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REPRESENTATION OF CHILDREN

 MY COURT EXPERIENCE
Johnny Madrid

THE EVOLUTION OF INDEPENDENT LEGAL REPRESENTATION FOR CHILDREN
Donald C. Bross

SEARCHING FOR THE PROPER ROLE OF CHILDREN'S COUNSEL IN CALIFORNIA DEPENDENCY CASES; OR THE ANSWER TO THE RIDDLE OF THE DEPENDENCY SPHINX
William Wesley Patton

AVERTING REVICTIMIZATION OF CHILDREN: STATE FUNDING NEEDED FOR INDEPENDENT COUNSEL REPRESENTING CHILDREN IN JUVENILE COURT
Jennifer Walter

LAY REPRESENTATION OF ABUSED AND NEGLECTED CHILDREN: VARIATIONS ON COURT APPOINTED SPECIAL ADVOCATE PROGRAMS AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO QUALITY ADVOCACY
Michael S. Piraino

PROSECUTING ATTORNEYS IN DEPENDENCY PROCEEDINGS IN JUVENILE COURT: DEFINING AND ASSESSING A CRITICAL ROLE IN CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT CASES
Meghan Scahill

REPRESENTING CHILDREN IN MENTAL DISABILITY PROCEEDINGS
Jan C. Costello

COURT-APPOINTED ATTORNEYS FOR CHILDREN
Hon. Josanna Berkow

ISSUES FORUM

CHILD CUSTODY EVALUATIONS AND THE NEED FOR STANDARDS OF CARE AND PEER REVIEW
Stephen P. Herman

WHEN POLICE QUESTION CHILDREN: ARE PROTECTIONS ADEQUATE?
Barbara Kaban & Ann E. Tobey

UNIFIED FAMILY COURT: A CALIFORNIA PROPOSAL REVISITED
Hon. Donna M. Petre

PERSPECTIVES

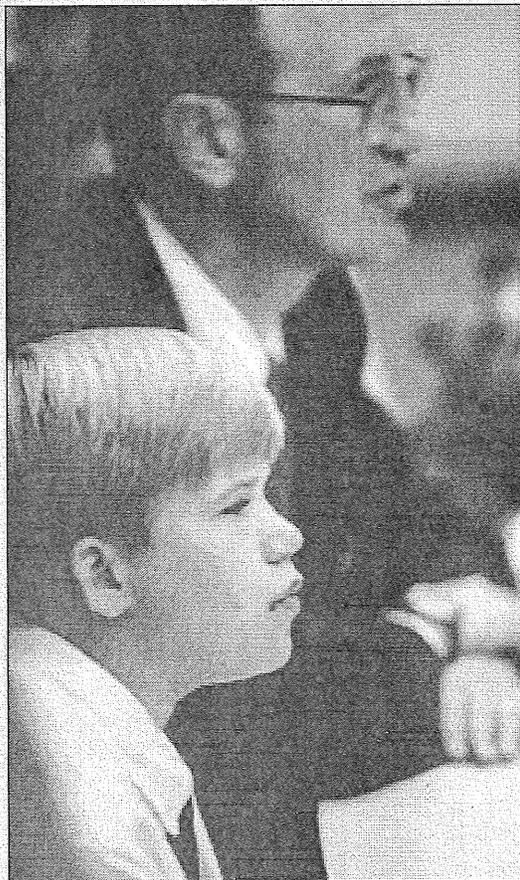
ONE JUDGE—ONE FAMILY: BUTTE COUNTY'S UNIFIED FAMILY COURT
Hon. Steven J. Howell

HARDSHIPS OF A MINOR HERO IN THE "SYSTEM"
Amariche Hawkins



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**REPRESENTATION
OF CHILDREN**



Photograph by Jonathan Alcorn

Essay

My Court Experience

The court experience is another branch in the lives of foster youth—a branch amidst a forest that we're supposed to muddle through and map out.

JOHNNY MADRID

Let's be frank: Foster youth are seen as burdens to society. It's not said, but it's felt. If we weren't, good people would be popping out of every corner to take care of us, we would never feel that our faces carried dollar-bill signs, and we wouldn't need to be skilled survivalists. But the fact is, we live in placements on a beds-available basis, we're the new industry of the 20th century, and our survival instincts are keener than those of seasoned soldiers on enemy land.

