mothers. It got her wondering about the important role of carers. Right from the beginning I liked the generosity of their thinking. As we worked through the assessment steps, Emily and Amanda talked about their beliefs, as individuals and as a couple, and the importance of not judging others. They hoped this belief would guide their approach to the families whose children needed their care and love.

My job was to prepare Emily and Amanda for the reality of foster care as well as I could. All parents have hard days – what keeps them going is the deep love and bond, built on being there from the beginning when those first breaths are taken. I have seen the reserves of the most patient and capable carers tested by children they barely know and are just learning to love. Foster care is full of rewards but it is bloody hard work. I knew Emily and Amanda didn’t need advice about babies or the importance of routines, or sleep or nutrition. That’s the easy bit. I just wanted to prepare them for the unpredictability and for the hard days.

It was late on a Friday afternoon when I called them about Lachie. He was 15 months old and on that day he had no one who could care for him. Emily and Amanda just said yes. I apologised that I didn’t have more information about Lachie but told them to trust their instincts and be guided by him. Lachie talks like a champion now but back then he had no words and he put his arms up to everyone. Amanda and Emily saw that and planted themselves firmly in front of him. We are here for you to trust us, they were saying to him. They were consistent and present and loving at such an important time for Lachie.

Not only have Emily and Amanda opened their hearts and home to Lachie, they have been so supportive and encouraging of his mum Skye. It can be difficult for foster carers to empathise with parents, and to be in their corner. Emily and Amanda are able to do that for Skye and the benefits for Lachie are obvious.

My own instincts turned out to be spot on. Emily and Amanda have been the best kind of carers. The love in their home for Lachie is so obvious and at the same time they do everything they can, in every thought and action, to honour his mum and do their bit to get him back to her. I love my job when I see it work like this.

It’s several months down the track now. Lachie is thriving and his mum is strong. She has taken so many steps to get him back and it’s happening. Amanda and
Emily are having their own baby soon and I know Lachie will always have a place in their hearts and their family. And best of all, I know many more children and families will benefit from their generosity.

**Emily and Amanda, foster carers**

**Emily** – I am organised and like to plan. We had a cupboard full of little baby clothes neatly folded and a bassinet ready and waiting. When we got the call about Lachie I had so many thoughts – first that he wouldn’t fit in the bassinet! Then I wondered what he liked to eat and how he liked to be put to sleep. Later we got to talk to his mum Skye about all that but in the early days we were in the dark. We were total strangers to him and he was completely dependent on us, with no words to say what he needed. It must have been so strange for him.

That first night we squeezed Lachie into some pyjamas that were a bit too snug. Amanda went late night shopping for some bigger clothes while I worked out how to put him to bed. I remember looking at him thinking – how do I make you feel safe when I don’t know you or your story? I handed him a dummy – he shook his head. I showed him a bottle and he nodded. As I filled it with milk he gave a little smile. We worked it out together in those early days. Lachie showed us the way.

Rebecca is always there for us. She keeps us grounded and has kept our expectations real. She is honest and pulls no punches about the reality of foster care. That really helped. Rebecca has been a wonderful support and her best piece of advice was to take our cues from Lachie. We are so grateful for that because Lachie has been our best teacher. He has taught us the most real lessons – it’s easy when we look to him for guidance. He needs love and he needs his mum. Whatever happens, we will always champion his right to have the best possible relationship with her and he will always have the most special spot in our hearts.

**Amanda** – When we first met Skye I felt so sad for her. She looked so young and alone. I wanted her to know we were on her side. I wanted her to know we would never take away her role as Lachie’s mum. I kept thinking what it would be like to be her. We talk to Lachie about his mum all the time and we try to let her know all the things about him that we would want to know.

Lachie is the most beautiful boy. His talking is amazing – every day he strings more words together, he is leaping ahead of his milestones and we are all proud together. We know the best place for Lachie is with Skye; we are all working for that. If it can’t work that way he always has a place in our family but he belongs with his mum. She is so strong and what she has achieved is amazing. Lachie got his loving nature from her.

**Skye, Lachie’s mum**

One of the worst things about your kid being taken is not knowing where they are. I was missing Lachie like it could kill me and I had no idea where he was or who was looking after him. I reckon if I hadn’t met Emily and Amanda in those early days I might have given up and got myself in a much worse place. Straight away I liked them. I went to that first meeting alone and feeling like shit. I was Lachie’s mum, and 19 years old, yet I didn’t have him and I was going to meet the people who did. It could have gone very badly. It didn’t because they were kind to me. You can tell when someone means it. They treated me like Lachie’s mum.

I know Lachie is in the best place for now. Emily and Amanda send me photos every week – not on a phone, but real photos they go and get printed for me. They think of everything – photos that show me Lachie’s bedroom, his day care centre, photos of him having dinner and him sleeping, snug as a bug. And we have a book that goes between us where they write things so I know what’s going on with my boy, the words he is saying, the things he is doing. The best thing is they ask my advice – if he is sick they call me; when his hair got a bit long they asked what I thought about getting his first haircut. We all agree it makes him look so handsome.

Emily and Amanda have always been real with me and they don’t look down on me. One day Amanda told me that she had once been in a relationship with a man who was
This is an awe-inspiring story of a selfless couple who are willing to give a child in foster care all of the love and security they would give a child of their very own. They do this despite knowing that one day they won’t be the ones to tuck him into bed at night – putting little Lachie’s needs above their own. Emily and Amanda embody all of the qualities you could wish for in foster carers.

What makes this story extra special is that their care and love for Lachie extends to his mum Skye. Through their empathy and respect, they have given Skye a most precious gift – the hope that one day her son can return home. Skye’s courage to put in the hard yards to be ready to once again care safely for her son is crucial, but her journey has been made that much easier, knowing Amanda and Emily respect her role as Lachie’s mum.

The power and strength of these three women and their love for Lachie is inspiring. The work Rebecca did in seeing this, fostering it and supporting the women, while keeping Lachie’s best interests at the heart of their decisions, is the most important work any caseworker can do.

Briony Foster
Director, Office of the Deputy Secretary, Northern Cluster
NSW Department of Family and Community Services
Open doors

Joel Frost, FACS caseworker

It was late when I knocked on Linda’s door. I was with another caseworker and two police officers, all crowded together on her porch.

We were there because earlier that afternoon, Linda’s 14 year old daughter Justine had told us she was too scared to go home. Justine explained that when her relatives stayed over, they drank, argued, got into punch-ups and trashed the house. The chaos and violence meant Justine and her five younger brothers and sisters hid in their rooms, trying to get some sleep for school the next day. She said she couldn’t take it anymore.

It was an after-hours call-out and even though I hated to do it, we had to move Justine to an emergency foster carer while we worked out what was happening in her family.

It was only afterwards it dawned on me that Linda must have feared the worst when she opened the door. We learned later that when Justine hadn’t come home from school that day, the whole family had gone out looking for her, getting more and more frantic as the night wore on. They were too scared to involve the authorities; I understood why. As an Aboriginal family they had their reasons to be fearful about putting their hands up for help.

That night Linda and I created a plan to get Justine home as soon as possible. She agreed straight away that certain family members were not allowed in the home anymore and there could be no violence. I looked around the house and I was filled with worry – six children and so much that wasn’t safe. Then I noticed Linda was pregnant. The home was in no shape for a new bub, so we added that to the plan too.

Because it was an after-hours call-out, I didn’t know whether I would see Linda again, but the events of Friday night made me worry all weekend. Everyone had gone into ‘battle mode’ and I was uncomfortable. We had made decisions on the run, based on assumptions about the family that I was not sure were right. I felt we needed to do something different or we could continue the injustice Aboriginal families have been living with for generations.

So on Monday morning when my manager asked me to keep working with the family I felt nervous. My first thought was, ‘How am I going to get in the door?’ I would totally understand if Linda never wanted to see me again. At the same time I wanted to work with her and her children and I wanted to apologise.

So that’s what I did. Linda opened that door and I said sorry. Then I said that I knew what we did was wrong, and hoped I would have the opportunity to make it right. I wanted to help her family stay together and be safe. Everything about Linda changed when I said sorry. It taught me that a simple apology can be so powerful.

To prepare for my work with the family I talked over the best approach with our casework specialist. Together we decided it was all about listening to Linda and asking her what she needed from us. So I invested a lot of time getting to know Linda and her story. Over many visits, I discovered she had been battling to keep up with unrealistic expectations from her partners, family and authorities like us. But no one ever offered help; they just made more demands on her time and energy. I needed to be a force for positive change.

Being present and curious allowed Linda to open up to me about the terrible violence she had been hurt by since she was a little girl. Over the years she had done so much to keep herself and her children safe; I don’t know where she
Matthew, Linda, Jasper, baby Ruby, Mark (Ruby's father), James, Ella, Ian (Justine not pictured)
found the strength. As a man, I made a conscious effort to be calm and gentle in her company. I didn’t want her to ever feel scared or intimidated, or agree with what I was saying simply out of fear. I also wanted to show Linda that not all men hurt women and that I could be a safe person in her life.

There were times I was overwhelmed. The children were facing a lot of challenges, there was a new baby on the way and at this point, Linda didn’t have reason to trust me. To help us take our first steps together, I decided to start by doing some practical things for Linda – to show I was there to help, not take her kids away.

So in came the skip bin! The family had collected a lot of stuff that was making the home unsafe and it was great to see everyone pitch in to get rid of the mess. I also organised basic repairs to make the home safer for the little ones. It was a bit of a metaphor for what I hoped for them all – out with the old and in with the new.

Spending time with the family opened my eyes. I could see that Linda was a smart, strong, resilient and kind woman. She loved her children fiercely and worked incredibly hard to take care of them – I’ve never seen someone make so many school lunches so quickly before! But this didn’t mean I lost sight of what happened when other family brought violence into the home. It had to change.

Another tactic was to bring the family together at a Family Group Conference. The conference helps families to lay everything out on the table and get real about creating safety for their kids. Linda wanted to make sure the facilitator wasn’t from her extended family – living in a small town everyone knows each other’s business. Families worry that they will be the subject of gossip and can shut down. I needed to make sure Linda could trust the process.

I was so impressed when Linda arrived with all her children, which by now included her precious newborn Ruby. It would have been a real juggle to get everyone out of the house after a sleepless night with a baby. But here they all were – squeaky clean, dressed in their best clothes and ready to be heard.

None of the men we invited showed up. This rattled Linda at first, but then she looked at her children sitting around the table and she said, ‘It’s okay, this is my family.’ To me it spoke multitudes. And I think it really showed Linda that her children were all that mattered.

I explained to the kids that this was their chance to tell all the grown-ups what they really thought, and even more importantly, that we had to listen. The facilitator was a wonderful, warm and gentle Aboriginal woman who made the children feel welcome straight away. As she gave the acknowledgement of country, she was passing her wisdom and warmth to them.

The children were so used to respecting their Elders that it was liberating for them to be able to speak out. Together they made their rules clear – ‘If people start drinking they have to leave our home and no one can fight there ever again.’

Linda was amazing; she would turn to each of her children and ask ‘What do you think of this?’ or ‘What do you think of that?’ She understood that they needed to know she was ready to hear what they said, no matter how hard. I loved my job that day – seeing the power of talking and listening.

In our early days together, I asked Linda to tell me about her biggest worries. They were always about her children, and upmost in her mind was Jasper’s teeth. Jasper has Down syndrome and constantly ground his teeth. He was in so much pain. Linda had tried to take him to the dentist several times, but he never allowed anyone near his mouth. What made it worse was that Jasper has never spoken a word, so he couldn’t tell his mum what might help him feel safe. It made her feel helpless and heartbroken.

I found a paediatric dental surgeon who works with children who have special needs. We were all nervous as we drove to the dentist that day, but I’m so glad I was there. It turned out that Jasper had lots of tooth decay, and at age nine needed 16 teeth removed. Luckily they were his baby teeth and the dentist is hopeful his adult ones will come through okay. Jasper isn’t in pain anymore and Linda was so grateful I was able to support her son to feel safe enough to get the treatment he desperately needed.

Linda also worried a lot about Justine. The school noticed that she was vomiting blood and we were all concerned about what this could mean. When Justine finally talked to her mum and me about it, we learned that all the violence made her feel terribly anxious – quite literally sick to her stomach. She had vomited so often that her throat was ragged and bloody.
This revelation was such an important moment for Linda. She had done her best to keep her children safe, but this raw honesty from her daughter made her grasp just how much the violence hurt her kids. I could see it tore her up to hear the truth from Justine, but at the same time it gave her this amazing clarity about what her children needed and the courage to put her foot down with her family. Justine had been seeing a counsellor, and together with big changes at home, she was feeling a lot better.

Together Linda and I also talked about something unique we could do to help each of her children and make them feel special. For James and Ian I worked with their school to get some extra help they needed. For Matthew, aged ten, this meant joining the local footy team. He has the most amazing natural talent and is scoring tries every game. Little Ella, aged six, is loving going to gymnastics. These sporting activities may not have been as necessary as the doctors’ appointments or the counselling, but I wanted to dream big. I’m a dad and I try to balance the sort of life I want for my own son and daughter when I work with other people’s children.

As for Linda, I’m now talking to local Aboriginal services to find the best way for her to start the process of healing after so many years of violence. She has her own private journey to take. I just hope I can set her on the right path.

I’m still working with the family, and they are doing beautifully now. They have reaffirmed to me that the best place for children is nearly always with their mothers. So if you find hope, hang on to it and work with it.

I chose not to tell Linda that I was Aboriginal until it came up in conversation a few months into our work together. I didn’t want to be another Aboriginal man in her life telling her what to do or use our culture to make a false connection. I wanted to build a genuine relationship of respect and trust. I think it was the right approach.

The day I knew Linda had some faith in me was the day she asked if I wanted to hold her gorgeous baby. Ruby represents everything that is most precious to Linda, so it was a great privilege to be allowed to cuddle her. It was definitely the best day of my career.

Linda, mother

We’d looked everywhere for Justine. We knocked on her friends’ doors and called everyone we knew. I was so scared. Then when Joel came to the door and the police went right through our home I was in shock. I was in my final term of pregnancy with Ruby and just so exhausted. My first thought was they were here to take my kids away. It was terrifying.

I was calmer on the Monday because I had Justine home by then and I wasn’t so tired and stressed. Then we got onto to having a yarn. Joel apologised to me. No one from FACS had ever said sorry before, so I thought straight away Joel might be a bit different. Now that I know him, I’ve come to respect him. He is doing a lot for me. He asks me straight up what I need and for me the most important thing is my kids getting to their doctors. I wouldn’t have been able to afford to get Jasper’s teeth done – I was ecstatic after his surgery. He isn’t in pain anymore.

