

Foster Care as a Support to Families, Not a Substitute for Parents

WALKING TOGETHER: HOW CULTURAL BROKERS CAN SUPPORT BIRTH PARENTS

Labels, poor choices, heartbreak, death, and emotional pain—any of these alone can set your ship off course. Dominique had all these factors, and they resulted in her family coming to the attention of the Sacramento County (CA) child welfare system.

Yes, the children needed protection, but this mom needed time to work through the high waves of addiction and dangerous swells of untreated and unaddressed past trauma she had endured. She had a “story,” skillfully crafted to draw sympathy from others and to not draw ire from child protective services (CPS), but there was much more to her than the “story” she told. A sensitive and intuitive CPS social worker knew she needed more—someone on her side to help her navigate the rising tide of challenges that could have resulted from losing her children.

A new, innovative program funded by the Sacramento County Department of Child, Family and Adult Services (DCFAS), the Sacramento County Cultural Brokers program, had recently launched, and her social worker referred her to it for services and supports. In Sacramento County, close to 40 percent of children in foster care are African American. The Cultural Broker program is specifically designed to work collaboratively with families, social workers, the court, foster parents, and the community in an effort to decrease the disproportionate number of African-American children in foster care. Cultural brokers receive extensive training from DCFAS about the various parts of the CPS system and available resources. The cultural broker serves as an advocate who helps parents navigate the murky and often confusing waters of the child welfare system, with its legal mandates, court orders, and timelines that can cause additional stress and overwhelm parents. The referral was made at a time when Dominique’s legal parent-child relationship could have been terminated.

The assigned cultural broker, LaDonna, was knowledgeable about the mandates and child safety focus of CPS and also had shared cultural and life experiences. LaDonna spent hours discussing options with Dominique, encouraging her to accept the “walk together” approach of the Cultural Broker program, and Dominique ultimately accepted the offer. LaDonna assisted her with focusing on what had to be done to get her children back and recover from the lifelong impacts of trauma.



Together, the cultural broker and mother had tough, courageous conversations. There was not hand holding; rather, there was hand supporting. LaDonna attended court hearings and meetings with Dominique. All of this, along with sheer hard work, is what gave Dominique the impetus to comply and fight. She was told she needed to be determined and show tenacity to fight for herself and her children.

When time was running out legally, Dominique, with her newfound courage, and her cultural broker rolled up their sleeves together and turned the tide.

Today Dominique is over 2 years clean and sober, lives in her own home, works, and provides a safe and nurturing environment for her three children. Yes, she had heartache, pain, and addiction, but those are in her “history vault.”

Dominique stated that her cultural broker “got her in ways deeper than can be expressed in a written court document.” She began to see herself as courageous, worthy, and whole enough to safely care for her children. When she started to believe it and live it, it could not be denied by others. The cultural broker’s understanding of CPS and the child welfare system, along with her supportive approach, allowed Dominique and her family to prevail. Further, the collaborative approach built trust between the family, DCFAS, and the court.

In Dominique’s words, “This program should be available for every mother!”

To learn more about the Sacramento County Cultural Brokers program, visit <https://www.culturalbrokerfa.com>.



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