

# The Anticipation of Brighter Chapters

Ivan was only seven years old in 2019 when his life became uprooted. His mother, having been born into a vicious generational cycle of drug abuse and neglect, had given birth to him at the age of fourteen. She was unequipped with the necessary skills nor the maturity to parent Ivan properly. At 21 years old, she was addicted to drugs and resided in multiple homeless shelters with Ivan. During moments of desperation and fury, Ivan's mother would lay her frustrations on him and the shelter staff both verbally and physically.

With best intentions, a shelter's manager reported Ivan's mother to the Division of Child Protection and Permanency (DCPP). Shortly thereafter, DCPP removed Ivan from her care and placed him with a loving and supportive resource mother who already knew Ivan. She was a retired basketball coach that bonded with him out on the courts during her volunteer efforts. Never having had children of her own, she grew to love Ivan and offered him a place in her home.

During this time, the court assigned Ivan a CASA advocate, Mr. Ross. Ivan and Mr. Ross quickly bonded just as he did with his resource mother. He finally felt loved and cared for – relishing in the consistency of a safe home and two adults who had his best interest at heart. Ivan loved playing basketball with his resource mom and enjoyed playing games with Mr. Ross. He was beginning to allow his true personality to shine through at home and in school. Mr. Ross recalls how heartwarming it was to see Ivan blossom into a vivacious boy with a beaming personality.

Additionally, the court mandated Ivan's mother to attend several programs that would guide her through recovery and teach her parenting skills. Unfortunately, she was not keen on complying as she saw drug use as a way to escape reality. She admitted that she wanted Ivan returned to her custody as she needed the money the government provided her as a single mother. She complied at bare minimum and attended enough counseling sessions to eventually merit reunification with her son in 2021.

As per court order, Mr. Ross remained Ivan's advocate during his transition back home with his mother to a basement apartment in public housing located in a neighborhood laden with gang violence. During his initial visits, Mr. Ross discovered that the apartment was filthy, cockroach infested and smelled like marijuana. He decided he would direct his advocacy efforts towards ensuring that Ivan and his mother had sufficient food, clothing, and ways to ensure the safety and cleanliness of the home. He also advocated for extra tutoring with the hope that Ivan would have more enrichment in his life. Unfortunately, Ivan failed to thrive in this environment. He became withdrawn and began doing poorly in school despite Mr. Ross' best efforts.

Before the case would close in 2022, Mr. Ross made one last push to ensure Ivan would have a safety net of resources. He fiercely advocated for Ivan to have an Individualized Learning Plan (IEP) in place at school that included a resource aide. His hope was that this aide could take his place as an adult Ivan could trust. He also vociferously recommended in court that Ivan begin counseling while his mother be required to continue counseling and find a safer home. All of which the judge agreed with unequivocally.

Although Mr. Ross no longer has contact with Ivan, he did learn through Ivan's DCPP worker that his mother had acquired safer housing and was leaning into counseling. Ivan had begun settling in with his IEP and had built trust with his aide. Mr. Ross holds onto the hope that Ivan will continue to thrive and that his story will have brighter chapters ahead.

# Hoping for a Happy Ending

JM was born in 2005 in Jamaica into what was already a highly dysfunctional family situation through no fault of his own. Surviving in a domestically violent household along with his two older siblings, JM was a daily witness to the frequent beatings his mother would endure at his father's hands. He and his siblings were recipients of their father's wrath both verbally and physically as well. Unfortunately, JM and his siblings quickly learned that to avoid their father's abuse they would have to mistreat their mother as well as per their father's orders.

Ten years would pass before JM's mother mustered the strength to place a restraining order on her husband. In retribution, JM's father took him and his siblings to the United States, leaving their mother behind. From 2015 to 2019, JM and his siblings continued to live with their father in New Jersey. Tired of seeing random women in his home and tired of the continued physical abuse, JM began to act out in defiance. Threatening to report his father to the police only made things worse for JM. His father hit him over the head with a pot and put a knife to his neck, swearing he would kill JM if he ever "snitched" on him.

Fearing for his life, JM began consistently running away from home. His father would report him missing each time, but would never make an effort to find him or collect him once found. Eventually, JM ran to the police. He refused to go back to his father's apartment and insisted on living with anyone who could care for him. The police called in Child Protective Services (CPS) to assess the situation. JM's father denied everything and insisted that JM was a liar. Upon further investigation, CPS found bruises and scars on the children along with records of the restraining order. JM's siblings vehemently denied the abuse out of fear. JM was the only sibling placed into a resource home in 2019. He moved in with a family friend, but JM's father threatened her life for having taken in his son. CPS decided to move JM into a shelter for the safety of everyone involved.