I appreciate that Joel listens to me and tries to understand my story. I also like that he explains everything to me properly and keeps his word. We have stuck to our family plan 100 per cent. The kids know that we won’t let anyone who starts fights into our home again, and we know what to do if it happens.

Now I just want my kids to stay in school and for them all to grow up happy. Right now we are all together and we look after one another. That’s enough for me.
Reflection

Joel’s story reminds me that as humans our brains are built to make assumptions and it takes skill, commitment and courage to challenge what we think we know. This is especially the case when we realise that we were wrong, because when this happens, we also have our ego to battle with. Joel displayed something more than courage; his values, integrity, accountability and compassion gave Linda and her family dignity during a difficult time.

Joel demonstrated his commitment to building a relationship with Linda that respected her for the capable woman and loving and committed mother she is. Rather than judging her, he demonstrated his commitment and skill in working with Linda to support change. There is no better practical demonstration of trust than when Linda invited Joel to hold her baby Ruby.

Joel’s use of Family Group Conferencing to support the family to agree on its own solutions demonstrates his commitment to self-determination. It was so powerful to give Linda’s children the space to define what they needed. Joel’s reflection on the power of talking and listening is an important lesson for us all.

Linda’s statement that ‘no one from FACS had ever said sorry before’ continues to ring in my ears. It’s a timely reminder that we must never stand still in our pursuit of excellence in casework and we must never be afraid to right the wrongs of the past. In this case, saying sorry opened many doors and supported real and lifelong change that transformed a family. This story made me proud to work for FACS and distils the values we all hold in our hearts.

Daniel Barakate
Director, Projects, Performance and Innovation
Child and Family Directorate
 NSW Department of Family and Community Services
Safe as houses

Kayleigh, FACS caseworker

I sat next to Millie as she lay in the hospital bed, paralysed and petrified. Work hours were well and truly over, but I wasn’t going anywhere.

Millie had been in a car accident, leaving her with no feeling in her legs. But that wasn’t why she was scared. Millie used this time away from her husband Chris to tell me her story. It took several hours to hear about her life with Chris. It was filled with cruelty, torture and violence so horrible it made my skin crawl. They had four children together – Chloe, Lauren, Anthony and Matt – aged from six to 13. At that moment they were all with their dad.

As I listened, I went from wondering why Millie kept taking Chris back, to being amazed by her acts of resistance and ability to survive. Every time she left, Chris became more and more erratic, desperate and dangerous. Millie explained that staying with Chris increased her chances of staying alive and keeping her children safe. Mothers are often judged for going back to violent partners. Millie taught me to think differently. She had endured years of abuse to keep her children alive – what’s more protective and courageous than that?

Once I understood how dangerous Chris was and how much Millie needed to be away from him, I knew what my job was. I stepped into action. I talked to the nurses and we worked it out so Millie could be admitted anonymously. We also moved her to a new room so Chris couldn’t find her next time he visited.

Millie told us that Chris had an appointment with a drug and alcohol service the next day – it meant he would be out and the kids would be home. It was the opportunity to get them to safety. I first spoke with someone I knew at the service, who agreed to call us when Chris got to their office and when he left. Next I flagged with the local police that we may need their help. As soon as we got the call we raced to the family home. After finding that Chris had locked the children in the house, I spoke to the eldest boy Matt through the window and explained that we were there to help. He opened the door and all the kids came out. The police were helping us get them into the car when we saw Chris running down the street towards us yelling. He had been tipped off by a neighbour when the police pulled up. It was intense, but we got everyone bundled in and drove away just in time, leaving the police to deal with him. The children were nervous, but none of them shed a tear or asked to talk to their dad. They just kept saying, ‘Dad’s going to kill us for going with you.’

Because Millie was in hospital, the children spent a couple of days with a carer. But first we told Millie her children were safe. And straight away she started to regain feeling in her legs. Just like that. A couple of days later she walked out of the hospital. The doctors were stunned. Later Millie told me she believes her body shut down due to all the stress she was under. I am convinced the children gave her a reason to be well; they needed her.

The next six weeks were a blur. We moved the family from hotels to houses and back again. We were working with a small team of carefully chosen professionals, but I still felt sick to my stomach that Chris would somehow use his charm, or his fists, to find out from one of them where his family was hiding. In the past, Chris had proved to be resourceful in finding the family, so we only told people who absolutely had to know.

I was lucky to spend a lot of time with the children and I learnt more about their lives. I’ll never forget when Matt said dinner times were the worst. They would eat really fast to get out of the kitchen because their dad would hit them over
the head. Some nights it was because they left food on their plates; some nights it was because one of them asked what was for dinner; and some nights it was just because.

We worked 24/7 behind the scenes to keep the family safe. We gathered information from other agencies and listened to the family’s experiences. The kids told us plainly that they believed their dad would kill them one day. We took them seriously and acknowledged the depths of their fear. After careful consideration, we decided that the children would never be safe with their dad in their lives. On the other hand, Millie was the children’s protector and safe haven – we had to keep them together with her.

At the same time, I was working with Chris to help him understand why he couldn’t see his children. This was new work for me and it was tough. Chris put on the charm. He told me how much he loved his kids and became teary and remorseful when talking about his violence. Chris was convincing and it was a challenge to make sure no one working with the family gave him information that could give away the family’s whereabouts. There were a number of times we had to keep everyone on track and remind them of Chris’ criminal record and history of violence. He could be very persuasive and had a way of making everyone feel sorry for him, rather than keeping the children’s safety at the forefront of our minds. We spoke a lot about this together. It was okay to feel sorry for him and his remorse may have been genuine – but it didn’t mean he was safe.

We had to hold back some identifying information from the Children’s Court, because this would have given Chris clues about the family’s whereabouts, but also had to make sure we weren’t compromising the evidence the court needed to make a fair and just decision. Millie had told us Chris was cunning. He would call all the time asking as many questions as possible to see if we’d slip up. We had to be one step ahead of him at all times. In the end, given Chris’ criminal record and our evidence, the magistrate granted an order that meant the children will not see their dad until they are 18 and can decide for themselves.

Our greatest dilemma was finding not one but two homes far away from here. Millie’s parents are the family’s greatest support and had agreed to be relocated secretly to be by their side. Our housing colleagues were amazing and found two homes close together.

Also on our list were the pet dogs. Chris had tortured the dogs in front of the children to show them he held all the power. Sadly, a few of them had responded by becoming dangerous and had to be surrendered. Millie found this heartbreaking. Thankfully they were able to keep their littlest dog, Fred. The Family Violence team had him rehoused during the upheaval and reunited with the family in their new home.

Working with Millie and the children has been a real game changer in how I view safety for our families. Refuges and AVOs are not always enough to protect women and children from violence. This family could never be safe whenever Chris could find them. It was a big ask, but for them, safety could only be found by changing their lives completely.

We’ve done everything we can think of to protect their identity and begin the healing process. The children have been silently enrolled in their schools, and support services working with the family have been carefully selected and briefed about their anonymity. We’ve arranged for the kids to get counselling and other support to start afresh, but we know this will take some time.

I couldn’t settle until I went to visit the family in their new home. I felt I could finally exhale when I got there and saw them safely together. Millie still questions herself all the time about the decisions she has made over the years. I reminded her, ‘You did everything you could, you made the right choices – you and your gorgeous children are alive.’

They have a new caseworker now, close to where they live, but I’m grateful whenever I hear from Millie about how they are doing. I miss the kids so much – their sense of humour, their love for their mum and how they have stuck together through all of this. There is so much love there and I know they have lots of wonderful times ahead. Millie has taught me more about violence than any training ever could. She is an amazing woman. I will never forget her.
**Millie, mother**

My husband Chris would say, ‘You have to leave me, Millie; I think I’m going to kill you one day.’ He slept with a machete under his pillow and kept a double-barrel shotgun in the cupboard, so I didn’t doubt him. In the weeks leading up to the car accident, he choked me a few times and told me next time he wasn’t sure he would be able to stop.

I honestly think I would be dead by now if it wasn’t for that crash. Things at home were spiralling out of control and every day I would pray to God to rescue me. Chris’ mood would change every five minutes and it didn’t seem to matter if I did something wrong or not, everything was always my fault.

I wasn’t allowed to go very far without him. After I dropped the kids at school I would race home in a panic. If I was even a minute late, he would rant and rave at me, ‘Where have you been? Who were you talking to?’

Over the years Chris has broken a lot of my bones. I was in the bathroom one day and Chris knocked on the door. Because I didn’t answer after the first knock, he came at me wearing steel-capped boots and kicked me while I was in the shower. He broke all my ribs on one side. Then he slammed a wooden box into my head. Afterwards, at the hospital, I remember the nurses picking splinters out of my scalp. He went to prison for that one, but only for 12 months, and he came out angrier and stronger than before.

Chris enjoyed making the kids watch his violence towards me. Sometimes he would wake them up and bring them out of their beds so they could see me being hurt. I would try and get out of the room so they wouldn’t see, but he would pull me back in. He could drag me from one end of the house to the other by my hair. I would shield my face when Chris attacked me and my fingers would break under his punches. My hands still ache when it’s cold all this time later.

I tried to leave Chris so many times. I spent time in refuges but he would always find us. The worst part was that the courts allowed him to see the kids. He would use these visits to try and charm his way back into our lives, buying presents for the kids, saying he was sorry. But then he would get frustrated because I wouldn’t take him back and the threats to kill us would start up again.

I remember one day he followed us home from a supervised visit at a play centre. After that it was too risky. Chris would climb onto my balcony and watch me sleep and the next day he would tell me what I was wearing to frighten me. In the end, the terror would drive me to let him back into our lives. At least this way I knew where he was and had some control over the situation.

I never felt like anyone I reached out to could truly keep me safe. Chris was slippery and seemed to be able to work the system so he always came out on top. I felt like I was the only one who could keep us alive.

I’m starting to relax a bit more now and my focus is settling the children into their new schools and building a new life together. We have a much calmer home now. They have discovered scooter riding and absolutely love it. I’m always tripping over scooter parts, or friends’ shoes lying all over the house, but I don’t really mind. I love seeing my kids have joy in their lives, wherever they can find it. For me, I hope one day down the road I can help other women living in my situation, and maybe something positive can come out of all this violence.
Reflection

Millie’s act of bravery to resist years of cruelty so that her children remained safe is truly inspiring. I am also deeply impressed by the bravery that both Kayleigh and her manager have shown in acting to personally confront Millie’s partner and his ongoing attempts to control the lives of his family.

While Millie’s success is clearly linked to her own resolve and resilience it could not have been achieved without Kayleigh’s resourcefulness and her genuine respect and empathy for Millie and her family. I was moved that Kayleigh emotionally connected to Millie’s needs and used this connection to act decisively in bringing the family to safety.

Kayleigh’s ability to respond to risk through acting on the dreams and aspirations of Millie and her children and trusting the formal and informal support system around the family was clearly an enabling factor in the family getting to safety. This empowerment and trust is a further testament to the depth of Kayleigh’s practice.

The work of Kayleigh and her manager in bringing hope and success to Millie and her family serves as an example of the dignity driven practice we all need to show if we are to support families to live rich and meaningful lives.

Sebastian James
Director Community Services Sydney
NSW Department of Family and Community Services
I’d never met anyone so sad. I would be talking to Nakita and out of nowhere she would start crying. The tears would just quietly run down her face. She was so young, so softly spoken and so heartbroken.

Nakita was still a child when her first son Nash was taken from her at two months of age. I met her a year later, 16 and pregnant for the second time. Her grief and pain were as fierce as the day Nash was taken. There still isn’t a week that goes by without Nakita telling me about how it all went down. The phone calls, the knock on the door, who said what to whom.

My colleagues told me that when Nash came into care, he had been hospitalised with feeding troubles and they’d been worried Nakita used drugs and never stayed in the one place for more than a few nights. At this point, Nash’s caseworkers didn’t have plans for him to go home with Nakita because they thought there was too much risk. I knew I had my work cut out to help her get ready and stay hopeful that it could be different this time around. That’s the great thing about working with pregnant mums. There is this precious window of time where motivation can be so strong and we can set out on a different path than ones already walked. So I chose to put everyone else’s doubts aside and work with the young woman I saw before me.

When I thought about how I could help Nakita, I put myself in her shoes. Nakita’s own childhood had not given her any experience of safe parenting. Now she was barely in her teens and having a baby without the help of a partner or her family. I have two young girls myself and remember how overwhelmed I was being a new dad. And I was lucky enough to have a partner, a job, a home and grandparents to help settle colicky babies and cook dinner. She needed the support we all need and someone to believe in her.

I had to do all the talking in the beginning. Nakita was like a brick wall. I told her I understood why she was so guarded and that she had every right not to trust me. I probably told her a hundred times that I wanted to help her keep her baby. Over and over again I said those words but I knew she didn’t believe me.

Nakita may have been quiet, but she was firm on a few things – like she wasn’t using drugs. Tests confirmed she was telling the truth, so I moved on to helping her find a safe place to live. Nakita really wanted to live with her girlfriend’s mum Katy. She was like a mother-figure to Nakita and when I visited I felt hopeful it could work. The home was safe and I was happy that there would be a caring adult close by to give her a helping hand.

Next I wanted Nakita to have support in the early weeks after the baby was born – with feeding and settling and other tricky things that crop up with new babies. I found a local service that lets mums and babies live in a house with support from workers around the clock. It was perfect and I booked her in for when the baby arrived.

By now I was slowly getting to know Nakita. She was kind and spoke with great love for Nash. The more I knew her the more I really believed she could be a great mum with the right help. When I spoke to one of my managers, he supported my belief in Nakita, but was still concerned about whether she was ready to take on such a huge responsibility. His worries were real, but I didn’t give up. I kept working with Nakita to help her make changes needed for her baby to go home with her. Nakita was so motivated and committed to this outcome. Ultimately my manager agreed that the best plan for Nakita and her baby was for them to go home together.

Right from the start, Nakita spent every dollar she had on her kids and never asked for anything from FACS. All on her own she saved up to buy the cot and the pram, the rompers and the wraps. Everything for the baby was set up
Nakita and Chayse at school

Themes and issues in the play:
- Friendship: would sacrifice anything for each other; they don't have anything alike.
- Sacrifice: loss of innocence, grief, strength, resilience, inspired to endure, overcome, forgive, survive.
- Propaganda: motif, pathos, very propagandists, cathartic.

