

The Inspiring Stories
of
Four New York Parent Advocates

New York City Administration for Children's Services
New York State Office of Family and Children's Services
Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies
Fund for Social Change
Child Welfare Fund
New School University: Center for New York City Affairs
Child Welfare Organizing Project
Seamen's Society for Children and Families

Photographs by Manny Millan

The Story of Rosita Pagan-Cruz

Parent Advocate, Children's Village

When Rosita Pagan-Cruz applied to become a parent advocate at the Harlem office of Children's Village, she feared she wasn't ready. She was on public assistance and had never held a nine-to-five job. But she decided to give it a try because she knew that parents dealing with the foster care system needed support and tough love from people like her—parents who once had been in their shoes.

Two of Rosita's daughters had been put into foster care and her son was required to live with Rosita's sister because, as a woman in her thirties with a very difficult five-year-old daughter, Rosita had started drinking heavily and quickly become an alcoholic who was deemed incapable of raising her kids safely. Even after she went through a 28-day, in-patient course of treatment and became sober, it took her almost three years of battling and frustration to get her children back.

One day during that long period, at a visitation with one of her daughters, Rosita found out that the child had been badly burned by hot soup. "I told the foster dad," she says, "Here we are, you're supposed to be taking better care of my child than me, but my child is burned." When the foster parent refused to take the girl to an emergency room, Rosita had had enough. "I asked to see the director of the program," she says. "It was right then and there that someone in this foster care agency was going to hear from me. I was going to have a voice. I didn't have a parent advocate for me, so I had to advocate on my own. Everything. I had to look things up, do research, do everything on my own."

Rosita eventually won back her kids, though not without having to wait several extra months because her custody hearing, scheduled for two days after 9/11, was delayed by that tragic event. When her kids rejoined her, Rosita says she "thought of nothing else but being the sober mother they lacked for so long. But when I was cooking or cleaning while the girls were at school, I felt empty. I wanted to do something to fill that void."

One of Rosita's sisters was then working as a crossing guard on 109th Street in East Harlem, the neighborhood where Rosita had been born and raised. Rosita stopped by one day to chat while her sister was on the job and happened to spot a flyer that said the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP) was offering a six-month training course that would teach parents how the foster care system works and how they can deal with it more effectively. Rosita enrolled in the class, and even before she completed it, the course director urged her to apply for a job opening as a parent advocate at Children's Village.

Anyone who has met Rosita, a smart, engaging, well-spoken and bilingual woman, wouldn't be surprised that she got the position. (It should be noted that she is also an eloquent writer who has published several stories about her life. This article is to a large extent an adaptation of one she wrote for the magazine *Rise*.) But Rosita was stunned. "When I found out, I was numb," she says. "I couldn't believe it! I thanked the CWOP staff for giving me the knowledge I needed to get my first professional job."

“Parents come to me because they need to know their rights,” Rosita says. “Or they want help understanding the system. Or they feel that the caseworker does not listen to them or help them. Parents are often intimidated by caseworkers. It’s easier for them to talk to me. I tell them, ‘I am your parent advocate, and you can say that I am your voice.’”

Rosita points to several examples of the different tones that voice can take.

“Sam was a young man with two children,” she says. “Things did not look good for Sam. He had been violent with his girlfriend, they’d separated, and the kids were in foster care.

“When I met Sam, he was a very angry young man. Sam was rude and loud, always using profanity. One day he came into the agency yelling, and the caseworker said to me, ‘Speak to him.’ The caseworkers know I can talk straight to parents because when my kids came into care I also felt angry and unjustly treated. I tell my story to the parents, explaining how I thought I didn’t have a problem and wouldn’t comply with the services. I tell them how hard I worked and how wonderful I felt when I got my kids back.

“I explained to Sam that acting out was not going to bring his children home: ‘If you really feel angry at the system, get back at them by proving you are a good father and that your main concern is your children.’ I also mentioned that his talking loud and wanting to be the center of attention gave me the impression he was nothing but a street thug.

