



# DCFS AT WORK

Investing in Los Angeles County families every day

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As a child, Jackie Robles remembers living in a constant state of upheaval. She entered foster care at the age of five, re-entering again at 16 after living with a relative for 10 years. Bouncing between group homes and relative placements, she was finally able to get her life on track with the guidance of social workers in the Department of Children and Family Services' (DCFS) American Indian Unit (AIU).

Now 21 and with her case officially closed, Jackie is an example of the approximately 120 children of Native American descent that DCFS provides support for every year. These cases fall under the joint supervision of both DCFS and tribal nations as mandated by the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA).

The oldest such unit in California, the AIU was established in 1989 specifically to work with this population, given the unique circumstances that set these cases apart from most children in DCFS care. Through extensive coordination with the respective tribal nations, the AIU works to provide culturally responsive services, ensuring that children maintain a connection to their heritage and the tribal community to the greatest extent possible.

Assistant Regional Administrator Robert Rodriguez started at the AIU in 2004 as a social worker, moving up to now oversee the unit's operations. Himself a descendant of the Pascua Yaqui Tribe on one side of his family and the Comanche Tribe on the other, Robert feels a personal connection to the unit's work.

"I love being able to share my own story and point people in the right direction," said Robert, who was the social worker assigned to Jackie and her brothers when they first entered foster care years ago. "My goal was always to be a role model for children and to help families. Here in LA we have such a need for more American Indian homes. If we are unable to identify relatives or tribal members, a child will be placed in a resource home where the caregiver may not be familiar with a tribe's culture or traditions."

One of the major challenges for the unit is the number and geographical diversity of tribes, each with their own governing structure, child welfare departments and social workers. The Los Angeles area is home to one of the largest and most diverse urban Native American populations in the country, according to Robert.

With more than 100 tribes in the state of California and more than 570 federally recognized tribes in the country overall, AIU social workers frequently travel long distances to connect youth with relatives or tribal members and to provide ongoing services. In a typical year, AIU social workers interact with as many as 45 different tribes at any given time, keeping the unit on its toes and requiring a working knowledge of a vast array of rules, regulations and traditions. Many urban families are also disconnected from their tribe, challenging the unit to get creative in finding the right information to reconnect children to their culture.

Jackie is grateful for the support she received from DCFS, and the important role that her AIU social workers played in her life. When she re-entered foster care as a teenager, the AIU arranged for Jackie to live with her older brother and his family in Tennessee in an effort to maintain tribal guardianship. The change proved challenging, and she longed to be back in Los Angeles as she struggled to adapt to a community that felt different in many ways.

She continued fighting, and after petitioning the court with the assistance of her AIU social worker, Robert Escamilla, she was able to return to a familiar group residence home and high school in Hollywood where she felt comfortable. She buckled down and tackled school with enthusiasm, graduating high school and starting college a semester early at California State University, Long Beach.

“Social workers have a lot of responsibility and authority,” Jackie acknowledged. “Everything goes through the social worker, and I’ve been really lucky to have social workers -including both Roberts! - who stay true to their word and follow through on things. Even my brother, now 26, remembers Robert R. and called him recently to thank him for being such a pivotal person in his life all those years ago.”

After earning her bachelor’s degree in May in only three and a half years and working with a children’s advocacy organization, she began graduate school last month, pursuing her master’s degrees in public policy and social work from the University of California, Los Angeles. She dreams of using her experience and education to pursue legislative policy changes on a broad scale that can have a positive impact on children and youth in foster care.



Left to right, Robert Escamilla, Jackie Robles, Native American Commissioner Cheri Thomas, and Robert Rodriguez.

She also hopes to strengthen her bond with the Choctaw Nation in Oklahoma, where she is a registered member. She is grateful for the resources and links to American Indian service providers that she gained during her time with DCFS, and she plans to use these to become more involved and enhance her own connection to the tribe and its culture.

Jackie attributes her academic success to the supportive services she received from the AIU and the encouragement she received from Robert E. He opened her eyes to future possibilities. Even though her case is closed, she knows that she can still reach out for support. She sees Robert E. as a mentor and confidante and has sought guidance from him over the years on topics beyond the specifics of foster care, such as working with difficult people and personal well-being. She even hopes to have him walk her down the aisle at her wedding one day.

“I know I can call him at any given time and he’ll answer,” Jackie said. “I’ve never once even gotten his voicemail. He’s always advocated for me, and I could always go to him for anything I needed. It takes a special person to be a social worker, and he is the best of the best. He really did change my life.”

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