Add to your glossary:
- Protagonist
- Motif
- Pathos
- Propaganda
- Cathartic
beautifully. But things didn't go exactly to plan. A few weeks before the baby was due, Nakita rang me to say that things were not working out where she was staying. This was a big deal. Nakita had never rung me before and I saw it as a chance to show that I was there to help, in ways she actually needed. I jumped in the car and drove straight over. When I got there she was standing in the yard, eight months pregnant and patiently waiting with all the baby things she'd packed up. It was getting late, so I arranged a motel room. It was nothing flash, but she was grateful for a safe bed all the same.

A few weeks later, Chayse came into the world. Nakita texted me the morning after but I didn't go to the hospital. I'd told her I believed that she could care for this baby and I had to show her I meant it. I know that mums can feel ashamed when FACS turns up at the hospital. I wanted to give Nakita the opportunity that she missed the first time around to simply enjoy the early days of motherhood, just like every other mum on the ward.

When I did get to meet Chayse a week later, I was touched by Nakita's tenderness. She was so in love. Nakita was feeding Chayse in another room and I could hear her quiet murmuring of affection and little snorts of laughter when he did something cute. It was beautiful to hear and confirmed everything I thought about Nakita. Right from the start she was a good mum.

After Chayse arrived, Nakita and I started to work as a team. It was as though she needed to have her baby and see for herself that I had no plans to take him away, before she could really let her guard down. Nakita did so well at the support service and the staff were impressed with her care and her calm around Chayse. In the background I was working double-time to find her a new home. After a few weeks she and her baby boy moved into a lovely townhouse my housing colleagues found for them. It was the perfect place to start their lives together.

I organised a few practical things like a fridge and a washing machine, and helped Nakita sort out issues with her missing birth certificate and getting her Ls. Then Nakita did something that really blew me away. She took herself down to DALE Young Parents' School and enrolled herself to finish the HSC. The school is amazing. There's an early learning centre onsite so Chayse would be well cared for while Nakita could get on with her studies. Even more importantly, the school really believes in the girls and understands that a baby's chance of future success is all wrapped up with its mum – they both need lots of help and care. The teachers are flexible and patient and I feel like they are extra cheerleaders on Nakita's side. Something she really needs.

In her first term I picked Nakita and Chayse up every day and drove them to school. I was so impressed by Nakita's motivation, even with the juggle of breastfeeding and nights of broken sleep. I still text every morning to check in and make sure she's going. I see so much potential in Nakita and I want so badly for her to succeed.

Even with the excitement of Chayse's arrival, Nakita always speaks about her sons; it is never one without the other. She revels in her time with Nash. When I take Nakita to visit, she texts me half an hour before I'm meant to be there to make sure I'm on time. She doesn't want to be late and miss a minute with her boy. She always has presents for Nash and loads the car up.

I'm now working with the NGO that cares for Nash to get him home to Nakita. I've watched Chayse doing so well with his mum, how could I want anything different for his big brother? My manager is behind me and I'm glad that Nakita will now have the chance to show everyone, including the courts, what an amazing job she is doing.

Nakita is absolutely beautiful with Chayse. He's healthy, and so happy he even laughs in his sleep! Nakita is the best mum I've ever worked with and fills me with hope for all the young mothers I support. I think Nakita always had it in her; she just needed a little bit of help and someone to believe in her. I'm so glad it could be me.

**Nakita, mother**

Nash is a real boys' boy and of all the things, he loves hiding in boxes and everything to do with football. Chayse smiles all the time and has just started eating solids. His favourite at the moment is mashed potato. The best part of having him home with me is getting to have lots of cuddles and being able to breastfeed him.

I didn't want anything to do with Steve. I thought, 'Oh great, not this again.' But now that I know him I can see he is different. I felt like the other caseworkers were against me and kept telling me I was doing the wrong thing even when I wasn't. They gave me a list of things I had to do when Nash was born – go to parenting courses, go back to school, find a house to live in. I remember thinking, 'How can I do all these things?' I had a new baby and was exhausted.

It took me three months to trust Steve. At first I got agitated when he called and texted, but I got used to it. I didn't believe that he thought I could keep the baby, until he came to Katy's house and started planning everything with me. He told
me he would fight for me. Those were his actual words – fight for me. No one had ever said that to me before.

Steve always has my back. Another worker tried to tell me that Chayse looked underweight, but Steve said, ‘Well let’s take him to be weighed properly and see.’ The chemist told me Chayse was perfectly fine, it was just that I’m breast feeding him and sometimes formula-fed babies are fatter.

I’m not going to say it’s easy, doing everything on my own and going to school and studying, but I think I’m getting better at it every day. At the moment I’m thinking about doing hair and beauty or motor mechanics after I get my HSC. I like working with my hands.

I love being a mum. Now I’m going to do everything I can to get Nash back. I feel lucky I’ve got Steve to help me; he is the best caseworker I’ve ever had.

There is a precious window of time where motivation can be strong and we can set out on a different path.

Reflection

Nakita and her young child Nash were separated from each other when she was so young. This greatly impacted on Nakita and placed her in a highly vulnerable and emotional state. Her personal trauma was visible to Steve on their first meeting. With the fear of losing her second child, coupled with her sadness, Nakita seemed to have lost hope of parenting either of her children. Steve thought differently and chose to work with Nakita in a trauma informed way, by asking not ‘What is wrong with you?’ but ‘What has happened to you to make you this sad?’

Steve worked on engaging Nakita with great empathy and respect. He wanted to empower Nakita, to give her the best opportunity to be the parent she wanted to be and later on, the hope that her first born son Nash could come home and grow up with his brother.

Nakita responded to Steve’s casework practice – she felt supported, trusted and believed. Nakita was able to leave behind the fear that she would lose her second child because Steve was inviting her to demonstrate that she could parent. With this invitation, Nakita responded with great courage and not only provided safe care for her child, she was able to regain her own life and re-enter school to complete her education. It is wonderful how the belief and hope of just one caseworker can transform the lives of a whole family.

Lyn Lawrie
Senior Caseworker and Chairperson State Aboriginal Reference Group
NSW Department of Family and Community Services
The best use of me

Narelle, FACS caseworker

I love my job. It’s the best use of me. It helps that I have thick skin and I persist. You need that when the door is slammed shut and the phone is slammed down. I don’t take it personally. It’s not about me, it’s about the work I do and the department I work for. There are people who are frightened of us.

To say that Rahni was one of those people is an understatement. She is Aboriginal and we had not done right by her or her family. Her childhood was nowhere near safe; she had barely left it before she had three of her own children, two boys and one girl. She started drinking before the babies were born. It was not hard to understand why. She had so much hurt. Those babies were all tiny when they were taken from her, one after the other. The grief of losing them meant she had added drugs to her ways for taking away pain.

Rahni was 28, single and four months pregnant when we first met. And she was in a wheelchair with a broken spine. Five years earlier she had been in a relationship with an awfully violent bloke. She doesn’t remember how she ended up lying on the ground one night below her third floor apartment. But she does know that by picking her up and carrying her back up the stairs before calling an ambulance, that same bloke took from her any chance she had of walking again.

We met at the hospital. She couldn’t avoid me there! Rahni had been in and out with infections and I had already been to her home several times and knocked on her door. She never opened it. I would stand and knock and then I would dial her mobile number and listen to the phone ringing inside. I knew she was there. I stuck notes under the door and left messages on her phone. Always the same words, ‘My job is to help you keep your baby. Call me.’ And then one day she answered the phone. Before I got my name out she said, ‘I know who you are. I don’t want your help. You people have never helped me before.’ I asked her where she was and she said she was in hospital. ‘I’ll come and see you there,’ I said. Ignoring the reluctance in her voice, I was in the car quicker than anyone could say, ‘Here’s your chance.’

Surprisingly, the first thing I said to Rahni in person actually seemed to amuse her. ‘I can’t knock on the curtain that’s around your bed,’ I called out. ‘But just tell me when I can I stick my head through it.’ I heard a dry sort of chuckle and then, ‘You can’t knock on a fucking curtain.’ It was nice to finally put a face to a name.

I said I had a social work student with me, a young bloke, and asked if that would be a problem. ‘Make him go away,’ Rahni said. The student waited in the hall. The best thing happened next: a nurse arrived and said Rahni could be discharged. It’s all about seizing the opportunity. ‘I’ll drive you home,’ I said. ‘Only if we get Maccas on the way,’ she said.

When I asked the student to bring the car round the front of the hospital he said, ‘But what about the interview and the home visit?’ ‘This is it!’ I said. ‘Get in the car quick before she changes her mind.’ On the drive I asked Rahni about her other children. Not why they were taken, just stuff about them, their names and ages. Straight up I had to show her that I saw her as a mother. No judgement, just respect. She answered my questions, ate hot chips and we listened to her – the student cramped in the back seat with the wheelchair, and me.

We pulled up at Rahni’s house to find it locked and she didn’t have a key. More opportunities to seize. I tracked down a locksmith who fixed the door and I was quietly pleased that he only left one key. My parting words were, ‘I will be back to get you a spare key cut.’ That was the beginning of a rocky but real relationship.

There was not a single thing I suggested that Rahni agreed to straight away. She always said no and usually hung up on me. One day she explained it. ‘I will tell
you to piss off when I’m upset, and I trust no one, but if I like you I will ring you back.’ And that’s how it worked.

Back then Rahni never told me whether she was using and she was not keen on having a drug test. I tried to talk her into hair testing, thinking it would be better for her in the wheelchair without the humiliating complications of filling jars. She refused, but did go to one appointment for a urine test and rang me from there furious. She had not done the test and was upset about how embarrassing it was. Then came the familiar hanging up of the phone. It was my turn to be blunt. I rang her back and said, ‘I’m worried you didn’t do that test because you were frightened it wouldn’t be clean. You think I would hold a drug screen against you. I won’t; it’s my job to help you keep your baby. If you have a positive result it just means we’ll work together to support you to stop using and get healthy – simple as that.’ Rahni hung up.

I didn’t hear from Rahni for days. When I eventually did she just said, ‘Tell me where and when to do the test.’ From that day onwards Rahni did every drug test asked of her and every single one was clean. It takes such willpower to stop long-term habits – and these were ones Rahni had relied on her whole adult life. She was determined to be as healthy as she could for her baby. I have never seen determination like it. All the credit belongs to her. The one thing I did was make her believe that keeping her baby could happen. That was her motivation to stop using. She made the most courageous choice and was strong enough to see it through.

Rahni changed in front of my eyes – she looked so much healthier. And her openness to me started to change, slowly but surely. She was trying her best to trust me. But the one thing that didn’t change was that she would still put me in my place, and often. I respected that about her; I knew where I stood. It was about a fear of our department that ran deep in her veins. It was going to take me showing her every day, in every action and word, that I believed the best place for her baby was in her arms. And I did. If I didn’t believe in her how could she believe in me?

Whether she liked it or not, Rahni was going to need help in those early weeks after the baby was born. That’s when I got onto the doulas. They are birth companions and provide support to mothers and babies. I booked them in for round-the-clock support for when the baby was born. The doulas were wonderful; they drove Rahni to appointments in the final weeks of her pregnancy and were a team around her. And I stepped back and watched with growing hope. Women helping women to have babies with love and safety – that is the stuff of life.
We always had someone take Rahni to her ultrasound appointments and she always had one of us by her side to get those early glimpses of her baby girl growing and kicking. We talked about that baby girl all the time. Making it real helps.

I kid myself that I am pretty tough, but there was no stopping the tears when Rahni rang me to say Rossana had been born. I wasn’t surprised when I saw them together – Rahni was a natural, that much was for sure. And Rossana was a healthy, strong, beautiful baby, safe in her mother’s arms. They went home together and the doula helped for weeks until Rahni could do it on her own.

Rossana is one now. She walks beside Rahni’s shiny, sporty, modern and pink wheelchair. She is full of joy and she is loved through and through. We do not need to work with Rahni at all now. Rossana is safe, and we have other mothers and babies to help. But we do have work left with this family and that’s about getting Rahni’s other kids to have better relationships with her and their little sister. It’s never too late.

I’m having my own baby girl soon. I can’t wait for the day I take her home from hospital, to do my best for her. It’s what all mothers want. I am lucky to have had people who believed in me, right from the beginning. That’s why I can trust my baby will be coming home. I can use that for good, to put that belief in other mothers. That’s why this job is the best use of me.

Rahni, mother

FACS people have been in my life since I was 13 years old. I never thought I could like one of them until I met Narelle. She is the first one who ever listened to me. In the beginning I gave her a pretty hard time. I regret that now because she is good at her job. Very good. But I think she understood me and where I was coming from. That’s because she listened and she didn’t tell me what to do. I was so sick of people telling me what to do. I don’t like being told what needs to change without having any say.

It’s because of Narelle that I think differently about FACS now. It’s because of Narelle that I have my little girl. Narelle came into my life right when I needed her. She believed in us. She helped me believe in me. I will always be grateful for that.

Reflection

The American writer Susan Sontag once commented we are all ‘temporarily able bodied’. Most of us will have to deal with the effects of disability, whether it is acquired through birth, accident, illness or age.

Rahni’s story is an indication of what one determined caseworker can do. By not defining her client solely as a person with a disability, Aboriginal, a substance user, abused woman or mother at risk, she made a genuine difference to an individual’s life. Rather than imposing her own hierarchy of preferred outcomes, Narelle put her client at the centre of her practice and dealt with Rahni’s needs and priorities.

The situation is an object lesson in the use of active compassion. To be compassionate is not to be passive. It is the opposite – compassion is not at all weak. It is the ability to witness suffering and act strongly, with skill.

Chris Leach
Deputy Secretary Disability Operations
NSW Department of Family and Community Services
Trust and acceptance

Julisa, FACS caseworker

The first time we met, Marette asked me straight up, ‘Are you here to take my kids?’ I gave it back straight and told her if we had real worries about her children, Kyle (14), Khiana (13) and Mason (one) she would be the first to know. I said my goal was to keep her family together but that could only work if her children were safe. She needed to hear that. It was the best way to start our work together because we had the same goal.

Over the years, Marette and the children had spent time in refuges and supported housing and had just moved into their own place when we met. She told me she had ‘lived out of a bag for so long’ that she didn’t even know how to live in a house. But while Marette and the kids now had a house, they needed it to feel like home, so I made sure the Kyle and Khiana had a new bed each, and Mason a new cot. I wanted them to feel safe and comfortable as they set up their own place.