“After that, Sam began changing little by little. First, he stopped being so loud and using so much profanity. Then he began speaking in a kind and polite manner. He took himself out of the spotlight and actually started listening, instead of debating every suggestion. Soon Sam was attending classes to learn parenting skills and infant development, and he eventually won back custody of his kids.

“Dawn, another young parent, was 18 when she was charged with neglecting her son. She smoked weed, her room was dirty, and the baby was dirty. When I visited her home I found it unsuitable. There was garbage all over, beer cans in the kitchen sink and no food.

“Dawn seemed confused, as if she didn’t realize what was going on. As I spoke to her, it occurred to me that she was a child herself. I thought she should be placed in care along with her son.” But over time, Dawn began to change. “She tried a program that she didn’t think helped her,” Rosita says. “Eventually she asked me to refer her to an in-patient program in upstate New York.

“Why do you want to go upstate?” I asked.

“If I go to an out-patient program, I’ll be distracted and won’t go to school,” she told me. “I want to go back to school and do my parenting skills classes, so that when I’m finished I am ready for my child to come back.” Since then, she has been drug-free, though she has yet to win back custody of her kids.

Juanita was a drug addict whose four children had been out of her custody for six years when she and Rosita met. For years Juanita had denied her addiction and refused help. Rosita immediately asked her, "Do you love your children?"

"I love my children dearly," Juanita replied.

"If that's true, why do you choose drugs over your children," said Rosita, who had been asked the same question in rehab and found that it motivated her to get sober.

With Rosita's help, Juanita went through a series of detox and rehab programs and was clean, but when she went to court to regain custody of her children, the judge ordered her to complete an additional outpatient program. After that she stopped trying to get her children back. "I felt sorry for Juanita," says Rosita, "but I was disappointed. It wasn't fair for her to think that after six years she could simply stay clean for six months and get her kids home."

"Not every case ends well," says Rosita. "Still, in the confusion of foster care, I am glad that these parents can come to me for assistance, comfort and reasonable answers to their questions. This is a time in their lives when they feel nothing is working out and they have lost everything. They count on me to give them hope."

The Story of Carlos Boyet

Parent Advocate, Child Welfare Organizing Project and Bridge Builders

When Carlos was in his mid-teens, he and his estranged girlfriend, Jasmine, had a son named Jeremy. Three years later, when a court contacted Carlos to pay child support, he denied that he was Jeremy's father and demanded a blood test, which showed the child was his. At 17 and without a job, he was ordered to pay \$25 a month in child support. He didn't comply. Around this time Carlos met Teresa. Against the wishes of his mother, the young couple married. Carlos still wasn't paying child support. "I had all the reactions of a deadbeat father in those days," he says.

With no job, a new wife, an angry mom, and a city after him for child support, Carlos moved with Teresa to Bridgeport, Conn., where he eventually found low-paying work insulating plumbing. Upon returning home one evening in 2000, he answered a call from New York City's Administration for Children's Services (ACS). The caseworker said Jasmine was using drugs and was involved in a violent relationship, and Jeremy had been placed in foster care. Carlos should come to New York to take responsibility for his son.

He and Teresa began arguing more heatedly over their financial difficulties and the prospect of Jeremy coming into their life. Teresa moved back to New York. Alone and low on money in Connecticut, Carlos abruptly quit that life, leaving his possessions in the apartment and the car parked out front, and returned to the Bronx to live with his mom.

His first appearance in court was on Aug. 7, 2001, when he filed a paternity petition. Carlos went alone. "No one asked if I needed a lawyer," he says. "The law guardian for Jeremy was chewing me up. I was just listening to big words and phrases that I didn't understand. I was basically illiterate of the system."

