



Thinking Outside of the Box



**By Judge John Sumner,
Cherokee County Juvenile Court**

I recently had a case involving a mother of three very young children. This mother had herself been placed in foster care when she was a child and was actually on my caseload. She experienced love in her home as a child, but her mother had made very bad choices in people and housing and lived a chaotic life. When the child became an adult, she too ended up involved with domestic violence, drug use, and chaotic living but not as bad as with her mother. In essence, she was mirroring her childhood but improved because she did not have quite the level of chaos as her mother had. In her eyes, she was doing a better job.

The three children came into care. The mother resolved her substance abuse, underwent individual counseling, and ended the relationship with the bad influence. She was still poor and did not have all of the life skills needed, but she was sober and trying. The Division fought very hard to not return the children under a protective order. The protective order was entered.

Through her journey, her oldest child who was now 5, had failed kindergarten twice. She needed very specific help to get caught up. The main issue was a lack of a useful vocabulary and no one had consistently worked day in and day out with her. As part of the mother's protective order, I ordered her to read 30 minutes per day to the children and to log the time. We provided a box of books and a calendar. Despite some scoffing of the "unenforceability" of the order, I still placed it in the order.

See [Box](#), page 5

Co-Parenting Isn't Easy... Or is it?



**By Sekema Harris Harmon,
DFCS Assistant Division Director Field Operations**

That may be the feeling for many families who find themselves not parenting under the same roof. We all know someone who has had to

co-parent at some point. Whether it was because of divorce, a blended family situation, a new relationship or because of other situations – it happens. Some of us have been there, done that, did it poorly or did it well for the children.

But, at the Division of Family and Children Services, we are grateful to have other likeminded agencies and individuals to help us 'co-parent' our children in care. We all have the same goal in mind and at heart – safe and stable environments for safe and stable children in Georgia.

So, what does co-parenting mean and what does it actually have to do with social services? Co-parenting can be defined as a formal or informal agreement or plan to help provide the necessary support and resources to meet the needs of children. Isn't that what we as DFCS do with the providers of services for our children? Whether our partners are child placing agencies, child caring institutions, foster parents, or relatives, co-parenting with our providers is a necessity for Georgia. As parents to our over

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OCA's monthly platform for the unedited voices of young people who have been in care....

Youth Voice

"My Defining Moment"

By Jessica Melford

Hello. My name is Jessica M Melford and I would love to share my story as a young teenager girl growing up in the foster care system. I aged out of foster care June 11, 2016 and am currently a social work major at Georgia State University. By 2019 I will be receiving my BSW by 23 and plan on pursuing a MSW that following summer. I hope my words are able to emotionally touch people as I share my experience as a foster youth. In advance I would like to say thank you to anyone who reads this and the role models who help me in my unique journey as a foster youth. I am proud to say my experience in foster care gave me an exceptional background in becoming a Social Service Advocate in the making.

Most people had a childhood, but I didn't. Most kids wondered about what they're getting for Christmas, but I always wondered where my brothers and I would live next. Having courage to stand up and speak out changed me forever. The moment I spoke out about my darkest time was the moment I was opened to advocacy, looked out for myself and others, focused on my permanency, and became a tiger butterfly.

"While you see a moment of weakness I see a moment of strength." When I was thirteen years old, I hit rock bottom. I wanted to give up on my life because I was put in state custody and I felt like everything was my fault. When I was down I didn't have feeling towards anything, and if I did feel something, it was negative thoughts. I used to say to myself, "why me?" "I hate my life." "I give up." "There is no hope for me." However, knowing this was just the beginning, giving up was not an option for me. I took the first step by putting my younger

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"Not a Single Child More, Not a Single Day More"

Carmen Bolden, an attorney from Buchanan, GA, attended one of Georgia's Multi-Disciplinary Child Abuse and Neglect Institute training sessions in September 2018. Following is an email she recently shared with some of her colleagues as she reflected 74 days later on that session...

