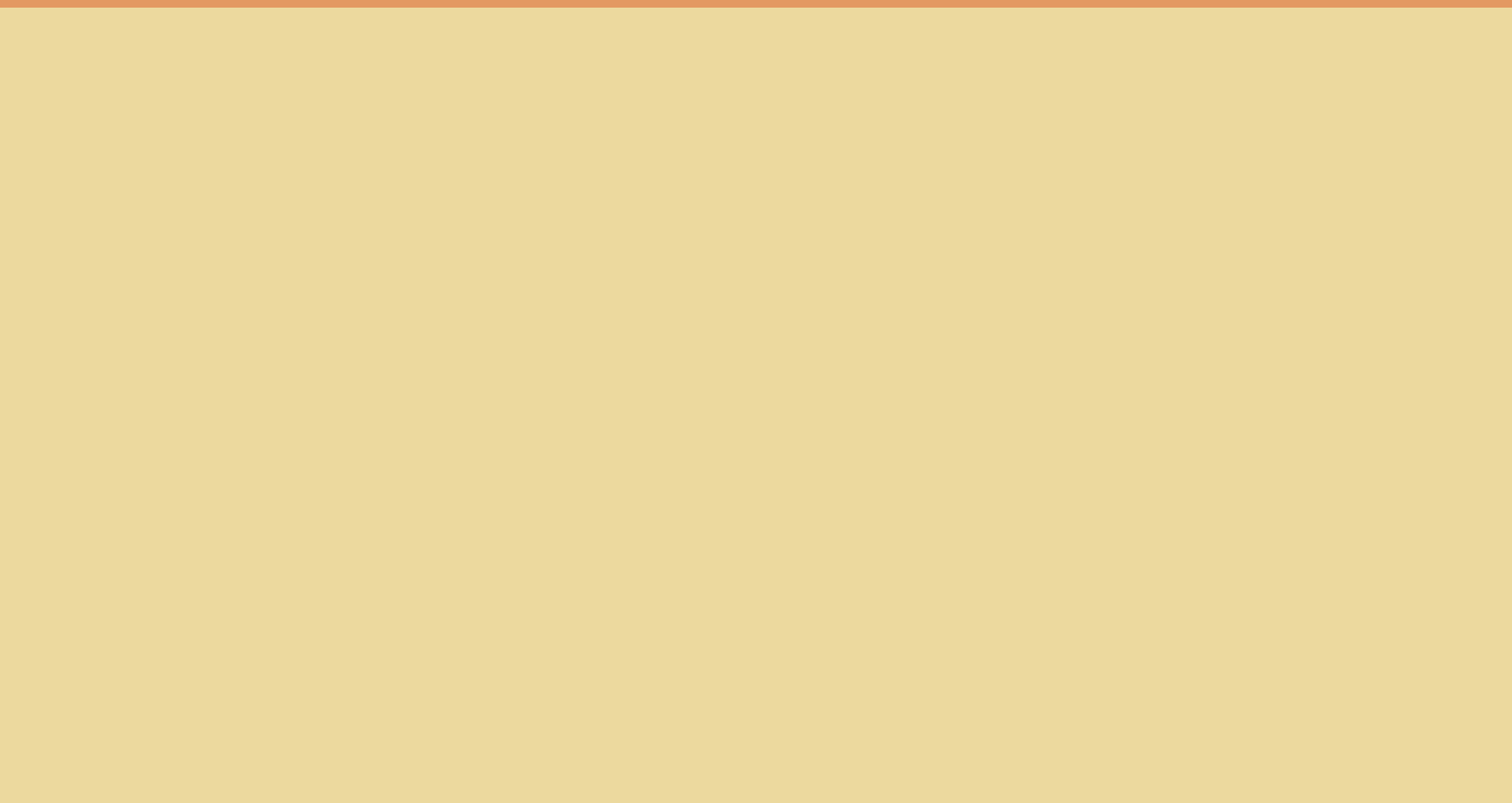




SISTERS IN STRENGTH





# SISTERS IN STRENGTH

A collaboration between The Rest of the Story  
and the Family Advisory Council of the  
Department of Youth Services

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# Who We Are

The Family Advisory Committee (FAC) of the Department of Youth Services creates meaningful opportunities to engage, encourage, and empower families (traditional and non-traditional) to participate in their child's treatment, including policies, programs, and practices to improve outcomes for youth in DYS. As a majority of FAC members prepared to transition off of the committee in June of 2021, the group decided to end their tenure by participating in the curriculum, *The Rest of the Story*, to share their stories with each other and to pass them along to the group of parents and guardians who will make up the next FAC cohort. This is a legacy of insightful knowledge from lived experience, and of love.

