

When you have to reunify a child considered to be Hannibal Lecter



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After 16 months in foster care, a child's future depended on the attention of a social worker. A child of Central American descent, his past background resulted in him viewed as a serial murderer and sexual predator. His last hope was in the hands of a Latino social worker, Ariel Rivera.

“The case came to me when no one else wanted it” stated Rivera, after receiving a Cornelia Funke award, which he earned for how he resolved the situation. “It’s what I do every day,” he said without boasting of having achieved family reunification.

He joined the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) eight years ago. At first he was an assistant, but in 2013 after he acquired his Master's at California State University L.A., he became a part of the social worker team.

He had been in his new position as a social worker for about 12 months, when the native of Estelí, Nicaragua received the file of a 12 year old from the office administrator.

“He was compared to Hannibal Lecter,” the 50 years old social worker said, referring to the murderer and cannibal fictional character created by novelist Thomas Harris, who was personified by Anthony Hopkins in “Silence of the Lambs” (1988).



The young man arrived in Los Angeles to reunify with his father, Rivera said. At the age of 2 he was left alone with his mother, in Honduras. Instead of giving him love the woman severely physically abused him. He was also sexually abused, before joining a gang.

“He had to flee because they were seeking to kill him” he added.

The encounter with his father was traumatic. Before he ran away from home, the minor was accused of inappropriately touching two girls, the daughters of his father’s partner. After picking him up from the streets, the system considered him a “high risk child” because of everything he caused.

“I looked at his case differently,” Rivera stated, affirming he understood the culture and the context of where the child came from. He also realized the child had severe emotional issues. When he first took over the case, the child’s father had moved to South Carolina.



The youth, acquired a negative stereotype because he said he had killed 50 people. The social worker, believed this was a defense mechanism, so he would be seen as someone that was rough and not be “bullied.”

However, while he was in the system, he did what he wanted. He tried to sexually assault a young girl, choke a social worker and attack a security guard. “We had to do something to save this child,” he asserted, noting the Monrovia police had issued an arrest warrant.

For four months, Rivera assisted the young man. “It took a lot of work and patience,” he admitted. During this time he evaluated the history of this youth. Additionally, what helped was that the youth started to communicate with the father telephonically “for many hours, and days.”

Due to his background, the youth did not have contact with other children. The court was asked to leave him with family members, to see if he could adapt to them and reunification could be determined. “It was a difficult case because there were many issues, stigmas and barriers,” he determined.

Instead of pointing and saying: “you are a bad kid, a danger to society, you said you killed 50, you’re a sexual predator, we will send to you to prison,” we tried to reunify him with family,” he pointed out.

The case closed when the minor was reunified with his father in 2014. As a result, in September, Rivera received an award for his great gestures.

“The award motivates and encourages me,” he said with great satisfaction having contributed to the minor’s change. “If he would have continued in that path he would have ended up in jail or dead.”

Amidst abuse, neglect and inequality

The Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) currently has 3,825 Social Workers, of which 40% are Latinos, this means that about 1,530 employees, followed by African Americans (24.5%), Caucasians (14%) and Asians (6%).

They receive the cases when children are at risk for abuse in their homes, it could be for physical or sexual abuse, neglect, domestic violence, drug use, amongst other causes.

DCFS spokesperson, Amara Suarez, affirms children are removed from their homes “if there is sufficient evidence.” The request is channeled through the court. In the process, the parents receive resources and assistance because “the first goal is for [children] to reunify with their parents.”

Maria Reyes has worked as a social worker for the past 10 years. According to her, the problems are the same in every home, but believes that some do not know how to seek help. “I always place myself in the place of those families, be it mother or father, and how I would like to be treated.”

Culture and education, in that sense, play a key role. The problems transcend to authorities when there’s a report of child abuse, something that in the parents view is seen as something normal, because they were disciplined with corporal punishment and they repeat it with their children.

“When one comes to this country [you realize] the laws function differently,” social worker, Ariel Rivera said, when he explained there are other ways of correcting, to the end of “eliminating the cycle so the next generation can treat their children differently so they will not return to the system.”

At the end of August, DCFS had 18,000 minors in foster care, about 9,000 were placed with relatives such as grandparents, aunts and uncles, or godparents; 60% of this population is Latino.

The County’s Physician and Director of Violence Intervention Program (VIP), Astrid Heppenstall Heger, stated that minors coming into the system are children of single mothers and adolescents; she further stated that another cause is poverty, which is a common characteristic of immigrant families.

“We are working to identify those families early,” said Heger, Pediatrics Professor at the University of Southern California (USC) School Medicine, because if they can find resources they can obtain support “to keep their children.”

In that sense Cornelia Funke, is a children’s science fiction writer, who values the work social workers perform, work that she performed in Germany, her native country, for three years, after she received her degree in education at the University of Hamburg.

“They change the lives of children,” indicated Funke, known for the Inkheart trilogy. “They show compassion, hope, [and] they can change someone’s life. If they don’t do it, there would be so much despair and many children and adolescents would be lost.”

County of Los Angeles Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS)

Child Protection Hotline: 1-800-540-4000

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