

Jeremy Long: [00:00:05](#) My name is Jeremy Long. I am a child welfare policy advisor to the Associate Commissioner's office at the Children's Bureau. And I'd first like to start off by saying thank you so much for joining us here today. I know it's the last session of the day. You guys have had a long day, hopefully learned a lot, but we're very thankful that you guys are here with us. I also want to start out by saying thank you to all of you, including the folks on the stage with me today for all the work that you do tirelessly day in and day out to strengthen families. As you know, the child welfare system has really historically seen parents as somebody who did something bad to their children, which often results in them being removed from their home. Because of this and the image that we project on these parents, we consider them bad or less than. We don't really see them as equals.

Jeremy Long: [00:00:50](#) And because of this, we reduced the time or the importance of the continued relationships we set for those parents and children once they've been removed from their home. And does this really sound like a system really want to have?

Jeremy Long: [00:01:04](#) No. One person got it. I would love to hear a resounding no. Yeah, there we go.

Jeremy Long: [00:01:11](#) And again, if you think yes, I encourage you to use that door to get out of this session and find a different one to attend. But if you're like me, if you're like the Children's Bureau, if you're like these wonderful panelists up here with up on the stage with me today, then you're in the right place. So, what do you really think our child welfare system could look like if we treated parents as equals? As human beings who've just fallen on hard times? As the most important people in a child's life, especially when they're developmentally at such an impressionable age.

Jeremy Long: [00:01:43](#) If we don't really start thinking about them differently. The number of youth in foster care. Does anybody know the exact number of care .. of youth in care right now? 443,000 young people in our child welfare system.

Jeremy Long: [00:01:56](#) That number. If we don't think about families differently, we'll continue to rise as it has done in years past. We know there will always be a need for foster care, but we also know that we will never ever have enough beds to place these youth in even those at the most imminent risk for abuse and neglect. And so we really know we must think differently in a transformative way. We must shake the system, shake the system, one that's operated in the same way for decades, but is still producing very undesirable results for our children and our families. And we need to be, it needs to be one that sees parents as the best

supports for their children, but sometimes just need a little boost in their capacity to care for those children in safe, loving, and nurturing ways and homes.

- Jeremy Long: [00:02:43](#) And that's why it is my pleasure to introduce you today to our wonderful panel. Aren't they beautiful? She graciously accepted our invite to share with you how when the system works in a preventative fashion, it leads to better outcomes for children and families. So let me first introduce you to Julia Jean-Francois, who is the Co-Director of the Center for Family life in Brooklyn, New York. Doctor Susan Esquilin who is a license licensed psychologist in the state of New Jersey. Irene Clements who is the Executive Director of the National Foster Parent Association, Jeyanthi Rajaraman, who is Chief Counsel on the Family Representation Project for Legal Services of New Jersey. And then Supajee Arnau who is our parent. I'm going to, I'm going to ask you to clap for her.
- Jeremy Long: [00:03:34](#) And then we have Linda Pietrocola.
- Linda: [00:03:37](#) Very well said.
- Jeremy Long: [00:03:39](#) He taught me, well I promise. And Darius Pietrocola who are resource parents for Supajee I will now hand it over to Irene who will be our facilitator for this session. Thank you.
- Irene: [00:03:51](#) Thank you Jeremy.
- Irene: [00:03:54](#) We're going to start our discussion off today with a real life story. This is one that my family experienced quite a number of years ago. As you'll learn, as I tell the story. We became foster parents in 1974 so we fostered for many years and we fostered many children, but that's not the point. The point is that we were able to work very closely with the families of almost every one of those children and almost all of our kids went back home. Only a handful of the 127 children we had went into other forms of permanency. All went into adoption very successfully.
- Irene: [00:04:43](#) But I want to highlight one family in particular, and this is Elsa and her children. I have permission to use their first names. Elsa's children, two boys and a girl, came to join our family and were there for two years. During that period of time we had very extensive contact with Elsa, with her parents, with her siblings, with the kids' cousins. We attended all visitations. We went to birthday parties, went to funerals, the family photo sessions. I learned very quickly that Elsa truly loved her children

and that Elsa had not had a role model as a mother when she was being raised at home. Elsa spent many days at our home, all day, watching and trying her very darndest to learn. She'd retain information for awhile and then it would be gone. Well after two years the children went home. That lasted one year and the children came back and thank God they were able to join our family again.

Irene: [00:06:10](#) One year later, CPS asked for termination of parental rights. During the trial I was asked to testify and I had to be honest about everything. All of our experiences with Elsa and her children. When I was through testifying, I walked to the back of the courtroom, sat in the very back row and Elsa got up from beside her attorney and started to walk toward the back of the courtroom and the judge said, "Where are you going?" And she didn't respond and he said to the attorney, "Where is your client going?" And he said, "Judge, I have no idea." Now I had been in this judge's courtroom a number of times before with other cases, so he just watched her and she walked to the back of the room, came in the row where I was sitting, sat down beside me on this side, took this arm and put it around her shoulders, put her head here and cried.

Irene: [00:07:16](#) She knew I loved her and that I loved all of her family. I told her she needed to go back and sit up in the front and then talk with the judge. When it was time for the judge to make his ruling. He looked at the back and he said, "Ms. Clements, I want to ask you a question. Are you committed to this family? It's appears to me you've are," and I said, "Yes sir. They're like family. They are a part of our family now after three years." And he said "then I'm not terminating parental rights on this mother."

Irene: [00:07:52](#) Those kids went home because everybody knew that they had a support system. Now why this becomes really significant I think is about maybe six months ago when I was having a conversation with Commissioner Miller. I had just gotten another Facebook message, and they've come maybe every two or three months or emails or pictures of things that are going on with the family and the mom sends me a message that says, "Irene, I think our daughter needs us." Now, what you have to understand, this is 20 years later, for 20 years we've had this relationship with this family. This mother went on to have four more children, none of which entered the CPS system because she had support and she knew she could call me when she was going to make a crazy decision. She identified crazy.

Irene: [00:08:58](#) This is what we can do with every family that we serve. Resource families must learn and be supported in their

decisions to work with the families of the kids who must be separated due to no fault of their own. So I hope that when you hear the conversation that we're going to have next, with Supajee and her family, that this will have an impact on you.