*The Rest of the Story* is a trauma-informed community-based storytelling curriculum, created by Michael Patrick MacDonald, which was designed to help participants transform trauma to voice, agency and leadership through story sharing. Using Restorative Justice Circle process-style prompts, the experience can be therapeutic for groups with specific trauma in common. The Restorative process can also serve to connect groups and individuals working toward common social justice and community-building goals. Invariably groups produce a collection of stories, but each individual story is ultimately owned by its storyteller. The process with FAC was co-facilitated by writer, grassroots literary instructor, and community builder, Shana Turner, alongside curriculum creator, Michael Patrick MacDonald.

The FAC cohort members who participated in *The Rest of the Story* curriculum (writers of all of the original pieces of work in this booklet) are: Nichole Campbell, Sasha Johnson, 'The Trying Parent', and Marilyn Thomas' YisraEL. Pieces that are not attributed to a name were written collectively by the group. The original cover art is done by youth artist, NKAtheartist. Graphic design done by Amala Diamond.

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# 'Black Woman Power'

by Nichole Campbell



# We Are Sisters in Strength

We are a courageous sisterhood of strength with the guts to stand up and boldly do anything we can for our and other people's children.

We as parents attended every meeting we could, and participated in every resource made available throughout our tenure as founding FAC members.

We've been willing to address the work we need to do in order to heal as parents, while understanding that our kids have their own healing work they are responsible for.

We believe in our children and we believe in this fight to passionately focus on doing what we can to make sure we all make it.

We are tough divas who use our voices to tell the honest truth, which at times can be lethal — we mean what we say!

Our journeys mirror each others', and the reflections we see of ourselves in each other makes us know that we are not alone. Sharing stories with each other helps us to release shame and guilt and to build emotional self-control, inspiration, and strength.

*[While this particular group was all mothers and identified as a sisterhood, future cohorts of FAC are open to all parents and guardians of young people who are in DYS treatment.]*

# Cover Artist Biography

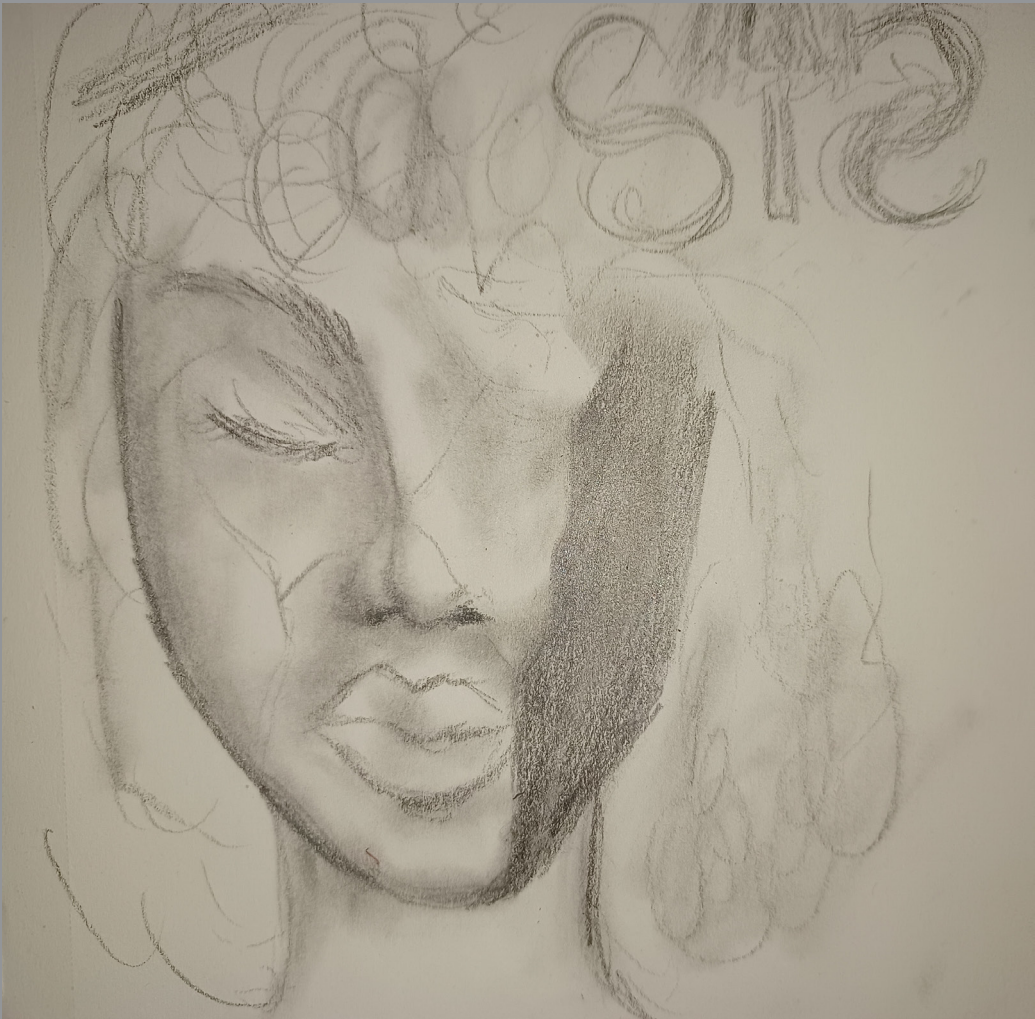
When I first received an invitation to work with S.I.S. (Sisters in Strength) I was immediately impressed with their creative name and after reading the text of the book I was deeply moved.