"Some of you were at the September training at the Paulding airport. For those who were not, A primary focus during that training was determining how quickly we can send a child home with conditions which will ensure the child's safety.

The Gift of Reading

As part of The Summit being held December 3-5, we are asking attendees to help share the gift of reading by bringing a favorite children's book (or books!) for a child in foster care. (More info [here](#).)



Unable to attend? Consider organizing a book drive before then and contact us so we can ensure these books make it to children in foster care.

Books should be new or like new and appropriate for a child aged 0-18.

In an attempt to encourage people to understand and experience the first 75 days of a case from the perspective of a child taken from family, the instructors provided a light blue bracelet with two notes engraved. (Like the bracelets for October breast-cancer awareness but for a different purpose).

The point was to wear the bracelet for 75 days and get a more practical perspective on how long 75 days really is in a life... How long 75 days would feel like if you spent that time waiting to go home to family. So, if I was a child removed around September 13 (the first day of training) I would believe that 75 days would be calculated showing October 13 as 30 days and November 13 as 60 days and then 15 more days (to make 75 days) would be November 28. If I am that child, I am on Day 74, hoping that everything will be fixed tomorrow on day 75.

Carmen Bolden and her bracelet

The two engraved notes on the bracelet "Not a single child more" and "Not a single day more" are intended as reminders for the wearer to think about whether removal is absolutely required, and if removal is required, how can you get the child home safely without spending a day more than necessary removed from family.

I've been wearing the bracelet continuously ... I'm not sure if anyone else still has their bracelet and can chime

See [75 Days](#), page 5

Upcoming Events:

- ✓ The Summit: Georgia's Child Welfare Conference, December 3-5, 2018, Atlanta, GA. More info [here](#).
- ✓ School-Based Social-Emotional Learning as a Foundation for Abuse Prevention: A State and Schools Collaboration in GA, December 7, 2018, 1 hour webinar. More info [here](#).
- ✓ Forced & Child Marriage in the U.S.: Identifying, Screening & Supporting Individuals at Risk & Survivors, December 7, 2018, Atlanta, GA. Register [here](#).

Mark your
calendar!



Teens are 4 Me: 6th Annual Conference for Youth and Their Adult Supporters

#WorkLiveThrive—the theme of this year's Teens are 4 Me Conference, an annual conference focused on supporting youth on the path to independent living. With one day dedicated to adults working with youth and two days dedicated to teenagers themselves, there's a little something for the more than 400 child welfare professionals, providers and youth that attended.

With a focus on Quality Engagement for Quality Futures, workshop topics for adults included: National Youth Transition Database (NYTD); Planning to Transition: Partnering with Youth to Create Smart Goals; and Interacting with Youth in Foster Care: Trauma-Informed Takeaways for Adults.

"Adult Day" also featured a dynamic panel of young adults currently and formerly in foster care, who shared their experiences and perspectives on how young people and adults can work better together, for improved outcomes.



Youth Panel on "Adult Day"

Whitney Gilliard, one of the panelists,

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A Champion for Children



Justice P. Harris Hines

Along with so many other Georgians, OCA mourns the loss of one of Georgia's true treasures, former Chief Justice P. Harris Hines.

For many years, Justice Hines, a former juvenile court judge, led the Supreme Court's Committee on Justice for Children. Thanks to his leadership, the Committee created the Cold Case Project (CCP), helped push through a revised juvenile code, developed the Court Process Reporting System (CPRS), and obtained additional funding for child welfare improvements.

Despite his many achievements in life, Justice Hines always remained a humble, kind friend to all.

We are forever grateful to Justice Hines for all of his efforts on behalf of Georgia's children and appreciate his wife, Helen Hines, for supporting him in those efforts and for sharing him with us.

Student Spotlight: Madison Bader



The Barton Child Law and Policy Center at Emory Law School provides students with an opportunity to gain practical experience pertaining to child welfare and juvenile justice issues while in law school. Students are afforded an opportunity to work on legislation, policy, and/or direct representation.