- Irene: [00:09:31](#) So I'm gonna turn it over to Supajee to start this section of our presentation.
- Jay: [00:09:38](#) So Supajee's really excited to be here, but nerves are high. So we're going to be all really supportive and Supajee, can you just start telling us about King and how you felt when King was taken from you, your son?
- Supajee: [00:09:55](#) I felt of course devastated. I was lost and empty and I felt like a piece of my parenthood was taken from me being that he was my first-born child.
- Jay: [00:10:08](#) And what were your thoughts when King was taken and placed and non-kin care resource home?
- Supajee: [00:10:16](#) I was scary.
- Jay: [00:10:17](#) Why?
- Supajee: [00:10:18](#) All of the stories that I've heard, you know about fostering and kids in the system. It just didn't, it didn't sit well with me as a mother and it just caused a lot of hurt.
- Jay: [00:10:32](#) And did you know anything about your foster family?
- Supajee: [00:10:36](#) Nope. No one told me anything. Wouldn't tell me where he was, if he was being cared for properly. Nothing.
- Jay: [00:10:45](#) How old was King when he was taken from you?
- Supajee: [00:10:48](#) Just three months.
- Jay: [00:10:51](#) And how did you feel when you learned that he was with strangers and not with family?
- Supajee: [00:10:57](#) Scared.
- Jay: [00:11:00](#) And how did you first meet your resource parents?
- Supajee: [00:11:03](#) They actually reached out to me. They sent me a letter and a picture of my baby on the 4th of July. And that was the first time I've actually got to see him, was through a photo.

Jay: [00:11:15](#) And how was the photo sent to you?

Supajee: [00:11:18](#) It was through James, which was my driver back and forth from the division. From my visits.

Jay: [00:11:25](#) And do you still have that note?

Supajee: [00:11:27](#) Yeah. And the picture.

Jay: [00:11:31](#) And how did you feel when you got that note in picture?

Supajee: [00:11:33](#) It gave me a sense of peace and release. Relief. Sorry. A sense of relief and peace.

Jay: [00:11:43](#) And why was that?

Supajee: [00:11:46](#) Just ... can I, should I read the letter?

Irene: [00:11:50](#) Now?

Jeremy Long: [00:11:51](#) Can you?

Jay: [00:11:53](#) Want to talk about your first visit?

Supajee: [00:11:55](#) The first visit with King?

Jay: [00:11:58](#) Yeah.

Supajee: [00:12:00](#) My first visit with him, it was hurtful. I felt like he didn't know me. In a sense, I felt like he resented me a bit cause he just continued to cry and cry and nothing that I tried to do made him, relax or anything. So, it's kind of hurtful.

Jay: [00:12:21](#) And was Linda there?

Supajee: [00:12:23](#) My initial first visit with him? No. It was just me and my worker at the time. And James the driver.

Jay: [00:12:32](#) And how did you feel after that visit knowing it was hurtful?

Supajee: [00:12:39](#) I was angry.

Jay: [00:12:39](#) At who?

Supajee: [00:12:42](#) At all the wrong people at the time. But at the division. I was really angry.

Jay: [00:12:49](#) Can you talk about your first visit in contact with your resource parents?

Supajee: [00:12:54](#) I was sitting outside of the division on the lawn with King who is of course ... he was screaming and crying and as they're walking up by swinging the car seat and my baby was huge. So I'm swinging the car seat. And as they're walking up, we introduced each other and I actually asked Linda and you're like, can you, you're like, you know him, you've been with him. Can you help me like soothe my baby? And she did, so.

Jay: [00:13:28](#) Before that, did you think that they wanted to adopt King?

Supajee: [00:13:32](#) Prior to the letter? Yes, I did.

Jay: [00:13:35](#) And the letter changed that for you?

Supajee: [00:13:39](#) It did.

Jay: [00:13:41](#) And after this visit where you saw your resource parents help you, what started to change for you in your case?

Supajee: [00:13:52](#) Once I met them, they played a huge role in the change. But the worker that I had at the time, she just planted the seed. Let go of the anger and the hurt and if you really love your child you're going to do whatever they ask you to do to make sure he comes home with you. And that's what I did. If I can ask the resource parents to sort of come in. Can you talk about what you thought the system was before Supajee's case and what you thought your role was?

Darius: [00:14:25](#) Not a clue. Absolutely not a clue. When someone's in foster and they thought adoption, completely clueless. And you know what? We find that with lots of people who see us with a little one and they go, "oh you're adopting." "No, we're fostering." And then you explained to them what fostering is and the levels of it and then the complexities and then they go ...

Darius: [00:14:45](#) Same thing we experienced. No clue.

Jay: [00:14:49](#) So why did you become foster parents?

Linda: [00:14:52](#) We had a family that we knew who had their children being removed, two and a half and a six year old girls. And they had called us frantically because the children were going to be removed and they asked if we would take them. And it was never on our radar to be resource parents, but we felt we are a

family of faith and we believed that this is at the heart of God to take care of these little ones. So as a family we decided we would absolutely take these girls into our home. And in the process we became licensed resource parents. When the girls left us with thought "we have a license, maybe we can help other children in crisis." So we continued fostering.

- Jay: [00:15:46](#) And you have kids of your own?
- Linda: [00:15:49](#) Two adult children and our daughter Amanda and our son Joshua.
- Jay: [00:15:55](#) And was everyone on board when -
- Linda: [00:15:56](#) Everyone was on board. And I need to reinforce that what we feel is crucial that the family all be on board because, and especially in this situation, Supajee has relationship with all of us, but each one of us has a unique relationship with her. So it is very ... it's very neat to have that going on as a family. We're all relating to her in different ways.
- Jay: [00:16:30](#) Can you talk about how King came to you guys?
- Linda: [00:16:38](#) We got a call on June of 2015 to have King placed in our home. He was three and a half months at the time and we fell in love with him immediately. And about a month went by, and I know this because it was the 4th of July, and we had gotten him a red, white and blue outfit.
- Darius: [00:17:00](#) A onesie, yeah.
- Linda: [00:17:02](#) And I was just looking at him and thinking, oh what a beautiful baby. And he was laughing and giggling. And while I'm enjoying this experience, I was seized by this thought. How would I feel if my son, my baby, were taken from me? I was gripped with such a sense of loss. And I thought about King's mom and what she must be feeling, not knowing where her baby was or how he was being treated. And Darius and I spoke and we said we have to do something about what ... we were pretty clueless about what to do. But we prayed, we ask God for direction and we felt that what we were going to do was take a picture of King in his little red, white and blue outfit and then send a simple note of reassurance along with the picture on his next visit.
- Darius: [00:18:05](#) Okay I pressed the button and nothing happened.
- Supajee: [00:18:13](#) There you go.

Linda: [00:18:15](#) There we go. So that's the note. Supajee now, why don't you read the note?

Supajee: [00:18:18](#) So it says, 'Your baby's a precious bundle. Please know we are doing our very best to take care of him for you. Here are some pictures of King on 4th of July, on July 4th that we thought you would like. God bless you. Darius and Linda'.

Linda: [00:18:32](#) Linda, Darius, what did the agency or the court say to you about reaching out to mom?

Darius: [00:18:38](#) They weren't real supportive about us doing that? They told us, "well, you know, there's gang membership involved in this" -

Linda: [00:18:45](#) On the father's part.

Darius: [00:18:49](#) And we really ... they really weren't encouraging to do that. But we felt, as Linda had said, we're enjoying this little boy and she's not getting this enjoyment. She's not connecting with her son. We should push for that. And Megan, your worker was very supportive.