S.I.S. is a group of strong women aiming to get stronger. The women immediately made me think of my mom. The way their voices came through on the page, and the tools they have used to get through tough times, made me remember how much my mom means to me.

Born into a most impoverished and neglected part of Haiti, I was often caught in life and death moments. It was my mom who was always there to save me. She literally pulled me out of the way of falling debris during an earthquake, which has remained a continuous metaphor for her sheltering me from so much more disaster. Reading the stories by the women of S.I.S. has given me new and deeper insight into how my mom might be feeling on an everyday basis and I am grateful to these women for this new way of seeing things. As I grow – as an artist and as a person—I will aim to continue to be a source of strength for my mom.

I create all types of art as I am constantly learning new ways to express myself and to strengthen my skills. It is hard to put a label on what type of artist I am, but the underlying theme of my art tends to be overcoming struggle. I love the idea of always emerging stronger and turning difficult circumstances into a source of strength--for myself and for my community. Art is itself an essential source of my own resilience and healing and I am thrilled to share it in collaboration with such strong, protective, and creative moms.

-NKAtheartist



# Our Values

For us to work together we had to build a space of support where we could truly listen and respect each other as sensitive topics came up. We chose a set of principles and values that helped guide our communication with each other.





## Kintsugi: That Shine We Find,



## to Mend the Broken Pieces

Kintsugi is the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery by mending the areas of breakage with lacquer dusted or mixed with powdered gold or other precious metals. As a philosophy, it treats breakage and repair as part of the history of an object, rather than something to disguise. The flaw is seen as a unique piece of the object's history, which adds to its beauty.

Who, what, where is your gold, even at the places where you feel broken? Who, what, where is YOUR shine?



Nichole Campbell

**The gold in me is the strength it takes to be able to put broken pieces together again.** I wake up everyday breathing and I continue to piece myself back together. That's my shine. Supporting each other as sisters the way that we do in this group, that's our shine.

My mom and I don't have the best of relationships. I felt powerless my whole childhood and my mom has said things to me that left me thinking, "you say that to a human?" I just have to laugh at it so I can deal with it. I've been through a lot of painful experiences with her but at the end of the day, she's my mom and I still make sure she always gets something to eat. But let me tell you, I am the only one, since my father died three years ago- the ONLY one- that makes sure this lady is straight. I stayed strong through all the stuff she put me through and I still look out for her. At the end of the day, I remember that my mother was 14 when she had her first child. She was 15 when she had her second child. Her parents died when she was 15. So she didn't know how to love. I take that knowledge to understand that I have to work with this lady. To this day, I just have to work with her. She had no education and she had to learn a lot about life on her own. There was nothing for them back then. I feel bad for her. But at the same time, I wonder whether she ever wanted more for her children, the way I want more for my kids. I understand now that she did all she knew how to do. I get it now. I've learned from our relationship and try, as a mom, to be better. I try not to do some of the hurtful things my mother did to me. I know I can tend to go that way sometimes--we all can; we're human!--but I know enough to be like, *Oh wait a minute, pump your brakes Nikki, pump your breaks.* **Self-awareness is my gold. The resilience I've had to have to be able to stand strong through all that is my gold. The way I work to be better for my kids is how I shine.**