Madison Bader is one of many students who have taken advantage of this opportunity. Of her experience, she says: *"Working at Emory Law's Barton Juvenile Defender Clinic has given me an opportunity that I wouldn't have been able to have anywhere else. Throughout my legal journey I've always known that I wanted to be in the courtroom, and in life have always felt that it is important to be well-rounded and get numerous perspectives. Defending minors for multiple semesters has been an eye-opening experience. Our justice system has a long way to go, and I'm looking forward to using what I've learned at the clinic in my post-grad job as a prosecutor. My experience working first as a defense attorney will definitely help me be a more empathetic prosecutor."*

"Forever Loblolly" Book Launch

"Forever Loblolly" is a sweet story of a tree and its journey to "forever".

Within the book are messages pertaining to nature and forests, vulnerability and storms, and nurturing and nourishment.

The Get Georgia Reading Campaign worked in partnership with the Georgia Forestry Foundation and Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) on this

"homegrown book" - a book written, illustrated, sourced, and printed all within Georgia.

The first public reading of this book occurred this month at the Decatur Public Library. It will be gifted to all public libraries and public elementary-school libraries across the state.



First Lady Mrs. Sandra Deal, with the authors of "Forever Loblolly", Carmen Agra Deedy and John McCutcheon, and the illustrator, Thomas Gonzalez



Adoption Month Happenings

“Instant Family”

I’m guessing many of you have seen the viral video of a little girl’s precious response to being told she was going to be adopted. (If you haven’t, check it out [here](#).) Did you know that little girl and her forever family live in Georgia?

This family became aware that, in their area at the time, there were more than 250 children in foster care and only 11 foster homes available.

This month, the family appeared on the Ellen DeGeneres show as part of a segment involving Mark Wahlberg of the new movie, *Instant Family*. During the interview, Paige Zezulka stated, “We knew we wanted to grow our family through adoption of some kind but we had never considered foster care. We kind of had the approach many people do—I would get way too attached; my heart would be broken. But then we had the chance to actually talk with someone who had fostered and they really challenged us on that. They said ‘We’re adults and we’re the most equipped to deal with heartache, not children.’ And that kind of started us on the path to fostering.

With that, they forged ahead. They started with one young child, but soon found themselves with a sibling group of 3. You can hear more of their story [here](#).

Thank you to this family and so many others who are prepared to shoulder the burden of possible heartache and to work through the difficulties and challenges of life while providing unconditional love to a child.



The Zezulka Family with Mark Wahlberg on The Ellen DeGeneres Show, November 2018

Fulton County Adoption Day

Fulton County Juvenile Court hosted its 17th Annual National Adoption Day Celebration this month. Festivities included honoring the journeys of adoptive families and finalizing adoption proceedings, along with plenty of family fun, food and lifetime memories.

Melissa Carter, Director of the Barton Child Law and Policy Center at Emory Law School spoke during this celebration of her own experience with adoption. Although she had little awareness of and no actual say about her adoption, it was for her what she believed this day was for so many—beautiful, profound, transformative, and in no way was it simple.

She reminded the adoptive parents that each child has their own story and encouraged them to help the child understand it and put it into perspective. And, especially when times are tough, to love them through it.





Box, continued

At a review 6 weeks later, the mother produced the calendar and showed her daily reading. The oldest child was slowly improving and appears to be on the right track to pass first grade. This child is on the path to a much different life now.

A court order, if given as a way to help and is supported, can make all the difference in the life of a child. Anyone who comes in contact with parents, whether they are DFCS, CASA, panel members, or attorneys, can directly impact a child's life with real life problem solving. After almost two decades on the bench, I have come to realize that so many of these cases involve families where chaos and crisis management are the norm, for whatever the reason or cause. Many times, real life problem solving on a basic level changes lives. It's almost like the families we see are stuck on a perpetual merry go round and need someone to slow it down and help them off. Many of us have life skills and decision making abilities that are second nature because someone instilled those as an adult. The families we see often lack those skills. They love their children; they just need the right help to change and support their children.

