Children's Health Issue

California Health REPORT

Summer 2013

healthycal.org

Poor Kids Shut Out of Costly Care

Latino Diversity & Public Health

Are Schools Failing Disabled Students?

COMMUNITY HEALER

Jennifer Rodriguez

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ED CALDWELL

Every Single Day Matters

Foster child turned lawyer helps kids in the system

BY ALEXIA UNDERWOOD

JENNIFER RODRIGUEZ GREW UP hearing that she was a delinquent, a loser and a troublemaker. Her father was in prison, her mother was diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic, and the adults in her life didn't have high hopes for her future. "They were like, I hope you don't get pregnant too early," Rodriguez recalls. "I hope you don't get incarcerated. I hope you don't end up homeless."

Rodriguez bounced between her mother's home and foster care facilities for the first decade of her life. She first ran away at age 10. By the time she was 12, her expectations for her life had diminished. She no longer hoped to find a loving guardian. She just didn't want to end up in a group home, even if it meant living on the streets.

She wasn't so lucky.

"I was on the street for a couple of

years, and then I went into the foster care system and never came out," Rodriguez says. Even now, at 36, she has no idea how many group homes she lived in during this tumultuous period. But she recalls distinctly the abuse she suffered and the trouble she often found herself in, including being arrested.

It was only later—many years later—that Rodriguez could glimpse a future unfolding in front of her, one without prison, abuse or homelessness.

After she earned her GED through Job Corps, a free program for low-income youth, she enrolled at Delta College in Stockton. Three weeks into the semester, Rodriguez realized that her education while in foster care had been woefully inadequate. "I had spent all of high school in special education, bouncing around between trailers for severely emotionally disturbed students, continuing education schools, schools that were part of hospitals," she says. "I had never had a regular math or science or English class."

Rodriguez, struggling with the course material, decided to drop her biology class. She went to see her teacher in person to tell her, because she didn't want to hurt her feelings. "I didn't understand how community college worked. I agonized over it for a long time," she says.

The intervention from her biology teacher was a turning point in Rodriguez's life. When the professor asked her why she was dropping the class, Rodriguez spilled out her whole story of past abuse, arrests and group homes. Rodriguez had come to see her teacher to drop out, but she left with a deal. If she stayed in the class and still failed, her teacher would give Rodriguez a withdrawal letter, so it wouldn't affect her GPA. But she was betting that Rodriguez could pass the class if she tried.

Before she knew it, Rodriguez was spending all of her time on campus or at her professor's house, helping her grade papers, tutoring other students and completely immersed in biology and her other course work. "By the time the semester was through," she says, "I had an A in her class, and an A in all the rest of my classes."

That was a defining moment for Rodriguez. "All of a sudden I could see that there was a different life possible. All of these people were studying and it was peaceful and everybody had goals and aspirations and was thinking about what they wanted to do with their life, the exact opposite of my experience in foster care. At that moment, when I thought about what I wanted to do, I just wanted to make sure that everybody had the chance to experience that."

Now, as an attorney and the executive director of the Youth Law Center (YLC) in San Francisco, Rodriguez is drawing on her experiences to help other children in foster care and the juvenile justice system find their own way to a better future. The YLC, a public interest law firm in San Francisco, was established in 1978 to keep children out of public systems and to protect the rights and improve the future chances of children in foster care and juvenile justice facilities.

"Our goal is that every child be treated in the way that we want our child or grandchild to be treated. All of our work is based on that," explains Carole Shauffer, the former YLC executive director, who now serves as senior director of strategic initiatives.

Rodriguez knew firsthand what foster kids had to overcome to succeed. Changing their odds motivated her ascent. After she completed two years of community college, she transferred to UC Davis and started studying for the LSAT. She wanted to be an advocate. "I didn't know anything about law school," she says, "but I thought, I probably have to be pretty close to perfect. Perfect GPA, perfect LSAT score."

Rodriguez also joined an advocacy organization called California Youth Connection (CYC), which shows foster youth how to become advocates for improving the system. "For the first time, I was exposed to all of these other people who had been in foster care," she recalls. She felt newly empowered as she developed solutions to problems she had experienced firsthand as a foster child. She helped develop the first foster bill of rights, as well as other bills that required more stringent standards for educators at foster facilities.

Most state child welfare systems are underfunded, which leads to a lack of monitoring of group homes and family placements, and a slow response to reports of neglect or abuse. The number of children in foster care in California exceeds 55,000. Almost 50 percent of foster children in the United States suffer from chronic medical conditions, and more than two-thirds have serious emotional problems, according to Children's

"I WENT TO LAW SCHOOL FOR ONE REASON ONLY: TO HELP PEOPLE GROWING UP WITH THE STATE AS THEIR PARENT."

Rights, a national advocacy organization.

One issue that comes up time and again is the bureaucratic, impersonal nature of a program that deals with so many human lives and futures. Shauffer says she was originally drawn to advocacy work because of her interest in human development. She wanted to understand how a system, or a facility, could serve as a parent. The answer she eventually came to is that it can't. "For the most part, it's the nature of the bureaucracy not to be able to personalize."

Rodriguez's evaluation is more blunt. "People have developed these very nice-looking facilities that lack the one thing that babies really need, which is, you know…somebody who is going to love them and going to be there for them," she says.

Instead of being loved as unique individuals, children are molded by a system—one that doesn't encourage the traits that kids need to become successful adults. "Some of the same traits I had that were really problematic when I was growing up in the foster care system were actually really assets in other contexts," Rodriguez says. "For example, I was called manipulative or an instigator in all the facilities where I lived. But manipulative is being an advocate, being able to figure out how to get the outcome you want. I'd always been an instigator in situations where I felt like injustice was happening to other kids I lived with. It's what makes me a good lawyer."