Three years ago, I lost my father. He was my role model, my everything. It still hurts that he isn't here anymore. One thing I got from both his life and his death is my voice. While he was alive he always told me, "Girl, say what's on your mind." But it wasn't until he died that I started saying what's on my mind. I know a lot of people don't like it but I don't care cause **I have the right to speak my mind. That's my gold.**

The gold to me means strength where you once felt broken, yet you were strong enough to put yourself back together. **We wake up breathing and that is gold.** One day at a time, I will be able to mend my broken pieces back together so everything can shine. We all probably broke when our kids got in trouble and went to DYS. And maybe not everybody, **but those of us in this group stood together and made ourselves shine, as advocates for our kids. Our shine is that we started the FAC and are trying to make a difference in kids' lives. I thank God for Marilyn Ma'Dear, The Trying Parent, and Sasha. I appreciate my sisters and all the ways we help each other shine.**



## The Trying Parent

**At times it is a struggle to remember our gold...**

**The Trying Parent:** I don't have gold. My pain and brokenness made me separate from my family and from life. It's so bad my daughter has anxiety 'cause she doesn't get to be around people and she doesn't go outside. That's how bad it is. In my situation, the hard times didn't do anything but isolate me.

**Michael:** Well you're here, The Trying Parent, doing this work. You chose to not hide out. You chose to be an advocate with DYS and you didn't have to. Some things got you to this place. It could be your faith, or the love in your heart. You could be a tiger mom whose kids are everything to her. So don't tell us you don't have any gold.

**Nichole:** Your grandson is your gold! When you wake up in the morning, that is your first gold because you're breathing air. You're still getting up and moving and living your life. Nothing in your past has stopped you from living. That right there is your shine.

**The Trying Parent:** I feel like my past does stop me though. I was a foster child to my cousin. There's something personal that happened in the family and when I tell y'all that I am isolated, I do not associate with family. And I grew up with the belief that there is ONLY family, so think about the pain and the hurt I carry. There's no gold there. My daughter doesn't even know her cousins and aunties. If I name people, she's like "who's that?" If I show her pictures, she's like, "I don't know them, they aren't related to me." My daughter, son, and grandson are my only family. If I die, my daughter won't even know who she's related to, because of the trauma.

**Michael:** It sounds like you had to make a break with your biological family for a lot of reasons. The fact that you took that step and made that break for the sake of your kids is gold right there. A lot of people put up with stuff cause they're like, "it's my family, we have to stay together." But the fact that you took those steps and are taking care of your children--that's gold. You didn't tolerate living in a certain situation.

**The Trying Parent:** I feel like I was protecting my kids. If you can do it to me, you can do it to them.

**Michael:** I'll throw into your gold-making alchemy: your ferocity. That's a fierce mom that's like, "no, my kids are not going to experience what I experienced. That's not a weak person, that's not a broken person. It's a person that's put together some broken pieces with some gold that they found deep inside themselves.

**Shana:** And still piecing together, cause we're works in progress.

**Michael:** Always! And we'll keep breaking in other places and piecing them back together.

**Shana:** The fact that you did what you had to do to protect your children in the ways you knew how, that's responsibility and fierce love. That's gold.

**Mike:** I've known moms who don't do that. They keep their kids in a risky situation.

**The Trying Parent:** NOPE. That's the part where I come in to say I'll die for mine. NOPE.

**Shana:** And that's gold. That's pure gold, that love that motivates you. And the love for yourself for knowing that you deserve to be treated well. There are consequences to the choice of separating from family, like the isolation that you feel. And there will be consequences for staying too. You got to weigh it out like you did and you made a decision based on fierce love.

**The Trying Parent:** Well then my gold is my children. My gold is safety, movement, survival, love, being blessed and healing. My gold is knowing that life is short so live for today, not tomorrow. My gold is being able to open my eyes. Of not hearing any bad news of loved one's deaths. My gold is gratitude for this circle we have right now.