Linda: [00:19:12](#) She's fabulous.

Darius: [00:19:15](#) She said, you know what? She said, you can meet in community. You don't have to have the parent come here, you can do this out there. It's very easy to do.

Linda: [00:19:23](#) She encourage us to do it.

Darius: [00:19:24](#) And so we did for several months. We met in community, we saw members of the family. We had ... it was a knitting process that happened. We'd see her, and we'd just love her more and more and more until the day we finally said her birthday was coming. It was October, so I from July to October, and we had her come to our home the first time and play with her son.

Linda: [00:19:58](#) But also during that process of doing the visits in community we were building, we were developing a relationship and building trust, which was extremely important. We were learning how to trust one another and it gave us a sense of the situation. So it was very, very instrumental in the relationship, helping the relationship grow.

Jay: [00:20:25](#) So Linda, we heard from Supajee, her first visit where he was crying and she was struggling and you being able to mitigate

that and help him and watch her struggle. What were you thinking at that first visit? If you can talk about that.

- Linda: [00:20:42](#) Well, it's seared in my memory. I told my husband the other day, I remember what I was wearing. I remember everything about that day because it really, it's there, it's in my, it's in my heart. It's in my mind. We were coming across the parking lot. She was having the visit outside that day. It was August, it was a beautiful day. And we could hear King crying from going into that from the parking lot. And we saw her swinging him in the car seat and he was crying and screaming and really not happy. And we met, we embraced. And I always tell people, I saw that I saw King's smile that we fell in love with on her face. And it was just it was something that stuck out in my mind. I said, "Oh, she's got King's smile."
- Linda: [00:21:34](#) But as I walked into this situation, I thought everything in me wanted to take King and try and comfort him. And I had to resist that urge. And I kept thinking, "This is her baby, this is her baby." And I just kind of stepped back and waited and she turned to me and she said, "Will you take him? Maybe you can comfort her."
- Darius: [00:22:03](#) No, no, she said, "Can you help me calm my son?"
- Linda: [00:22:04](#) Can you help me?
- Darius: [00:22:04](#) It was about him.
- Linda: [00:22:08](#) And that spoke volumes because we saw in that moment a mom who cared more about her child than herself and her humility and teachable spirit. We just ... God just knit our hearts together. And we were hooked.
- Jay: [00:22:28](#) Darius, can you talk about being a resource dad and your relationship specifically with Supajee?
- Darius: [00:22:35](#) I have text messages in my phone that I'll never delete. I'll have to transfer to the next phone. Because we spent some Father's Days together. And the night before she texted me and said, "we are so looking forward to meeting over your house to spend Father's Day with you." And I replied back how excited I was to have King come and then later on in the evening she wrote me a text and said, "I really appreciate you being there for me and my boys." And I think in the childcare system, a lot of times, men are forgotten. On more than one occasion. I've

had to ask the division, could you please put me on the resource letter?

- Darius: [00:23:19](#) Simple request, right.
- Darius: [00:23:22](#) I was at a CP&P meeting and then person said, "We'll move heaven and earth to look for mom. Dads get one shot. If I don't find him—oh well." I sat there stunned and gratified that I had figured this out before she said that. Because dads seem to be ignored.
- Jay: [00:23:40](#) How did you feel Supajee you about your relationship with Darius?
- Supajee: [00:23:43](#) I love him. My Dad went to prison when I was 16 so that's kind of ... the way he treated my mother is what I accepted from King's father. So it's sorta like a pattern and he'd kind of filled that void for me and King. All three of my kids actually, cause they all love him just as much as I do.
- Jay: [00:24:07](#) Did you and Linda ever disagree?
- Supajee: [00:24:10](#) We have. We've had our fair share. We're not perfect, but let me start off by saying that.
- Supajee: [00:24:15](#) We're not perfect.
- Linda: [00:24:16](#) We're not?
- Darius: [00:24:16](#) Big news.
- Supajee: [00:24:17](#) This was all a learning process for us all and we do have our fair share, but we respect each other and anything, any issue that we ever have, we're able to speak to each other in a respectful way. And we worked through it. We're not perfect -
- Darius: [00:24:37](#) We built trust. There's trust, so we can say things to each other trusting that I don't have an ulterior motive. I feel this way and I'd like to express it. Am I right or am I wrong? No, I never meant this meanly. Okay.
- Linda: [00:24:51](#) She knows we love her.
- Supajee: [00:24:52](#) Yes.

Linda: [00:24:54](#) And we know she loves us. So when there is any kind of conflict, we know it ... the basis is love. And we can trust each other so we can resolve it.

Supajee: [00:25:01](#) That's something that we work very hard on because it took me some time. I admit I'm a bit hardheaded sometimes and they deal with all of me and my ways and I love them for and I respect them a lot for that.

Jay: [00:25:19](#) Did you feel accepted? Is that what you're -

Supajee: [00:25:22](#) Yes.

Jay: [00:25:23](#) When did that happen?

Supajee: [00:25:26](#) We had our visits at the park and that was when my trust was, very ... they work for the division. I can't fully trust him how I want to. But the one thing I wanted for my birthday, I asked everyone at the division, "Please, please, I just want to be with my son on my birthday". And then they had me over, they bought me presents, which wasn't what was important to me, but just them having me in their home trusting me enough to know where my son is. That's where it all just began for me.

Linda: [00:26:03](#) Why that was really wonderful was because we were able to ... after that point we spent holidays together. You can see some slides. We began spending holidays. That was Christmas and then again at Easter and then I think the next Christmas.

Darius: [00:26:23](#) That was the next Christmas. That's here mom.

Supajee: [00:26:23](#) My mom.

Linda: [00:26:26](#) And we celebrated -

Darius: [00:26:26](#) We had her family over, we've got a whole new side of the family now.

Supajee: [00:26:29](#) They're half Puerto Rican now.

Linda: [00:26:35](#) Also, we celebrated some milestones in your life. High School graduation and most recently graduating as a Dental Assistant.

Supajee: [00:26:45](#) With honors. Yes. [crosstalk 00:26:51]

Darius: [00:26:50](#) You were valedictorian in that class weren't you?

Supajee: [00:26:55](#) I spoke at graduation. It was awesome.

Linda: [00:26:58](#) So today we're a family. Four years later, we are family.

Supajee: [00:27:03](#) My baby.

Linda: [00:27:04](#) That's him now.

Jay: [00:27:09](#) What does King call you guys?

Linda: [00:27:12](#) Uncle D and Aunt Linda. Uncle D.

Jay: [00:27:21](#) And were you afraid to include Supajee's family? When you started to bring them in, what was that like? To open your heart to everyone?

Linda: [00:27:32](#) We never, I never felt threatened or in times of fear at any level. They accepted us and I think it was because of great deal because of whatever you said to them. They knew Supajee felt good about this relationship and they just embraced. They just embrace our family as well.

