

The Long Road To Stability

Imagine having a second chance at life solely because a concerned neighbor cared enough to reach out to the Division of Child Protection & Permanency (DCPP) and alert them to the neglect you were enduring. Such was the case for AS back in 2016. AS was 12 years old at the time of these allegations. Her mother, Ms. P, had a habit of keeping countless cats in a filthy home with little to no food in sight. She was an avid cocaine user and an alcoholic; she would disappear for days on end and would bring homeless men to their home. Ms. P was astute enough to instruct her daughter to lie about her actions if she was ever questioned. The neighbor made several allegations throughout 2016 and helped AS survive by bringing her food. DCPP was unable to substantiate these allegations, because Ms. P was always able to clean up her act and the home by the time DCPP made their visit.

To AS' benefit, in 2017, DCPP finally had a visit with Ms. P that would substantiate the neighbor's allegations. Ms. P was clearly under the influence of cocaine, the house was in disarray, no food in the home, and AS finally felt brave enough to admit that the neighbor was telling the truth. AS was removed from her home at this point.

Initially, AS went to live with a relative but did not stay there long. She was struggling to adapt and had not been diagnosed yet with behavioral issues. The court assigned her a CASA advocate, and she was placed on multiple medications after a brief stay in a psychiatric hospital ward. Unfortunately, AS had a habit of refusing her medications when she started feeling better and would quickly begin to spiral mentally. Her resource families frequently found it difficult to get her to resume taking them. AS had frequent violent outbursts that would see her through seventeen different resource homes, therapeutic homes, and shelters within the next five years. She had multiple stays in psychiatric hospital wards as well. Throughout those five years, AS had multiple CASA advocates assigned to her that would encourage her to take her medications and follow through with therapy sessions. She would improve briefly and then spiral once again.

In 2021, her current CASA advocate, Ms. D, encouraged the school to get her tested for an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP), fearing that there was something more aside from her behavioral issues. AS was diagnosed with Mild Intellectual Disability, which shed light on her inability to remain consistent with medications. In light of the diagnosis, and amidst the thick of the pandemic, AS missed several months of school due to behavioral outbursts, suspensions, and an exposure to COVID-19. Ms. D worked with DCPP and the school to find her an alternate placement at a charter school designed with a classroom geared towards her specific disability. She became very engaged in classes, and behaved appropriately and respectfully towards peers and instructors alike. It was the perfect nurturing, supportive environment AS needed, and she graduated 12th grade in 2022 at the age of 18.

Since graduation, Ms. D has been working with her to find permanent housing and a stable job. She has been living in a transitional program with less structure and unwantedly became pregnant. AS opted to have an abortion, and Ms. D worked closely with her to review her options and the steps she would need to take. Fearing the lack of structure would cause AS to spiral anew, Ms. D helped her apply for jobs while searching for vocational rehabilitation programs that will assist AS with finding a career path for youth with disabilities. AS recently landed a job at a local store she loves and is thrilled to begin earning her own money. For the first time in her life, AS is in a stable upswing, and she shares the hope with Ms. D that it will only get better from here on out.

What the Future Holds

By the age of seven, most children have become adapted to the idea of school being a commonplace event in life. Such was not the case for H. In seven years of life, H had never seen the inside of a school or a doctor's office. His mother, enduring her own traumas, made several decisions that led to her incarceration. She is currently living through a ten-year sentence.

Removing him from his home, Child Protective Services (the Division) placed H with a resource family. He was registered immediately in first grade despite never having any formal education. Understandably, H failed the year and was retained – adding additional trauma to his life. The school placed him on an individualized learning plan (IEP) that was designed for children with general learning disabilities, but H was not thriving under this plan.

During the next two years, his resource family came to realize that they wished to adopt H. Being unaccustomed to the stability and strict structure this family provided, H began exhibiting disruptive behaviors in hopes of one day reuniting with his mother. The Division removed H from this placement and sent him to live with a new resource family that over time grew weary of his behavior. Luckily, H's original resource family had not forgotten about him and were monitoring his wellbeing from afar. The family's daughter (Ms. X) had grown to love H as if he were her own son. She reached out to the Division and requested that H come live with her, with the intention of adopting him, and she was granted the right.

With more than two more years of transitions, the court deemed it beneficial for H to have his own CASA advocate (Ms. D). Having scoured H's case, Ms. D felt it right to petition the school for a re-evaluation of his IEP. The school refused her various times, but she kept insisting that something was not right. His behavior at home was not improving and his grades even less so. The school finally acquiesced and discovered that H had additional learning difficulties that needed addressing. He began making significant progress with his comprehension under a new plan!

Meanwhile, H's mother started reaching out from prison, which renewed his hope that he would one day live with her again. It escalated his behavioral issues at home, but Ms. X was willing to work with him, supporting him through his outbursts as he adjusted to new patterns at school and the sporadic presence from an incarcerated parent.

As an 11 year-old pre-teen, the goal between Ms. D and Ms. X became keeping him occupied during the summer months so he would not lose the progress he was slowly making. Ms. D requested funding from the Division for a summer sports program but was denied.

Unfortunately, his unstructured time led to H's experimentation with marijuana. While Ms. X was at work, he would spend time with boys in the area who encouraged him to smoke. The experimentation grew to frequent habit despite the intervention of Ms. X and Ms. D. In an effort to help H, Ms. D informed the Division of his risky behavior and the summer program was approved. Upset over the original denial for the summer program, H refused to go. He was placed instead in an intensive drug abstinence program but was dismissed for failure to comply.

His advocate, Ms. D and resource parent Ms. X. are not sure what the future holds for H, now 13, but they refuse to give up on him. They both love him dearly and pledge to continue to make a difference by being there for H as he navigates life as a young black male in the child welfare system.

The Journey Home

So much can transpire in the span of two years. In 2020, at the young age of eight, BH witnessed his mother overdose on drugs. Because his father was serving a ten-year sentence in Pennsylvania, The Division removed BH from his home and sent him to live with his paternal grandmother. BH's mother (Ms. H) committed to a substance abuse program but tested positive on several occasions for opioids, thereby lengthening his stay in foster care.

While staying with his grandmother, BH began attending therapy. It was not enough to curtail his uncontrollable, disruptive behaviors stemming from his trauma. The court deemed that a CASA be assigned to BH to assist with his needs, but his grandmother had already asked for his removal because of said behaviors.

During the search for a new resource home for BH, his CASA worked diligently to create connections between herself and BH, his mother, and all stakeholders in his case. She began by working closely with Ms. H to encourage her on her path to recovery. Simultaneously, the CASA advocated for BH to receive a neurological evaluation to determine if there was a necessity for an Individual Education Plan (IEP). When deemed necessary, the CASA also encouraged the school to provide BH with additional tutoring. She attended IEP meetings and advocated for her youth in and out of the courtroom. The CASA also ensured that BH's therapy remained scheduled during these difficult transitions.

In due time, Ms. H passed the substance abuse program and was seen fit to resume care of her son. Throughout the transition of bringing BH home, the CASA worked closely with Ms. H and the caseworkers to mitigate any additional trauma for him. She assisted in the transference of his IEP to his new school and made sure his services were continuously implemented.

The case was closed in May of 2022, and a large part of that milestone stemmed from the CASA's ability to create positive relationships with all stakeholders in BH's case. His story changed for the better, because someone cared enough to never give up on him, his family or his needs.