## Marilyn Thomas' YisraEL

**My main gold--and who holds my world together--is my God. Strength, prayer, hope, patience, communication, listening, empathizing, being a rock for people- being eyes for loved ones when they can't see, ears when they can't hear is my gold.**

I watched my mother suffer with PTSD while I was a child. She lost her 14 year child, my sister, who I laid next to in the bed while she was being killed. Part of how my sister's murder affected my mother was that she dealt with trying to protect me by staying away from me as a way to try and prevent the potential pain of losing me too. Even though I felt abandoned at one point, my strength was to hold on and keep fighting for my mother's healing.

I understand why my mother had to be a bit estranged from me in order to survive and I'm not bitter about it. I understand because I've gone through some of the same things I saw my mother go through. She and my father died sixty days apart. I was thirteen and my baby brother was ten. I became like a mother to my brother after we lost our parents. Then, when he was eighteen, shortly after my first baby was born in 1981, my brother got killed too. Since I had raised him after our parents died, it felt like I had lost my own child. I pushed myself away from my new baby just like my mother had pushed herself away from me when my sister got killed. My baby was so small. I didn't want to touch him. I didn't want to have to take care of him. But I didn't stay gone, I came back around quickly.

Years later, that baby--my son Jihad--was murdered on my birthday while he was in the middle of trying to throw me a surprise party. When that happened, a black wall went up and all I saw was pain and fear. When Jihad got killed eleven years ago, I shut down and abandoned myself from my other kids. It took me longer to come back to my other children than it did to come back to Jihad after my brother died. It was hard. I've been on this domino path, back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. And everytime I go through it, I understand it a little more: **I understand how we as people are affected and what is needed for us to be well. I understand how to support and advocate and help others. Not just survivors of homicide, but also people who have been involved in DYS 'cause my brother was involved in DYS, my son was involved in DYS. I have a lot of strength to share and that is my gold.**

I am 60 years old so my Kintsugi bowl is big and full. Something breaks it every single year, and I keep right at it, putting it back together again. I never thought I'd make it this far in life. **More time to heal and have revelations is my gold.** For eleven years after Jihad was killed, I stopped celebrating my birthday. Because the day of my birth had also become the anniversary of my child being killed. One thing I've learned from the pandemic that we've all been doing our best to survive, is that I need to celebrate each year that I'm blessed to continue living. So now I celebrate my birthday again.

**Today is a brand new day to right my wrongdoings, to write a new chapter in my book, to be able to return to my room which is my peaceful sanctuary space that I'm blessed to return to every night. That is my gold. My gratitude is my gold. Gratitude for everyone in the Family Advisory Council, and all of what each of you bring to the table. Gratitude for my courage to do this story-telling class. Gratitude that we get today as a new page in our lives. Today is our gold.**



## Sasha Johnson

**The gold means heart, dedication, love, perseverance, and resilience. These traits are my gold. I've had to be a fighter, I've had to be deeply empathetic, to find my own motivation, and I've had to be extremely patient. My ability to be what I've had to be to survive and keep my family together is my gold.**

**My angels are my gold, too.** My sister who died in a car accident twenty years ago and my nephew who passed away due to gun violence five years ago. I know they are my angels because so many things have happened and I shouldn't even still be here, yet here I am. I've even had health issues and needed my kids to do CPR on me to bring me back. My angels are my gold. **My willingness to fight for my son to get the support he needs for the mental illness that started before he even entered kindergarten is my gold.**

I know I have a lot of broken pieces and I really don't always know what holds it together. I feel like I'm the one who's always helping someone else to put their broken pieces together. I've always been like that since I was a child. My parents made me be the one who was more responsible and the one always paying attention and supporting the others, and to this day I am the go-to person for all family emergencies and crises. But I don't feel like I ever get that back. No one can ever be as strong as me, for me. Do I expect them to do for me what I do for them? I don't. But even small attempts at being supportive would make me grateful.

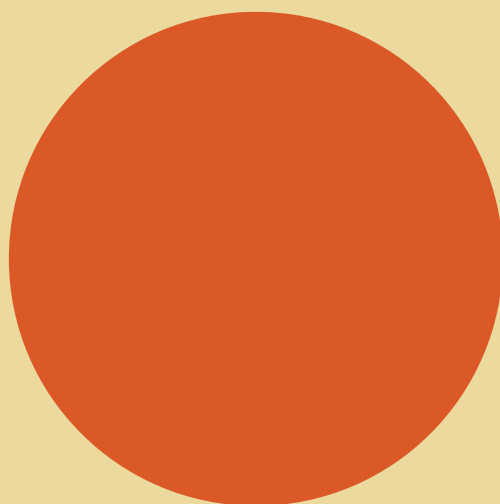
I've had to isolate myself from my family 'cause I've learned that they don't have healthy relationships and boundaries. They don't call to say, "How you doing?" They only call to say, "You won't believe what happened." I'm like, how about asking how I'm feeling today? It's always something. But even though it bothers me, I still always fix what they need fixed. I don't know why. When will I start really being like, I'm not going to do this. I need you to respect me and listen to me and hear me out. I don't ever do that, even though I know I deserve the kind of support that I give.