After finishing her BA at UC Davis, Rodriguez earned a full scholarship to law school at the same university. Though the American Bar Association prohibit students from working full time while in law school, Rodriguez kept her job at the CYC. "I went to law school for one reason only: I wanted to help other young people who were growing up with the state as their parent," she says. She wasn't willing to give up work on their behalf in the meantime.

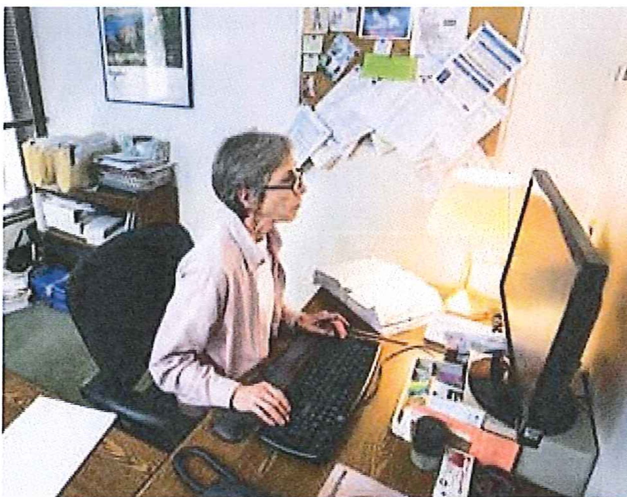
Rodriguez remembers walking through the halls of her law school and seeing press releases and announcements posted about foster care legislation that she was working on, with her name prominently displayed. Her friends would try to help by ripping them down. "They were like, you're going to get busted! They're going to know why you weren't in class," she says.

During her last year of law school, Rodriguez had another distraction to contend with: She was pregnant with her first child. "He was born six weeks after the bar exam," she says, smiling. "I like to tell him that's the reason I passed the bar, because I had two brains. He's really smart."

Shauffer hired Rodriguez as a fellow in 2007, and Rodriguez took over Shauffer's position as executive director last year. "Jennifer knows. She's less removed, she's one degree closer to the system than we are," Shauffer says. "I can imagine, what if this were my child? She can say, what if this were me?"

Most of the staff at the center are lawyers, but legislation is just one form of their advocacy work for youth. That drew her to the center's work, says Rodriguez. "Advocacy is about bringing about change, no matter what mechanism you use to achieve that." The staff engage in policy work, work collaboratively with nonprofits and spearhead projects that focus on education and training.

One such project is an education intervention for incarcerated teen parents, aimed at helping them develop a deeper connection with their children. The Youth Law Center developed this program with researchers at Georgetown University. The program is unique



Alice Bussiere, Staff Attorney, Youth Law Center

Jennifer Rodriguez talks to Piper Kamis from the Vera Institute of Justice

Jennifer Rodriguez, Piper Kamis, and Ben Richeda, Baby Elmo Program Manager, Youth Law Center

in its use of media: the curriculum uses Sesame Street episodes to teach teens how to improve their parenting. The project is focused particularly on boys and has a unique name. "We were calling it the Juvenile Justice Teen Parenting Project, and the boys called it the Baby Elmo project," Shauffer says. The name stuck. In a letter to the program founders, an incarcerated teen named Alfonso writes that if it were not for the Baby Elmo program, "I would be a stranger to my daughter. She wouldn't even know that I exist."

Much of the center's work focuses on these two vital points: improving parenting skills and improving conditions for youth. "The most important thing for young people to have, no matter what system they're in, is parenting—loving, supporting parenting," Rodriguez says. "The reality is that institutions can't provide that. People sort of forget, they think that habilitation happens by putting you in a facility and locking you up, but the truth is that it happens when you have a parent who loves you and sees your potential and connects you to opportunities to reach that potential."

"Parenting is the basis of health, really," she continues. When her own daughter (now 5) was a baby, she brought her into work at the law center every day, and wore her strapped to her chest while she did public speaking engagements and trainings. "Parents drive everything related to health. Without having that person there, the stable loving committed adult in life, it's really hard to tackle any of those other issues," she says. Even though she didn't have this experience growing up, Rodriguez understood how to give it to her children. "As a mother, it hasn't been all that hard to figure out how to do it without a map," she says. "It's part of the reason I feel a sense of hope that we actually can reform the system."

Shauffer and most of the other employees are in their 50s and 60s, and sometimes they worry about who will continue their work when they retire. "With Jennifer in leadership, we know that the center's work is going to go forward," Shauffer says.

Rodriguez remains focused on the kids in the system now. "When I hear stories about children who are living in a group care facility, there's a certain level of outrage and urgency that I feel. I can imagine that if my kids were put in a home where they didn't have somebody who really loved them, every single day would matter. It wouldn't be a matter of let's get together and develop a working group and talk about this and make recommendations. I'd want them out tomorrow, or tonight, if possible."

Rodriguez says that one predominant viewpoint today among social workers and others in the child welfare system is that family settings are only appropriate for certain types of children, and not others. "You'll hear that, that they need to complete a program before we can move them into [a family setting], and it's like, who is that? What child is that, that doesn't need a family?"

Another issue that remains is recruiting enough families to foster these children, families that have the skills and resources to be good parents. Unfortunately, foster care is not seen in the same light as other altruistic undertakings, like the Peace Corps, she says. "If you really want to change the world and make a difference, becoming a foster parent is one of the best ways to do that." **CHR**