



“Meeting Them Where They Are”: Social Work Fundamentals Change a Family’s Life

Sometimes, the best social work isn’t found in any policy or procedure. Sometimes social workers change lives by simply looking and listening.

For 27 years, starting at the age of 13, Maureen Rivas struggled with heroin, PCP, and alcohol addiction—mostly from the inside of a jail cell.

In 2008, Maureen received news that would be a blessing to most women. She was pregnant with twins. But decades of substance abuse and drug-related criminal activity proved hard habits to break. Her twins were born with opiates in their system and her prospects for turning her life around did not look promising.

A Challenging Case

Children’s Social Worker Kim Masinter, who works out of the West Los Angeles office, was assigned to the case. Kim was used to difficult cases, and had



CSW Kim Masinter is honored by Supervisor Yaroslavsky during Family Reunification Week

built a reputation of reuniting very troubled families. But at first, Kim was not sure she would be able to turn around Maureen’s lifetime of abusive behavior.

“When I first met Maureen, I didn’t think she was going to pull it together with her long history of drugs and criminal behaviors,” Kim said. “She looked like she had a hard life.”

Which begs the question facing many social workers: How do you make a connection with someone disconnected from themselves,

society and even their own families?

Starting with the Basics

Says Kim, “I start by meeting them where they are, not expecting too much, working with them and listening to them without being authoritative or judgmental.”

And this is the approach she took with Maureen. But it was a challenge.

“When her kids were taken away she was in a really low place. She was dispirited and feeling guilty. She was still using and not in her right frame of mind,” Kim says.

Maureen agreed with that assessment: “When they came and took my babies away, all the denials, all the rationalizations hit me real hard. There was no getting around it. I was confronted with the truth... I was an addict.”

Maureen's children had been placed in a foster home far from where she lived. She was visiting her kids regularly but she had yet to enroll in any of the court-ordered programs.

A Fateful Decision

But early on, Kim made what would prove a critical decision. After careful assessment, she decided to place Maureen's children with their Godmother, a family friend. Maureen's whole attitude changed dramatically.

"She was so much happier. She realized I was working for her and what she wanted—not just what the system wanted."

Maureen recognized that Kim was a special social worker.

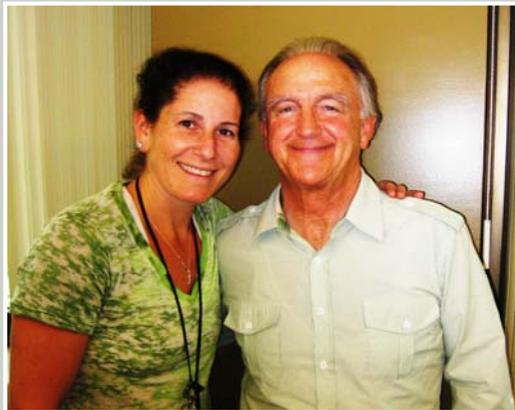
"Kim was different. I had heard so many horror stories but Kim was willing to work with me to help me get my kids back. I knew that I had screwed up and I was willing to do whatever I had to do to get them back."

When Kim noticed that Maureen's children exhibited developmental delays in speech and motor skills, she referred them to the Regional Center, where they made significant progress. This action also registered with Maureen. Contrary to her expectations, here was a social worker genuinely interested in the well-being of her children.

Helping Mom Make Changes

With the kids in familiar hands, mom was now motivated to make big changes. She completed a 30-day detox program at the Clare Foundation and then enrolled in a 90-day residential program.

Yet, despite her commitment to change, the treatment programs were very demanding. Court had ordered Maureen to complete parenting, drug testing, and an in-patient substance abuse program as well as anger management classes. Though the treatments were designed to help Maureen, the classes seemed endless and the routine began taking its toll on



Kim Masinter, CSWIII, with her Supervisor Kane Phelps

Maureen in the form of several emotional breakdowns.

"Kim knew how guilty I felt over what I had done to my kids. She never looked down on me or belittled me in any way for my past. She kept me moving forward. She kept telling me I was a good mother when she would see me with my kids. She listened to

me when I needed help to get through the tough times."

Recognizing how vulnerable Maureen was, Kim knew this wasn't the time and place to add to her negative feelings by discussing case plans or court orders. Maureen needed to be reminded of how far she had already come and what a great mom she was with her children.

"She didn't think she could go on. She was very emotional and at nearly every visit, she would cry over what she was dealing with and the issues that were coming up for her in therapy."

With guidance and support from Kim, however, Maureen regained her momentum, and started feeling better about herself and what they were working for: so that Maureen could once again hold her children, and have the chance to be a mother to them.

