



Parenting in Public

Family Shelter and Public Assistance

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children were sent back to their rooms because they were overexcited and couldn't control themselves.

While being in the shelter, I realized that this was a time I could focus on nurturing my children. We had all been through a very difficult time that led up to us becoming homeless, and while I was working hard to keep my sanity, I had tried really hard to keep routines as familiar as I could for the children. They actually said they had a good time in the shelter. We spent time talking, reading, playing, and walking. We had routines when we were in our own place, but having a set bedtime curfew in the shelter helped them to get their sleep schedules back on track. After being in our own apartment for about six weeks, my son complained about not having fun. "I wish we could go back to the shelter so we could go places and have fun in the playroom." He really enjoyed the company of other boys and the child care volunteers who played with them and took them on field trips. On the other hand, I'm happy to be in a place of my own. I now feel a sense of privacy and safety, and the autonomy to make decisions for myself and my family without the intrusion or control of others.

Reflection: Mother and Staff Member, Rosa Clark

As I sit here today dictating my reflections, I have to admit that it probably took me so long because it means having to revisit some feelings I would rather not think about. The feelings that I'm revisiting bring me back to having a family, having my first child, having my first apartment and to the relationship that I was in at that time with a man who could not cope with being a father. I was probably also going through postpartum depression now that I think back to it, and I had a good friend of mine who I just called one day and said, "Please you have to come and get me out of this situation, out of this relationship," and that was how I ended up at Project Hope.

As I remember, coming through the doors of Project Hope, I immediately sensed a feeling of relief. People were welcoming, people were smiling, people hugged me, and I felt the beginning of a sense of safety and warmth. For me, my experience at Project Hope was one of safety. I felt a lot of warmth, you know, and it may have had to do partly with the way I was welcomed into Project Hope, the care that

people gave to me. They opened their arms and they opened the doors to me and my nine-month-old son. I am a Hispanic woman. I was twenty-three years old. When I came to this country, I was fourteen years old, so I came with much more of a sense of my own home back in Honduras, where I did not challenge rules. A sense of entitlement was not even in my vocabulary. When I came into the shelter, I was so grateful for being given the opportunity just to get out of the situation I was in and pleased to be in a place where there was a lot of care, which I experienced on a day-to-day basis.

At the beginning I isolated myself in the room, and I think it had to do more with feeling abandoned, not by the system but pretty much abandonment by my mate because he could not deal. He was twenty-three also, and he hadn't been brought up on how to be a father or how to respond to me. I was very vulnerable and he just couldn't deal with that. He was more dealing with his stuff, what was going on with him. So, isolating myself in my room gave me some time to bond with my first son, who at that time was nine months. I kept my room immaculately clean. I spent a lot of time just organizing it and cleaning it and arranging my things to feel comfortable with my baby. I had one room and one bed and I had a dresser and I had my baby's crib and I had a lot of things to stimulate him. As I think back to that room, it was a place where I could have my private time and mourn the ending of a relationship but also begin building a new one with my child. At the time I was at the shelter, a lot of couples there were Hispanic. Little by little I began to leave my room and get more involved with the happenings around Project Hope. I am a person who likes to clean a lot, and I like to cook. I didn't know if people had chores that they were supposed to do. I just found myself cleaning things, trying to help out. It was like I'm living here, this is ours, and we have to take care of it. There wasn't anything that I wouldn't have done.

Remember, I wasn't much into structure, and I did understand that there was a curfew. I didn't have anywhere else to go but to be at Project Hope, so curfew was beside the point for me. I didn't really care about that. I did feel like if I wanted privacy I could go to my room, and this was back quite a few years ago so the shelter system wasn't as developed as it is now, so that rules were not a problem for me. They

really didn't affect me in any way, shape, or form. I wasn't in tune with whether it affected other families. I just know that we got along well. We all did what we were supposed to do. I was just pretty focused on myself but also got kind of tuned in with some of what was going on around me. My stay at the shelter was about four months, and during that time I made some friends. I got to know the staff, and it was quite a positive experience. I have been and will continue to be forever grateful. That is the only way that I could see the situation for me. Because I was in need and someone or many people were there to help me. I was at a low point in my life, my self-esteem was down. People cheered me, people were thanking me for things that I did and how I looked out for the shelter.