It wasn’t always easy building a relationship with Marette. She’s someone I call a ‘fierce mamma’, because of how protective she is of her children. I also suspected that she was using ice, which sometimes made her cranky and erratic. She would ring often, yell and tell me she hated me being in her family’s life. It was hard to hear Marette hating what I was doing, but I just had to keep remembering she was afraid. It would have been so easy to step back and say she wasn’t cooperating. The better option was to never forget that she was just frightened of losing her kids. Kyle had already decided to live with his aunty to get away for a while. He said, ‘I know mum loves us, but she’s not a nice person when she’s using ice.’

To help me understand the family, I read files and realised that Marette had lived through some hard times that led to the drugs. I spoke with local services that had been working with the family. They used terms like ‘aggressive’ and ‘not engaging’ to describe Marette. I didn’t see that. I saw that she was worried and got overwhelmed when lots of people were involved in her life. It seemed that other workers had already written their own story about Marette. I wanted to know her story through her eyes. I arranged a consultation with my Aboriginal colleagues and our psychologist, before speaking to my manager and casework specialist about my worries and how I could best support the family.

Next I invited Marette in to have an honest conversation. That meant asking her to take a drug test so that I could get a better picture of her use and what it may mean for her children. I needed to reassure Marette that if her results came back positive, it didn’t mean I was going to swoop in and take her kids. I was clear that we had a team of people to support her and we would make a plan to help. Marette cried a lot at that meeting. But it was a break through because she admitted to using ice and said she wanted to stop straight away. She didn’t want to go to residential rehabilitation and really wanted to do it on her own, so I consulted with the Clinical Issues Team about how I could help. They told me that lots of parents want to try coming off drugs on their own, as going into rehab can affect their housing, or they worry about being away from home. Marette had struggled with anxiety for so long, so I understood that the idea of going into rehab with strangers was frightening. The Clinical Issues Team told me that if a parent thinks they can stop using drugs on their own, it can work better than us imposing what we think works best. I gave Marette information about the effects of drugs so she could see the whole picture and knew what to expect and referred her to a number of services. In the end she chose an Aboriginal service she felt safe to work with. I encouraged her to take the lead, as it helped her feel in control of the situation and more likely to stick with it. We also found a psychologist to help Marette with her anxiety and depression.
Next I looked at how I could support the three kids. They had missed out on so much in recent years. I needed to understand what life was like for them so I spent time with Khiana and Kyle and visited Mason at day care.

Kyle had a longstanding relationship with a local youth worker who continues to support him. I arranged a catch-up with the youth worker, and together we took Kyle out for a milkshake and a chat to help understand where he was at. I love working with teenagers; it’s great how honest they are and call out bullshit when they see it. Kyle was spending a lot of time out of the home, and I didn’t want him to be another kid in care. I visited Kyle at his aunt’s place and made sure it was safe for him. I also got him a mobile phone with credit and put my number in it so he could call at any time. Kyle had been refusing to see his mum for several weeks, but I finally arranged for them to meet. Kyle broke down and hugged his mum and said he loved her and they both cried. It was an important step in getting him home.

Khiana was a beautiful, caring sister who had taken over caring for Mason. She needed help to be a kid again. I took her out for afternoon tea and we talked a lot. Khiana told me she has big plans and wants to be a neonatologist. Straight away I saw how bright she is and I was filled with hope to help her reach her dream.

The next day I organised a meeting with a school that I thought could help Khiana’s dream become real. The school agreed to give Khiana a five-year scholarship! We got her school supplies and a uniform. She was so excited. Marette sent me a photo of Khiana’s first day in her school uniform and I was so proud. The principal said, ‘I know you think we have done you a favour but you have done us one, because this girl is outstanding and will shine.’

Just a short time later, and it’s amazing to see the difference. Khiana is so happy and motivated; she races home and gets straight onto her homework. Marette believes Khiana’s life will be changed forever because of her education.

Everyone working with Marette began to see dramatic changes in her parenting. It was clear she had stopped using drugs and was becoming a better mum for it. I knew there are some circumstances where we don’t need to keep testing parents, like when there are clear signs things are back on track. With this in mind, and the obvious changes I could see in Marette’s parenting, my manager agreed to no more tests – we were going to reward Marette instead. I organised a Christmas hamper filled with lovely things. It was a way to show Marette and her family that we were a team. I wanted to support her to stay clean, and I recognised how hard she had worked to get this far. I also just wanted the kids to have fun at Christmas.

Despite these improvements, Kyle staying away from home was still hard for Marette. I kept telling her, ‘When you’re well and the home is stable, Kyle will come back.’ Sure enough, he did. I helped Kyle set up a sanctuary in his bedroom to make it easier for him to want to stay home, and enrolled him in an outdoor bush program through his school.

Mason is now two and just gorgeous. In the beginning, I could see Marette would get frustrated with him because she was flat and tired. It has been wonderful to see her patience, energy and affection grow. When I visited, I made sure to interact with Mason – I wanted Marette to see that he needed plenty of playtime and conversation. It was a gentle way to model parenting. I also referred him to specialist health services to help with some speech difficulties. When he started walking, Marette rang me to celebrate. I was so touched.

As we came to the end of our work with Marette and the kids, we discussed her plans to stay clean. I encouraged her to let me know if things fell off the rails and if she was tempted to use again. I said, ‘Please just ring me, or reach out to someone you trust.’

I felt Marette wanted to change and just needed someone to walk with her. I have this philosophy about ‘holding the space’. By this I mean, allowing Marette to be who she actually is. This is when the real work begins. And I think that’s what everyone wants … to be accepted for who they are and what they have experienced.

Marette, mother

When I was growing up I always wanted to be a youth worker. Then I met the wrong bloke, had kids, and got trapped in a violent relationship which started my depression. I stopped loving myself and eventually I started misusing drugs, and things went downhill fast. Now that I’ve made it through to the other end, I still have the same goal. I want to share my life experiences with others; it won’t just be a job to me.

I started using drugs when my son Mason was small, and I feel like I missed so much. A lot of the time was just a blur. I know I stopped trusting people and pushed them away. I felt judged by everyone and was so lonely. Using drugs became my only comfort.
Marette, Mason, Khiana and Julisa
It all got worse when my eldest son Kyle ran away from home. I wasn’t there for him or my daughter Khiana the way I needed to be. They were teenagers and needed me to be my old self. I went to the police to ask for help to try and get my son home but they told me to see FACS. I didn’t like FACS at first, until I met Julisa. I was trying to hide my drug use. I was so scared and anxious the kids would get taken away. Julisa and a casework specialist met with me, asked me about my experiences and said ‘you’ve had it tough’. That made me feel comfortable. When you’re on drugs and in that space, you need help, you don’t need the hate. I kept trying to look after the kids but I couldn’t keep up while I was using. It was a juggling act that deep down I knew I couldn’t balance.

I wasn’t doing the things I should have at first. I would pretend I wasn’t at home when people knocked. A lot of services judged me for this and told Julisa I wasn’t engaging, but it was because I was having a bad time so I shut the world out. It’s just what I do. Only Julisa seemed to understand. Not all ice users are violent junkies. They’re just normal people going through a tough time.

FACS invited me to a meeting and asked me to do a drug test and I knew they would find out I was using. I cried and cried because I thought I was a step closer to losing the kids. That was my turning point. I told myself I would do everything in my power to stop using and keep my children.

Ice is a horrible drug. FACS was straight on in and that’s how it should be. It was good that Julisa was persistent; she kept calling and asking me what I needed, no matter how many times I turned her away. I could see she truly cared about the kids. I’m good at sensing things; I know when someone really cares or it’s just a job to them.

It was a breakthrough when Julisa and her manager said they had faith in me and didn’t keep retesting me for drugs. It gave me the strength to stay clean. I now enjoy the kids and that’s the difference when you’re not using drugs. Khiana changed her Facebook status the other day, counting down the days until she becomes a neonatologist. That’s a paediatrician that takes care of sick or premature babies. I know I only have her till 18 and then she’ll be off to university. I couldn’t be prouder. The scholarship has been so great; she is so smart and loves to learn. She’s also joined the choir and the school band to play clarinet.

Mason goes to day care three days a week and is so happy there. He’s not just my baby but the family baby; we all love him so much. Kyle still has struggles with going to school but at least he’s at home. Julisa and I are working closely with his school to help him get back there full time.

The other day, Julisa drove me to an appointment and took me out for a coffee. I was really upset that day because my dad had just died. I loved that Julisa and I talked like two adults instead of me being the ‘drug user’ and her being the ‘FACS caseworker’. There were no ‘roles’ that day. It felt like two human beings connecting because of trust and acceptance. It was so comforting. Julisa opened up a bit and told me she started her career with a Certificate IV in Community Services from TAFE and I had an epiphany: ‘Hey, that could be me. I could help women who are struggling like I was.’ Sharing my story is another step in my recovery.
Reflection

As I started to read about Marette, Kyle, Khiana and Mason many families came into my mind. This is not an unfamiliar story I thought; I was already formulating the various pathways for how Julisa’s intervention with this family might unfold. Julisa’s first interaction with Marette was open, honest and respectful; it created the space for the beginning of a relationship that was built on trust and acceptance. Together they worked out very quickly they shared the same goal; to keep the family together so long as the children remained safe.

Like with so many of the families we work with the journey is often a bumpy one where the best laid plans don’t always work out the way we intended. Behaviour change takes time, hard work, courage, hope and patience. What stood out for me was that Julisa saw Marette through a lens of empathy, she took the time to read the family’s history, she was curious about Marette and the children’s experience of life and previous interventions, she listened to Marette and included her in the decision-making, she did not get stuck with other people’s views, and she challenged language like ‘aggressive’ and ‘not engaging’, which is sadly what we see recorded in the stories of many families. This reminded me of the power of language and how quickly just one word can change our frame of reference, intentions and the subsequent relationships with parents, children and young people.

What keeps caseworkers engaged in this work with families? Getting to the end of a journey like the one in Marette’s story, I could feel the sense of achievement and pride coming through in the words she spoke about her children, of what she has achieved, the courage it has taken, the belief she now has in herself and the change she has made for her children.

Kim McMullen
Director Community Services, Illawarra Shoalhaven
NSW Department of Family and Community Services
Brave and strong

Janay, FACS caseworker

As I walked up the stairs to meet Cassie for the first time, I stepped over a used syringe, heard neighbours yelling at each other and was surrounded by shattered windows. The block of flats was notorious for housing drug dealers, so I was pretty worried for Cassie, who was squatting there at a ‘friend of a friend’s’ place. She was 17 years old and five months pregnant. And she already had another baby who was being cared for by her parents.

When Cassie opened the door I couldn’t even tell she was pregnant. She was so tiny. Cassie invited me in, but could barely keep her eyes open. Right by her side was her boyfriend Patrick. Police had told me he could be violent so I trod lightly as I told them about my worries. I did not want to put her at further risk. I explained I was there because we’d been told Cassie was using drugs and we wanted to help her keep her baby safe.

Patrick tried to answer all the questions himself and got mad when I asked Cassie about her life. He didn’t let Cassie speak with me alone, or let her have much of a say about anything. He wasn’t the father of the baby and I could see he was very controlling. Despite this, Cassie managed to tell me about her little Archie, who was eight months old. She spoke with a lot of love, told me she missed him and was thrilled about the chance to be a mum again.

It struck me that while Cassie worried about Archie and wanted to be with him, she recognised that at the moment he was safer living with her parents. It spoke volumes about who she was as a mum. She could put her son first, though it broke her to be apart from him. Even still, I left that first meeting with a heavy heart. There wasn’t room in their tiny squat for a bassinet – and that was the least of it. I was worried about the drugs and I was worried about Patrick. At the same time there was something about the way Cassie spoke about Archie that made me feel like she wanted things to be different.

Cassie didn’t want to know me in the beginning, but that didn’t stop me showing up. Over and over. Cassie left home at 14 and had burnt a few bridges in the past. If we were to have any kind of relationship, I knew I had to be rock solid.

I started driving Cassie to her midwife appointments and took the time in the car and the waiting room to listen to her story. I learned early on that, like most 17 year olds, she hated being told what to do! So I tried a different tack. I started explaining all my worries in lots of detail. I didn’t say she couldn’t use drugs – I just stepped through what would happen to her growing baby if she did. I didn’t make her see the midwives, but went through how they could help her baby come into the world healthy and safe. In the end we never missed an appointment, Cassie and me. I think this is when she realised nothing she could say or do would make me give up on her and her baby.

Cassie had once been close to her parents, Keith and Sandra, so I took the time to get to know them. Straight away I could see their deep love for Archie and Cassie. But I could also sense their raw grief and despair, worn down from years of worrying about her. They felt their daughter had become a stranger. They were doing a wonderful job caring for Archie and I hoped that by bringing them into our decisions about the new baby, I could help them reconnect with Cassie.

As I got to know Cassie, I began to understand just how much Patrick hurt, threatened and controlled her. I supported Cassie to take out an AVO against Patrick, but he broke it time and time again. The police were right on to him and they arranged a Safety Action Meeting with us, housing, health and other domestic violence services so we could all work together. The police told us that only women who were at risk of serious injury or death were part of this program. I knew things were bad, but hearing that was terrifying. I felt sick with worry for Cassie and her unborn baby.
We all had a role in keeping Cassie safe. Police would conduct random checks on Patrick, a local service provided Cassie with domestic violence support and a place at a safe house and my housing colleagues looked at finding her a home. Cassie didn’t feel comfortable dealing with so many people, so I would take their calls and manage the appointments and meetings. Often it was hard to find her, but I always managed to track her down – by calling, texting or even driving around – and get her the help she needed. I knew I couldn’t keep her safe on my own.

The whole time I worked with Cassie I was terrified she wouldn’t make it. Mostly I was scared Patrick would kill her, or she would overdose. We had a lot of frank discussions about her drug use and I learned that Cassie turned to drugs when she was scared or anxious, and this was a frightening time for her. Every time I saw her I would ask when she had last felt the baby kicking; she would take my hand and hold it on her growing belly so I could feel him move. Getting that little kick against my hand was the best feeling in the world. It was also a tactile way of helping Cassie bond with her baby and motivate her in hard moments.

