

LEARNING FROM LIVED EXPERIENCE



HUMAN-CENTERED JUSTICE FOR COURT-INVOLVED CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

By Valerie Frost, Community and Parent Advocate

At 15 years old, I sat in the guidance counselor's office after a friend walked in on me crying in the school locker room. I don't recall much of the conversation that followed, other than generally not being taken seriously by the school professional. But everything changed the moment I dared to utter the magic words: "I really don't wanna go home." A cry for help that, to my surprise, was met with instant action.

The guidance counselor explained that because I had just disclosed my feelings, I was now a liability to the school. Legally, they had to ensure I made it home safely once I boarded the school bus. She said that she couldn't let me leave alone. Even though my friends were waiting for me, I would need to be escorted home by law enforcement.

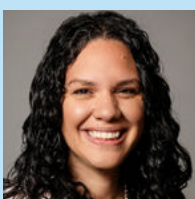
This was my first encounter with the system. I was a straight-A student, a classical piano player, a hospital volunteer since I was 13, and an altar server at my Catholic church. I had never even received detention before. Yet, in that moment, I was labeled a risk — an immediate threat, not to others, but to myself.

When the police officer arrived, I was informed that I was now considered a potential runaway and needed to be taken to the station for fingerprinting. If I truly ran away, I would be placed in juvie.

We grow up believing in the potential of the world, of life. We're told to dream big, to believe that we can be anything we want to be. At one point, I wanted to be the next Kristi Yamaguchi, or a ballerina dancing to Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*. But that day, the system seemed to confirm what I'd feared several times since, that perhaps the world was not built for someone like me.

Slowly, or abruptly for some, lived experiences start to chip away at innocence.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:



VALERIE FROST is a dynamic public speaker, trainer, and advocate with firsthand experience navigating the child welfare system as a parent. With over a decade of teaching early childhood education, she blends her passion for learning with a commitment to supporting families and communities. Valerie focuses on childcare, education, special needs, family violence, and child welfare. She envisions a world where gaps in wellbeing are seen as opportunities for support, not risks. Above all, her proudest accomplishment is being a mother to three children, her greatest inspiration.



At 22, a judge handed me a small Dixie paper cup of cold water, like the ones we used to swish and spit in at the dentist. The judge's words still echo in my mind, firm yet gentle. "Please go to therapy." This judge, a witness to the same kind of pain I had expressed years earlier in the school locker room, offered me the first real sense of justice.

But that same pain would later be weaponized against me as an older adult. When I became a mother, an "anonymous report" was used to push me back into the system again.

The courtroom can single-handedly make or break a person or family.

People who haven't experienced it firsthand often underestimate how daunting it is to stand in court facing accusations. One of the most common things I hear as an advocate and organizer of other individuals with lived experience is the blanket blame of Child Protective Services (CPS), "*they took my kids!*" The reality, though, is that CPS cannot remove a child without a judge's signature. It's the judge's final say that determines a family's fate. And yet, the courtroom remains a closed-off space, often shrouded in secrecy, out of public sight, and typically stays out of mind when we think about and discuss child welfare.

Here's what I know from my experience and the experiences of others: The courtroom can be a scary place.

The term "judge" alone can send a chill down your spine, as someone stands over you, quite literally passing judgment.

Most people, even professionals in the child- and family-serving space, are unfamiliar with legal jargon, or "legalese," which only adds to the sense of helplessness. But what many fail to recognize is that the legal process also has the power to save and restore lives.

Last year, I had the privilege of moderating a panel for Kentucky's Dependency, Neglect, and Abuse legal training. The panel consisted of former foster youth and parents with firsthand experience in the child welfare system. I asked them to share their experiences with appointed parent and child attorneys and their overall courtroom experiences. One panelist, a former foster youth, referred to themselves as "a piece of furniture" in the courtroom — sitting in the corner, feeling like nothing more than an observer. Another panelist shared about speaking to people in a room with a one-way glass, even as an adult now not knowing they were participating in a forensic interview. What I heard overwhelmingly from parents and youth was that they did not feel they had a voice in the courtroom. They were stuck in a nightmare, watching their fate play out, yet when they opened their mouths, no sound came out.

