

BE WELL

Our Starfish Clients: The Power of Believing *Being a Lawyer Isn't Easy, But We Have the Power to Transform Lives and the Privilege of Being Transformed by some of our Clients*

The Starfish Story. We've all heard it. If you haven't heard it, I will summarize it here for you: Thousands of starfish had washed up on a beach after a big storm, drying out and dying. A young child was walking along the shore, picking up starfish and gently throwing them back into the ocean. Passersby jeered, "Do you realize there are miles and miles of beach? You can't possibly make a difference." The child paused, then bent down to pick up another starfish and gently throw the animal back into the water. "Well," said the child, "I made a difference to that one."

I met Anna in a hospital. Hours earlier, while alone in a bathroom, Anna experienced a terrifying explosive birth. Rescue took her to the hospital, and DCF got involved. The State requested emergency custody, and the Court issued an order to take Anna's baby from her.

I was a contracted family court public defender, and I was assigned to represent Anna. When I received the assignment, I wasn't given any contact information for Anna, but the hearing was scheduled for the next day. I knew I had to find her. After reading that Anna's baby was just hours old, I made the best guess I could and headed for the hospital. A lady in reception inquired about the nature of my visit. "I'm here to see Anna," I said. "She just had a baby." The woman nodded and handed me a visitor sticker. I hurried down the long hall and rode the elevator up to the birthing center.

When I met her, Anna was a wreck. Her skin was pale, and her hair was disheveled. At times, she looked dazed. Anna had a long history with substance use disorder, and she was a fugitive from justice and wanted in several states. But that wasn't what I saw when I looked at Anna. As I sat down in a chair beside her, I watched as Anna gently cradled her newborn daughter, stroking her soft black hair and kissing her sweetly. I saw a mother. I saw a future. I saw hope.

I was in the room when the police and DCF handed Anna the order stating that she was no longer her daughter's legal custodian. The order stated that she couldn't be alone with her child. I asked the hospital attendant what that meant on a practical level. They said that as much as they wanted to keep someone there, as important as

it was that a baby remain with her mother in the hours immediately after birth, they didn't have the staffing. The baby would be taken from Anna's hospital room. In response to that information, I decided to stay with Anna for several hours—to help allow that crucial bonding time while we figured out a plan.

That night, I stayed up writing a motion to try to return the baby to Anna's custody. In the morning, the police showed up at the hospital with handcuffs. They barely let Anna finish nursing her daughter before cuffing her and taking her to the courthouse. Any attempt to return the baby to Anna's custody was thwarted when the criminal court judge ordered her immediate incarceration. I remember looking at my client, shackled and leaking breastmilk, being hauled away less than 24 hours after giving birth. I remember her despondency. I remember holding her hands, looking her in the eyes, and telling her that she could get through this. It would be a ton of work, but we could work together.

Anna worked. She worked and worked and worked. She committed to her recovery and sobriety. She pumped milk. She hung on every word I spoke and followed every instruction I gave her. And because of Anna's hard work and relentless determination, Anna's criminal attorney was able to negotiate a global resolution. In family court, Anna and I were able to get her baby back, and Anna was able to start to build her life.

Today, Anna uses her life experience to help people who are struggling with substance use disorder. She has found her calling in helping others to heal through restor-

ative justice. A handful of years after she was a resident at an in-patient facility, Anna was hired to be a counselor.

While I credit Anna completely for her successes, she frequently informs me that I was a catalyst in her story. Anna recently gave an interview about her experience where she said, "[Meg] remained in high hopes of me; kept her faith in me. And that is exactly what I needed. We... people who are suffering from addiction are suffering, and we need connection. We need just one person to step up and say, 'Hey. I believe in you,' and actively show it. Not enable behaviors, but show that we're worth it and there's someone who believes in us."

Anna is my starfish. As attorneys, particularly as public defenders or public interest attorneys, it is easy to get overwhelmed. Our clients' needs are extensive and our caseloads are enormous. Even as we remain committed to zealous advocacy, it can become easy to feel defeated. Can we really make a difference? The answer is yes, and Anna's story illustrates just how much of a difference we can make simply by believing in our clients.

Anna is an inspiration. Since working on her case, Anna and I have remained in touch. She sends me updates on how she is doing, and photos of her daughter. I feel so fortunate to know Anna, and to have been a small part of her amazing story.

This story was submitted with "Anna's" permission and approval. Nevertheless, her name and other identifying information has been changed to protect Anna's identity and the identity of her daughter.





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