**Knowing I deserve more and working to create healthy boundaries is in itself gold. Knowing that even though I haven't yet figured out how to get what I need, that I am putting in the work to grow, is my gold. Some people don't even know that they deserve to be treated well. I know that I do. That is my gold. My fight to learn how to take better care of me is my gold. I'm grateful for my higher power, for faith, for my strength and daily prayers, for medicine and doctors. I'm doing this one day at a time. Giving myself grace to do my best is my gold.**

# A Room I Really Know: That Sanctuary Space

We were asked to individually respond to the writing prompt, "A Room I Really Know." We were not surprised to find out just how in-sync we are with one another—each of us went right to that sanctuary we all know well. We discussed how, in order for each of us to maintain the emotional and mental strength needed to deal with the challenges our families experience, we have all had to create personal sanctuary space to go to whenever we need grounding, balance, and peace. That can be a physical space that actually exists in our lives, or it can be a "place" we go to in our imaginations. We encourage incoming FAC parents to create sanctuary space, to which you can always retreat (either physically or through meditation or prayer) when you need to reconnect to yourself.





My Room I Really Know is being in my God's arms.  
When I open up the door to my bedroom at night,  
I get the sweet smell of lavender.  
As the door continues to open up,  
my eye catches my bed which tells me it's time to rest.  
As I sit there in the comfort of my bed, I look around and focus on my day,  
and then I look above and I say my prayers.  
Lord as I lay me down to sleep,  
I pray the Lord my soul to keep,  
and if I should die before I wake,  
I pray to the Lord, my soul to take.  
I thank you for this day and ask that I may  
Have protection over me as I sleep.  
I get a voice back saying, job well done, you may rest for the night.  
A place I know so well... there's no place I'd rather go.  
Where my soul and spirits are restored.

*Marilyn Thomas' YisraEL*





You see me every morning & night and sometimes in between.

You hold me tight, keep me warm, see my pain and hear my cries.

You're the only place I have peace. It's where no one bothers me. I isolate for hours to keep space.

You hold my darkest deepest thoughts. You keep me sleeping for hours never really wanting to get up.

I think in the dark about plans, solutions, options, and change. You listen, don't judge or speak back.

I talk out loud and no one answers. I find balance and reflect on life.

I can't be understood, if I can't plan and pray alone.

Being alone in this room brings me joy. My bedroom.

*Sasha Johnson*



My zone, my space, my peace of mind.

A room I really know it's filled with things that represent me.

I love this place in the morning or afternoon. Even at night.

I'm bold, I'm free, at last I'm me.

This room is where I will be when I'm happy, sad, or even mad.

It's often dark, it's huge, it's whatever mood I'm in.

This room, I can live here forever, it is perfect just for me.

I'm surrounded by Starbucks cups, perfumes, tons of clothes,  
lots of sneakers and a few pictures, but most importantly,  
I'm surrounded by the comfort of my own space!

I don't share this room. In this room, everything's locked away from  
everyone else.

This room I allow myself to close from the outside world.

I cry, I pray, and I'm most joyful in this room I really know.

*The Trying Parent*

A Room I Really Know:

It's not an imaginary place, it's my bedroom — the place where I go to dream.

A room where everything and everyone is free.

A room full of life, full of loved ones, of joyful people.

A room with happiness where my dad and uncle are still here like when I was younger.

A room with no violence, with no sickness, where everyone's healthy.

A kid-free room so I can get a break.

It is the place where I am free, that reminds me of when life was easy.

My safe space, my comfort zone, my relaxation room that is mine to keep going back to, when I need to get away from the troubles of the world.

Thinking of A Room I Really Know truly did something to me.

*Nichole Campbell*



# Our Tools & Our Gems

From adjudication to commitment/treatment all the way through to after-care, there are tools and gems that we either had to begin with, needed, or acquired through the process, all of which we would like to share with parents and guardians in a similar situation.