Cassie and I also had plenty of conversations about why I might need to bring her baby into care. I know how important it is to stay hopeful for parents, but I also needed to be real about what life was going to be like for the baby when he was born. I felt like I was struggling to just keep Cassie alive, and that there wasn’t the time and safety for her to prepare to be a mum too.

Patrick ended up in prison for breaching the AVO, but Cassie was still using drugs when little Jackson was born. She loved him at first sight. Even though she knew in her heart she couldn’t care for him, it was still the hardest day of my career to tell Cassie that Jackson needed to go and live with his grandparents along with Archie. We had both wanted her to be able to take her baby home so badly. I was gutted that it had come to this.

Three months later it all came to a head when Cassie came to the office in a terrible way. She was crying and yelling and so broken. She missed her boys and her parents, and was desperately alone. She was finally honest with me about how much ice and cannabis she was using. I was so scared for her when she told me she’d just tried heroin for the first time. Something had to give. I was able to use this moment of honesty to convince Cassie she needed to detox. Incredibly, she went, right then and there, and stayed for the full 10 days. I was so proud of her, and even more so when she agreed to take the next step and go to rehab in Sydney.

Every time I visited, I reminded Cassie that her time in rehab was only a tiny fraction of her son’s lives, but could change her family forever. I’ll never forget my second visit. She told me straight up that she and Jackson would not be alive if it wasn’t for me – it was without doubt the most rewarding feedback I’ve ever received.

I took Jackson and Archie to visit Cassie in rehab each month and talked to her about what life could be like when she had her boys with her. I wanted her to know that I believed it was possible. We documented their blossoming relationship and the amazing changes she’d made by taking a selfie each time. I wanted her to have a record of this time, proof of all her hard work and love for her boys.

Eight months later and Cassie is still in rehab. She wants to do it once and do it right. Now that she is clean, I feel like I’ve met her all over again. She is an amazing young woman. It was obvious to me, and eventually the court, that she was ready to take back the care of Archie and Jackson.

Because of the relationship I made with Keith and Sandra, I was able to talk to them about how I would love to see Cassie come home to them and Cassie’s grandma June, and take over the care of her boys with their gentle guidance and support. Thankfully the family and Cassie are completely on board. In time, when she is ready, Cassie will be able to care for the boys on her own with help from her family.

Cassie deserves all the credit for her journey. I have to remind myself she is still only 18, because she has been through so much and is just so brave and strong. Cassie always wanted to be a good mum, far more than she wanted the drugs. She just needed someone to believe in her.
Cassie, mum

In the beginning I was pretty rude to Janay. I called her every name under the sun. Janay was always hounding me and no matter how hard I tried to hide, she managed to find me. And she always knew when I was lying, especially when I was trying to convince her that I was okay, even when I wasn’t.

I eventually realised that she was just trying to help. She never judged me for the things I said or did; she would sit and listen if that was what I needed and she always knew what to say.

When my boys were taken into care it absolutely crushed me and made me feel horrible. That feeling stuck with me for quite a while, but it ended up being a huge motivator for change. Janay wrote me a beautiful note about my boys and whenever I was having a hard day in rehab, I would look at it and the photos of Archie and Jackson as a reminder about why I was there. The boys kept me going.

The day I received the news Archie and Jackson were coming back to me was one of the best days ever, equal only to when they were born. I cried out of happiness and sheer exhaustion. The court process had taken forever and it felt like it was never going to end. My mum was with me and it was so wonderful to see her cry out of happiness, rather than sadness. Mum and dad were so amazing and I’m so grateful they were willing and able to look after Archie and Jackson when I couldn’t.

The most important thing for me was having a caseworker who listened, was supportive and persevered despite my protests. If it was not for Janay I definitely wouldn’t have gone through rehab and I certainly wouldn’t be getting my boys back. She changed my life.

Reflection

What an uplifting and inspiring story and one that gives me great hope for the families of the future. Every caseworker has the amazing potential to be the ‘Janay’ for every ‘Cassie’ who needs the gentle persistence, belief, courage and honesty that Janay has shown.

From a scary and delicate first meeting where many would have lost hope, Janay was able to see something in Cassie that allowed her to dream of the best outcome for Cassie and her babies.

The path was tricky and there were many times where it could have gone a different way. What I see is a caseworker adjusting and negotiating and staying with the end dream, while constantly balancing all the risks in this story.

Cassie’s honest description of her relationship with Janay and the impact this had over time helps us understand what we need to be for the families we work with. Such a wonderful outcome in this story; Cassie, still a child herself, reconnected with her own parents and also able to be a mum to her beautiful boys Archie and Jackson.

Well done Cassie and Janay; may this great result continue and give this family the chance to rear two happy and healthy boys.

Marie New
Executive District Director, Hunter New England
NSW Department of Family and Community Services
Jennifer, FACS caseworker

I was a teenager when I got my first job at FACS. It was a 12 month admin traineeship and I was happy to be providing clerical support. But then I started to understand what caseworkers did and how they helped and I wanted to be one. I applied to university to get my degree. I didn’t get in straight away but I persisted and here I am now, doing what I was in awe of all those years ago.

Meeting Jessica confirms I made the right career choice. I met her in the late stages of her pregnancy. We sat across from each other at that first meeting, me ready to lay all of my worries about her drug use and mental health on the table, and Jess, sick as a dog from the pregnancy trying to show me that I had nothing to worry about. The visit was planned and Jess was ready for me. She had all of her prescriptions laid out on the table, her way of showing me she was managing, but we both knew things had spiralled out of her control a long time ago.

The last time Jess had a caseworker in her home was when FACS took her other children away. I understood that having me there would bring this memory back with crushing force. And I knew she would be scared that I would be standing here in the future, taking this baby away from her just like her other babies had been taken. I had to respect that Jess would be guarded and give her the space to share only what she was comfortable talking about on that first visit. I knew I wouldn’t get the full story straight away. And that didn’t matter. There would be many more visits and opportunities to learn about each other. I was clear with Jess though. I told her about all of my worries – we didn’t muck around on that. And there was a lot to be worried about.

I met Jess a few more times before she broke the bubble. She told me that something had to change, that she couldn’t go on like this. I could see the desperation in her eyes, the longing for something different. This was my opening. I knew I had to harness this opportunity and act before she started to doubt that change was possible.

I organised an appointment with drug and alcohol services straight away to see if Jess could be admitted to the detox clinic for high-risk pregnancies. When Jess asked me to come along with her I jumped at the chance. I was so relieved that the clinician had the same sense of urgency as me about helping Jess. Before we knew it she had been admitted. She had started her journey towards a different life.

After detox, came rehabilitation. Jess was there for three months. Pregnant and separated from her partner Nigel. He could only visit a few times because of the distance. There were times when she wanted to give up, just leave and go back to what she was used to. I knew it was tough for Jess, being alone and taking on the fight of her life, but I knew she wouldn’t be able to keep her baby if she left. We spoke a lot. I praised her for being so strong and brave, listened to her frustrations, kept her focused on the end goal and reminded her of how far she had already come. She had to know that rehab wouldn’t last forever.

I was getting worried that talk wasn’t enough though. There was serious risk here and I had to use my authority wisely. I could see that Jess’ commitment to rehab was starting to waver. Other people had written Jess off and I could sense that they thought I was naive to hold such hope for her, especially in the times when Jess herself had lost hope. I knew in my heart that Jess could change but how could I put so much weight on what I saw in her when everything on paper screamed risk? These are the thoughts that keep you up at night. You start to doubt your judgement. Group supervision and talking with my manager Chris helped. Chris encourages us to give children every chance possible to be with their parents, but she is a realist; she knows when to pull us back if a child could be hurt by our optimism. She ensured that I kept an open mind, and that my hope was backed up by real evidence of change and safety.
Together, Chris and I decided that we would talk to Jess about a Parental Responsibility Contract. Given Jess’ experience of Children’s Court, talking to her about a legal document had to be managed sensitively. We used the contract as a support tool, not a big stick. Through courts we often make decisions about what should happen for a child, but with Parental Responsibility Contracts, caseworkers and parents make that decision together. That’s how we approached it. Together we developed the plan and together we measured progress. This was important. In the hard times, Jess had to know that she was moving forward and that I had noticed the change in her.

A beautiful, healthy baby girl was born in February. Jess welcomed Kyesha so warmly into the world. I drove to Sydney to pick them up. When the doors opened to the hospital, there was Jess with her baby in her arms, all ready to jump in the car with me and start her new life. What a car ride that was. Those few hours made all the past worry wash over me. I knew then and there that the best decision had been made for Kyesha – she was wrapped in her mother’s love and Jess was hopeful that she would be able to be the mother that she was moving forward and that I had noticed the change in her.

When we arrived home, Nigel was standing on the front step waiting for us. He was smartly dressed, and had cut his hair and shaved his beard off for the occasion. You could see his pride in how he held himself. He took Jess and Kyesha in his arms and without a word, showed them safety. To Nigel’s credit he had been getting help for himself while Jess was in rehab. He went to programs and did what he had to do to stop using drugs and pay off his debts. He’s all square with the state now, which means he can get his driver’s permit back. He’s pretty pleased about that!

Jess doesn’t take drugs now, and we now know that her mental health problems were because of the drugs so we don’t need to worry about that anymore. But my work with Jess isn’t over. I need to help her regain her confidence as a mum and a young woman. She feels the stigma and shame of her past every day. Jess has some homemade tattoos and she knows that people look at her and judge her because of them. So they are coming off. We managed to secure funding for laser tattoo removal. It was an important thing for us to do for Jess. Tattoos don’t make kids safe or unsafe but for Jess they were a constant reminder of a past life she had fought hard to leave behind. They affected her confidence and Jess needs all the confidence she can muster to achieve our next goal – having her other three children returned to her. We are on the way to making this a reality. Kyesha needs her brother and sisters around her and deserves nothing less than to be part of a whole family.

Jess, mother

Kyesha is my fourth child and the only one that I get to tuck into bed each night. My life was a haze of drug use and sadness before she was born. I was in a rut that I didn’t know how to get out of. I didn’t dare dream of happiness.

I was smoking 60 cones a day, smoking my life away really. All that it was doing was landing me in jail and making me unwell – mentally and physically. I had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder and schizophrenia and was so sick during my pregnancy with Kyesha that I couldn’t be further than a few metres away from a bathroom. I didn’t know if I had it in me to be the mum that Kyesha needed.

I knew that between my diagnoses, my drug use and the fact that I had my other kids taken from me, I would have to fight hard to keep this one. I was nervous when I met Jennifer. I was wary for the first few visits but I soon realised I had to be upfront and honest. Jennifer hadn’t judged me so far so I figured if anyone was going to help me, it was going to be her. I took a risk and told her everything. She was upfront and honest with me about her worries. I liked that – she was gentle and caring but she didn’t stuff around. She didn’t mince her words. It was a relief to be this honest and have her tell me she still wanted to work with me to help my baby have its mum.

Within days I was sitting next to Jennifer again. This time we were in a meeting to try to get me a place at a detox centre. It was nice to have someone to support me through this. Appointments like this are scary and uncomfortable – everyone is so formal and they just ask question after question, probing you to talk about all of the things you are ashamed and embarrassed about. Having Jennifer there put me at ease. She talked when I found it hard to explain myself and she reassured me that it was safe to tell my story.

Detox was tough. But the hardest bit was rehab. It felt like it was never-ending. I was away from home and away from my partner. I really struggled at Christmas time and was ready to chuck it all in. I didn’t though. Jennifer kept me strong. She kept me focused on my baby and kept reminding me of the progress that I had made and what I would be giving up if I didn’t keep going.

I knew Jennifer was getting more worried though as my due date got closer. She talked to me about a Parental Responsibility Contract as a way of keeping us all on track. I liked that. When I had been in court with my other children it felt like the goalposts were always shifting. To see in writing what I had to do and to know what Jennifer was going to do to help me succeed was good. It was what I needed. We worked together to figure out what should be in the plan. I knew
Jennifer wasn’t asking me to do anything that I couldn’t or shouldn’t do for my baby so it I signed it without hesitation.

I’m grateful for every day I have with Kyesha. Jennifer is always telling me I’m doing a great job but once a child is taken from you, the fear of losing another never goes away. I see how people look at me and I know they are judging me. I was talking to Jennifer about this one day and I told her how I feel that my tattoos are holding me back, keeping me stuck in my old life. It’s hard to move on in your head when your body is marked by reminders of your past. She came back a few days later and told me that she could help get rid of the tattoos. I wasn’t expecting that! And I definitely wasn’t expecting her to be by my side while it happened. But there she was, once again supporting me to move on.

Thanks to Jennifer’s belief in me I am showing everyone that I can be a good mum. Kyesha is safe and loved. I’m going to be able to tuck my other kids into bed soon. That is our next goal and I can’t wait for it to happen. My kids will grow up together, in a home that isn’t always perfect, but is one that’s always filled with love and belonging.

Reflection

When I read ‘Fresh start’ it took me a couple of days to take all of the information in about Jennifer and Jessica’s amazing story. After thinking about it, what it came down to was hope, perseverance, determination, laser-eyed focus on the issues that needed to be addressed, as well as exceptional relationship-based practice.

One of the first things that struck me was Jennifer’s journey in becoming a caseworker. I have no doubt her career from clerical officer to caseworker has put her in a good position to help families change. Jennifer’s motivation, her tenaciousness and expertise in working with Jessica was outstanding. She focused on addressing Jessica’s immediate needs, slowly building her trust and delivering on the things she said she would. There were clear plans and achievable goals that they agreed on together.

Jessica’s story is one of sadness but also hope, and now a future with her children. Understandably Jessica took some time to trust that Jennifer was there to support her and care for her baby. Jessica said there were times she was on the verge of giving up but Jennifer’s perseverance prevented this from happening. Sometimes as a caseworker you need to think outside the square and the removal of the tattoos is something that may not be typical casework but made the world of difference for Jessica. The hope that Jessica now has for the restoration of her three other children is inspiring. I hope to read a story in next year’s Shining a light on good practice in NSW describing how this has been successful!

Simone Czech
Executive Director, Child & Family
NSW Department of Family and Community Services
A letter from my dad

Jessica, FACS caseworker

We do a lot of hard things in our work. For me, one of them has been supporting a 12 year old girl after her dad died. Our jobs put us right there, alongside families in the most real way. There is no manual to prepare you for all the conversations you need to have, and there is rarely one right way to be. It’s just about honesty and thinking about how I would like to be treated if it were me.