Irene: [00:27:56](#) All right. Thank you so much. Thank you for sharing your story. We're going to move on now to the next -

PART 1 OF 3 ENDS [00:28:04]

Irene: [00:28:00](#) Thank you. We're going to move on now to the next segment of our presentation and talk about some practice shifts that need to be made in order to support the parent and the resource parent relationships and partnerships. And the first question is going to go to you, Dr. Esquilin. Can you help us understand from a clinical perspective why strong relationships between parents and resource families are so important, and what type of impacts they have on children?

Doctor: [00:28:32](#) Sure. Children coming into foster care have a number of challenges that they have to negotiate. One of the big ones, of course, probably the biggest one, is the loss of regular contact with the primary people in their lives. Their parents and their other family members. And so for many children, that loss itself creates anxiety, creates feelings of depression, that may show themselves in behavioral issues. Often those behavioral issues don't include an expression of, I want to be home, I want to be with my mommy. It's just behavioral disruptions.

Doctor: [00:29:14](#) In addition to that, I often say to people, just imagine one day you have a new set of people you live with in a new place with new rules, new food, new bedtime experiences, new professional people in your life, new church, new teachers. Everything happens all in one day. And that's what happens for kids who go into foster care, that they have a tremendous adaptation to make. Which would be so much easier to make if there were communication right from the beginning between parents and resource parents. So that things like, what kind of food does he like to eat? What usually happens at bed time? What has he been taught about praying? Whatever the various kinds of daily rituals are, what's this child's experience been in his home? And can we somehow make it work in the home that he's temporarily in?

Doctor: [00:30:16](#) What happens, I think, when the kids' behaviors become disruptive, because they're anxious, because they're depressed, because they have all this new learning to do, is they often end up getting moved. And as a psychologist who sees a lot of those children, one of the biggest problems, I think, is the number of disruptions in placements that occur because the child is exhibiting behaviors that are directly related to the experience of being fostered. As opposed to historical things that that child may or may not bring with him in a given instance. There's a huge tendency in the field to blame all of the behavioral disruptions on the history with the parent. When, in fact, there's such a huge change that's happened to this child that we tend to kind of gloss over and pretend that it's not very significant.

Doctor: [00:31:10](#) Also, the other big issue that I see is that when the parents and the resource parents do not have any relationship, the visitation between the child and the parent is often quite awkward, quite unnatural. It's not in a normal setting, it doesn't feel like a living room, it feels like an office, there's people they don't know, observing and supervising the visits. So the visitation is, itself, very strained. And children come to feel that somehow they're going between two sets of adults or two sets of families. And I think often there are messages, implicit or explicit, from one side to the other, that are negative about the other side.

Doctor: [00:31:58](#) What I often end up seeing is children who were in foster care responding the way children do who are in adversarial divorce situations, adversarial custody situations, where there's a conflicted loyalty. And that adds to the behavioral disruptions. It certainly adds to disruptions around visits and coming back from visits, but to a general sense of anxiety and where they loved and where they belong. So from my perspective, the issue

of developing a relationship between the parent and the resource parent is critical for the child's adaptation during foster care.

Doctor: [00:32:39](#) And the final thing I think that I would want to say to this is that, at some point, the child is going to be reunited or they're not. And in either case, what tends to happen is there's a huge loss of a significant person because there's no relationship between the adults. Unlike the family that you just heard about where there's a continuing relationship that the child has with the people who were caring for him in that first period of his life, in many situations, children just... These people are wiped out of their lives, one side or the other. And I think for the child, that sense of continuity with significant people is critical, and really can only be achieved if the adults have some kind of a working relationship with each other.

Irene: [00:33:27](#) Thank you. Julia, your agency, the Center for Family Life, has very intentionally structured its foster care programs to support parent and resource parent partnerships. Could you tell us a little bit more about what that looks like at your agency?

Julia: [00:33:44](#) Sure, I'd be happy to. First of all, I am so moved by this story that you share, and I think some of the things that we've done structurally at Center for Family Life are things that you intuitively knew needed to happen and created in your own relationships with each other. But at the Center for Family Life, our model was developed by our founder, Sister Mary Paul Churchill, who was very forward-thinking back in the 1970s when she created what she referred to as a neighborhood foster care model. And at that time, she was considered something of a renegade, because her view... And she actually was a Sister of the Good Shepherd, when you mentioned the issue of faith... Her view was that the community in her own life, she had a community, and in our work at the center, we have a community. The community where the organization is sited, in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, was the holding space for foster care to happen.

Julia: [00:34:57](#) Her view was that children should not be removed from a neighborhood and there shouldn't be all of the discontinuity that you just talked about. Children should be able to go to the same school, have the same place of worship, have the same pediatrician, have the same friend group, be able to socialize regularly in the ways that they had done, always, until the time that they were separated from their parent. And fundamental to her view, and this was very radical when she proposed this, was that the resource parents should be a mentor to the birth

parents from the very beginning. And that the entire enterprise, much like open adoption, should be an open experience for everyone. So that unless there was some reason that maybe was decided because of the court, that there was any kind of barrier to people being with each other in the same space, right from the outset of the placement there would be open communication, visiting, welcoming into the home, for all birth parents and resource parents so that people could begin that healing process together.

Julia: [00:36:13](#) So Sister was adamant that that was not only possible, but that was the most desirable way for the work to proceed. And I think, by bent of her personality and her sheer determination, which some folks here fondly remember, I know Paul does too, he's in the back. She frankly just said to our commissioner, this is the way I'm going to do it, and your view on this is not what is going to make it happen or not happen. She was about 4'11" and she was quite the spitfire. So she pioneered this, and actually the model was then adopted by the Casey Foundation as the neighborhood-based foster model that they disseminated across the United States.

Julia: [00:37:04](#) And now fast forward 40 years later, the model has expanded in a way that I'll just briefly touch on. Our foster care program is small, and it's nested in a very integrated array of services. Things like employment services so that people can find jobs. Birth parents, foster parents, extended family members, children, whoever needs a job. We have afterschool in nine different public schools where we see over 1500 kids a day in afterschool. We have summer camp programs, we have a food pantry, we do screening for benefits, we have insurance advocates who will help you negotiate the insurance signing up system, we have free tax filing. I mean, it's an incredibly comprehensive web of services.

Julia: [00:37:59](#) And so when a family comes into the program, both the foster families... And recently we've had many kinship families that are intimately part of each other's lives who need help. They're underemployed, they are unemployed, they need economic stability, they need afterschool programs, they need an evening recreation program, they want to participate in a soccer team. Just regular life as it needs to be lived. We supply those supports to everyone who's involved in this picture. So while master's level social work staff are doing that counseling and reparative work around relationships that may have been challenged because of trauma, we're also ensuring that the economic and social context in which the family is living is being attended to, bolstered, people are fully engaged.