Important tools for new parents coming into the system are determination and connection. Parents and guardians need to be connected and involved in all the resources that are being offered throughout this process. Not because they have to but because they're modeling something that we all want our youth to pick up. We want our young people to feel not alone, but supported. As a parent, I don't show up because I'm forced or mandated, I do it because my child is not alone. I'm modeling a vision for them that it takes a village; we do this together. I've participated in everything I can as a parent and I encouraged my child to participate in the work that is gonna help them grow. You should participate as much as you can in all the classes and groups because you're getting information, you're connecting with other parents who have stories like yours. Show your child that you want to be involved and that will also show them that you'll be involved on the other side.

*The Trying Parent*

Strength and hope and togetherness are important tools for new parents coming into the system. It's important that you don't let anyone make you think it's your fault that your child is in treatment. The people you're working with don't necessarily know your reality, they don't always understand the barriers and the traumas that our families go through. There is distance between the systems and the people they serve, so it's important for us as parents to have strength, hope, power and a willingness to be present---to be able to get up and advocate for our kids and for what needs to be done. We understand the pressures and realities our kids face in ways that a lot of the people hired to make decisions for them don't understand. And sometimes--a lot of time--those people can do more harm than good. Do not be intimidated or quiet, don't let anything hold you back from being your child's parent.

*Nichole Campbell*

New parents coming into the system need to pray. There is power in prayer and there is power in knowing who you are and letting your voice be heard. Don't sit back without saying anything 'cause a closed mouth does not get fed. If you don't speak up, no one will speak up. You get out what you put in.

*Marilyn Thomas' YisraEL*

### Mother's Cry: Help our Child Through Mental Health Issues

Step 1. Do your research. Never just listen to the doctors, you have the right to seek more information.

Step 2. Be patient, this is not overnight, encourage and monitor your child to take their medications and you'll all be in a better situation.

Step 3. Inform those around you of the situation. Look for support and build a team.

Step 4. Don't blame yourself.

Step 5. Get professional help. Please participate in the therapy and ask for help.

*Sasha Johnson*

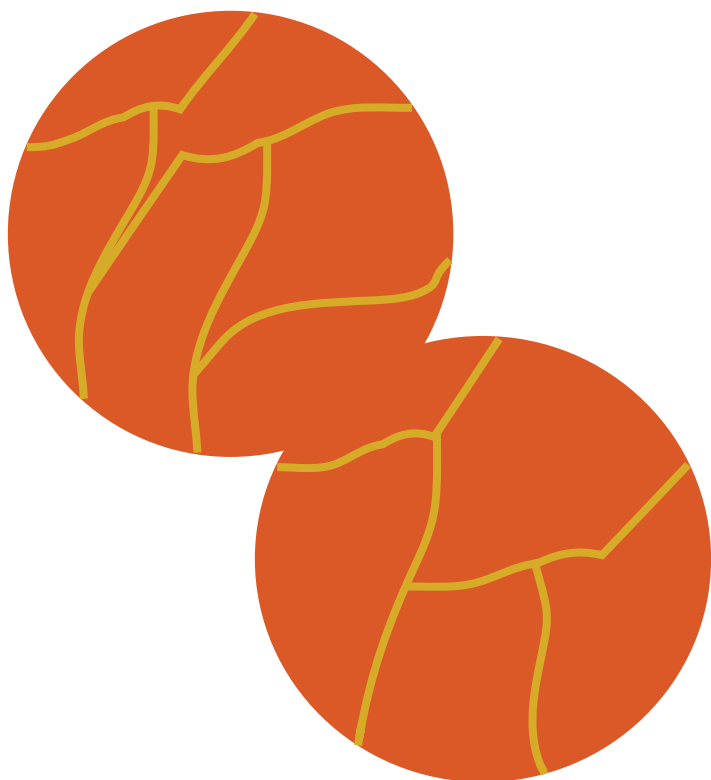
It's important for us parents to model the healthy behavior we want our kids to learn. Some parents still entertain the mentality that they don't deal with people from neighborhoods that don't get along with their neighborhoods. We are the parents, we have to grow out of that and let that go. Responsibility and leadership are tools we all need.