I remember that there was one person who was doing some child care. I remember her knocking at my door. The first time I remember her knocking at my door on the third floor, I was a little withdrawn. It was the beginning of my stay. She asked if I wanted to bring my son into the day care and I said, "No, no, we're okay." And I don't know if part of it was because I wanted to just spend time with my baby or part of it was having to come out and confront another situation, whatever, but Mary Ellen was her name. I'll never forget her. She was a beautiful person. She had such a low tone of voice, you could sense the realness in her from the first time I met her. She had a beautiful smile on her face. There was a warmth about her. She continued to talk with me and let me know that if I wanted to bring him in to the child care, he could play a little bit and then I could have some time to myself. So I understood her reason behind it, and after probably about a week, I said, "Okay I'm going to give it a try." And I did, and it was beautiful because I got to go in the day care. I got to see my son play on the floor, and he was more stimulated, and I was able to play with him; and then little by little as I let the wall down, I could trust Mary Ellen with my son. I did leave him, and I saw what a genuine person she was. So that was a good thing for me to trust her. I didn't see it as her forcing me or invading my privacy, not at all. I guess for me it was trusting people and believing that we're all good people. She's real and the people that are in the shelter are all real, and they're caring and they're doing this because they want to help us. So for me privacy was not really an issue.

In closing out these reflections, there was no point in the time I was in the shelter that I felt like I was being taken advantage of or felt like if people were leaving me out of any type of decision making, or people were not sensitive to my needs, or that the frontline staff used their power in any way to humiliate me. I think I learned a lot about people who do this work and their commitment to it. Along the way, like everything else, shelter systems have gotten bigger and more people are coming into it. Now it's different. My personal experience was very gratifying and I learned a lot, and for that I am appreciative.

Reflection: Program Director, Michelle Kahan

Previously, as director of a few different types of shelter programs, and currently, as a consultant to various programs serving homeless populations, I have had the opportunity to experience and witness shelter living in divergent physical settings. The first shelter I worked at provided each family with their own living unit, complete with kitchen, bathroom, living room, one bedroom, and a locked door. The shelter building was comprised of five of these units, four of them serving families of various sizes, and the fifth converted to staff offices and shared living spaces. While the building was not always in prime condition, each family benefited from private spaces within which to conduct their lives. During my tenure there, we expanded this small, homey program to encompass an additional ten scattered site apartments of between two and four bedrooms that the agency rented on behalf of homeless families. The units were scattered among the various neighborhoods served by the agency. Families placed in these units were provided with the same services as families living in the shelter building; they benefited from increased independence and privacy, yet had fewer opportunities to share in community support.

After several years, I left this program to direct a battered women's organization. This agency also offered a shelter program, at a secret location for safety purposes. The shelter was located in a three-story building, a converted two-family house. The first floor offered a recently renovated communal kitchen with two stoves and refrigerators and a walk-in pantry; a large dining area; a small living room; two children's play areas; several storage closets; and a hot line office used

Reflections on Chapter 4



Reflection: Mother and Staff Member, Rosa Clark

Rules were not something that really bothered me. I came in not knowing a lot about the system and rules. The staff explained some of the rules and gave me a copy of them. I don't know if I said yes because of the position I was in needing to have shelter, but to me it was not an issue. Safety was an issue and I did feel safe. I would say that the rules are made to keep the children, to keep staff, and to keep the families safe because there's a lot of movement in and out of the shelter. Different people are in them for different reasons. People come from various backgrounds, from different situations. There needs to be some type of a structure, some type of a saneness throughout the day. In my particular case the rules were good, I knew what they were and I followed them and I knew that by following them that it would lead to me not getting kicked out of a shelter. But I wasn't interested in challenging rules at that point in time. I was glad to be safe. As far as the frontline staff were concerned, there was realness in them. If they were saying something to me about a rule, then I had to give them some credit because they were the ones on the front line and had the experiences. So I valued that and I wanted them to let me know something up front instead of letting me kind of stumble into a problem. So if I asked a question about a rule, I got an answer.

As far as safety was concerned at the shelter, I remember that the

night before I got into the shelter I had to be placed in another shelter with my nine-month-old son. The worker had done some investigation and found out that there was another shelter with one room, and so I would have to stay there for the night. I think that the shelter I ended up in for that night was a shelter for battered women. I was not battered physically although I would say there was some verbal abuse, but I was not in physical danger. I was placed in that shelter for the night because I had nowhere else to go. When I walked in that door, I felt afraid. I did not feel comfortable. No one greeted us at the door. People were hardly around. No one knew what was going on. They took me up to my room. I was scared the entire night. I didn't sleep. There was no one to say, "Well, if you want to fix your child a bottle, here's the kitchen or the bathroom." Things were just not organized, so that night I didn't sleep. I put my bed behind the door. I was scared. I heard a lot of noise downstairs. At one point I went downstairs and there were people around who obviously were under the influence of either drugs or alcohol and it made me scared. It was dreadful.