Julia: [00:39:01](#) Fundamentally, we're doing that for the community of Sunset Park as a whole. Foster care or no foster care, this is our commitment to the entire community. And when people live in stronger communities, we see, inevitably, that there are much lower rates of foster care engagement in the first place. So we're hoping it's a virtuous circle in the way that we're framing it.

Irene: [00:39:24](#) Thank you. All right, Jay, talk to us about the role that the courts and legal partners can play in helping promote this relationship.

Jay: [00:39:36](#) Certainly. I come from the parents advocate position. And I think we've heard incredible foundation of when it works organically and seeing past the barriers. But I often represent the [Sopagis, 00:39:48] where they are terrified, they're afraid that their child is hurt, they don't know where their child is. And I'm being told from the agency that the resource parents are not interested and they're afraid to have visits and partner with the parent. So as a parental defense attorney, I am forced to make applications. What else can I do as a lawyer? And I make applications to the court and put this under the basket of reasonable efforts.

Jay: [00:40:15](#) As I've described, I've talk to Linda about this before, it's not reducing resource parents to a contract or a service provider. But that's the reality. At the end of the day, that's what the division has said to me, is that we are afraid to lose these resource parents. We pay them, they're contracted out. We can't get resource parents to take the child to a medical appointment. They're definitely not going to meet with Mom who they feel is drug using, dangerous, afraid for Mom to come to their home. So I make applications under the application for reasonable efforts or return home, just to identify what's going on legally to sort of enforce the needs of Mom and parents advocate.

Jay: [00:40:56](#) To be honest, I usually lose, because judges will say, "I'm not going to force non-parties or resource parents to do something they don't want to do, because it's so fragile and you don't want to lose good resource parents." But what I've learned is that's not the case, because if resource parents are good, they're really committed to what reunification is and what that child needs.

Jay: [00:41:18](#) The one case that sort of started this for me, personally, was years ago, about 10 years ago. I had a client who had struggled with addiction, mental health, and child was removed and placed in resource care with a foster mother. During that time,

the child actually got into a car accident, a school bus accident, and was placed in a wheelchair. And my parent client, I had to call and inform her that her child is now in a wheelchair at five. And even with all her addiction and mental health issues, she said, I would walk my child to school, and that would never have happened under my watch.

Jay: [00:41:50](#) So I made an application as we were learning that the child had to get into a wheelchair, they had to build a ramp at the resource mother's home. And I said, wouldn't it make sense for Mom, if we're really talking about reunification, to learn how to use the wheelchair, because of the ramp and the angling, the medical care. And based under that argument, I was able to get Resource Mom and Mom together. And 10 years later, they're friend's, child was returned. Mom and child... I just checked in again to make sure I can reveal this story... moved to North Carolina, and they still keep in contact with the resource family. But it had to be that dramatic and drastic to actually convince the court system that this was needed to connect the resource parent.

Jay: [00:42:35](#) It often feels like it's a leap to trust resource parents to foster this relationship, but that means we're not being genuine about reunification. This is the goal. And when we bring resource parents in, I always encourage their participation, and we'll ask judges to explain what's required of them and how awesome it is to be part of the reunification plan, and thank them for their support to the parents. All of a sudden, that changes the narrative quite quickly, and the legal framework. And then I have a court order to enforce, which always helps. So I think that you have to be creative and it's not difficult to do this. We have to stop worrying about these as huge leaps. It's actually really comforting to the parent. And then, as I said, my parent is still good friends with her resource mom there.

Irene: [00:43:26](#) Awesome. This next part is going to be a question for everybody on the panel. Part of getting to where we want to go and changing this narrative really means that we're going to have to do things in a different way. And one of the things that I know that we've identified, as the National Foster Parent Association, is the words we use when we describe the people that are in the system, what we do with people in the system, and changing from this negative language that we use to strength based language. And we can all start doing that today, can start changing public opinion about foster care, about the parents of kids whose children need to be separated from their families. And certainly begs the thing about, well, why are we even separating them in the first place? When we know we should be

working much, much closer with the family much earlier on in order to not have to go to that route.

Irene: [00:44:34](#) But in a presentation that I was at earlier today, on the slides they used, there were some things that just caught my eye, and one was children removed from home. Well, in my world, they're being separated from their family. So the difference in what those two things mean. One is desensitizing, one makes me feel. Because I feel for people whose children are separated from their family and I feel for those children. Another was supporting a child through an out-of-home placement experience. These kids are human beings. They're not things, they're not placed anywhere. So a better way to say that would be supporting a child through the process of joining a family other than their own. I mean, we can do this all day long, right? The system says how many beds do you have available? No, it's how many options do you have available in the families that can meet the needs of this specific child?

Irene: [00:45:45](#) So there's lots of work being done on that. I think that we can all start the process of helping make this change by talking about strength-based language. But I'd like to, Linda and Darius, if you would talk about what you think needs to change in order to make this happen more often.

Darius: [00:46:08](#) Please.

Linda: [00:46:10](#) Words. Words are indeed very powerful in the way people see things. That's the reason why a good parent doesn't call their children stupid, ugly, and all these things, because they know that child will... It'll run deep, and that child will grow up believing those things. So words are very powerful in the way we see ourselves in our world. For us, we believe, in view of all of this push toward families working together, that the goal should be wholeness and stability, bringing wholeness and stability. And the byproduct will be reunification, which presents a whole different picture for the resource family. If they're looking at this as an opportunity to help bring wholeness and stability to the parent, then alongside of protecting and nurturing and providing for that child that is living with them, they also see the bigger picture of working with that parent or parents to bring about wholeness so that that child can be reunited with their parents.

Darius: [00:47:36](#) If a resource family looks at the whole family that they're dealing with, rather than just the little baby or youngster, there is a wholeness that has to happen. What you were saying before about just the whole person, their spirit, their mind,

their body. Let's look at a family. We oftentimes get asked, isn't it painful to foster? And the answer is yes, it is. However, the big question, especially when you have a little one, a little baby in your arms, is, how can you give up this child? Hold on a second. This isn't mine to begin with. So if I'm thinking that there's a family, that we're helping them, let's come alongside them. Let's meet them. Let's give them what they need so that we can easily release. When we released King back to Supajee, it was an easy thing. Number one, because she was ready. Number two, we were ready, because we knew she was ready, and we knew that we were going to continue to have a relationship with him. It's next weekend, right?

Julia: [00:48:55](#)

Yes.

Darius: [00:48:55](#)

She can't say no, right?

Irene: [00:49:02](#)

Julia, do you have any comments about that?