Almost a year later, again without a lawyer, Carlos filed a petition for custody of Jeremy. He had been seeing his son during visits supervised by ACS. Over the months Carlos had persuaded ACS and the judge that he could create a safe and stable home for the boy with his new partner, Veronica, and her mother in Woodside, Queens. On July 29, 2002, Jeremy was "paroled," in the criminalized parlance of family court, to Carlos's custody.

Jeremy had been in nine different homes in the four years he was in foster care, due in large part to behavioral problems variously traced to cerebral palsy, learning disabilities, attention deficit disorder, and mental illness. When he was seven and living in his ninth foster home, Jeremy took or was given an excessive amount of Valium. He was rushed to a hospital and stayed there a week. Soon thereafter he was freed from foster care. "The fact that he was released to me shortly after this incident did not feel like a coincidence," says Carlos. "I felt like ACS was saying, 'Here, just take him and be quiet about this.'"

Jeremy was placed in a special education class in a regular public school in Queens. "He couldn't recognize colors, talked at about 2% function, and was making no progress," Carlos says. He kept Jeremy out of school for two weeks. After a court hearing, Jeremy was transferred

to another regular public school, which didn't work out, either. Then school officials transferred Jeremy to a public school exclusively for children with severe learning disabilities. But Jeremy still made no progress.

"I got pissed off and took him out of school," Carlos says. He also got ticked off at Veronica and ended up in jail for a weekend after the police came to end a violent dispute. ACS, having learned from Jeremy's school that he wasn't attending classes, tried to have him removed from Carlos's custody. Scared and still without a lawyer, Carlos fled with Jeremy to his mom's house in the Bronx. Without much difficulty, ACS found him. At a court hearing, he was given a week to get Jeremy back in school.

At about that time, Carlos ran into India Echevarria, whom he knew slightly from around his Bronx neighborhood. The meeting would change his life. India was working as a family support worker at Bridge Builders, a collaboration of community organizers, local service providers and lawyers who assist families in the Highbridge section of the Bronx whose kids are in foster care or are at risk of being placed there.

India introduced Carlos to Nanette Schorr, a lawyer with Bronx Legal Services. Nanette took Carlos's case, no charge, and said she'd meet him in court on June 7, 2004. "The court date comes, and she's there!" Carlos says, recalling his disbelief. The judge not only agreed to let Jeremy remain with his dad but also took a bolder step, granting Carlos permanent custody of his son, who now attends a private special ed school.

At India's behest, Carlos enrolled in a parenting class offered by Highbridge Community Life Center. In addition, he participated in a fathers' support group run by the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP), an organization of activist parents who have been reunited with their children from foster care. India also suggested that Carlos take a training course provided by CWOP. She would sign up for the training, so they could go through it together. The six-month course teaches parents how to advocate for themselves in the child welfare system, how they can help other families with similar problems, and how to argue for broader changes in child welfare programs and policies.

As part of the curriculum, Carlos and his classmates visited a drug treatment program where parents told their stories, crying as they described their addictions and the loss of their children. Carlos found the words of Tracey Carter, the parent leader for his training, to be the most compelling. She told of losing her 11 children to foster care while battling her addiction. She didn't know her rights, she said. Carlos identified with that.

A few months after his graduation from the course, he received a notice that CWOP had an opening for a part-time parent advocate. "India helped with my resume, which was a mess," he says. "You could tell I had issues." But he was bilingual, had been trained by CWOP and had experience dealing with ACS, a prerequisite to being able to help other parents the way CWOP does. He got the job. He began by supervising parent-child visits and now runs a support group for fathers who have kids in foster care. Carlos's work with CWOP caught the attention of ACS, which hired Carlos to, as he says, "work with hostile parents in case conferences."