"I always reminded her of how much progress she had made and would give her a hug after we talked. Clients don't want someone just asking questions and checking off a list. They feel like you care when you ask them about how they are doing and what they are feeling."

TDMs Make a Difference

One tool Kim used with success was Team Decision Making (TDM) meetings at key points, especially when Maureen was getting off track.

“TDMs are great because they bring a lot of people in the room to assist, whether it is DMH or Family Preservation. It gives the client an opportunity to talk about everything going on in their lives.”

Over time, with Kim’s constant support, Maureen completed her residential program and was accepted into The Clare Foundation. She was visiting her kids and had completed all her court-ordered programs. Still, Maureen decided to complete a second round of parenting and anger management classes. She knew that staying in classes with other people in similar situations would help her to stay sober, focused and busy with positive things.”

A Challenge: Coming Home

Before reuniting Maureen and her children, Kim knew it was important to discuss how the family life was about to change. “When a child is returned to a parent, it’s a whole new ballgame; that child may have been out of the house for 6 months or 3 years and there are going to be a lot of issues and stressors for both the parents and the children.”

Maureen remembered how tough it was: “When the kids came back home on November 8th, I had just transitioned into sober living and I was 7 months clean. I was scared and didn’t have a job. I didn’t know how I was going to make the rent and Christmas was

coming up. I prayed to God to be able to just buy one Christmas present for each of my babies. Kim managed to get me more presents than I could ever ask for. I was so overwhelmed. Thanks to Kim it was a wonderful Christmas.”

A Brighter Future

Maureen has surpassed everyone’s expectations by enrolling at West Los Angeles College to pursue a degree in substance abuse counseling. After volunteering at the Clare Foundation, she was offered an internship with the program, which led to a part-time job as a drug counselor.

On May 2nd of this year, in recognition of her outstanding efforts in reunifying Maureen Rivas with her twins, Kim was presented with a Board Scroll commendation by Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky at the Hall of Administration as part of the Family Reunification Week festivities.

The recognition of a job well done and the ideas behind Family Reunification Week mean a lot to Kim.

“Our jobs are often hard and stressful. Remembering those cases where you successfully reunified a family, seeing how happy the kids and parents are, and seeing the changes made by everyone is very rewarding.”

Success is a Team Effort

Kim is quick to point out that success at DCFS is a team effort. She is very appreciative of the support of her supervisor, Kane Phelps.

“Kane is a great supervisor. He’s very supportive, involved and knows so much. He sees the bigger picture and assesses each case with a fresh perspective. If I’m not making progress with a request, he helps get results. He’s always introducing the unit to new programs and services to help our clients.”

On their relationship, Kane states, “we work collaboratively. I listen to what she’s telling me, trying to tease out solutions. I try to really be there for my workers to meet their needs and provide support.”

Kane points out that Kim “rolled up her sleeves to make sure this family had all their needs met. Maureen trusted Kim because she knew Kim cared about her kids. Kim believed in Maureen and in turn, she trusted Kim. That’s not something you can teach. It’s not a matter of filling out a form; it’s looking someone in the eye and being truly present.”

Kim Masinter knows that social workers can make a huge difference in the lives of their clients. She has the satisfaction of knowing that largely through her efforts a family has been saved and a mother’s life renewed.

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“As a caseworker, you have the option to play a significant role in our kids’ lives, to be there and advocate for them when they don’t have anyone else. Helping people get to places that they don’t feel they can get to on their own is very rewarding for everyone involved in this kind of work.”

Grateful to her Social Worker

At the same Board ceremony, Maureen Rivas was also honored for overcoming a lifetime of obstacles to reunify with her children and make a new life for herself and her family. Maureen had many people to thank but at the top of her list was her social worker, Kim Masinter.

“I would not be with my kids if it weren’t for Kim. Her support made it possible for me to get my kids back. She understood that you have to meet the parent where they are and that the relationship is a learning process that needs to progress one step at a time.”

Maureen is well aware of the precious gift she’s been given.

“I am totally blessed everyday. I have two rambunctious three-year olds who are stubborn like their mother but they are adorable. I appreciate what I have since I came so close to losing everything. And now that I have them back, I don’t ever want to do anything that will jeopardize that. I wake up every morning to the sound of my kids in the house. Life is good.”



*Maureen Rivas with
Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas*

DCFS Mission Statement

The Department of Children and Family Services, with public, private and community partners, provides quality child welfare services and supports so children grow up safe, healthy, educated and with permanent families.