

Interviews

June 2014

Lisa Howard

We had to physically remove Shawntese from the care of Ms. Ruth Little – Shawntese calls her “Grammie,” even though there’s no blood relation, because she’s been Shawntese’s caregiver for so long – after Ms. Little had a mild stroke. The Department filed for legal custody and named both Freda and Caleb in the petition. That’s Shawntese’s mom and dad. Unfortunately, Caleb never really had much history of being involved with the family, and he had an extensive criminal background. We tried to engage with him at the beginning, after he was arrested again, I mean, but he just wasn’t interested in what was happening to Shawntese. And I guess it’s true that we didn’t conduct any needs assessments for him, but given the circumstances it didn’t really seem like a priority. I mean, he was going to be in prison for another 8 years at least, and Shawntese was already in a very stable placement where all her needs were being met, and she got to stay in the same school district. Plus her reunification with her mom was moving forward by then. Shawntese would have been an adult by the time Caleb got out. There really wasn’t anything for us there. Later Caleb changed his mind. The prison has some really restrictive policies so my involvement with Caleb was primarily through his caseworker, Otis Watchman, at the prison. Otis was able to convey Caleb’s desire to have contact with Shawntese and that Caleb supported our efforts to reunify Shawntese with her mother.

I’ll admit that I thought the prognosis for this case looked bleak at first. I did consider establishing a concurrent plan of adoption, but it became clear early on that the Samuels were providing an excellent home for Shawntese. That’s why I never felt the need to talk to them about adoption. Certainly not before I’d gotten back the assessment results, and, after I had those, it seemed even less necessary. There was some confusion at the beginning about how Ruth would be involved in the case, but she made it pretty clear that, while she wanted to be a part of Shawntese’s life, she didn’t want any sort of full guardianship responsibility. So I just let her do what she felt comfortable doing and focused my attention on Freda and Shawntese.

The providers in this case were excellent, although it was next to impossible to get written reports from the providers we were working with, so I had to always send letters of confirmation to them. They were really good about coming to court to testify. The foster parents and I worked especially closely with Dr. Ball and Shawntese on management of her medication. Everybody was on the same page on that – and that really helped to make sure that Shawntese was on the medication for a short time. I also spent a lot of time on case planning with both Freda and Shawntese, both formal meetings and informally during visitations. We also conducted all of the formal and informal safety and risk assessments that were required. You know, during the investigation and case planning, before court, before closing the case. I also assessed Shawntese’s safety in the foster homes and asked Shawntese about it during my visits with her. I’m not saying that everything in this case went perfectly – it did take slightly longer than 12 months to reunify, for example. But there was a delay in securing housing, and, given Freda’s history, we really wanted to make sure she was ready to parent. Once she did secure an apartment, it took her a little longer to get situated and stable in it. But now that the case is closed, I believe that there’s more than enough

support in place to ensure that Freda and Shawntese succeed. They've got formal supports like Dr. Ball, Dr. Etheridge, and the whole staff at Serenity, and they've got informal supports like Ruth and the Samuels and Freda's church. I feel good about this one.

Freda Jordan

I gave things a go with Caleb. When I told him I was pregnant, he even said he was proud and we moved in together. When Shawntese came, we tried to make it work as a family. But it didn't work. He was in and out of jail and, even then, I was having problems with my medication. He'd left for good by the time Shawntese was five, and I never got one penny from him after that. I know he's reaching out to Shawntese now and writing her letters. She sometimes talks about it, how she doesn't see him as a father, but is curious. But I think he needs a lot of help before he can have any real part in her life. Never mind the drugs and that he's never even had a real job. He doesn't even know how to be a father. I hope he's getting some services or whatever in prison, because he needs them.

That's what helped me so much, anyway – getting those services I needed. Lisa – that's my case worker, Lisa Howard – she was great. She was patient and kind, always kept our appointments, brought Shawntese over for visits. She always talked with me about plans for Shawntese, even while I was still in the hospital. She'd talk to me about what I wanted to have happen, and that surprised me. I didn't think she'd care what I wanted. And then she helped me get my apartment and spent a lot of time checking in with me about where I was at with my therapy, if the medication I was on was working for me, how I was doing at work, who are my friends, stuff like that. Before Shawntese came home, we spent a lot of time talking about what she called my "crisis plan." We came up with a plan for if I start feeling crazy again, if I thought I might use, or if anybody feels that Shawntese isn't being cared for.

I didn't used to have close friends, or other people I could depend on, except for Ruth. It was hard for me to open up and accept the kind of help I needed. Maybe I thought I needed a man to take care of me. But since I've been working, both Shawntese and I have made some good friends. A couple of my coworkers have daughters her age, and there are people at the church we visit. Girl Scouts has been good for Shawntese, and she's involved at our church camp. And then there's the Samuels. They've been such a blessing for all of us, Shawntese and Sylvester and me. Javon and Charlotte, they've taught me so much about being a good mom, about taking care of my family. They've stayed a part of our lives even though they didn't have to. And Ruth is still around even though she's still dealing with stuff from her stroke. I like that I can help her now just like she helps me.

I think the system really did help me. I didn't know what was going on in my life, and I guess I had to fall down to get up. I think it was good in the long run, but I wish none of it had to happen in the first place. I really hurt my children, but I think I'm stronger now.