That job led to one of his most valued experiences, helping a mother of four children who were at risk of being placed into foster care. The mother and all four kids had HIV, brought into the family by the father, who had died of the disease. She wasn't taking her medication; the children weren't taking theirs. The kids also weren't in school. Perhaps because he'd had similar difficulties with ACS or because he came from a background similar to hers, she talked freely to Carlos. He found out that she needed a homemaker to get the kids ready for school in the mornings and to help manage the household. He was able to arrange that for her. And he convinced her to take her medication for her children's sake, so they would take theirs, too. Her kids remained with her.

It was only in May 2001 that Carlos walked out of his old life in Bridgeport. He completed the CWOP training, which opened up a new world for him, just three years ago. He still doesn't have a G.E.D., but he does have support from the people he works with, like Mike Arsham, executive director of CWOP, whom Carlos describes as "the father I never had." A difficult and uncertain journey lies ahead. Still, he says, "The best you can have is self-knowledge. I thought I would be blown off, but I'm being heard."

The Story of Tracey Carter

Parent Advocate, Child Welfare Organizing Project and Bridge Builders

Tracey Carter is an attractive, middle-aged, hard-working mom. She has bangs and wears jeans, small gold hoops in her ears, and a bright blue slicker with *Bridge Builders* in large white letters on the back. To look at her, one wouldn't imagine that all of her 11 children have been out of her custody and that she spent 13 years on the streets smoking crack.

Today Tracey is a parent advocate, working in the storefront office of Bridge Builders at Ogden Avenue and 164th Street in the Highbridge section of the Bronx. She helps parents who have "been on the other side," as she describes her former life.

One day Marjorie walked into the storefront looking for Tracey. She had stick-on, black-and-white checkered fingernails that she tapped on the table, making a rolling, muffled sound. Her adopted son, who was three months from high school graduation, had been killed a few weeks before in Boston. He'd moved there to escape the streets of the Bronx. Marjorie was still grieving, and she knew that talking to Tracey would bring her comfort.

One of Tracey's proudest moments as a parent organizer involved helping Marjorie. At 11 one evening, when Tracey was asleep at home with her husband and their two children, Marjorie called. Although Tracey gives out her home phone number to each of her clients in case the client has an emergency, a call this late at night was unusual. Marjorie was about to relapse into drug dependency. Tracey spent two hours on the phone with her. "I let her vent" Tracey says. "The next day she enrolled in Success Counseling, a drug treatment program that is part of Bridge Builders. She graduated and is still clean."

Working with parents like Marjorie is one aspect of Tracey's job as a parent advocate—she has a caseload of about 30 clients—for the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP), part of Bridge Builders. Another is co-leading a support group every Monday night for parents experiencing what she went through: losing their children to foster care. "Sometimes I have to contain myself when parents talk about their lives" Tracey says. "I want to cry remembering my life and hearing that they're going through the same things."

Tracey, along with her colleagues at CWOP, also has worked to change child welfare policy. The goal is to ensure that the system helps rather than punishes parents. In one campaign, CWOP for several years pressed the New York City Council to write and pass legislation to create a parent advisory board to the city's Administration for Children's Services (ACS). The 14-member board would advise the ACS commissioner on policy and promote the education and employment of parents as peer advocates in the system. The aim was to make ACS more responsive to the needs of parents who are affected by the child welfare system.

In December 2004, the general welfare committee of the New York City Council held a public hearing on the proposal. Tracey was there but didn't speak. "It was a most surprising experience for me," she says. "I'd never been at City Hall, and now I was inside and we had a voice. The

City Council people were listening to what the parents had to say.” The bill establishing the board passed unanimously in December 2005.

Tracey did talk several months later at a conference of 300 social workers from different child welfare agencies. She’s a powerful speaker about the dangers of drugs, the pain of losing children to foster care, and the child welfare system’s abuse of parents’ rights. “Talking about myself, I had people crying and laughing,” Tracey says. “One of the ironies was that staff from Community Development Support Corporation, the agency that had my children in foster care, were at the presentation. They were very proud of me speaking, even though I gave them a hard time when my kids were in care.”