Living at the shelter was extremely difficult for JM as there was no sense of family. He continued running away until CPS finally placed him with a resource family. This family tried all they could to break through the walls JM had put up but were finding it incredibly difficult. The courts assigned JM a CASA advocate in 2020 during the height of the Covid-19 Pandemic, but the lack of personal contact made it exceedingly difficult for his CASA to build a solid relationship with him.

In 2021, JM and his CASA finally had a chance to see one another face to face. They bonded over sports and played games. His CASA was the first male figure that truly showed he cared about JM's interests. Despite the friendship that developed, JM found it difficult to change his destructive behaviors. He became friends with gang members and continued running away.

Unfortunately, JM's relationship with the gang members gave rise to his arrest in 2023. The police found him in a stolen vehicle with a gun. As he is now of an adult age, he was tried as such, and is serving a sentence for the crime. JM's CASA affirms that JM is such a good person, but he constantly allows himself to be misled by the wrong people. His CASA continues to visit JM despite the case being closed and tries his best to be a positive male role model for JM. With time, there is the hope that JM will learn to make better choices despite the deep trauma of his tumultuous past.

# It Takes a Village

JM was only three years old when he and his brother left their mother's custody. Having suffered with bipolar disorder since adolescence, mom (Ms. W) spent years avoiding a diagnosis. She leaned heavily on her religious beliefs to get by and subjected her sons to inappropriate behaviors in the name of religion. JM and his brother were removed by Child Protective Services in 2012 after reports of Ms. W having held them under water for long periods of time in the attempts to cleanse and baptize the boys.

Because their father was and would be incarcerated for thirteen years, JM and his brother were taken in by their maternal grandmother. They lived with her while their mother cycled in and out of therapy and psychiatric programs repeatedly. The courts allowed JM and his sibling to return to Ms. W in 2014, having deemed her behavior safe enough for reunification under the court's supervision.

Unfortunately, in 2015, Ms. W made a decision that altered the stability of her children yet again. She gave birth to another son without disclosing this information to the court. Ms. W allowed the child's father to care for him so that there would be no evidence of his existence. But upon finding the child, the courts removed all three siblings from Ms. W's care.

JM would spend the next 5 years of his life being passed around to seven different resource homes. He had developed severe behavioral issues stemming from a lack of trust, love, and consistency that can be found in a stable home environment. The patterns became clear as time went on – JM would start off well, but would begin to act out when his resource families would try to get close. He would misbehave in school, disobey, and verbally threaten those around him.

In the middle of the mayhem, JM was assigned his CASA advocate – Mr. C in 2018. It would take time before JM felt comfortable trusting in Mr. C, but it became clear to JM that Mr. C was trying his best to make positive shifts in his life. Mr. C realized that JM was most likely in need of a few small wins. He advocated on behalf of JM for an educational evaluation which showed that JM needed an IEP. This individualized educational plan would give JM the support he needed to begin excelling in school. It tampered many of his behavioral issues once he realized he has what it takes to excel.

Through a fortunate turn of events, in 2020, JM's maternal grandmother felt herself capable of caring for JM so he moved back in with her. At the same time, Mr. C had found a small, private school for JM that provided focused attention to students with IEPs. These two changes proved to be instrumental in JM's ability to thrive. JM not only excelled in his classes, but he also tried out for the school chorus and was accepted! He found camaraderie and support with his fellow singers. Most excitingly - the chorus was invited to sing in Hawaii, which meant JM would have the opportunity to travel and broaden his horizons! JM was thrilled as Hawaii was on his bucket list of places to see some day.

JM has been loving spending time with his grandmother. He sees his siblings quite often and does have communication with both his parents even though his grandmother is now his legal guardian. She ensures that JM has access to his family whenever he feels the need to be around them. Grandma has JM in summer camps which prove to be a great outlet for him as well. He will soon be graduating from eighth grade with hopes for a bright future ahead. It goes to show that the village can lift you and help you thrive in times of need.

# Finding Clarity through the Turmoil

CA was only 7 years old in 2010 when Ms. Y decided to adopt her after her biological parents became unfit to care for her. CA, an extremely bright child, was astute enough at the age of 7 to understand that she would not be returning to her parents. The next six years would prove challenging for Ms. Y as CA's behavior began changing with the development of severe separation anxiety, and ADHD. Ms. Y took her to a hospital for a psychological evaluation that also revealed CA had Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) and Impulse Control Disorder. CA was placed on medication and assigned a psychiatrist for therapy.

Despite being placed on a new regimen of medications, CA could not control her impulsive behaviors. The medication and therapy were simply not working. She would strive to do well in school because she loved it and it kept her busy. Outside of school during down time was another story. She began smoking marijuana, engaging in underage sexual behaviors, and consistently finding ways of running away from her adoptive home. Ms. Y found it increasingly difficult to endure CA's behavior and petitioned the court to have CA reside with her adult sisters while retaining her parental rights.