Not all of us have control over our circumstances. Some of us, as children and adults, face more systemic barriers than others. Some of us carry more weight on our shoulders throughout our day-to-day lives.

But I want to believe that childhood imagination was not in vain. I want to believe we can picture a brighter future and take the steps to get there. Here's how I see that happening:



- It starts with bringing humanity into practice. The law may be black and white, but lives are never as simple. Court cases should not be an assembly line pushing families through a conveyor belt. Professionals in the system must see children and families as people, not as problems. They must engage with empathy, as the judge did when he saw my pain, instead of dismissing it as a small, isolated issue.
- Next, intentional engagement is essential. Court professionals often have heavy case-loads, with many working what essentially become pro bono hours beyond their means. Yet, the stakes in these cases are incredibly high. Families, generational trauma, and healing potential are all on the line. We need professionals to make the time to reach out, to be responsive, and to clarify the often-overwhelming legal processes.
- Finally, proactive measures must be prioritized. While I commend the judge for recognizing my pain, the cold water-cooler water in that Dixie cup was a cold hand-off. What if there had been stronger prevention supports for me as a youth or entering adulthood? What if there had been a system in place to intervene when the first signs of crisis appeared, rather than waiting for a series of events to escalate until I ended up back in the system as an adult? We need to break down the silos that currently exist in the system, so that we can intervene early and avoid re-traumatizing vulnerable individuals and families.

The courtroom can either be a place of healing or harm. It is within our power to make it a space where families can truly be heard, where justice is not just a concept, but a practice that transforms lives. We owe it to those who are caught in the system to make it a place that actively works toward healing, not just judgment. It's time to stop pushing families through the system as if they're just another case to be processed. It's time to bring humanity back into the equation.

I often speak of engagement, so I want to leave with some tips around what this looks like in the legal setting for attorneys, but also other professionals in this space:

- **Reach out as early and as often as possible.** Don't wait until the last minute; make contact early on and maintain regular communication. Consistency is key.
- **Be accessible and responsive.** A simple acknowledgment goes a long way. Let people know you received their call, text, or email. If you can't respond immediately, be honest about it: "Received — I'm swamped but I will get back to you as soon as I can." It's all about setting expectations and following through.
- **Treat each case like your first and only.** Don't let previous cases or experiences bleed into your current one. Leave biases and assumptions at the door and approach every situation with a fresh perspective.
- **Listen to what people are really trying to say.** People often communicate more than what's on the surface. Repeat things back to them and ask for clarification if you're unsure. Sometimes directly asking, "What do you really mean by that?" can help them open up.



- **Prepare children and families for court.** Court can be a confusing experience. Give families the information they need ahead of time, so they know what to expect. After the hearing, offer to debrief with them, either immediately or within a day or two, to address lingering questions or thoughts.
 - **Check in after 48 hours.** A lot can happen in a couple of days. Reaching out after some time has passed gives families the space to process and come up with new questions or concerns that may have emerged.
 - **Validate before you problem solve.** When someone expresses frustration, fear, sadness, or overwhelm, don't rush to fix it. Acknowledge their feelings and validate their experience before jumping into a solution. You don't have to agree with how they feel, but you do have to recognize their right to feel it. Then, work with them to find a way forward.
 - **Provide as much information as you can.** Transparency is critical. Don't hold back difficult news or hard truths. The last thing you want is for someone to find out something important too late or from someone else. Let them know as soon as you have information, good or bad.
 - **Answer questions.** "I don't know" is still an answer. Silence breeds unknowing. If you don't have the answer, let them know you'll look into it. Then follow through. Being honest about what you know (or don't know) builds trust.
 - **Always remember: the people you're engaging with are human.** This seems obvious, but it's easy to forget when you're swamped with cases and paperwork. Families are not dockets, case numbers, or files to check off. They're people with emotions, stories, and lives that don't fit into a box. Treat them with the dignity and respect they deserve.
- Engagement in the legal world isn't just about legalities, it's about people. The way you communicate, the time you take to listen, and the trust you build can make all the difference in a family's journey through the system, and through life. ■