75 Days, continued

*in. Whether you
were at the training
or not, whether you*

received a bracelet or not, whether you kept the bracelet on or not ... I thought it would be worth pointing out we are at 74 days away from family, and the whole world may be fixed tomorrow ... Carmen"

Troup County Juvenile Court Judge Michael Key has shared these bracelets at with the stakeholders in his court and the courts involved with the Court Improvement Initiative and at the MDCANIs. He personally wears his with the words facing him because it is a personal reminder. When he thinks about removal and placing the child back home, he is reminded that we should have "not a single child more" for "not a single day more" in foster care.

The 75 day part of the challenge is that it's the length of time from removal to the first review. It's the first part of the case where there should be a lot of activity going on—case plan development, early evaluations and services, the relative search, etc.

Hoping
your holi-
day season
is full of
happiness.

Happy
Holidays

Several other people have shared the impact these bracelets have had on them:

Fulton County Juvenile Court Judge, **Brad Boyd** took the challenge. The next time he saw Judge Key, he told him a couple of things about the bracelets:

1. 75 days is a long time. And, if it's a long time to an adult, think about how long it is to a child.

2. Wearing the bracelet did inform his thoughtfulness on the bench. A mom appeared before him who was extremely close to having her children returned, but it wasn't quite yet time. He could tell she was getting frustrated about the decision. He called her up and showed her his bracelet. He said he was taking this decision very seriously. He encouraged her and told her she was so close, but he wanted to be sure that when the child was returned, it was going to be a sustainable reunification.

Rosalind Watkins, an attorney practicing in Douglas County, shared that about 30 days after she started wearing the bracelet that it had really made an impact. On days when she's really stressed and frustrated in court, she looks down and sees it as a reminder and tells herself she needs to keep going, keep pushing because these kids need her to and deserve it.

Angela Tyner, Georgia CASA Advocacy Director, shows her bracelet whenever she presents on permanency or best interests to a CASA audience. She wears this bracelet, even though her work doesn't usually address individual cases or children, because even in her macro policy role or supporting affiliates around the state, she can be influenced by these critical points and that CASAs should make sure kids aren't staying in care any longer than they need to.



Co-parenting, continued

14,600 children in our care, we can't do it alone. It takes all of us to provide a balanced environment for our children to succeed. It takes the entire village of co-parents.

As co-parents, we should always interact positively with each other, communicate effectively with each other and plan timely with each other, as this only contributes to the child's positive development and overall well-being. Co-parenting is the shared responsibilities, goals, and collaboration between those who work together to ensure the positive development of a child. Co-parenting is also linked with a child's cognitive, socioemotional, and behavioral development. When children are exposed to positive co-parenting, they are less likely to show externalizing problem behaviors, less likely to run away, and less likely react in ways that may contribute to a disruption to occur. When children know that they have supporting adults, working together for them, then they are able to feel cared about and secure. They have better social skills, engagements and interactions. This is a win-win for everyone, especially the children!

When we, as concerned co-parents at DFCS and other agencies, are consistent in our messaging and the delivery of services, it provides opportunities for 'both parents' to work better on behalf of the children. With every consistent interaction, we learn what communication method works best for our 'co-parenting' relationship. After all, children do not care about what you have to say, unless they first know that you care.

Research shows that children benefit most when parents do the following:

1. **Communicate truthfully about events or discussions.** Depending on the age and the circumstances with each child, we should be discussing with them information relative to their case plans. "Nothing about them without them."
2. **Stay consistent, as children need structure.** If you tell a child that you are going to do – just do it. Be consistent in our visits, phone calls, messages, etc. They are watching.
3. **Utilize resources available, reaching out into the community and building a supportive social network.** Ensure that the services you arrange are specific to their needs and will benefit them for real, not just on paper. We often hear kids say they are more than what is in their record.
4. **Take a vested interest in children's physical, mental and educational development needs.** Wouldn't you do it for your child in your own home? Do it for our child in Georgia. They deserve it too...
5. **Maintain open communication and stay educated on what our children are seeing, learning and doing and how it is affecting them.** Just like yours...