We are "taken care of" because we are categorized as "children," and negative media coverage, ACLU lawsuits, political suicide, and overwhelming guilt lie on the other side of the fence for the American culture. Slap a bunch more years on us and we become a different, more acceptable, kind of societal burden, homeless ones. Nobody wants to feel like a burden. Why do many older people feel dejected and rejected? Because many of us treat them like burdens. This is the type of culture that many foster youth must experience. Why do I mention this? Because the court experience is far from the least factor creating this culture for foster youth. When a judge looks down at me from a court stand, he's not seeing Johnny Madrid, a breathing, vibrant youth that could be his own son; he sees case number 32 with 47 more to go for the day. The system makes people lose the compassion and caring they may have had when they came into it. Nobody has time for foster youth.

"Blook gai ki jak shimbladoo dee sot garka bloop, so, Johnny, det feir guit mitsa desda doo dee. Reunification tuty blor tohasset blek tekk dee sot permanent placement. Glak ke fot doa kee delotis da. Any questions?" Sure, where's the translator?

There I was, a little kid, still a tad naïve about the workings of the adult world, listening in court as my fate was pronounced in High English. I sat there and nodded my head as if I knew what was going on. I remember the scene well: big room (almost like the ones I've seen on TV), many people I didn't know, a

judge talking down to me from an elevated desk-type thing, and a sense of rushing. I felt eerie and intimidated in court, as if it were a big machine that I was being fed and crunched through.

Court sophistication sent me into a whirl of bewilderment. I wished my lawyer had taken the time to walk me step by step through comprehending what was happening to me legally, in and out of court. She was nice and I felt that she was on my side, but I could tell that she was busy as heck and didn't have time for me. She couldn't be the helping resource and contact for me in the system. The three to five minutes that I saw her before a court hearing wasn't enough. Presently I work at a law firm, so I have a feeling of how attorneys should treat clients. Of course, foster youth don't pay, but does the issue always have to be about money? Having grown up in a "low-income," traditionally Hispanic home, I'd never have dreamed of being able to say, "I have a lawyer." But the beautiful luster of those four words was dulled by the lack of quality interaction between my lawyer and me.

Now that I'm a die-hard member of the California Youth Connection (CYC), a foster youth advocacy organization composed of foster youth throughout California, I very much know my various rights and responsibilities, but before I joined I knew squat. It would have been helpful if somebody would've explained to me the meaty words of *Legal Rights of Teens in Out-of-Home-Care* by the Youth Law Center. Knowing my rights would've been the best gift anybody could've given me to help me help me. If I had known that I could officially file complaints against my placement or social worker, I'd have nailed several very lousy ones.

For the most part, many of my social workers never encouraged me to go to court. "You don't have to be there," they'd say. I accepted this wholeheartedly because I didn't like going to court. But on the other hand, I didn't know that it was in court that all the big decisions were made. For me to voice myself in court was another way to sway the lean of my fate in the system, but I didn't know that.

Earlier this year a group of CYC members and I discerned our top five desires from our court attorneys. We sent a letter listing them to Ed Gilmore, the head of Los Angeles's Dependency Court Legal Services firm (DCLS). The following are the desires:

1. Foster youth want to be treated as paying clients rather than as another number among DCLS attorneys.
2. Foster youth want attorneys to explain what the judges are saying during court.

3. Foster youth want to be contacted a week before their court appointments.
4. Foster youth want more face-to-face and telephone communication with their attorneys.
5. Foster youth want to be involved in training attorneys about the foster system.

The problem with attorney-youth relationships, and ultimately one of the big problems of the whole court experience, is that attorneys are overloaded and are given limited resources. How can they be expected to effectively do all of the above, secure youth legal entitlements, and advocate for youth needs with the hundreds of cases they have? Simple—they don't. It can't get much better than dealing with files, returning some calls, and rapidly preparing for each court session. In such an atmosphere, lawyers, just like social workers, get jaded by the system and lose motivation. Who wouldn't?

The solution is to bring back their fire and motivation. Significantly decrease the quantity of their case-loads and significantly increase their resources. Let them have the possible joy of getting to know their clients. For as Ghandi says, "Service can have no meaning unless one takes pleasure in it. Service which is rendered without joy helps neither the servant nor the served. But all other pleasures and possessions pale into nothingness before service which is rendered in the spirit of joy." Of course, my solution means more money will be needed, which means politics, which is a whole slew of issues alone. And in that mess, the foster youth are surely, as always, to be forgotten. What a crazy world we live in!