*Nichole Campbell*

Practicing mindfulness exercises are another tool parents can engage, to ground ourselves in our visions of wholeness. I either sit in the bed or on a chair. I put myself in a relaxing posture with my spine straight, not curved or slouched. With my feet flat on the ground and my hands on my lap, I start off with three deep breaths through my nose. I find my rhythm through the breathing. Sometimes my mind wanders and I just keep taking deep breaths to catch the rhythm again. I give thanks, and express my gratitude and humility for simply having woken up another day. After I sit and breathe, I ask myself morning questions. I set a goal for the day and give myself a simple and positive affirmation to focus on throughout the day.

*Sasha Johnson*

**Sisters in Strength**





# What We Found Most Helpful From People Who Worked With Our Children at DYS

There were certain mindsets, behaviors, and actions that were most helpful for our families from DYS workers. This is what we collectively encourage other parents to advocate for and to expect to receive.

The system should be about rehabilitation. In addition to providing therapeutic counseling as an essential and required part of every young person's treatment plan, we want the people who are hired to care for and monitor our children to care deeply about what happens to them.

When we think about why one works in this field of human services, most of the time it's because people lived through something themselves that makes them want to change something for the better in someone else's life. This can be good because personal experience can increase people's understanding and compassion. At the same time, people who enter positions of service and rehabilitation need to look at themselves and question if they are healed and healthy enough within themselves to be able to offer support to other people through their job. Without this, more harm than help can come from the adults who are in positions of caring for our children.

We want the adults who are responsible for our children while they are in treatment to have the mentality: "If you're willing to learn, I'm willing to teach." It is important that DYS take responsibility for providing ongoing training about effective ways of communicating, connecting with, and caring for young people. Caseworkers- which really should be called Careworkers- should look at each child as though they were their own niece or nephew, their own son or daughter. If they don't deeply care about what happens to these kids, then they're in the wrong position. Period. You can't just think about the young people as some other person's kid, you can't be there just to pick up a check, you can't just say, "f\*\*\* these kids' feelings!" That is not it! You chose to be in this job, it is your role to be a mentor.

There are some Careworkers who really show our children love. They bring them to church, they bring in home-cooked food to show that loving care. They check in to see how the kids are feeling and what they are thinking about. They let the kids know they have expectations for them and they let them know when they are disappointed. They understand that our children's wellbeing is in part in their hands. Some will say things like, "I'm not a babysitter." But it's not about being a babysitter, it's about providing guidance and helping to keep our kids from danger and trouble. It's about helping to monitor where our kids are at and what they're doing, and it's about encouraging them to do the right thing. It also requires communication with us as the parents as well.

A good Careworker will ask us parents questions to better understand what's going on in our kids lives, so they can be more sensitive to what they may need as far as support and also so they can clock when our kids are lying or trying to get away with less than their best. Good Careworkers will encourage parents to get involved in the resources available to help us advocate for our kids, like Parents Cafe and the FAC. Most importantly, they will listen to what we feel is best for our kids and will advocate to the team especially when we aren't being listened to and our insights aren't being respected. WE are the parents. WE are important parts of the process.

As important parts of the process, we have expectations for ourselves as well, to speak up not only for our own kids, but for the wellbeing of all the young people in DYS treatment. Some of these kids don't have supportive guidance at home and so they're looking for that concern, structure, and loving guidance when they come to DYS. Sometimes they need help understanding what is right and wrong. As parents that make up the FAC, we are willing to be there to fight for somebody else's kids that might need that extra set of hands and eyes. We stand strong to help whoever we can, to be those mother and father figures to fight for young people who might not have that guardian or parent to fight for them. That's who we are as the parents who make up the Family Advisory Council. We understand some things about what these kids need and we are willing to do all we can to share our knowledge, ideas, resources and to fight for these kids to experience as much real mental health and trauma-informed care-centered support as possible.

# Conclusion

## Sink & Float

We closed out the final Rest of the Story class by naming what feeling or thought we want to sink (release, no longer carry) and what feeling or thought we want to float (hold onto, make stronger).



**Sasha:** I want to sink the hatred I have in my heart and float my faith.

**Nichole:** I want to sink my bad thoughts and float flowers which represent me opening up to give myself more room to experience good things.

**Michael:** I want to sink resentments and anger and float forgiveness.

**Shana:** I want to sink self-doubt and float knowing that I only deserve love.

**Marilyn:** I want to sink my PTSD, and float my faith.

**The Trying Parent:** I want to sink my pain and hurt, and float my faith. Everything I believe in and see for my future will come about.



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