Julia: [00:49:05](#)

Sure. I think that part of what we know about foster care is that there are particular communities who tend to have more children who go into the foster care system. In New York City, where I work, there are 18 community districts that, for the last three decades, have reliably been the districts with the highest levels of foster care placement. So taking the community model that we have, we've really thought a lot about not just the language that describes the foster child or the caretaker, but the language that describes the community as a whole. The idea of having the placement happen within the same neighborhood, everyone can feel lifted up, everyone can feel valued. Kids who are in a community where there are productive afterschool options, and kids are graduating from high school, and good things are happening to their neighbors, and they have thriving houses of worship, or whatever all it would be, feel a sense of wholeness and pride and worth that creates really important outcomes like civic participation, and more voting, and people doing things that help them have voice and choice in their own community.

Julia: [00:50:32](#)

From our perspective, the thinking has to change from really just how do we reimagine talking about foster care to much more of a preventive lens. How do we reimagine thinking about all people in all neighborhoods who are undertaking the valiant task of being human beings and living their lives and moving forward in a way that's affirming for themselves and their neighbors, so that everyone has a sense of a deep pride about their own community and the humanity of their community. I think one of the things I've been very grateful to Jerry and the

team about, is their eagerness to lift up that view. That it's really a project that engages an entire community from a very early, early stage in the community's life. And not only after sad and hard things have happened to people, and then we're kind of picking up the pieces. So I think that reframe would be very productive if we looked at foster care broadly, as really just a piece of something that relates to community development and a larger community development project.

Darius: [00:51:55](#) May I jump in on that also? We're talking about changing the vernacular and how we say things. When, in America, we live a very, very independent life. You read our history books, it's all about independence, and we love the Rambo movies and so forth. Independence. It's a very hard thing to ask for help. The difference between somebody sitting on the beach who needs some help putting on suntan lotion and the one in the water who needs help because they're drowning, is, is what? It's I need this. It's more than just, it'd be nice if. And I think if we can help people to not feel belittled to say I need help, your community can jump in and prevention can happen.

Irene: [00:52:43](#) All right. Doctor.

Doctor: [00:52:45](#) I'd like to just make a comment, picking up on that. I think there is this notion out there that child protection is about saving children from their families, and often from their communities, rather than supporting and empowering families and communities. And I particularly want to make a point regarding the issues of substance abuse and mental health problems. Because one of the things I've become very aware of is within child protection, often that becomes some information that is transmitted to resource parents. And the resource parents become panicked at the idea of having contact with somebody who might have a substance abuse problem or might have a mental health problem. And I will tell you, as a psychologist, I could make the argument that we all had one or more of those. But it becomes so stigmatized. It becomes so stigmatized that often, resource parents are afraid they're going to bring some frightening creature into their home. So we need to really work on this issue, I think, of community development, and also de-stigmatizing people with identified problems that might need some assistance.

Irene: [00:54:01](#) Thank you. Julia, one of the important aspects of how the Center for Family Life does work is the focus on community building. Can you talk to us about how that infuses all of your child welfare work a little bit more?

Julia: [00:54:18](#) Sure, it's very much what I think I've been trying to share. We really view Center for Family Life as a community development enterprise taken all together as a whole. Foster care is one part of what we do, it's actually a relatively small part of what we do. But what we try to have is that all of the programs work in sync with each other. We actually have an integrated intake form that we use. So when someone comes into our foster care program, for example, among the first questions that we're asking is, does this person need a job? Do they need higher education? Do they need adult basic ed? Do they need a GED? What is it? This is as much a part of our view as a trauma based therapeutic intervention around communication.

Julia: [00:55:12](#) What we try to think about is that if we can help all of the folks that are involved in this situation, birth parents, resource parents, children, accomplish deep connection to each other, to resources, to a neighborhood, to a future, a career, that all together, that will result in a strengthened and resilient community of people. And I think that taking it at the community view, rather than looking at this as the circumstances of responsibility of unfortunate individual people. If you take more of a public health view, almost, of the situation, you-

PART 2 OF 3 ENDS [00:56:04]

Julia: [00:56:00](#) Make more of a public health view almost of this situation. You would say to yourself, as in medical care, if we thought about our responsibility as a primary care physician as only emergency appendicitis and broken bones as we do in an emergency room, we would neglect the critical role of public health interventions. Like clean water, enclosed sewage systems, ability to put fluoride in water for teeth. These are fundamental matters that really have transformed public health in our country. And so thinking about child welfare more as a community enterprise around strengthening people's economic, personal, social resilience, which relates to things like substance abuse as well. In our view is how we create this movement toward community strengthening. And that you can get a little bit like looking for your keys where that old phrase, trying to find your keys where the light is shining. If we only look at where the foster care family has landed when they need emergency intervention, that is very late in a process that we could think about much more holistically from a different place.

Irene: [00:57:19](#) Thank you. So quickly, let's talk a little bit more about the worker's role and how they can either help or hurt the development of a strong relationship between parents and

resource families. I know you all touched briefly, Supajee, on your worker. Anything you'd like to add to that?

- Supajee: [00:57:40](#) I had four workers total.
- Irene: [00:57:42](#) Wow.
- Supajee: [00:57:43](#) But she was the only one who understood me and really had my best interests at heart. Just Megan.
- Irene: [00:57:53](#) Okay. And she was the one who encouraged...
- Supajee: [00:57:57](#) Me to release the anger and just-
- Irene: [00:58:01](#) Work with it.
- Supajee: [00:58:01](#) Yup. And flow with the punches and just do what I had to do for my son.
- Irene: [00:58:06](#) Wonderful. I know Julia, when we've talked before, you expressed the importance of supervision. Would you like to just speak to that briefly.
- Julia: [00:58:17](#) Sure. At our agency we have about 30 child case planners that work in our child welfare programs. They are very, very closely supervised by my sort of core group, which is the supervisory staff, to be extraordinarily thoughtful about the ways that they're engaging with families and to really listen and to really respect the humanity of all people, to be respectful, plain and simple. And that doesn't happen by itself. I think from an institutional perspective, unless you have really well-developed supervisory strategies and they're constant, it's easy for systems to fail to be respectful to the folks engaged. To be responsive to even some things like answer phone calls in a timely manner, be there in an emergency. These are the things that I think only through supervision are really going to happen in the ways that they need to. And it sounds like you've experienced sort of the good and the bad on that side.
- Doctor: [00:59:28](#) I would just want to add about the supervision and the training of workers. Is that I think it's particularly important that workers become attuned to and aware of race, social class, ethnicity, as major variables that influence how we see people, often negatively. And so it's really important, I think, that workers are trained to really understand how those -isms work and how they get internalized by workers as well as everybody else, and how that has to be addressed. Because I think a lot of the

concerns about the interaction between resource parents and parents has to do with differences in class, differences in race, where there's a concern that you're going to lose resource parents who tend to come often from backgrounds with a little bit more money, a little bit more education, a little bit more privilege. And so those are real areas of potential discomfort that I think has to be addressed.