In 2018, CA moved in with her two adult sisters where the situation worsened. CA continued her destructive behaviors, mainly bringing random men into their home without permission. Her sisters tried their best to support CA financially, but that became difficult, too. Ms. Y, who was still financially responsible for CA, was not giving CA's sisters much, if any, of the state allocated funds for CA's care. Child Protective Services (CPS) intervened and required Ms. Y to provide evidence of how she was spending the funds to support CA's. Despite the financial relief, CA's behavior did not improve.

CA continued running away and in 2019 CPS found her living with her biological father who is disabled and living in unfit conditions. She returned to Ms. Y's home, but CA's ODD worsened. She just wanted to be with her family. After having a physical altercation with Ms. Y's paramour, Ms. Y brought CA to CPS and requested to have her parental rights terminated. She had had enough.

Between 2019 and 2021, CA endured the most difficult years of her life. She bounced between thirteen different resource (foster) homes at the height of a pandemic, and fell behind in school. Each home finding her too oppositional and disruptive for them to handle. The court assigned CA a CASA volunteer in the hopes that she could form a bond with someone. Her CASA, JP, found CA to be warm, open, and extremely bright – the complete antithesis of the picture her records painted.

JP has been working with CA closely, knowing CA just needed someone to feel connected. JP acknowledged that CA has a strong commitment to academics, knowing it is her key to brighter days. Despite constantly running away, CA always found a way to log on for virtual schooling during the height of the pandemic. She never lost sight of that goal.

At 17 years old, CA confided in JP that she really wanted to turn her life around. JP helped secure and move her into transitional housing, which has been a blessing for CA. It has given her the space to find herself. JP helped her enroll in a supportive high school and had weekly updates with CA's entire team to make sure CA stayed on track. She successfully graduated on time thanks to a CASA who never let CA slip through the cracks back into the turmoil of her past. CA is currently at her college of choice studying nursing and is so excited about the possibilities this path holds for her.

# The Long Road To Stability

Imagine having a second chance at life solely because a concerned neighbor cared enough to reach out to the Division of Child Protection & Permanency (DCPP) and alert them to the neglect you were enduring. Such was the case for AS back in 2016. AS was 12 years old at the time of these allegations. Her mother, Ms. P, had a habit of keeping countless cats in a filthy home with little to no food in sight. She was an avid cocaine user and an alcoholic; she would disappear for days on end and would bring homeless men to their home. Ms. P was astute enough to instruct her daughter to lie about her actions if she was ever questioned. The neighbor made several allegations throughout 2016 and helped AS survive by bringing her food. DCPP was unable to substantiate these allegations, because Ms. P was always able to clean up her act and the home by the time DCPP made their visit.

To AS' benefit, in 2017, DCPP finally had a visit with Ms. P that would substantiate the neighbor's allegations. Ms. P was clearly under the influence of cocaine, the house was in disarray, no food in the home, and AS finally felt brave enough to admit that the neighbor was telling the truth. AS was removed from her home at this point.

Initially, AS went to live with a relative but did not stay there long. She was struggling to adapt and had not been diagnosed yet with behavioral issues. The court assigned her a CASA advocate, and she was placed on multiple medications after a brief stay in a psychiatric hospital ward. Unfortunately, AS had a habit of refusing her medications when she started feeling better and would quickly begin to spiral mentally. Her resource families frequently found it difficult to get her to resume taking them. AS had frequent violent outbursts that would see her through seventeen different resource homes, therapeutic homes, and shelters within the next five years. She had multiple stays in psychiatric hospital wards as well. Throughout those five years, AS had multiple CASA advocates assigned to her that would encourage her to take her medications and follow through with therapy sessions. She would improve briefly and then spiral once again.

In 2021, her current CASA advocate, Ms. D, encouraged the school to get her tested for an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP), fearing that there was something more aside from her behavioral issues. AS was diagnosed with Mild Intellectual Disability, which shed light on her inability to remain consistent with medications. In light of the diagnosis, and amidst the thick of the pandemic, AS missed several months of school due to behavioral outbursts, suspensions, and an exposure to COVID-19. Ms. D worked with DCPP and the school to find her an alternate placement at a charter school designed with a classroom geared towards her specific disability. She became very engaged in classes, and behaved appropriately and respectfully towards peers and instructors alike. It was the perfect nurturing, supportive environment AS needed, and she graduated 12th grade in 2022 at the age of 18.

