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STORIES FROM THE FIELD

The Path to Permanency is Not Always a Straight Line:
One youth's story towards finding her family

“Julie” (11 years) had been in foster care almost three years when her social worker, Nelly Zambrano (Desert Region), decided to meet with a Coach to improve her newly trained skills in Safety Organized Practice. Ms. Zambrano shared her worries, which was that Julie was lying, stealing, and sneaking around to have phone conversations with her birth mother. Ms. Zambrano was desperate to find permanency for Julie and her foster parents were having reservations about adoptions because of her behavior and Julie did not want to be adopted by them either. Julie had been to two adoption matching events with no success and the only option seemed like Legal Guardianship with her current foster parents. Every time the Social Worker met with Julie, Julie would ask, “Have you talked to my mom?”. It was the only thing Julie wanted to talk about. The Coach asked one question that changed the direction of the case and the path of Julie’s permanency. “Why doesn’t Julie see her mother?” Ms. Zambrano’s response: “Because she can’t test clean,” mid-sentence Ms. Zambrano’s words slowed as she began to consider approaching her case in a new and different way than was traditional, which at the time was to deny parent visits when they tested positive for drugs. It was true that Julie had come to the attention of Child Welfare because her mother struggled with drug addiction. So much so that she allowed unsafe people in her home, around Julie, and that resulted in Julie being hurt by some of those individuals. Julie’s mother could not remain sober long enough to provide a clean drug test to be allowed to see her daughter, so the visits were non-existent and had been that way for a year. The coach and the Social Worker

began to discuss what the true Danger was in the case which was that when Julie's mom used drugs, she allowed unsafe people around who could hurt Julie. It was decided that this danger could be mitigated in a controlled, supervised, and safe environment, so Ms. Zambrano set up supervised visits between Julie and her mother.



At the first visit, Julie's mom came with gifts. It was apparent that she had been collecting toys from garage sales or even collecting toys that had been discarded by others as old and no longer needed. As Julie's mom gave her gifts, Julie's smile grew. The toys appeared to be for a child younger than Julie, but she did not care, nor did it bother her that some of the items were old or broken. The gifts were from her mom. Ms. Zambrano worked with the foster mother so that she was able to supervise the visits with Julie's mom which allowed them to continue their relationship in a safe environment. They spoke on the phone regularly and Julie's mom would even come over and help Julie with her homework. Julie stopped lying, stopped stealing, and stopped sneaking around to contact her mom and her grades improved in school.

Julie began to talk about her mom and her mom's family with Ms. Zambrano, indicating that while she loved her mom and her mom's family she did not want to be "like them." Fast forward to three years later and Julie decided that she did want to be adopted by her foster parents and her foster parents expressed that they loved her and wanted to adopt her. Julie needed to first learn about her mom and where she came from so that she could understand why she was not with her mom, and that her foster family was right for her. In Child Welfare, we often worry that connecting children with

their birth family may confuse children when we are heading towards adoption. In this case, it allowed Julie to connect with her mother, gain clarity, heal, and create a permanency plan that worked for her. Julie's adoption was finalized, she still has contact with her mom, although sporadic at times, and her mom supports her relationship with her adoptive parents. Julie's path to permanency may have had a few unexpected turns along the way but it was her unique path to her forever home and Ms. Zambrano was willing to walk that path with her.

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