- Julia: [01:00:34](#) I would strongly agree. I'm doing racism training for all of our case planners. That's a given, and just to briefly mention the issue of language, I think it's very, very important. A lot of our work happens in Spanish and also interestingly in Cantonese and Mandarin and Fujianese, to the degree that you can have workers who actually speak fluently, the languages that folks speak at home. That can be critically important as well.
- Irene: [01:01:06](#) How do we address, hopefully ease the anxiety and fear that we know that both resource families and parents may bring into a relationship?
- Darius: [01:01:22](#) I think if you... There's one thing that we heard over and over in different places, and that was that 75 percent of the people who get into fostering do it to adopt. And while adoption is wonderful, that one issue sets up between the parent and the resource family, well why do they say that? Well maybe they're trying to undermine so that they get my child, and there's this back and forth thing goes.
- Irene: [01:01:52](#) Absolutely.
- Darius: [01:01:53](#) So if a resource family is getting involved to adopt, wonderful. But let's not put them in a situation where there's a child here that's really going back to their family. And that's the goal, is wholeness in the family and reunification to the child. There's gotta be a way of screening for who, the same way you do for language or for anything else.
- Linda: [01:02:21](#) Also if resource families are engaged in the process at the beginning, knowing that part of this process is reaching out and getting involved to help bring wholeness, then this is no surprise during the process. But it was never told to us. We were never encouraged to do any of that.
- Darius: [01:02:52](#) Well we saw a video in the training about this. And this family that had got to know the mom and do the visits at their house. And then we went and did it, and the division went, nobody's ever done this before. But that's what they told us to do!

Doctor: [01:03:04](#) I would just also add, that I think ultimately you want resource parents to see parents as human beings. Not in a category-

Darius: [01:03:16](#) And they're just as important as their child. You want to take care of the child, but what about their parents?

Doctor: [01:03:17](#) Right. And one of the things I think is an interesting barrier is the confidentiality requirements that the workers have, that they're not supposed to tell what the histories of the parents are. But I often say that you don't have to tell that particular story. You can tell the stories of how it is that people get involved in the system. The kinds of challenges that families often face that bring them into child welfare, without identifying a particular person. I think there needs to be an education of foster parents, resource parents, about those stressors, about what the stressors are in the community as well as in the individual lives of families, in a general way. So that rather than having this imagined horrible person on the other end of their imagination.

Darius: [01:04:14](#) It's as simple as Sandy happening on the coast of New Jersey. When that happened, social services had this influx of children because housing was a huge issue, just like that.

Irene: [01:04:28](#) Jay?

Jay: [01:04:29](#) So I would liken this to youth and participation in courts. So when by law again, you're required to have children presented at court, they have a right to come to court.

Irene: [01:04:40](#) Absolutely.

Jay: [01:04:40](#) And there was a fear in New Jersey and a lot of jurisdictions, of what would that look like? What would happen? They'll be re-traumatized, they'll see their parents, it will disrupt the court system, it will delay due process for everyone. And we spent a lot of time unpacking the law and going through every hypothetical. And what we learned quickly after it was processed and accepted, it was not a big deal. And in fact was really helpful. It was incredibly helpful, and youth were participating, judges were seeing their youth with the parent. And it needs to be enforced, there's still a lot of work to do. But that reminds me of what's happening here. We're assuming the worst and we're not assessing, we're not really unpacking what the concerns are, when we know if truly, if it's reunification is the goal, how do we serve that. And through orders, through

resources, through supporting all the players, this can be very successful.

Irene: [01:05:38](#) A foster mother tell me, a very tenured foster mother tell me one time, she said, "Oh Irene, every time a child leaves, my heart breaks. But it's not heartbreaking. My heart breaks because a child's not here anymore. But I'm happy because the child is gone home." And she said, "You know, I think the hearts of foster parents oftentimes look like patchwork quilts because it gets broken and you patch it, and then it gets broken again, and you patch it again." And she said, "You know, I've realized that I have a really very, very beautiful quilt walking around inside my body." And I think that that's... We have to get to the point where we accept that that is the challenge of foster care. One of the big challenges, and get over the fact that these children need to be safe in another form from being with their family.

Irene: [01:06:36](#) So what we do and how we frame all of this I think is critical over the next few years, because I agree with the other speakers that we've heard over the last two days that the time is now, the time is right, the momentum is there, the leadership is there and I think that there's some really determined people in this country who really want to make this happen. So we have a little bit of time yet. Awesome.

Julia: [01:07:14](#) If I could just make one point.

Irene: [01:07:15](#) Sure, please.

Julia: [01:07:16](#) That was occurring to me while you were talking. You know, I think there are other areas. Take for example, criminal justice involvement. Where people have been really taking a very different perspective on understanding of history and the results. So if you look at something like Bryan Stevenson's book, Just Mercy. Where he talks about the history of mass incarceration. Like what has led toward this point, and what are all of the historical periods and issues that have driven us to this place that we're at right now, with an extraordinary number of people being incarcerated. And then I thought, when you opened with half a million kids in foster care. I think it would be so helpful for foster parents not to feel that the only option is to feel the sort of sad and somewhat bittersweet comfort of their patchwork heart. That sounds very hard to live in, in a way. I think there's also a way to feel a sort of social justice motivation here to think, is this the only outcome of history that we can imagine? Is this the only sequence of events in where we would end, that we could imagine. And I think if we read books like

Just Mercy, or you see movies like 13th, you have a very different view of what these realizations can then bring us toward. And I think child welfare is ripe for that kind of thinking as well.

Irene: [01:09:01](#)

I agree. Doc, do you have any comments on that?

Doctor: [01:09:04](#)

No, I fully agree. I totally agree with that, because I think if you just look at the history of the child welfare system to the extent that I know it, this is not a system that was designed originally to deal with social problems. And a lot of what we have-

Irene: [01:09:21](#)

It is. It's social.

Doctor: [01:09:23](#)

I mean, originally it was designed to deal with the deaths of parents, the illnesses of parents. But we have significant social problems in the country and child welfare has been kind of saddled with those problems rather than looking at the problem in a more social way, a more social justice way rather than as individual dilemmas of individual families.

Irene: [01:09:49](#)

Very true. I know we've talked a little bit about the motivations of people who become foster parents. And I guess since the late eighties and when we've had guidance that, as the states have had guidance that we should dual license families to be foster and adopt. And in my own experience, having been in this work now for about 45 years, I really started seeing the difference in families and their motivations when, when that occurred.

Irene: [01:10:34](#)

I also see every day, from my perspective at my work that the decline of tenured families is significant. There are very few tenured foster families left in this country. That scares me. We have family first that is encouraging family care, encouraging us to limit group care, which I completely agree with. But we have to have families for these children to become a part of that are able to meet their needs, that can be effective with them at whatever their level of need is. With tenure, foster parents become wiser with every child that joins their family.

Darius: [01:11:32](#)

For sure.