The story of how all 11 of Tracey’s children ended up in foster care or adopted, and how she extricated herself from a life of crack and homelessness is painful and inspiring. Until she was 10, Tracey lived a middle-class childhood. Then her parents died within two weeks of each other. In the ensuing 10 years, she resided with relatives, became a rebellious teenager and finally hooked up with a much older man, with whom she quickly had three children.

Then she fell into the abyss of crack addiction, where she remained for 13 years. During that time she lived mostly on the street or in shelters, was severely abused by one of her partners and had eight more children, all of whom were taken from her. During one of her periodic attempts to get off crack, she met a man named Theodore, or T. They married soon after graduating from the drug program, and although they relapsed into drug use several times in their early years together, they have remained a couple. Tracey says she has been clean since 2002, and she and T have with great effort regained custody of two of their children.

With her kids in school and T working for the parks department. Tracey began searching for a job. She found out about CWOP, whose office was near where she was living. Tracey started going to a CWOP support group and then enrolled in CWOP’s six-month training program for parent advocates. She graduated in June 2004. “When my kids were in the system, I didn’t know my rights,” Tracey says. “I wish I had known them back then. Hearing the stories of other parents, some were recovering addicts, I realized I’m not the only one who went through hard times trying to get my kids out.”

The CWOP training provided support for Tracey and the other parents. “We exchanged phone numbers, so we could check in to see if we’re doing the right thing,” Tracey says. “When my daughter, Tahjai, didn’t get her way, she said, ‘I’m going to go home to Grandma’s,’ meaning her foster mom. I called one of the other parents who had gone through similar things with her kids. I came back and told Tahjai, ‘If you want to go to Grandma’s, go ahead.’ That stopped her. I said ‘Stop crying and stop threatening me. I’m doing the best I can.’”

One month after Tracey graduated from CWOP training, she was hired as a parent advocate at Bridge Builders. After a year of working with families, going to case conferences and court with parents, training ACS staff, leading a parent support group, and speaking at conferences, Tracey became the parent trainer for CWOP.

And so the little ripples in Tracey's life that were set in motion by nurturing and informed training have started to cause ripples of their own. Between 1999 and 2006 CWOP trained more than 70 parents, many of whom are now working to help other parents get their kids back from foster care. Half of the graduates, including Tracey, are employed as parent advocates who help parents who have kids in care or as organizers who sit at child welfare policy tables and press government to improve the system.

The Story of Leeshorn Franklin

Parent Advocate, Seamen's Society for Children and Families

“Parent advocates offer hope to people in a hopeless situation,” says Leeshorn Franklin, and she ought to know. Not only is Leeshorn a long-time parent advocate with the Seamen’s Society for Children and Families, a venerable Staten Island-based social service organization, but she has also known hopelessness.

Born to a 15-year-old mother who was unable to care for her, Leeshorn was taken in by her godmother, who raised her “in trust and affection.” As she entered adolescence, Leeshorn became curious enough about her birth mother that she decided to go live with her. “It was a nightmare,” says Leeshorn. “My godmother was a nurse, she was stable, she had a house with a backyard and a regular income. My mother was on drugs, she lived in a project, she had three other kids living with her and others living elsewhere.” It wasn’t long before Leeshorn, who had been on the college preparatory track, had quit school, left her mother’s home and begun using narcotics.

By the time she was 26, Leeshorn had been on drugs and largely without regular housing for about a decade. She’d also had three sons, two of whom had been cocaine-positive at birth and all of whom had been out of her custody at various times. When the third boy was born in 1992, child welfare officials told Leeshorn that she had to enter a more rigorous drug recovery program if she wanted to gain custody of him. This led her to the Seamen’s Society, which in turn directed her to a 28-day, in-patient course of treatment in Rochester, N.Y. Within a few months of Leeshorn’s graduating from that program—she says she has been clean throughout the 16 years since then—her eldest and youngest children rejoined her. Her second son continues to live with a friend of a friend of Leeshorn’s, though he does see his mother from time to time.

