

At the Child's Side

Lawyers For Children

Issue No. 14

"Unwavering advocacy for children in foster care since 1984"

Executive Director's Message:

LFC Stands by New York City's Children in Times of Greatest Need

The past year has been a challenging one for New York City's low-income families and especially so for children in foster care. Crucial services have come under attack as the impact of the state budget deficit has rippled through city agencies.

Though we believe we have weathered the worst of the crisis, the state of our economy remains precarious, and the recoveries that have been won on Wall Street have yet to reach the poorest New Yorkers. When life is difficult for New York City's families, the need for Lawyers For Children's services grows. It is your continued support throughout this economic crisis that enables us to answer this call for help.

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The past year has revealed the powerful commitment many of you have made to the children of New York City. I have been overwhelmed by the number of letters I have received from those who have suffered personally as a result of the financial downturn, but who still want to contribute what they can, knowing that while their other investments may not always pan out, investing in children invariably will.

This newsletter stands as a testament to the real impact your generosity has made on the lives of New York City's children.

Karen Freedman
Executive Director



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Social Worker Helps Abused Children Find A Voice



Lisa Lubell

Lisa Lubell, Lawyers For Children's Child Sexual Abuse Education and Evaluation Project Director, says that her interest in working with children who have suffered sexual abuse stems from her lifelong sensitivity to those who have been silenced.

Lisa began her career as a social worker in the early 1990s, when sexual abuse was just gaining legitimacy as an issue impacting children's lives. She came to Lawyers For Children in 2000, and after nine years serving as a mentor, sounding board, peer leader and consultant to other LFC social workers, she accepted a position as one of LFC's social work supervisors.

Working with children in foster care requires great compassion and understanding, but cases that also involve sexual abuse are especially complicated and require a deep understanding of trauma. Lisa's extensive training and vast experience have given her the skills to meet her clients' particular set of needs.

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(Social Worker Helps Abused Children Find A Voice from p. 1)

When a client discloses abuse, Lisa assures him that the abuse was not his fault and that she works with many children who have been in similar situations. Generalizing her clients' experiences helps to relieve some of the isolation that many abused children feel, especially those who have suffered sexual abuse. One way that Lisa seeks to normalize these experiences is by giving each client the handbook that she helped create, entitled *You Are Not Alone: Sexual Abuse Survivors*.

Lisa says that all of her clients have incredible strengths and that she simply helps them tap into their resiliency while simultaneously aiding them in finding safety and stability. Over time, Lisa shows all of her clients that "with the proper resources in place, their lives can get better."

To Lisa, the most important and

rewarding part of her job is validating her clients' experiences. She says that nothing is more affirming for her clients than having a judge stand behind them, especially for those whose families have marginalized them because of their disclosure of abuse. Lisa explains, "When a child testifies in court about her abuse and the judge believes her testimony, that child finally believes she is worth something and matters to someone."

"With the proper resources in place, their lives can get better."

Youth Advocate Honored for Work with Adolescents

Jarel Melendez, LFC's Youth Advocate, was recently named the Youth Advocate of the Year by NACAC (the North American Council on Adoptable Children). Jarel uses his experiences as a former foster care youth to inspire his clients to take every opportunity available to achieve success. In addition to working one-on-one with adolescent clients, Jarel has created LFC's Youth Advisory Board, a monthly meeting of current and former LFC clients who are dealing with the challenges of entering the community as independent young adults.



Jarel Melendez

LFC Team Fights to Keep Teen with Loving Godfather

After facing abuse and neglect for the first five years of her life, Ciara* was removed from her mother's home in New York City. She was placed in foster care with her godfather, Mr. Miles, who lived in Rochester.

Though Ciara loved Mr. Miles and felt safe and happy growing up in his home, she was painfully shy and struggled in school as a result. Mr. Miles enlisted the help of a tutor, a behavioral therapist, and a psychologist. But by the time Ciara reached high school she had caught the attention of school administrators, who sought to remove her from the school district rather than provide her with the supportive services that she needed to succeed.

The school tried to use Ciara's status as a foster care youth as an excuse to deny her services. When they discovered that Ciara had moved with her foster father into his parents' house next door, they seized the opportunity to claim that Ciara was no longer living in an approved foster home and needed to be removed immediately and returned to New York City.

After more than ten years of living in Rochester, a place where she had found the only loving parent and safe home she had ever known, a move to New York City was unthinkable for Ciara.

Mr. Miles called Ciara's LFC social worker, who immediately traveled to Rochester to meet with Ciara, Mr. Miles, and the psychologist. They all agreed that a move to New York City would be detrimental to Ciara's well being. Her LFC social worker visited Mr. Miles's new house and confirmed that it was a safe, appropriate, and loving home. She also met with the school administrators and Ciara's caseworker, who agreed to participate in a meeting the next day with Ciara's LFC attorney.

