



MONDAY MORNING MEMO

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Ashley Rhodes-Courter Gives Message of Hope and Healing

Acclaimed author and presenter Ashley Rhodes-Courter shared her experiences while in foster care at two presentations in Western New York this October, and offered a challenge to all of those involved in the child welfare and family court systems: don't fail older youth in care.

Ashley spoke as part of a training on "The Words of Permanency: Challenging Child Welfare Professionals to Find Permanency for Older Youth," sponsored by the NYS Child Welfare Court Improvement Project. The seminar included a lively afternoon session by Barry Chaffkin and a special video presentation of "Hear Me! Hear Me! Hear Me! Voices of Youth in Foster Care Regarding their Court Proceedings." Hon. Sharon S. Townsend, Administrative Judge of the Eighth Judicial District, provided welcoming remarks at the Oct. 3rd event. Representatives of the court system, social services, CASA programs, and community agencies attended the training.



"You have a thankless and tiring job," Ashley said to the gathered professionals and volunteers. "You are just here because you care so, so much."

Ashley also spoke at the State University of NY at Fredonia the previous day for a presentation sponsored by the Chautauqua County Department of Social Services and the NYS Office of Children and Family Services.

Ashley said she was "energized and inspired to take action" after being placed in foster homes with people who had problems with drugs, alcohol, violence and even pedophilia. During her nine years in foster care in the State of Florida, she lived in 14 homes, several of them abusive. She participated in a class action suit against the Florida child protection system based on repeated abuses that occurred in a

foster home under their supervision. The process of that suit allowed Ashley both the pain and privilege of reviewing her own case file. That file enabled her to connect with some of her former foster parents, as well as offered information about her birth family and first-hand evidence of problems in the child welfare system.

For more information about Ashley, visit her website,

www.rhodes-courter.com.

*To learn more about her memoir, **Three Little***

***Words**, go to www.simonsays.com*

She said, "Never judge a child by her case file." When she reviewed her own file, she saw things that were distorted and others that simply were not true. In one notation, she was listed as a boy; in another, her eye color was incorrect. "Every child deserves an adult," she said, "who knows the color of her eyes." When making your own case notes, she advised child welfare workers to make sure to add positive comments along with the negative. Make a child's file personal; include photos, art the child has created, and samples of school work. And above all, she said, "Make sure you hear from the kids. Kids should be involved in every step of the case."



Ashley is also a strong advocate for thorough, relentless searches for family members and other significant individuals in the life of a child. “All kids have someone somewhere,” she said. Do not stop looking for someone connected to a child who can serve as a permanent resource. In her own case, there was evidence that some of her relatives came forward early on and were ignored. She mentioned a website, www.ussearch.com, that can assist in finding relatives and others known to the child. “Children need families and not programs,” she said.

She praised the work of her CASA volunteer, Mary Miller (a Guardian Ad Litem in Florida), who did in seven months what had been impossible in five years. “It was a miraculous transformation caused by just one woman who cared enough to be a constant presence on the case.”

Ashley, now 22, graduated from Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, FL last December. She was adopted at the age of 12 by Phil and Gay Courter of Crystal River, FL. On June 1, 2003, the New York Times Magazine published her grand prize winning essay about her adoption day. She expanded her essay into a memoir, *Three Little Words*, published this year by Simon and Schuster.

While much has been done to improve court and child welfare procedures, Ashley said there is still an urgent need to make things better for children in care, particularly older youth. “It is people with warm hearts and bright minds like all of you,” she said, “who are going to change the system.”

Video Offers Information on The Racial Geography of Child Welfare

A video is available for download on the University of Washington Television website that features Dorothy Roberts, A Harvard Law School graduate and the Kirkland and Ellis Professor of Law at Northwestern University Law School discussing “The Racial Geography of Child Welfare.” She argues that the overwhelming number of black children in foster care is a result of racial bias. To watch the video, go to: <http://www.uwstv.org/programs/displayevent.aspx?rID=26883>

Save the Date

Conference Call Nov. 18th to Review CASA Program Manual Chapters

The NYS UCS CASA Assistance Program and CASA: Advocates for Children of NYS (CASANYs) have been working collaboratively for the past year on a program manual for local CASA directors, *How CASA Works in New York State: Solving the Program Proficiency Puzzle*. The manual is designed as a read-me-first guide for new and experienced CASA program directors, covering all of the major aspects of program administration. Local directors Grace Thompson (Ulster County), Bill Lamb (Ontario County), and Linda Burns (Fulton/Montgomery Counties) have participated in the Program Manual Committee, devoting many hours to this project and providing critical feedback.

A conference call to discuss *Chapter 6: Grant Management and Fiscal Responsibility*, the most recently distributed chapter of the manual, will be held **Tuesday, November 18th at 2 p.m.** Please contact Darlene Ward at the UCS CASA Assistance Program at daward@courts.state.ny.us for call-in information. Completed chapters may be downloaded from both the UCS CASA Assistance Program website, www.nycourts.gov/ip/casa/casa_publications_a.shtml and the State Association’s site, www.casanys.org.



Trainer Development Workshop Offers Skills in Facilitating Activities

Some 30 representatives of Community Dispute Resolution Centers (CDRCs) and CASA programs participated in two days of trainer skill development, sponsored by the NYS UCS Office of Alternative Dispute Resolution and Court Improvement Programs. Led by Duke Fisher from Learning Laboratories and Brenda Episcopo, Executive Director of the Peacemaker Program, the session was part of the UCS Trainer Development Series.

The training provided experiential learning in the use of games and activities to facilitate learning objectives. Participants shared strategies they have used in their own trainings, as well as creating new activities.



Participants Linya Bell, Katie Montague and Kathy McGowan (left) participate in a human chain designed to cross an imaginary river, teaching skills in decision making and collaboration. Above, a small group builds a human statue demonstrating a stage of group dynamics.

Learn to Play, Play to Learn

At right, trainers Brenda Episcopo and Duke Fisher congratulate the group on a successful exercise.





Resources

(Please note: Links to third party sites do not imply any affiliation between the UCS CASA Assistance Program and the site owner, or an endorsement, approval, or verification of any content available on such third party sites.)

November is National Adoption Month: Website Offers Resources

November is National Adoption Month, devoted to raising awareness about the adoption of children and youth from foster care. This year's theme is adopting teens from foster care.

The 2008 National Adoption Month website is now live on the Child Welfare Information Gateway site at www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/nam. This website provides resources to assist professionals and families in planning November activities that celebrate adoptive families and raise awareness about the need for more adoptive parents for children and youth in foster care.

November also National Homeless Youth Awareness Month

There are more than 1,000,000 homeless youth in this country; some 43,000 of them are in New York State alone. November has been designated by Congress as National Homeless Youth Awareness Month to help raise awareness of the circumstances that land youth on the streets, and the services that can assist them in finding stable homes. For more information, go to: www.homelessyouthamongus.org

Site Offers Information on Children with Disabilities

The National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities (NICHCY) provides a national source of information on:

- Disabilities in infants, toddlers, children, and youth;
- IDEA, which is the law authorizing special education;
- No Child Left Behind (as it relates to children with disabilities); and
- Research-based information on effective educational practices.

Visit their site at: www.nichcy.org

Quotable

"Where there is an open mind, there will always be a frontier."

- Charles F. Kettering

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