

# Los Angeles Times

## Family reunited after child welfare system odyssey

A college application essay tips off authorities to a family's slide into drugs and homelessness. After a year of parenting classes and drug treatment, the family is back together.



Danielle Stone plays with her brother Joseph after Friday's hearing. "Coming from a million-dollar house to being homeless .... it was a nightmare. Drugs were a way to not think about it," their mother said. (Luis Sinco / Los Angeles Times / September 20, 2013)

By Sandy Banks

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The college application essay was the tipoff. It was beautifully written but painfully rendered; a high school student's story of her family's tumble from middle-class stability into homelessness and addiction.

It helped Danielle Stone earn a spot at UCLA. But it also drew her family into a yearlong odyssey through Los Angeles County's child welfare system.

A teacher who read the essay notified social workers. They visited the family in the San Pedro motel they moved into after a string of evictions.

"They felt like there might be emotional abuse," recalled Danielle's mother, Lisa Stone. "When they visited, everything was OK."

For the next six months, things were mostly OK. Then in the summer of 2012, social workers monitoring the family walked in on an ugly argument between mother and daughter. About a month later, they picked up Danielle's little brother from school and announced that he wouldn't be living with their parents anymore.

"They did an on-the-spot drug test, and we failed," said Lisa's husband, Archie Stone.

The couple began using drugs when they lost their home in the recession. Then Archie's paychecks from his longshoreman's job were garnished and they couldn't even afford an apartment.

"Coming from a million-dollar house to being homeless .... it was a nightmare," Lisa said. "Drugs were a way to not think about it."

They didn't realize how much they were hurting their children with their mood swings and neglect.

"The day social workers walked up the door with our daughter and son and said he was going to foster care, that was the worst day of our lives," she said.

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If that was the worst day of their lives, last Friday was probably one of the best.

That afternoon they were among a half-dozen reunited families released from supervision by the Department of Children and Family Services.

To get their children back, Lisa and Archie had completed drug treatment programs, taken parenting classes, attended weekly therapy sessions and compiled a year's worth of clean drug tests.

"If you'd asked me at the time it happened whether we needed all of that, I'd be in total disagreement," Archie said. "But did it work out the way it should? It probably did.

"Our life has gotten a lot better. We're a lot closer than during our days of addiction. That part has really been good."

For years family reunification has been a goal of the child welfare system — and a target for critics when children suffer because parents don't make good.

But the horror stories don't tell the whole tale. So many children are taken from struggling parents with fixable problems that it makes sense to try to repair families rather than strand children in foster care.

"This is the best thing we do," said Judge Michael Nash, who presided over Friday's reunification hearings. "When we can put a family back together and get the government out of their lives, it's a victory for everybody involved."

Last year, 6,000 children were returned to their families in a county that has more than 17,000 children in foster care.

The Stones were lucky. An uncle took custody of 12-year-old Joseph, who returned home in March though the family continued to be monitored until Friday. Danielle lived on campus at UCLA, and an older son attends college in San Jose.

Still, the experience shook the family. Lisa had dreamed about moving her daughter into the dorm. But she was in rehab at the Betty Ford Clinic when Danielle's freshman year began last fall.

And Danielle struggles with the emotional fallout. Her parents blamed her for siding with social workers; she blamed them for forcing her to grow up so fast.

"I knew something was going on with them for a while, but I thought it was mental illness," Danielle said. "To find out about the drugs, to feel like we lost everything ... that was the hardest thing ever."

The upside? She's decided to become a family therapist.

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Their case was simple compared to most: A middle-class family with no history of abuse, a steady income, good health insurance and the motivation to do whatever it took.

"We were really afraid," Lisa said. "And we were really fortunate."

For less fortunate families, the county has trained a group of parents to usher them through the reunification process. Called Parents in Partnership, they have lost and regained custody of their own children in the past.

"We know what it feels like," said Ambyr Rose, who works in the Chatsworth child welfare office. "There's no instruction manual when DCFS steps into your life. It just hits you. You feel helpless. We know when we see them cry."

Rose was in foster care from the ages of 2 to 19. Her mother wouldn't leave an abusive partner. "I have six siblings. We all grew up in the system," Rose said. "She never reunified with any of us."

By 22, Rose was a homeless drug addict with four young children. "Getting loaded all the time, living in a car that had gotten impounded, sleeping in a stairwell ... I called DCFS on myself."

Her children spent years in foster care in Palmdale. It wasn't until welfare officials threatened to put them up for adoption that Rose went into drug treatment, took parenting classes and got them back.

She's been sober for eight years. She knows it's not an easy trek.

She also knows what research suggests: Children tend to fare better with their parents than they do in foster care.

"I saw stuff," Rose said. "It's not always safer in foster homes. What's best is for families to get the help they need — parenting classes, domestic violence help, substance abuse treatment.

"And all that takes money and parents who want their kids back bad enough that they're willing to look at themselves honestly."

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