Since graduation, Ms. D has been working with her to find permanent housing and a stable job. She has been living in a transitional program with less structure and unwantedly became pregnant. AS opted to have an abortion, and Ms. D worked closely with her to review her options and the steps she would need to take. Fearing the lack of structure would cause AS to spiral anew, Ms. D helped her apply for jobs while searching for vocational rehabilitation programs that will assist AS with finding a career path for youth with disabilities. AS recently landed a job at a local store she loves and is thrilled to begin earning her own money. For the first time in her life, AS is in a stable upswing, and she shares the hope with Ms. D that it will only get better from here on out.

# What the Future Holds

By the age of seven, most children have become adapted to the idea of school being a commonplace event in life. Such was not the case for H. In seven years of life, H had never seen the inside of a school or a doctor's office. His mother, enduring her own traumas, made several decisions that led to her incarceration. She is currently living through a ten-year sentence.

Removing him from his home, Child Protective Services (the Division) placed H with a resource family. He was registered immediately in first grade despite never having any formal education. Understandably, H failed the year and was retained – adding additional trauma to his life. The school placed him on an individualized learning plan (IEP) that was designed for children with general learning disabilities, but H was not thriving under this plan.

During the next two years, his resource family came to realize that they wished to adopt H. Being unaccustomed to the stability and strict structure this family provided, H began exhibiting disruptive behaviors in hopes of one day reuniting with his mother. The Division removed H from this placement and sent him to live with a new resource family that over time grew weary of his behavior. Luckily, H's original resource family had not forgotten about him and were monitoring his wellbeing from afar. The family's daughter (Ms. X) had grown to love H as if he were her own son. She reached out to the Division and requested that H come live with her, with the intention of adopting him, and she was granted the right.

With more than two more years of transitions, the court deemed it beneficial for H to have his own CASA advocate (Ms. D). Having scoured H's case, Ms. D felt it right to petition the school for a re-evaluation of his IEP. The school refused her various times, but she kept insisting that something was not right. His behavior at home was not improving and his grades even less so. The school finally acquiesced and discovered that H had additional learning difficulties that needed addressing. He began making significant progress with his comprehension under a new plan!

Meanwhile, H's mother started reaching out from prison, which renewed his hope that he would one day live with her again. It escalated his behavioral issues at home, but Ms. X was willing to work with him, supporting him through his outbursts as he adjusted to new patterns at school and the sporadic presence from an incarcerated parent.

As an 11 year-old pre-teen, the goal between Ms. D and Ms. X became keeping him occupied during the summer months so he would not lose the progress he was slowly making. Ms. D requested funding from the Division for a summer sports program but was denied.

Unfortunately, his unstructured time led to H's experimentation with marijuana. While Ms. X was at work, he would spend time with boys in the area who encouraged him to smoke. The experimentation grew to frequent habit despite the intervention of Ms. X and Ms. D. In an effort to help H, Ms. D informed the Division of his risky behavior and the summer program was approved. Upset over the original denial for the summer program, H refused to go. He was placed instead in an intensive drug abstinence program but was dismissed for failure to comply.

His advocate, Ms. D and resource parent Ms. X, are not sure what the future holds for H, now 13, but they refuse to give up on him. They both love him dearly and pledge to continue to make a difference by being there for H as he navigates life as a young black male in the child welfare system.

# The Journey Home

So much can transpire in the span of two years. In 2020, at the young age of eight, BH witnessed his mother overdose on drugs. Because his father was serving a ten-year sentence in Pennsylvania, The Division removed BH from his home and sent him to live with his paternal grandmother. BH's mother (Ms. H) committed to a substance abuse program but tested positive on several occasions for opioids, thereby lengthening his stay in foster care.

While staying with his grandmother, BH began attending therapy. It was not enough to curtail his uncontrollable, disruptive behaviors stemming from his trauma. The court deemed that a CASA be assigned to BH to assist with his needs, but his grandmother had already asked for his removal because of said behaviors.

During the search for a new resource home for BH, his CASA worked diligently to create connections between herself and BH, his mother, and all stakeholders in his case. She began by working closely with Ms. H to encourage her on her path to recovery. Simultaneously, the CASA advocated for BH to receive a neurological evaluation to determine if there was a necessity for an Individual Education Plan (IEP). When deemed necessary, the CASA also encouraged the school to provide BH with additional tutoring. She attended IEP meetings and advocated for her youth in and out of the courtroom. The CASA also ensured that BH's therapy remained scheduled during these difficult transitions.

In due time, Ms. H passed the substance abuse program and was seen fit to resume care of her son. Throughout the transition of bringing BH home, the CASA worked closely with Ms. H and the caseworkers to mitigate any additional trauma for him. She assisted in the transference of his IEP to his new school and made sure his services were continuously implemented.

The case was closed in May of 2022, and a large part of that milestone stemmed from the CASA's ability to create positive relationships with all stakeholders in BH's case. His story changed for the better, because someone cared enough to never give up on him, his family or his needs.