Lexi is an amazing girl. She is one of those young people who you just know you will never forget. Lexi and her little brother and sister had been taken from their mother’s care for a whole lot of sad reasons. They were living with their aunt and uncle, Jean and Jim, and their two kids. My job was to get to know Lexi and show her I was there to help in any way she needed.

I didn’t want to be another adult just asking her questions. I needed to put in the time to really get to know her. I showed her how to make friendship bracelets and took her out for sushi. I got to be interested in Justin Bieber because she loved him, and I listened to whatever she wanted to talk about. You can’t expect kids to tell you private stuff straight away – you have to listen to everything they’re saying and just be curious. That’s when Lexi started talking about her dad, who she had not seen since she was very little.

Lexi told me she was worried that the only memories she had of her dad were fading. He had been in and out of jail. She knew he had problems with drugs. I think because things had been so difficult with her mum, it was especially important to Lexi to find a positive connection with her dad, separate to the things she had heard from others.

I went looking in our records to see what I could find about Lexi’s dad. That led me to Corrective Services and the discovery that his name was Jay and he was in jail. Wasting no time I called the jail straight away. I told Jay who I was and why I was ringing. His response was so positive; he said he thought about Lexi every day. But for him to hear she was wondering about him was obviously unexpected. I remember him saying excitedly, ‘My baby girl’s asking about me?’ I was so glad I had made that call – it was about tapping into love.

I asked Jay to write Lexi a letter. I thought it would be a gentle way of bringing him back into her life. Lexi waited and waited for that letter, and at each home visit would ask if it had arrived. I was so happy for Lexi when it finally did. It was a beautiful letter. Jay had obviously taken so much care with it – he told Lexi how much he loved and missed her; he said he thought about her every day and he was sorry for the poor choices he had made. The letter was so important to Lexi. She wanted to write a letter back but didn’t know where to start, so we spoke about what things were important to her that she wanted to share with him.

I knew that Jay was soon to be released and Lexi was keen to meet him. I wanted that for her and I helped her get prepared. It was good to talk openly with her about her dad’s drug use – no judgement, just the facts. We talked about how difficult coming out of jail can be and that her dad might not adjust easily or be the way she wanted him to be.

When Jay was released from jail I couldn’t find him. As the days passed I grew increasingly worried but I also understood that it might take time for him to settle back into society. It was a month after his release that I was told that Jay had died from drug use. I was heartbroken for Lexi that the chance to reconnect with her dad was taken away so suddenly.

There was never going to be a good time to tell Lexi but the news could not have come at a worse time. In that same week, her mum had given birth to a new little brother and he needed to be brought into care. This little baby was Jay’s son and Lexi had to cope with all sorts of emotions. I spoke with Aunty Jean and we decided that she was the best person to tell Lexi the sad news.
Lexi, Jim, Jean and her family
Lexi was adamant that she wanted to go to the funeral. I knew her mother and older brother would be there. Things had been strained between Lexi and her mum and I was worried about what might happen at the funeral.

Together, Lexi and I worked on a safety plan for the funeral; or as she named it – ‘Lexi’s Plan’. Lexi knew her mum and brother, while I didn’t, so she was the best person to develop the plan. I think Lexi started to feel a little relieved after taking the time to think about what the funeral might be like. I asked her what she thought her family might think, feel and say at the funeral. Lexi is such an empathic young woman and was able to identify that they would also be hurting. She planned for all of the different reactions that her mum and brother might have when they saw her. We talked about the sadness of funerals and how they can be a tribute to a person’s life, that sadness and crying is normal and healthy and there isn’t a ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ way to grieve.

Lexi wanted her aunt and uncle involved in ‘Lexi’s Plan’ so we invited them to join our conversations. I wanted Lexi to be the one explaining the plan, so she could have a sense of ownership. Everything else that was happening around Lexi was out of her control, so it was important that she feel empowered. It worked – as I watched Lexi step out her plan her whole body language changed. She went from looking flat and tired to sitting up straight and even smiling again.

Before I left, I spoke with Lexi about how I knew she had wanted to write back to her dad. I was worried that this might play on her heart and mind. I said that although her dad was no longer here, she could always write a letter back to him and express how she felt.

I decided not to go to the funeral. It was an important time for the family to show their love and support for Lexi. I checked in with Jean and Lexi regularly. After the funeral they told me that Lexi had arranged to have the letter her dad wrote read aloud during the service. She did that because she wanted everyone to know the goodness that was inside him. It was a stance of loyalty, a correcting of the record books. And I really believe it helped Lexi in her grief. She is a smart girl; she knows that people are more than their actions or their labels.

Lexi did write her own letter to her dad and she placed it on his coffin. I was so taken by her courage and maturity.

Since losing her dad, Lexi’s relationship with Jean and Jim has become even stronger. Lexi has also become closer with her dad’s family – spending time with her grandmother and uncle, even visiting them interstate. Lexi’s grandmother worked with Jean to give keepsakes and baby photos of Jay to Lexi. She even sent her a beautiful silver necklace with a pendant containing some of his ashes. Lexi wears it all the time, saying she is keeping her dad close to her heart.

I wish Lexi and Jay had had more time together but I’m so grateful about the letters. Lexi will always have Jay’s, and she can take heart from it in knowing she was loved. And writing to him was important for her – to put her feelings down and know she did her best to let him know those feelings.

Lexi and I have talked about how grief isn’t a straight line and can come in waves. She understands there will be ups and downs and she knows that I’m here to support her. I am so proud of Lexi; she has so much strength and a big heart. I am privileged to work with her, she is inspiring.

Lexi, young girl

When Jess became my caseworker I thought she was really nice and easy to talk to. I don’t know what it was exactly, but she just seemed really warm and kind. I felt like I could talk to her about anything. She made visits fun and would bring all this colour-coordinated stuff so we could make bracelets. It made it easier to talk to her.

I really wanted to find my dad, as just after I came to live with my aunty and uncle, my nanna died. She was like my second mum, she was my safe space. I felt like I was losing everyone and wanted my dad back. So when my dad passed away, it was horrible. Jess came over and we talked about the funeral. I really wanted to go but wasn’t sure what it would be like. She just asked me what I wanted and I told her and she wrote it down and we planned it all out. I felt better after doing the plan; it helped because it makes you think about how the day is going to go.
Losing my dad was a really hard time for me. I love Justin Bieber and my favourite song is ‘Purpose’. The song is about losing someone you love and that they are always there to talk to, even if you can’t hear their answer.

I organised for dad’s letter to me to be read out at the service. It was important that everyone knew he was a good person and heard the things that he wrote to me. It meant a lot that he said sorry to me in the letter for some of the choices he made. I also took the letter I wrote back to him and put it on his coffin. That really helped me.

If other kids out there lose someone close, I would say to them to not hold it in; talk about it and know it’s okay to be upset and ask for help. Your caseworker or carer can help by being there to listen and by helping write a letter or sharing photos. My nanny gave me a necklace with some of my dad’s ashes so I can remember him. I wear it all the time. I’ve had a lot of sad times, but I’m lucky I’ve got such a great family.

Jean, carer

Having keepsakes has been so important. Lexi’s nanny sent her photos of her dad and now she has a small life story book of his life as well. We can look through the photos together and talk about what a cute baby he was and what a lovely person he became.

I think the fact that Jess looked for Jay and found him, gave him the opportunity to express how he felt for Lexi – which is something he may never have been able to do if it wasn’t for Jess’ hard work. Jay had a big heart, so I’m so grateful for the amount of effort that Jess put in to achieve this. Jess was able to access information that I couldn’t and this led to her finding him.

I think that it is really important for caseworkers to go those extra miles. Jay and Lexi’s story shows that you have to seize the moment – you can’t wait to reconnect families. It’s made all the difference in the world to Lexi, because she’s going to have that letter forever. For one of her parents to be brave enough to admit they made mistakes took the responsibility off Lexi’s shoulders. She could now understand that none of what happened had been her fault. Without it she may never have known how much her dad loved her. It also means that Lexi will be able share this letter with her baby brother when he grows up, so he knows the type of person his dad was. I know Jay would have been so proud of Lexi’s bravery after his death and at the funeral.

It’s important for kids to know that no matter what their parents do in life, people make mistakes and it doesn’t mean that they are bad or that they cannot love or be loved. I always tell Lexi she has gotten all the good things from her dad and all the good things from her mum and what she does with that now is her choice.

Reflection

As I read Lexi’s story I admired how Jessica continuously worked from a basis of strength, trust and non-judgement with Lexi and her family. This allowed Lexi to gain a positive understanding about her father Jay and enabled her to turn her grief into a sense of power, healing and self-discovery.

What also shines through in this wonderfully strong and courageous young girl’s story is how Jessica always put the wishes and best interests of Lexi first. Jessica’s level of astuteness about when to be involved and when to step back empowered Lexi to gain the strength she needed to attend her father’s funeral and to see her mother, through the planning they had worked on together.

Lexi’s story shows the fundamental importance of family in a child or young person’s life and about how time is of the essence when it comes to finding family. In having the letter from her father, Lexi was freed from the confusion, guilt and self-blame that many children and young people in care wrongly feel.

I passionately believe that it is part of our job to support every child and young person on their journey of discovering who they are and where they come from. As Jean, clearly a wise woman herself, put it ever so beautifully, to help them realise they can take the good from both mum and dad and choose what they do with it in their own lives.

Jo Lawrence
Executive District Director, Murrumbidgee
Far West and Western NSW
NSW Department of Family and Community Services
Dreaming big

Freya, FACS caseworker

I knew so much about Tony before I even met him. Everything I read, or was told, painted a picture of an out of control 12 year old who was pushing all the boundaries. He would stay away from home for days at a time and refuse to go to school. He was in a lot of trouble, using drugs and hanging out with people who weren’t safe. What we had written on Tony’s file didn’t help much and only gave me glimpses of his life before he came into care. Everyone had a take on Tony, but nothing that helped me understand what life was really like for him.

I started my work with Tony by refusing to accept he was just a ‘bad kid’ – what he needed most was for someone to see him differently. I learned that he was very young when his mum and dad died and he started living with his grandparents, Margaret and Jack. They were grieving the loss of their daughter and trying to support their grandson; it was such a hard time for all of them. From day one, I could sense this family loved and cared about each other deeply, but were close to breaking point.

Jack and Margaret were exhausted, frustrated and at their wits’ end. They’d spend nights driving around, looking for Tony when he was missing, calling the police, doing what they could. And they were angry with FACS because they felt so alone. Their stress made it impossible for them to think about what Tony really needed. This helped me to be clear about my own role – it was my job to stand up for Tony when no one else could.

At first, I couldn’t get Tony to meet with me. He eventually agreed after I told him we didn’t have to talk about anything if he didn’t want to – and especially when he found out that lunch was part of the deal! When I saw him for the first time, he didn’t match the picture I had in my mind. He’s a big fellow for his age, but he’s quiet, sweet, peaceful and gentle. I just couldn’t imagine him getting into any trouble.

We took baby steps at first. I needed to build his trust and help him understand my role. I remember asking him what he thought my job was. He saw me as one of the people who’d taken him away from his dad when he was little. I realised he resisted meeting me because he thought I was going to take him away again. I told him that was the last thing I wanted to do. I made sure he knew I was going to work hard for him and was on his side.

At first we’d just hang out and sit in comfortable silence. We talked about his favourite foods or computer games. I kept it light and we laughed lots. I worked to take the intensity out of our meetings and help him to feel relaxed around me.

There were definitely tensions – while we were getting to know each other, things were unravelling even more for Tony. He was still doing a lot of things that were making him unsafe. I needed to stay patient with him, while at the same time take calls from his worried grandparents, work with police and other services, and do whatever I could to keep him safe.

I think consistency helped him to start to trust me, or maybe he just realised I wasn’t going away! If I said I would do something, I always did it. I showed up when I said I would, and if he didn’t turn up I’d text and say, ‘Hey mate, I missed you today, see you next week.’ I knew it was working because he started talking more with me.

I always have a ‘no bullshit policy’ when I work with young people. I won’t take bullshit from them, so they shouldn’t take it from me. When we needed to start having some harder conversations, I would tell him straight. We once had an honest chat about a time when the police found him hanging out with an older man he didn’t know. We had lunch in the park and talked about sexual exploitation and grooming. I wanted him to have the language to talk about it if he needed to. I gave him a brochure to read. He was quiet and reflective.

We took baby steps at first. I needed to build his trust and help him understand my role. I remember asking him what he thought my job was. He saw me as one of the people who’d taken him away from his dad when he was little. I realised he resisted meeting me because he thought I was going to take him away again. I told him that was the last thing I wanted to do. I made sure he knew I was going to work hard for him and was on his side.

At first we’d just hang out and sit in comfortable silence. We talked about his favourite foods or computer games. I kept it light and we laughed lots. I worked to take the intensity out of our meetings and help him to feel relaxed around me.

There were definitely tensions – while we were getting to know each other, things were unravelling even more for Tony. He was still doing a lot of things that were making him unsafe. I needed to stay patient with him, while at the same time take calls from his worried grandparents, work with police and other services, and do whatever I could to keep him safe.

I think consistency helped him to start to trust me, or maybe he just realised I wasn’t going away! If I said I would do something, I always did it. I showed up when I said I would, and if he didn’t turn up I’d text and say, ‘Hey mate, I missed you today, see you next week.’ I knew it was working because he started talking more with me.

I always have a ‘no bullshit policy’ when I work with young people. I won’t take bullshit from them, so they shouldn’t take it from me. When we needed to start having some harder conversations, I would tell him straight. We once had an honest chat about a time when the police found him hanging out with an older man he didn’t know. We had lunch in the park and talked about sexual exploitation and grooming. I wanted him to have the language to talk about it if he needed to. I gave him a brochure to read. He was quiet and reflective.
and I could see him processing what I was saying. He folded the brochure and tucked it in his pocket.

I tried so many services to get support for Tony and his family, but I hit a brick wall at every turn. He was either too young, too old, didn’t live in the right place, too ‘behavioural’, needed a diagnosis or his behaviours weren’t serious enough. Sometimes I’d end the day in tears of frustration, I felt so stuck about what to do. The support Tony had just wasn’t enough to keep him safe.

I took a chance and applied to an outpatient clinical adolescent service for help. I wasn’t confident, as the service was in high demand. It was a great relief when Tony got in. And when Dr Brendan started working with him, everything started to change. He really understood what Tony needed and Tony trusted him straight away. Dr Brendan and I formed a team that was the beginning of the help that Tony and his grandparents needed.