As co-parents for Georgia's children, we can also utilize these strategies in our daily work for and visits with our children, especially during our contact with them and our co-parents. We must make visits to see our children and should have detailed and specific conversation with the co-parent about our children and their development/well-being. Visiting those that we care about is very special to most of us, so let's make it special for our children. So, the next time you are asked what you do, proudly say that I am a 'co-parent' for children in Georgia and we make it work well!

None of us do this work to make millions, but we can make each child feel like one in a million. As Georgia's co-parents shouldn't we do this for our children? After all, it is about the children, right?

The Co-Parent Pledge

*I am dedicated to co-parenting
Georgia's children*

*I want to successfully co-parent
on their behalf*

*I want to strive, strain, stretch
and succeed for them*

*I face this challenge with my co-
parents and all that is good for
our children*

Why...because they deserve it



Office of the Child Advocate

For Georgia's Children

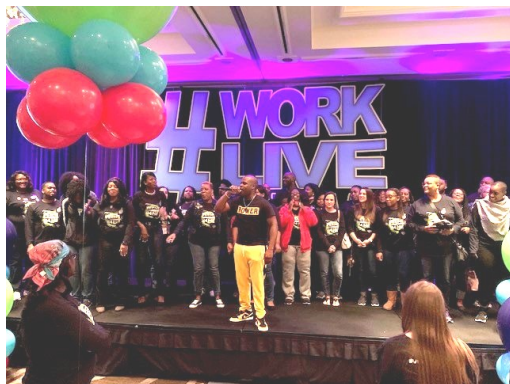
AdvOCacy

Your child welfare update

November 2018

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Teens, continued...



Georgia's Independent Living Specialists (ILS's) with the "Youth Day" speaker, JR Henderson

encouraged all of the professionals to "see something in the child that the child doesn't see themselves."

Youth were provided an opportunity to engage with state level DFCS leadership by asking questions and sharing recommendations. The youth also learned a variety of skills through workshops and demonstrations.

This year's conference continued to support and strengthen programming and professional development which enhance efforts to support young people in making safe transitions to adulthood, academic attainment, sustainable employment, stable housing, and access to health care—all goals of Georgia's Independent Living Program.



DFCS State Office Staff, L to R: Erika Dennis, Interim ILP Director; Tara Kelly, ILP's Business Operations Manager; Lamar Smith, Well-Being Services Director; and Carmen Callaway, Well-Being Unit's Senior Program Director.

Voice, cont'd...

brothers in the system. I couldn't leave and have someone else decide

what was best for them.

Being tossed around in the system wasn't the hardest thing I faced; the hardest thing was saying no to all the people who wanted to let me in their homes. I was fourteen when I decided I never wanted to be adopted or have the family life environment.

God gave me a family, so I never saw the reason for me to be placed with another one. Instead of closing the door on all of those families, they became great support systems for me: plus, it's always good to have more than one. I prefer to stay in one place and make my own decisions for myself given that I have one less thing to be concerned about and focus on a bigger picture I wanted to work on.

Earlier this year I was involved in passing State House Bill 242. Bill 242 allows residents in state care to be provided service from the state to age 23 instead of 21. What statistics showed was that many young people in state care were found dead, homeless, or in jail, because they didn't have that support they needed. For these years, hopefully there is some enhancement. I was introduced to this opportunity by a group I am now working with called Interfaith Children's Network. They walked me through all the steps on how a bill is passed at the Capitol.

When I turned eighteen I got two tattoos: a phoenix and a butterfly. I got the phoenix tattoo because it defines my whole life, rising from the ashes. A butterfly means transformation and a tiger is fears. I formed a lot over five years in state care and became a person I didn't think I could be.

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