Irene: [01:11:33](#)

Because every child is different, every child is unique, their family situation is unique. How things resolve are unique. How you have to deal with each child depending on their personality and their genetics is unique. We have to have, and we have to develop some tenured families in order to have the families with the wisdom that it's going to take to meet the needs of

some of these kids. So, I think that how we recruit families moving forward has to change. The message can't be that'll save these kids. The message has to be, we want well families for every family. And we need to help each other and we can do that. And for those families whose children do need to be separated for whatever the critical need is in the future, that we have those resource or foster families available that can actually help them. Not just the child, but that family heal and become well.

Irene: [01:12:42](#) So a challenge needs to go out, I think, to all the agencies, the counties, the states, the private sector, that does foster care work, about rethinking and re-looking at how they do their recruitment. and certainly how they support those families once they've brought them on and licensed them.

Irene: [01:13:06](#) When I get calls and I get lots on the national level from foster parents, from every state. And it's heartbreaking when they call and say, "We're quitting. We can't take it anymore." And when you say, "Well, what is it?" They don't say it's the kids. They never say that. We get no support. Nobody cares what foster care is doing to my children. They don't care that we're burnout. That secondary trauma has just all but broken our family apart because we're trying to help somebody else and their kids. They don't recognize it. I had one lady say, "You know, the staff at the county, they get this employee benefits, free counseling and all this kind of stuff because they get burnout or they got secondary trauma. Nobody's ever asked me one time, 'Are you burned out? Are you experiencing secondary trauma?'" And she said, "You know, I don't want to say is I experience it 24/7 every day and nobody seems to care. And nobody's come in here and asked me, what is this doing to my own kids? That's why I'm quitting, because I can't do this to my kids anymore. Nobody cares."

Irene: [01:14:22](#) So the challenge is not just to bring on more families, it's to support those families in the ways that they need it. The same way that the workforce needs it, experiencing the same kinds of things. And the other thing I hear all the time is, at least the staff get to go home at five o'clock or six o'clock. They get weekends off, most of the time. They get holidays. We can't even get respite care. We have to ask for it three months in advance and they still can't find anybody to help us with respite care. How are we supposed to continue to function?

Irene: [01:14:57](#) So we have a lot to do as we change the system and know that we will have foster families in the future, and that we will need them because not every family will be able to remain intact. But

if we want the families who can really be effective and help with this reunification and family wellness, we have to provide... I think I just went off. We have to provide family wellness for those that are serving as resource parents. And that goes for the relative caregivers as well. And certainly for folks who adopt these kids and post adoption services.

- Irene: [01:15:39](#) Any closing comments or remarks from anyone? We have a few minutes left, so now's your time to say your piece.
- Linda: [01:15:48](#) I wanted to comment, Irene, on things that you just mentioned, because I remember with that first situation that I described with the two little sisters that came to us, and we were completely green. It was our first situation. We didn't understand trauma, we did not understand the behavioral issues and the acting out. And although the girls knew us, they were going through tremendous pain. And we kind of learned by trial and error. But at the end of the day, what we did as a family to survive, because the girls were a handful, the girls would go to sleep, we'd put them to bed and then the four of us, our daughter and son and husband and I would meet in our family room and we would-
- Darius: [01:16:38](#) No, we'd collapse in our family room. A little different.
- Linda: [01:16:41](#) We would collapse. It was rough. I say it was the best of times and the worst of times. And we would debrief and we would encourage one another. And we would say, what happened today with this one and what... And any movement forward was great. We grabbed onto it and we were, okay, we're making a difference here. Things are changing. But for a while it was really rough going, but we were our support system. We realized we had to reinforce one another because that was it. There wasn't anybody.
- Darius: [01:17:14](#) But we learned a lot about ourselves as a family.
- Linda: [01:17:17](#) And we grew.
- Darius: [01:17:17](#) Someone said to us before we started with these two little girls, the person said to us, without any malice at all, these children will find the cracks in your marriage and in your relationships. And we learned... We were always a pretty forgiving family, because the Bible says we should be. And we were always pretty good at that. But once we had foster children, the stresses... We really did have to forgive each other a lot more

for snapping, and saying something a little too quickly or whatever, because there is very little rest.

- Irene: [01:17:54](#) Very little rest. That's right. I was interviewed for a TV, actually a newspaper article and it turned into a TV segment, and the reporter said, well what do you think the most significant thing between you and your husband is about foster care? And I said, it makes us talk to one another. We have to talk to one another regularly or we can never be on the same page with what's going on in this family. And I said, I have friends and even relatives that are saying, "Oh we're getting stale, my husband never talks to me, he sits in front of the computer all day, whatever." I said, "Not in my house. We have to talk to one another." And so it was kind of a... And the other thing we learned is, you better have a really good sense of humor if you want to survive foster care. In whatever role you play in it, I think. Because there can be a lot of humor in some really tragic things. When you put them in perspective, in the right perspective.
- Darius: [01:18:57](#) You were talking about marketing before.
- Irene: [01:19:00](#) Uh-huh (affirmative).
- Darius: [01:19:00](#) When you're looking to get foster families, resource families, I think that's a key. Family. If it's a family who's decided to make this decision, when one's up the other might be down, and they can kind of encourage each other and be their own... We were our own support system because we did it as a family. And so when you had to schedule things... So who's picking one up from school and who's doing this, and who's going there.
- Linda: [01:19:30](#) Who's babysitting tonight, so we can get out and get a break.
- Darius: [01:19:33](#) Yeah, Mom and Dad need a date, so who's pitching in? So when you do it as a family, and then you can bring the parent into a working family. We can as a family help this parent and their children become something whole in society. And that wholeness can go to the next generation and the next generation and there won't be fostering having to be done in that family anymore.
- Jay: [01:20:03](#) Can I just hit on-
- Irene: [01:20:04](#) Absolutely.

Jay: [01:20:04](#) Going back to the recruitment and looking at the difference of a resource family, because post removal, it becomes competitive. And it's not being described that way. Reunification is the goal. But the agency's so desperate to make sure the resource parents are happy and they're afraid they're going to reject the child and maybe ask the child to be removed, and the plan of adoption won't be fulfilled. And so we're not being real when we're actually requiring resource parents to support the family, because we want to keep them happy, and they're not being included in the process. And then we're really not talking about reunification. It's really, who are you betting on? Are we going to bet on the parent we removed from or separated the child from or keep the resource family happy so they can adopt?

Jay: [01:20:48](#) And so that's been the tension, post removal. I know the burden is on the agency to continue to reunify, but it's really the burden falls on the parent advocate to justify that this parent is worthy of reunification. And so I think when the prevention, the community efforts that you've described and all of that pulled in together, it's incredible. But it's unique, it's still very unique.

Irene: [01:21:16](#) Yes. That's why we think we have to change the way we do a recruitment, which would change the message and the expectation. We may not have as many takers, but those that do, hopefully we'll be able to support the system that we see coming, that we all want.

PART 3 OF 3 ENDS [01:21:40]