Then things suddenly got really hard again late last year. I got a call from Marg and Jack to say I needed to come and get Tony. They were trying their best to be strong for him, but they had lost hope that things would change. It was hard to accept that he needed to leave straight away but I knew that while Marg and Jack were heartbroken, they all needed some breathing space. I went to see Tony and said, ‘Mate, you can’t stay here for now.’ He flipped out. He was screaming, crying, kicking and smashing up the house. I’d never seen him like that.

We found a place for him but I knew it wasn’t right – Marg and Jack knew it too. He ran away with his older brother before I could even get him there. They stayed with a friend for about a week and Tony refused to talk to me. I was devastated for him. I had done what I said I wouldn’t – took him away from his home. I remember thinking, ‘Well, that’s it, the trust we’ve built is gone.’ I cared deeply for him and it was gut-wrenching to feel like I’d let him down.

With support from Dr Brendan we were able to work with Marg, Jack and Tony to get Tony back home. We had so many conversations but the key was Marg and Jack – deep down they knew the best place for Tony was with them. With the help of Dr Brendan and me, they laid down the law and told Tony exactly what they expected from him. This was a turning point. Tony began to see how worried everyone was, and how much they loved him. He started to realise things needed to change if he was to stay at home, and he had to be a part of that change.

The next hurdle was finding a school. Tony was enrolled at a local school, but he wasn’t going at all. After talking to school staff, I saw how many labels he was carrying in that environment. The staff seemed to have little hope for Tony, and I think he knew it. They didn’t see what I saw.

I started looking at a smaller school that I knew had a holistic and academic focus. Some people laughed and told me I was being unrealistic. But I refused to give in – he needed a fresh start. We applied and the school loved him! He was offered a place with a bursary.

I remember his first day in his new school uniform. I could have cried – he was in this big, scary environment but he was doing it with a huge smile on his face. I was so proud of him, and how far he’d come.

The school has lived up to my big expectations. They are 100 per cent on board. Tony has been there every day this year, which is a massive change. There’s also been a huge turnaround in other things in Tony’s life. He is working so hard; he’s not hurting himself or taking risks.

We still have ups and downs, and we’ve got a lot more work to do, but I’d never have dreamt we’d come so far. All I wanted a year ago was to keep him alive, safe and out of hospital. Tony now has this amazing circle of support with strong connections to different people – his family, school and helpers like me and Dr Brendan. These are people who show they value and love Tony every day, even when they’re stressed or frustrated. Everyone in Tony’s circle is deeply connected; we’re all in it together. We’ll never stop dreaming big to help Tony get where he needs to be.

Tony and his grandparents have never had the kind of support they’ve been given over the past year. The changes in Tony’s life show how powerful a bit of extra help, care and persistence can be for a family. But most of all, these changes are a credit to Tony’s strength and resilience – he amazes and inspires me every day. He has incredible insight for such a young man and he’s used this to make better decisions for himself.

Tony, young person

I can’t put my finger on the first time I met Freya but I definitely remember not liking her! She always caught me at the wrong time and would ask me too many questions. ‘What are you doing? Who are you hanging with?’ It was annoying.
But that started to change when I realised I couldn’t get rid of her. We got to know each other and I started to find good things about talking to her.

Freya was smart enough to know to chuck in free food so I’d turn up and talk to her. She has me to thank for her new love of KFC chips!

We now hang out every couple of weeks. We have a feed and a laugh and she’s not as annoying as she used to be. We talk about school and I can whinge to her about stuff.

It’s been a big year. Freya helped me get into a new school and I’m happy there. Compared to my old school, I feel like people care about me. I didn’t go to school much last year. Since I started at the new school, I haven’t missed a day.

I like being at home with grandma and granddad – with my brother too. They’re family, it’s always been that way. Freya always asks me, ‘What do you want?’ My answer is always same – I want to be with my family. There’s been times when I’ve had to move away but Freya’s made sure I go back. Because that’s where I’m happiest.

**Reflection**

What’s fantastic about Freya’s practice is that she was absolutely committed to getting to know Tony and his family for who they are, what they needed and how to achieve that. Freya’s ability to see the family for their strengths, and to understand what would benefit Tony, was critical.

Freya also didn’t let the file tell the whole story or shape her view, which is a strong reminder about the importance of what and how we write about our kids and families. Record keeping is critical, critical that the whole story is reflected about children and families’ strengths and connection as much as anything else. Great work, Freya.

Susan Priivald
Executive District Director
Northern NSW and Mid North Coast
NSW Department of Family and Community Services
When I first met Marie, she told me she had grown up in a Muslim Australian–Lebanese family, rich in customs, responsibilities and expectations. As a child, her family had escaped domestic violence from her father. Then at the age of 14, she was married to an older man, and became the victim of further violence. They had a daughter, Nikki, and then Marie mustered all her courage and left, returning home to her mum, sisters and brother. But it wasn’t easy. She felt ashamed about the divorce and being a single mother. Any remaining confidence or independence she had was lost. She seemed broken, was softly spoken and avoided eye contact.

Nikki and Marie came to us from FACS. Nikki was really struggling – she was only eight years old and was so worried about her mum. She had missed a lot of school and was telling her teacher some pretty terrible stuff about what was going on at home. Nikki and her mum lived with a large extended family of eight adults. She said her uncle was yelling, threatening and hitting her and her mum, as well as her aunts and her grandma.

Marie’s older brother Eli took on the patriarchal role of their family. It seemed to me that he used this powerful role to take away Marie’s freedom. Nikki was growing up being parented by so many adults and constantly afraid of being hurt. I was worried about them both.

The more I worked with Marie and Nikki, the more Marie told her, and the more worried we became. Marie was doing what she

I worked with Marie, listening to her views, supporting her to slowly see the violence for what it was, and building her capacity to take the action needed to keep her and Nikki safe. Marie told me that Eli believed he was helping his family and wanted Nikki to grow up well-behaved and respectful. We talked a lot about Eli’s violence – about what happened before, during and after he hurt her. This helped her to see the deliberateness of his actions and understand the control he was using and the impact it had.

I was meeting with Michaela from FACS regularly to keep her updated. I was a bit worried about what she would decide about Nikki, but I knew that she was listening to what Marie was telling me, and could see the support I was giving her and Nikki. I was confident Michaela was looking for the best solution for Nikki and like me, knew she should be with her mum.

I admit I was sceptical about Eli at first. It was hard not to be with all that I read, heard and assumed. I had to put all of this to one side so we could work with him effectively. Michaela helped me to work with Eli and I really admire that she found a way to make him responsible for the impact of his violence – this is never easy work.

I couldn’t see Nikki with anyone but her mum, and I couldn’t see Marie living without her family. We just needed to work together to find the right path for everyone.

When the reports about Nikki came through, I read Marie’s family history and could almost picture Nikki growing up to a similar fate. I felt drawn to her family’s story and wanted to find a way to give her a different life to her mum’s. Brighter Futures seemed ideal.

Tracey really supported Marie, but the more she worked with her, the more Marie told her, and the more worried we became. Marie was doing what she
Marie and Nikki
could to protect Nikki. She would try to keep Nikki quiet, and send her to her bedroom to keep Eli away. Marie would be as compliant as possible to avoid upsetting him and physically intervene between Nikki and Eli when she could. It was sad – she wasn’t responsible for Eli’s choices but she was doing everything in her power to protect her girl.

As things got worse for the family, I had to trust Tracey as my eyes and ears – to hear what Marie was saying and believe that Tracey would tell me if Marie was no longer able to keep herself and Nikki safe. Once we started to understand the full picture, we worked out how each of us could best use our different roles to come together with real purpose and teamwork to stop Eli using violence.

Marie had shared with me a lot about her family’s culture. To take the next steps, I consulted with our multicultural caseworkers, worked with our legal team, spoke with police, and connected with Nikki’s school to try and find the best way for Marie and Nikki to be safe while still staying connected to their family.

The cultural consultation was a game changer. We talked in depth about engagement, familial roles, birth order, divorce, parenting and violence. Marie’s cultural connection to her family meant leaving the home would be difficult and isolating. She would lose everything she had known – family, community, everyday life and purpose. We had to find a way to ‘build’ safety, not just ‘make her safe’, and help Marie see that violence and her culture can be separated. We talked and talked, all lost sleep about it and talked some more, before we brought all the family together to agree on a way forward.

Making Eli part of the plan was key, but also complicated. I knew that if we cut him out from the family it would exclude him from help and a chance to change. If we didn’t consider how to keep Eli connected, it would also undermine his culturally accepted role as the leader of the family and make it hard for the rest of them. We had to invite him to change, find ways to show respect to him and his culture and at the same time hold him accountable for the great deal of hurt he caused Nikki. It wasn’t easy for Eli to see that he needed to change his behaviour. I spoke to him about how he could be a supportive uncle and brother without using his fallback position of control. I struggled with this. I had to put to one side my own feelings about him as a perpetrator of violence and see that he still needed to have some role in the family. I had to think hard about how to help him change his behaviour.

Eli saw himself as his sisters’ protector. I used this as a hook to talk, to help him see that the bravest way to protect his sisters was for him to leave the family home. I knew we were getting somewhere when Eli agreed it was the best way forward too. This was a big deal for the whole family. We spoke about how he was still able to continue to be part of family life, meals and routines, while he worked on stopping his violence. It was a mark of how much he cared when he agreed to work on his violence with a counsellor.

It was also important for me to give him practical ways to keep looking after his family. When he would suggest needing to keep his family safe and wanting to help around the home, I was able to give him practical ways for doing so without living there, like arranging new locks for the windows and looking after the garden.

With Eli out of the house, we worked hard with Marie to create a space for her to grow and rebuild her sense of self. Marie had never parented Nikki without Eli getting involved. She loved Nikki but needed support to build her confidence as her mum. I first noticed the change in the sisters. At the start they were sceptical of us. Probably like Marie, they’d grown to respond and resist Eli’s violence and control in their own ways. Having space and freedom allowed them to bond as part of the network of people responsible for Nikki’s safety. With their increasing encouragement and support, and our gentle suggestions about what Nikki needed from her mum to start to recover, Marie’s confidence slowly grew and she was able to rebuild her life and reclaim her role as a parent.

I look at this family now and they’re like different people. Marie has a job. She stands tall, and looks me in the eye. Her confidence grows every day. She’s
parenting on her own for the first time in nine years and she’s doing marvellously well. Nikki smiles all the time and loves her mum. Eli is still in their life. He has done a lot of positive work on himself and his behaviour. Full credit to him. Nikki says she’s got a ‘happy uncle’ now.

When I think back about how we helped Marie, it wasn’t a fluke that it all came together. It worked because we could trust in the partnerships we’ve built with our non-government organisations. These relationships have paid off. Nikki is happier and safer because of it.

Marie, mother

Having freedom – that’s the biggest change for me. For Nikki, it’s having me as her mum. That’s what I’m most proud of. That I was able to do this, protect her and make the right decisions for her. I was scared but with Tracey’s help I felt strong enough to move forward.

It was hard – really hard at times – and pretty emotional. I didn’t want our family split up, but I wanted Nikki to be safe. There were times when I was really worried about how it would turn out.

My head was pounding when we sat down to create the family plan. I was hot inside, and felt sick, frozen and scared. It was hard being in the middle of this with my family, feeling I was the cause of all that was going on. I just had to take a big deep breath and trust that Tracey and Michaela were bringing all the right people together.

The best outcome is that I’ve got Nikki, and I feel confident to be her mum. She’s happier, she’s affectionate and she laughs so much. She respects me as her mum and we’ve still got our family. I didn’t have to choose. Eli is still her uncle, but he doesn’t hurt her now. He’s not controlling anymore. Now I feel sure that Nikki and my sisters will be able to have a life that I didn’t. We all have freedom now.

Reflection

In the NSW Practice Framework the words in the practitioner mandate –

*We work hard to give dignity, partner with parents, families and communities and use collective wisdom, skills and courage to keep children safe. Family strengths are valued, resilience is nurtured, dignity is upheld and enduring connections are formed*

could have been written precisely about this family and the work that we all did together. Valuing the strength of the family was absolutely critical as was the courage to name domestic and family violence as a risk to Nikki, Marie and her sisters. How easy it would have been for Michaela to judge Marie and expect her to be responsible for her brother’s violence and the impact on her daughter. Good on Michaela and her colleague Tracey for being clear-sighted to understand that Nikki, Marie and her sisters needed their support and guidance. When I read about the meeting with Eli that called out how his violence was not helping his family but hurting them in every way I held my breath. Eli got it – his violence and control was not helping but was placing them all in danger. Well done Michaela and Tracey for being brave in calling out what was going on but compassionate and wise to see the strength that was right there in the middle of all that.

Deidre Mulkerin
Deputy Secretary, Commissioning
NSW Department of Family and Community Services
Just like everyone else

Georgie and Tracey, Barnardos out-of-home care case managers

Adolescence is hard for everyone, but particularly for kids in care. We have supported lots of teenage girls facing some tough times. We kept finding out that many of the conversations the girls desperately needed just weren’t happening at home. They might have just moved in with a new foster carer and hadn’t had time to build the trust needed to ask uncomfortable questions, or new carers may have presumed carers before them had already covered off on something. Others were nervous it wasn’t ‘their place’ to talk about things like sex or body image. It was just another way teenagers in care had it harder than everyone else.

An idea started to emerge. What if we brought them all together for a weekend, spending time sharing and learning from us and other young women just like them? We know our girls are funny, clever, and beautiful in their own ways – together they could be magic.

We carefully considered the young people we supported and made a list of the 10 we believed would gel. The dynamic between them could make or break the experience. We invited some young girls going through a tough time, even if we were a bit worried their experiences might be confronting for the others. There were a couple that had no school friends at all, and we hoped it would be life-changing for them to make connections with girls their own age in a safe space. The girls we had to work the hardest for were the ones we knew had the most to gain.

Chaos and uncertainty were pretty much a given for our girls before they came into care. So to help them prepare and have a sense of control, we sent them a timetable of what would happen. We were covering everything from healthy relationships, self-esteem, body image and cyber safety to self-care. There was so much to talk about. Next we spent undivided time with each girl. Some of them felt quite worried in the beginning. We ‘buddied up’ the girls – the more confident ones could keep an eye on the ones who were nervous. We told the ‘buddies’ that we trusted them to take another girl under their wing. Their eyes lit up to be given such an important role.

We held a girls’ dinner the week before camp. Karen was nervous about coming and so we asked Zara, who couldn’t wait, to reach out to her. She was so empathic and followed her up after the dinner. Karen’s caseworker told me that feeling accepted made all the difference to Karen, and she went from being anxious to counting down the days to camp.

