



June is National Reunification Month which recognizes the critical work of people and organizations helping children in the foster care system and their families achieve the ultimate outcome – a safe return home.

Walker believes that *all* providers serving children who have been removed from their families due to abuse and/or neglect must make exhaustive efforts to rebuild and reunify those families before other courses of action are taken. This includes providing and connecting children and parents with intensive direct services and helping to develop their skills and supports so that they can live and function as a safe and healthy family. It can also include becoming a critical advocate as demonstrated in the true* story below.



In 2012, Michael* was removed from his home by the state child welfare agency and admitted to the residential education program at Walker. Even at eight years old, this wasn't his first out-of-home placement. He had been living at home with his mother for only a short period of time following a stay at another facility for aggression and sexualized behavior.

Michael had an early history of parental neglect as well as physical and sexual abuse at the hands of his maternal grandfather, something his own mother Cassie* had experienced herself as a child. Like Michael, Cassie had been in residential treatment herself as a youth. In addition, she struggled with substance abuse early in Michael's life. Despite these issues, the state child welfare agency's goal for Michael was to reunify him with his mother.

When Michael came to Walker, Cassie did not engage with the treatment team or visit or contact her son regularly despite attempts from Walker staff. As a result, the state changed Michael's goal to adoption. However, Walker staff were persistent and kept trying to engage with Cassie. Over time she confided that she purposely disengaged because her son hadn't made progress in past treatment programs and she thought it was best to leave him alone and let the professionals work with him. Staff assured her of the critical role parents play in treatment of their children even when they are not living at home. Cassie began to develop a closer relationship with the clinician and milieu supervisor at Walker and started to come every week to spend time with Michael and attend family therapy. Even though Cassie was taking an active part of her son's treatment, the state did not change the case goal back to reunification.

She had not completed everything she needed to do on her plan, which still included individual therapy. Cassie confided to the Walker clinician that being forced into therapy reminded her of her time in residential treatment as a youth and that it made engaging very difficult for her. However, she eventually agreed to seek individual treatment and Walker went to work advocating for a goal change.

While at Walker, Michael received a structured milieu, individual and group therapy, social skill building, trauma treatment and other services and started to show progress. Staff wrote a letter to the state and attended two foster care hearings communicating their belief that Michael would be most successful with the ongoing support of his mother and any treatment progress made would be lost if Michael's hopes of returning home were dashed.

After several months, Michael's goal was changed back to reunification due to Michael's steady progress, Walker's testimony to Cassie's involvement in that progress, and Cassie remaining involved in her own outpatient services. Once that goal was changed, Walker staff started to facilitate Michael spending time at home. This included arranging transportation to and from the train station and Walker and periodically transporting Michael home so that they could conduct family therapy in a home setting. Staff also advocated for Cassie to have her educational signing rights restored so she could secure a new school placement for his transition home. At the end of the 2015 summer school program at Walker, Michael went to live with his mother. Michael continues to live with his mother today, and while both Michael and Cassie continue to utilize outpatient services, Michael is by all accounts a thriving teenager.

****Names have been changed to protect identities***

For more information about Walker's work in creating permanency for children and youth in out-of-home care go to: <http://www.walkercare.org/walker-trieschman-institute/walker-permanency-center.asp>.