Shawntese Jordan

I understand what happened. My mom was sick and needed help. We always managed OK when it was me and Sylvester, and Grammie was there, but then Sylvester left for school, and Grammie had her stroke. I don't like thinking about how I felt back then. I was really scared those 2 days when I was by myself in the apartment. And then Ms. Howard took me to live with the Samuels. I didn't want to go live with them, even though they seemed really nice. When Grammie got out of the hospital and went back home,

what I wanted to do was go live with her. I thought that maybe I would feel better if I did. I was having a real hard time sleeping and I kept thinking that something more terrible was going to happen. And people would say stuff and I would lose it. Deciding to take medicine was hard. My mom has to take medicine and I was afraid that it meant I was like her in that way. I got a lot of help from Dr. Ball, the Samuels and Ms. Howard on that. After a month or so I started to feel better and then the other things I was doing in therapy started to make sense and work for me. I still keep a journal and sometimes I share what I write with my mom. She thinks I'm a great writer.

I saw Ms. Howard a lot. She was always asking me how I was doing, how I felt, if I felt safe. I got to tell about things I wanted, like when I got to go to court and tell the judge I wanted to live with my mom again. Ms. Howard used to talk to me about the plan for my case, and she explained all the things my mom had to do in order for it to be safe for me to live with her again.

Mr. Lewis, I mean my father, well, I'm starting to get to know him because of his letters. He's written me a couple of letters, and I didn't respond at first, but I've written him back a few times now. He says he's trying to improve himself. I guess I'll wait and see. He doesn't write really well. Mom says that he wasn't a really good student but that she thought he was smart – just not book smart. I'm not sure if I'll go see him when I am older. I guess we'll see what happens.

I was having some problems at school for a while, mainly because some of the girls were mean to me and said bad things about my mom. But that hasn't been a problem for a long time. There was a while where I didn't like school, but I like it now, and I'm glad I got to stay in the same one.

I guess it all worked out OK, on account of the Samuels have been so nice to me and Sylvester and even Mom. The Samuels were great foster parents. They took good care of me, and if I ever needed something I knew I could ask them. They helped me feel really comfortable in their home. And now they are like family!

Caleb Lewis

(by telephone)

I'm really glad Otis—he's my caseworker here at the prison—was able to make this happen. Usually at the prison they don't let us talk to anyone but immediate family or our attorneys. I'm still looking at a lot of time before I can get out of here. I've been trying to get myself into the services they got here, you know-- AA and job training and whatnot. And I want to finish my GED so I can have some kind of future when I get out, not just go back to selling drugs and whatnot. I guess it would have been nice if someone could've helped me earlier. I mean, when that caseworker—what's her name, Miss Howard?—first contacted me, I'd just got myself arrested again and was looking at 10 years. How was I supposed to focus on anything then? She came back a second time and I think that is what made a difference for me – I started thinking about what she was saying about Shawntese.

But I want to make things right with me and Shawntese. They talk about that in the AA meetings, how you've got to make amends with people you wronged. So I wrote her a bunch of letters, and she just started writing back. Maybe someday she'll come visit. If Freda lets her, I mean. Shawntese and Freda have other family out there – not my dad, I mean, he's nothing but bad news - and Ruth was right to get the hell away from him as quick as she could. But my mother and my brother, they would've helped if Freda had

asked. Me and them, we've been on the outs a long time on account of all the bad things I've done, but they've talked to me on the phone since I've been back in here, and they've been really supportive. They'd love to know Shawntese.

Anyway, I guess my case worker here in prison, Otis, he's been the one they've been talking to the most. And my attorney came up in here a couple of times to tell me what was going on and how Shawntese was doing. He's the one who took my first letter to Shawntese. I told Otis I wanted to write her, and he made it happen. I'll tell you something. That Shawntese – she's a smart girl. I was worried that maybe she might be a little too much like her mother, you know? Back in the day, that Freda was a crazy little thing. Fun, but crazy. I heard she really pulled it together this time, though. I'm glad for her and Shawntese.

Charlotte Samuels

My husband, Javon, and I have been foster parents for a very long time. I've got to say it's been a real pleasure working with Shawntese, Sylvester, Freda, and Ruth. They've really become like family to us. Javon and I were prepared to keep Shawntese for as long as we had to – she's a wonderful girl and deserves every opportunity in the world – but I'm glad that things have worked out, and she can be back home with her mother.

Lisa, the case worker, was amazing. She discussed everything with us from the get-go, and she was always incredibly responsive to our needs. Javon and I felt like we were part of a real team, and that doesn't always happen. We especially all came together around Shawntese to help her through her rough patch. All the other things we were trying just weren't working and I saw Shawntese sinking deeper into her sadness. Shawntese needed the anti-depressant medication. Dr. Ball was very responsive, and she talked to us about how we had to administer the medication and monitor Shawntese. We received a lot of information about risks and side effects especially at those critical times when Shawntese was getting on the medication and then tapering off. We were a little nervous some of the risks are really scary risks like suicide, she said. I'll be honest; I was glad when she was finally off them.

I guess one of the areas where I felt like I made the most difference with Shawntese was with her schoolwork. She was having some problems there early on—bad grades, absences, just having trouble keeping up. I talked to her teachers and let them know what she was going through and really tried to work with her on getting her missed assignments and finishing her homework. She is doing so much better in school now and she was so excited about it. I knew she was capable of more; she'd just never been encouraged or really challenged in a positive way. We had some unfortunate problems with bullies for a while, but I think those are all behind us.

I also think I was really able to make a difference with Freda. I'll admit that I didn't think too much of her at the start. Running away with her ex to do drugs, leaving her daughter alone? But the more I got to know her, the more I saw that there really is a loving mother in there. We talked about all kinds of things – how to plan a good dinner, ways to organize the house, how to talk to doctors and teachers, stuff like that. She had some real problems when we started that really hurt the children, but I don't think I've ever seen anyone try harder than she has. I'm proud of what she's accomplished, and I'm proud to have been a part of it.