When we got in our cars to drive everyone down the coast, any of our concerns about the girls getting along flew out the window. We couldn’t get a word in! Over the weekend, the activities were fun and engaging, but we had a serious agenda. Many of the girls had moved around from carer to carer and carried deep wounds from feeling rejected by their families. They craved connection and for people to like them, but without a template for healthy relationships, found it hard to make safe choices about who to let into their lives.

One of the young girls, Selina, had sent a nude picture to a boy, who then passed it around the school. Selina wants everyone to like her, so when someone asked for pictures, she didn’t want to say no. There were lots of stories like this. We talked a lot about staying safe online. We kept reminding the girls that we wanted them to be safe because we really cared about them. They had lost friends with every new carer, and every new school, and then we expect them to be resilient and stand up for themselves. It wouldn’t happen overnight, but we wanted to try and repair their sense of self, so they had the confidence to say no when something didn’t feel right.
Some of the girls struggled with healthy eating and taking care of their bodies. Before they came into care they often missed out on meals, or grew up eating fast food. And sadly, for some, they just don’t believe they are worth looking after. They didn’t feel good about themselves on the inside and it showed on the outside too. Along with lots of chats, we took the girls grocery shopping and talked about healthy food choices and hidden sugars. Then we gave them each a huge care pack filled with nice soaps, lotions, face wash and other fun things to feel pampered. We wanted them to feel worthy of being cared for.

Family relationships were another big part of our discussions. One of the girls, Penny, shared with us that even though her memories of her dad are quite scary because he was violent, she still missed him all the time. The others piped up that many of them didn’t know their dads either. We could see how comforting it was for them to find out they weren’t alone in their feelings of loss. Afterwards Penny said a few times, ‘Well I’m just like so and so, because she doesn’t see her dad either.’

One young woman, Allie, was dealing with some big issues, so her caseworker came for the weekend to be by her side. Allie had lived through lots of harrowing experiences and night-time triggered painful memories for her. We put in plans around bedtime, set up a nightly routine and had meditation apps ready to go. The other girls were prepped too so they knew what to do to help her. Planning was key to making Allie and all the girls feel safe.

On the second night we found all the girls in a circle, sharing intimate details about their lives with one another. Things their regular school friends just wouldn’t get. It was spontaneous and beautiful. Many of these girls had never told anyone about why they came into care, and it was powerful for them to feel safe enough to speak. They named it the circle of trust.

We gave the girls free time one night – this was really a chance to take a little breather on the couch. One of the girls came in and said, ‘We feel really bad for leaving you on your own, do you want to come and hang out with us?’ It was lovely they wanted to make sure we felt welcome too!

At the end of the three days together, we all wrote letters. Everyone had to note down something special about everyone else on the camp for them to take home. Allie in particular had such beautiful comments, which showed how much the others had rallied around her. We don’t think she had ever experienced kindness of this sort before. For all we covered off on the hard stuff, it was a really happy weekend with lots of laughing and dancing. They all wanted it to go for a whole week, but we were pretty tired by Sunday night!

After the camp, we checked in carefully with the girls and their carers to make sure they were okay with what they had experienced. Sharing so much can stir up quite a lot of emotions and we were ready to step up if anyone needed us. Most of the time they were only worried about their new friends, checking in with us to see how they were going. They have this amazing empathy for one another.

Most of the girls have stayed friends. Having a connection to someone who has experienced the same things as you is priceless. We know one weekend away can’t fix everything, but the kind of work you can do over three days with a group can be far more powerful than individual casework. Time is golden with young people. It is the best gift you can give them.

Zara, 14, young person

I came into foster care when I was nine. You wouldn’t have recognised me back then; I was a bit out of control. I didn’t like my first two carers. I used to run away to my school because that’s where I felt safe. Once I scratched my carer so hard that she bled. Mostly, I just remember feeling sad.

Then I started having respite care with Cara. In her family we were always laughing and having fun. At the end of the weekend I would become hysterical – I wouldn’t want to get in the car. Cara said it would break her heart to give me back. I was so happy when Cara asked Barnardos if I could stay. She is my mum now. I have been here for four years and belong in this family with mum and dad and my two sisters.

Lots of my friends take their families for granted; they come to school and say, ‘I can’t stand my mum, she wouldn’t let me go out on Friday night.’ And I just think, ‘What are you talking about? You have your mum and dad with you.’ I appreciate my family so much. Mum says I’m wise because I’ve been through so much.

My support worker Georgie is like my second mum. She always gives me good advice – even if it feels like she always agrees with mum! When Georgie told me about the camp I was really excited. We had a dinner a few weeks before and shared our Facebook and Insta details so we could chat before we got to camp. Georgie told me Karen was really nervous about coming, so I made sure I liked all her posts and sent her some funny messages so she felt more comfortable.

I don’t like telling people that I am in foster care. I usually just change the subject whenever people talk about when they were little. Only my best friend knows I’m in care; I’m very careful about what I share with people. A friend at camp, Kyla, told us all that when she told her schoolmates she was in foster care, they turned
their backs on her. A lot of us stress out about this happening. One of the best things about the camp is that I didn’t have to worry that someone would find out I was in foster care, because we all were. It was nice to be like everyone else for once.

There were lots of serious chats that felt a bit like school, but I loved it best when we were listening to music, cooking dinners together, colouring in and chatting. I had the best time – it was like the world’s biggest sleepover.

There was a full-on time at breakfast when Karen told us she had been cutting herself. I got really upset about it. But Tracey and Georgie talked to her and then to all of us. We pulled her into our circle a bit closer and I think she felt better. I don’t think the kids at her school would get it like we did.

I’m still friends with everyone and next week we’re having a having a catch-up dinner; I’m so excited. Georgie has told me that she would love if I mentored other kids in care when I’m older. She says that no matter how hard she tries, she can never really understand what it’s like to be in foster care, and other kids in care like me can do a better job. I think I’ll be pretty good at it too.

Reflection

What magic! Waking up at camp with the blissful and peaceful feelings that within an arm’s reach is a group of people there for you. You are safe, accepted and understood. The often negative stigma that young people experience in care was removed, not having to avoid questions, feel different, or misunderstood. The adults on camp were able to shift the power dynamic and be present, sharing wisdom through enjoying and facilitating activities together.

This story is an example of when young people are given an opportunity to learn through experiences, in a safe environment, mixed with the right amount of challenge, responsibility, fun and care – they thrive! What a sacred ‘circle of trust’. Sharing the highs and lows of life with each other promotes support and provides these young people with genuine and authentic care.

Congratulations to all the young people who took a leap and turned up to camp. Your care and commitment to each other and the adults in the group was inspiring. You were always offering the opportunity for people to be part of your inner circle or just to ‘hang out’. Zara, your wisdom and care for others is heartening.

What an extraordinary effort from the adults that organised the camp. Knowing the importance of connection they carefully and purposefully designed the program, managed risk, allowed time for sharing and invested time and care into these young woman.

Bring on a one-week camp!

Danielle Schmid
Senior Project Officer
OOHC Initiatives | Design, Innovation, Safety & Permanency
NSW Department of Family and Community Services
Zara, Georgie and Tracey
A mother’s care

Ashley, mother

Ricky’s dad Matt and I were together for almost six years. We met in high school. Some would say high school sweethearts. It might have started that way but that certainly isn’t how it ended.

I first started to notice changes in Matt when Ricky was six months old but it wasn’t until Ricky was one that I realised Matt was using ice. Before then we had our arguments. I used to think that was just normal couple stuff but then he started to hurt me and put me down. He kept telling me I was a bad mum and that I was going to hurt Ricky. I didn’t tell anyone about what he was doing to me. He got into my head and I started to believe all of the bad things he said about me. I got scared that what he was saying just might be true.

Of course, having all of these thoughts swirling through your head isn’t good for your sanity. When FACS first came out to speak with me it was about my mental health – guess I shouldn’t have been surprised about that! The caseworker must have suspected that Matt was hurting me though. She wanted me to leave him but I just wanted her to bugger off so I made out everything was okay.

I did leave Matt a few times but I kept going back because I thought it was the right thing for Ricky, for him to have his dad around. I figured I could put up with the abuse for the sake of Ricky having his dad in his life. But the abuse got worse and I knew it had to come to an end.

The last day Matt had the chance to hurt to me was the day I left him. He beat me badly that day and burnt me with his jet lighter. I walked barefoot for three kilometres to the local hospital after that beating, desperate for help. I ended up in there for four days. When mum turned up at the hospital to see me she just broke down and cried. I was black and blue – there was no more hiding or explaining away the violence I had suffered.

After Matt hurt me that last time, he took Ricky. I was physically and mentally broken and couldn’t fight back. I felt like I wasn’t even there, I was empty. I fell to the ground when I heard that he had hurt Ricky just like he had hurt me. Ricky’s face was really badly burnt and he too ended up in hospital. Nothing prepares you for that kind of news.

Ricky needed so much help after being hurt. I didn’t want him to go into foster care but I knew I needed time on my own to get stronger, mentally and physically for him. He was always in my thoughts. Your child never leaves your mind when they are taken from you. I was lucky that I had some good support to help me at this time, which was important to me. I felt listened to and I knew that I always had someone around who would help me.

I was so happy when I got Ricky back. It was so good to have Jayne there for me during this time. She was an amazing support, and I knew that I always had someone to talk to and help me.

We are doing great now. We’re living with my grandparents. I’m back at work and Ricky goes to day care, which he loves. He still has some nightmares but with Jayne’s help I’ve learnt how to talk to him about what has happened and how to help him recover. We still have a tough road ahead of us but we are on the right track. I made it and I made it out alive. It seemed hard at the time but when I look back now, it really wasn’t that hard. I had the support, I just had to use it.

Jayne, FACS SafeCare caseworker

I first met Ashley after Ricky was back home with her. At first I was confused about why she needed my help. Ashley had some really good parenting skills. She had started a childcare course in the past so she already knew lots of
When you are too little to talk, the only way you can communicate your pain and confusion is through behaviour.

Important information about caring for children, but it turns out that this wasn’t enough to prepare her for the type of care Ricky needed. He had experienced so much – he had seen his mum get hurt and he had been really badly hurt himself. When you are too little to talk, the only way you can communicate your pain and confusion is through behaviour. For Ricky, some of his behaviour was starting to get worrying.

I got to work on taking Ashley through the SafeCare program. SafeCare offers really practical ideas to suit the unique circumstances parents like Ashley find themselves in. Over 18 weeks we worked on making the house safe; understanding Ricky’s physical health needs; and importantly for Ashley and Ricky we spent a lot of time rebuilding their relationship. This included setting routines, playing and interacting together in ways that helped their obvious love for each other flourish. It also involved ways to support and reward Ricky’s good behaviour. When a child has been hurt by one parent it can be easy for the other parent to be overly lenient with them – it’s their way of trying to make up for the past hurt, but in the end this doesn’t help anyone. SafeCare helped Ashley with how to structure their day, how to set the right limits and how to show Ricky that home was safe by putting in some clear rules that she stuck to no matter what. What Ricky needed most was to feel secure and the best way to do that was by making things as predictable as possible.

Ashley was eager to learn. It was great to have such a willing participant! She spoke openly with me about things that were going well and things she needed help with. She wanted nothing but the best for Ricky and for her that meant making sure she had all of the skills and knowledge she needed to help him heal from the past. She persevered, embracing everything SafeCare had to offer; she practised new skills whenever she could and she did her homework between our sessions. Before too long, Ricky was a different boy. By Ashley being really predictable in how she responded to him, and just as importantly, strengthening their relationship through play and the nurturing love that only she could give, he blossomed. He felt safe and cared for – the magic ingredients he needed from his mum, and Ashley provided them in abundance.

**Reflection**

Ashley’s bravery is truly extraordinary. She has suffered deeply – from the violence she has endured from Matt over many years, to the pain of seeing her beautiful boy hurt so badly. But Ashley has shown so much strength to resist Matt’s violence. And she had so much courage to acknowledge she and Ricky needed some time apart, so she could get herself strong and ready for Ricky to come home.

SafeCare was the perfect program to help this family. The practical, intensive approach meant Ashley and Ricky were given the resources they needed to heal and adapt to their new life together. Ashley was determined to seek the right kind of help from our system. With the support of great practitioners like Jayne, Ashley has been able to take back control of her life and restore her dignity, confidence and self-worth.

Sarah Bramwell
Manager, Office of the Senior Practitioner
NSW Department of Family and Community Services
Practice Framework

Bringing together practice approaches, reforms and priorities to guide FACS child protection work across systems, policies and practice. United by principles, language and standards, the Framework puts children and families at the forefront.
Language

We will speak to families with respect, and about them, as if they were in the room.
The language of practice

Language is not neutral, it is loaded with meaning. It communicates to others how we as individuals, and as representatives of an organisation, interpret, evaluate and make sense. Being aware of the language we choose and the way in which we use it can be critical in determining whose view of ‘reality’ we are accepting, what power relations we wish to reinforce, what kind of world we wish to adopt, and the type of social work we wish to create.

Linette Hawkins, Jan Fook and Martin Ryan – 2001

Language is a critical component of the NSW Practice Framework. The Framework recognises the potential that language has to connect and unite all parts of the department and reinforces its importance to children and families through the Practice First Principle, ‘Language impacts on practice’.

Language is the one tool we all use every day. For this very reason, it is a key component of the NSW Practice Framework. From the receptionist whose first call of the morning is a worried parent who has been burning to talk to someone all night; the practitioner whose words can support a hurting child or break through the pain a parent is experiencing; the manager who can use language to model the partnerships we need to form with families; leaders whose use of language communicates priorities in a way that keeps children at heart; through to policy, program and commissioning staff who have the power to describe the ethics and values of the department through policies, contracts and briefings. We all use language to help provide the important services we have been entrusted to deliver.

The Framework invites us to be purposeful in what we say and what we record. It ensures we all understand that the words we use in direct and indirect practice tell the story of who we are, how we understand our work, and importantly the impact our words have on the children and families we seek to support. It reminds us of the power of language as a social response – shaping how the community experiences our system and how we hold responsibility.

It is time to get real about language, to step away from bureaucratic talk, jargon and acronyms. It is time to use common words to describe uncommon things, to get deliberate in all that we say, hear and write. It is time to harness the collective power of language to support our pursuit of excellence in practice.

Office of the Senior Practitioner