So, early that next morning, I called the worker and I said to her, "Please, please get me out of here. I don't feel safe." She did some legwork and found out that there was an opening at Project Hope. She came over, and because she knew me so well she advocated strongly for me. She even brought the coordinator at that time. I'll never forget her. My worker told her what a wonderful person I was. She said she would put herself out there for me, so please take me. They would not regret it and they did. So that was how I ended up at Project Hope and so that's why I could tell the difference between shelters, by how safe I felt.

So now, since living at Project Hope and after that becoming the coordinator of Project Hope and having to be the one on the inside, I understand so clearly the work that is done in shelters and how difficult it is. When I think back to my stay, I realize how difficult it must have been for the frontline staff at times to deal with the unpredictability of certain families who are very challenging.

For me, one of my goals in running the shelter was to try to maintain the balance of respecting the families but at the same time trying to explain the need for rules, the need for safety. Whatever the families wanted to ask about the rules, we would have answers for them.

When they challenged them, we gave them answers that were based upon our past experiences. These were not rules that we suddenly thought up one day. I remember clearly at one point we reviewed all of our rules and we had all of our rules reviewed by a committee of women who used to live in the shelter. It was incredible because when we did that review process with families who lived and were affected by these rules, they all unanimously said that these rules needed to stay the way they were.

So for me trying to maintain that balance has been such a incredible journey, from the day that I walked into the shelter living here with my child to the days when I ran it. I just felt so proud and I tried my best to treat everyone with dignity and respect. I tried to answer every question that was asked of me, remembering at times what it was like, even though my experience was different. I was not one to be too challenging. But that experience of running the shelter for seven years was an incredible journey into the lives of so many families and children. I see how each one of them is so unique in its own special way. During the challenging times you have to resist shutting them out but let them be heard. For me at times some of the difficulty was trying to get the frontline staff to understand some of that. At times, due to confidentiality, they did not have all of the information about why a family was behaving a certain way or why this one gets to do something when the other one doesn't. Trying to be consistent with all of them at times is a difficult thing because every family's needs are different. I think that at times it's hard to get the frontline staff to understand that. But one of the things that I tried to focus on and tried to talk about was how important it was for frontline staff to get good training, good training in conflict resolution, good training in the sensibilities of not taking things personal.

I have been cursed out, I have been called every name in the book. At times I have wanted to just throw in the towel and just say forget this, this is ridiculous. And then at that moment someone or something would happen that reminded me why I was doing the work that I was doing. It wasn't only to give back because people gave to me when I was in need. I became so committed to wanting to work with families who are in such a struggle with the system, with families, with friends, with authority. That's been my goal to reach out to fam-

ilies, to let them know that we're not here to demean them. I want to help them to get to that other side. It can be such a struggle. At times I have been able to reach the families and at times I have not. At times the issues were so great for that family that they just couldn't see beyond their situation. I know that my life was changed and I would say that their life was changed by our interaction.

At times I had to make decisions for the safety of everyone and yet still there were people who disagreed with that decision. They thought we should give that person an extra chance, even though I know that I had already given them just about as many chances as I could. I continue to do this work and try to meet the needs of families, with their assistance. I know that I'm not Superwoman, and that I'm not going to be able to do it all, and that there are going to be people who are not going to be ready for rules.

Reflection: Executive Director, Margaret A. Leonard

This chapter on shelter rules conjures up in my mind all types of images that convey a messy quagmire where the most difficult and painful negotiations of shelter life get played out. It is the place where we seek to delineate boundaries between individual rights of families, of families collectively, and of the community of families and staff. It is the place where the test of being a family support model is truly tried. It is the arena where the learning community of families and staff embark on an uncharted course.

How *do* we live these moments of formulating shelter rules at Project Hope? As executive director of Project Hope, I, and my colleagues in mission, raise a question critical to ensuring that our collective journey, while filled with uncertainty about routes, pitfalls, human conflicts, is also accompanied by mountains climbed, community experienced, and growth shared. The most important questions that confront us are these: How do we prepare for the journey, and what are the resources we bring with us?

I will attempt to respond to the substance of this chapter and these questions by raising and responding to two additional questions. What does it mean to be seeped in mission? And what does it mean to be committed to an inclusive process?