Based upon the LFC social worker's comprehensive evaluation, Ciara's LFC attorney developed a legal argument in support of Ciara's desire to stay at home in Rochester. The attorney attended the meeting, and after several hours of discussion, she convinced the school administrators and foster care agency that moving Ciara would be devastating and would violate state foster care guidelines and regulations. The agency agreed to provide additional services to help Ciara succeed in school. With these resources in place, Ciara's attendance rate and grades have improved, and so has her confidence.



Heidi Rieger, MSW, Joins LFC Board

LFC welcomes Heidi Rieger to its board of directors. With a background in social work and a lifelong dedication to philanthropic causes, Ms. Rieger embodies the core values of LFC's board. Karen Freedman says, "Heidi is an invaluable asset to LFC's dedicated and hardworking board of directors. Her social work training, philanthropic expertise and commitment to making the world a better place for children in need will add to the tradition of service and support that exemplifies LFC Board membership."

Education Specialist Joins LFC

This year, LFC's Education Advocacy Project welcomed social worker Kia-Fiara Williams. Kia now works closely with Laura Daly, an Equal Justice Works Fellow and the legal director of the project. Together, they follow up on referrals, consult on cases, and meet with clients.

Kia's clients face a variety of obstacles to obtaining an education. Some clients have parents who prevent them from going to school, a situation known as educational neglect. Other clients are struggling in school because of special educational needs that have never been properly addressed. Still other clients avoid going to school because they lack what most children take for granted, such as school supplies, appropriate clothing or the confidence that they will be safe in their classrooms.

In each case, Kia and Laura begin by interviewing our client to gain insight into the problems that must be overcome in order to achieve the educational results that the young person wants and needs.



Kia-Fiara Williams

Arlene Fried Memorial Fund Allows LFC to Invest in Young Talent

When AJ* was separated from his family and placed into foster care, he became distraught, began skipping school and joined a gang. His foster care agency labeled him as unstable and placed him into a psychiatric hospital. After months of aggressive advocacy by AJ's LFC social worker and attorney, AJ was released into the care of his uncle in Washington, D.C.

Though he was finally safe and stable in his uncle's home, it was not until AJ found sports that he began to thrive. AJ became passionate about boxing, yet his uncle could not afford the cost of lessons and his foster care agency denied his requests for the necessary funds.

Through LFC's Arlene Fried Memorial Fund, AJ's LFC social worker and attorney were able to secure funding for lessons and a pair of boxing gloves. As AJ's boxing lessons progressed, he made new friends, his grades began to improve, and soon he was able to discontinue his psychiatric medication. A year later, AJ is succeeding in school and staying out of trouble. His coach says that AJ is an extremely gifted athlete and if he continues his hard work, he may someday have a career in the sports world.



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They obtain new educational evaluations and work with each client to determine the most appropriate educational setting for him or her.

Kia finds her work extremely rewarding and explains that in most cases, a client's educational needs can be met simply by conducting a proper evaluation, taking the time to get to know the client, and being aware of all of the specialized programs that are available.

Recently, one of Kia's clients, Sam,* was desperate to go to school, but he needed an adult to take him to registration. Sam's foster father refused to accompany him, and his caseworker at the agency was unable to go, so Kia went with him to his school's registration. Kia says, "He was so excited to be enrolled. He kept thanking me for coming with him. I told him, 'Just make sure you go,' and he has. He is doing really well."

Kia and Laura plan to distribute the new Education Advocacy Project handbook before the next school year begins. Kia says that when they first come to LFC, most of her clients are unaware that they have any educational rights as foster care youth. She relishes the opportunity to empower her young clients with the information that can change their ideas about their own ability to succeed in school.

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**All client-related information in this newsletter has been altered to protect confidentiality.*



LFC Welcomes Summer Interns

Each summer, LFC offers an intensive internship opportunity to highly qualified law students and college students. Through LFC's internship program, students develop an understanding of the child welfare system in New York City and the vital role that our interdisciplinary teams play in effectively representing our young clients. We are proud of the broad range of experiences that our extraordinary interns bring to their work at LFC, and we thank them for sharing their many talents with us and with the children we represent.

Legal Interns

Emily Bennett
Cardozo Law School
Theresa D'Andrea
University of Michigan Law School
Kevin Doten
CUNY Law School
April Marcus
CUNY Law School
Gillian Menza
Rutgers Law School
Diane Mirabile Rafal
Brooklyn Law School
Benjamin Schaefer
NYU Law School
Erica Segal
NYU Law School

Julianne Susman
Columbia Law School
Elizabeth Verillo
Brooklyn Law School
Amy Wolf
Columbia Law School

Social Work Interns

Liza Dorison
Bates College
Amanda Gilbert
Brandeis University
Kaitlyn Hamilton
Princeton University
Jillian Hirsch
Cornell University
Anna Joseph
Claremont McKenna College

Milo LeDoux
Oxford University
Kate Mangels
Princeton University
Liza Pincus
Harvard University
Rosemary Raymond-Sidel
Princeton University
Samantha Rubin
Cornell University
Jacqueline Tartell
University of Pennsylvania
Kaitlyn Tongalson
Columbia University
Samantha Schnell
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