Since 1992, Leeshorn, an exceptionally articulate and frank woman, has worked in a variety of roles for the Seamen’s Society and other social service organizations, obtained her G.E.D., taken some college classes and had a daughter, who’s now 10 years old. Eight years ago she became a parent advocate at the Seamen’s Society, and recently she was named coordinator of parent advocates for the organization.

Her role at the Seamen’s Society is more than a job for Leeshorn, who says, “Service is the rent we pay to be on earth.” Fulfilling that noble sentiment requires not only hard work but also patience and perceptiveness when it comes to helping families at risk of falling apart or in which one or more kids have already been removed from the parents’ custody.

Leeshorn considers herself an advocate for both parents and children, and her guiding principle is that, in most situations, it’s better for children to be with their parent or parents, provided the adults are clean and not abusive. But she won’t recommend that a family be reunited unless she believes it will benefit the children. Coming to that determination is at the heart of what Leeshorn and other parent advocates do.

Leeshorn's job has its practical aspects, notably acting as a supportive and able guide for parents as they move through the very complex and often seemingly arbitrary world of the child welfare system, where her typical client—a minority woman with scant education—can feel frightened and overwhelmed. She also acts as a liaison between clients and the various professional assistance organizations, like Legal Services, available to them in their quest to rebuild their families.

As critical as those functions are, Leeshorn, who has about 20 clients at a time, sees a more amorphous role for the parent advocate that is as important—or perhaps more important—than the practical part of the job: helping her clients come to understand themselves. This harkens to Leeshorn's decision to enter the 28-day drug treatment program all those years ago. Yes, she wanted her children back, but she also wanted herself back. "I really got fed up with my lifestyle," she says. "I got tired and angry and wanted something different."

When she begins to work with a parent, Leeshorn tries first to understand the parent, to connect with the client. "You have to get to really know them, you've got to build a relationship with them," she says. "Sometimes it will all come out the first day. Mostly, it takes time. You have to peel away the layers, like an onion, to find out what the person is truly like."

In her own recovery, Leeshorn found she had to become an "open book" before she could make herself right. This frankness, she says, is the way for a person to "lift herself from a hut to a condo, from illiteracy to a master's degree."

It's also the way to mend a broken life. "It's in the internal that the damage is done," says Leeshorn, referring to parents who sink into the self-centered despair of addiction and abuse. "It's in the sharing that the healing is done."

But openness is an awakening, not a solution. Once Leeshorn gets to know a client, the work of reviving the family really begins. "It's more or less the parent advocate's role not to sugarcoat things," she says. "You try not to hand-hold too much. The clients have already been co-dependent [on drugs, for example]. They've got to get independent. If they get their child back, the kid is going to be there 24 hours a day, but I'm not."

"Once you get to know a person, you might decide, for example, it would be better if she waited six months for the kids to return until she has a better grip on her life. You've got to tell the client tough stuff like that. She might not want to hear it, but she's got to. You have to say things like, 'You've only done X, and they've asked you to do X, Y and Z. If you don't start doing the things you need to do, you're going to lose the possibility of having your child with you.'"

And Leeshorn believes the parent advocate has to be vigilant in order to both help the parent and protect the children. "If a young woman who wants her child back doesn't come to [to her drug counseling sessions] for a couple of days, if she misses a couple of visits with her child, it raises a flag," she says. "There's something going on there, but you don't know for sure what it is. It's cause for concern."

And she believes it's the parent advocate's role to urge action by the client, by saying things like, "If you and your boyfriend have domestic violence issues and you're not willing to work on these issues, then you ought to separate."

This adds up to an emotionally arduous process, and it's not always successful. But the rewards for parents and children can be great. And so can the satisfaction for the advocate. "You're not going to be able to save everyone," says Leeshorn. "You've got to get to the point of feeling that when you've saved one person, you've done a lot."