

Reunification Heroes



Dr. Jocelyn Gainers

"We believe in connection - intentional connection - and see that as the main way to invoke change. We believe in doing whatever it takes to assist with the change process, as different outcomes occur for each person in a different way and in a different timespan."

- Dr. Jocelyn Gainers



Dr. Jocelyn Gainers is the President and CEO of The Family Recovery Program, Inc., in Baltimore, Maryland. With over 30 years of experience, her work centers around providing services to prevent family separation and to reunify families who have lost custody due to substance abuse.

Launched in 2005, the Family Recovery Program has impacted the lives of over 2000 families through offering housing, case management services, and by connecting participants with other organizations in the city that can support their needs. The nonprofit has transformed townhouses and an old school into modern apartments that house families while parents return to school, seek new jobs, and strengthen their families.

By Adrienne Elliott, Legal Intern at the ABA Center on Children and the Law, J.D. Candidate at Georgetown University Law Center

Tell me something interesting about yourself (something you don't mind sharing with the world). E.g., interesting hobby, adventure, background.

One of my favorite hobbies is gardening. It does not sound exciting, but it brings me joy because it is a place where in silence, there is beauty. In my day-to-day work with families, there are a lot of people, places, and things involved that create noise. But when I am with my plants, the only thing that is involved in growing and changing them is me, a can of water, and whatever I decide to add into the mixture. It is rewarding because I can grow an amazing plant from such a small seed.

This year, I am planting tomatoes, lettuce, marigolds, strawberries, and a variety of other vegetables. Every day, once I finish my work, I change my clothes and I just really get into the spirit of what's going on with my plants. My plants talk to me through the different things that are going on in their leaves, such as if they have holes in them or if they are turning yellow. I can research to figure out how to help this plant grow. My garden is a quiet place where I can do some introspection, but also have fun, show my love, and share my bounty with others.

What made you interested in child welfare?

Child welfare has always been a soft spot for me. I graduated from the University of Virginia when I was 22 with a degree in psychology. My first job was at an adolescent drug treatment center. I was young. I had a typical childhood and did not experience deep issues or trauma. I once thought that some of my clients stories and the things they were using drugs for was from the movies, but the reality was that it was not. I have spent my entire career trying to support children. Each of us is only one person, but we each have a responsibility to do something. My work culminates in my desire to improve the lives of children.

How long have you worked in child welfare?

I began my career in 1990. Wow. I actually had my daughter Brittany that year and she jokingly says she was raised in a drug treatment center. She has saved lives with her knowledge of drugs and alcohol. She's really a champion for the work that I do as well.



June is National Reunification Month

For more information see www.ambar.org/nrm



What types of positions or roles have you had during that time?

I began my career at an adolescent drug treatment center, where I spent many, many years. I learned so much about children and their needs. I advocated and fought for them. There were so few inpatient facilities around, so it was a wonderful opportunity to hone my craft and really understand children at a level that most people do not get to understand. When you do inpatient treatment, you don't just see someone for 45 minutes, you get to know the whole person. You see how they interact outside with their friends, how they are when their families come to visit, and so much more. I ended up learning that children need a lot of protection and a lot of support. That spurred a desire to continue advocating on behalf of children.

This desire led me to the City of Baltimore's local substance abuse authority, where I was responsible for going to different substance abuse treatment facilities to really look at the quality of care to determine if this place is worthy of care for children. Did they have proper programming? Did they have all the things that children need to thrive? That time led me to my final career in child welfare working with families.

I began as the assistant director of The Family Recovery Program, which gave me the opportunity to really combine all I've learned about substance use, children's development, and parents' development to create a program that helps both adults and children be their best selves. I turned this into a nonprofit, and the rest is to be told.

What was one experience that had a big impact on the way you think about reunification?

Each family in our program (FRP) has an impact on how I think about reunification. I have seen the magic of wrapping intensive services around families and wrapping people who care about them and producing creative solutions to support amazing individuals raising their children.

In 2006, one of my first families was a single dad who had all the odds against him and was struggling with addiction. We worked with him to address substance use and build parenting skills, especially since few resources existed for him to seek treatment while caring for his son. I stayed in contact with him over the years and just last week he sent me an invitation to that little boy's high school graduation. It felt like a full circle moment. This young man who had come to my office over the years, run around, written pages of

June is National Reunification Month

For more information see www.ambar.org/nrm



little notes to me, papered all my walls, and left pictures on my desk is now a high school graduate with a full scholarship to college. When you invest in people, things do change for the better. I just like being part of that process.

What are some of the strengths of the child welfare system in your area?

One amazing thing about Baltimore City Department of Social services is that they recognize that they cannot do everything by themselves. They have so many excellent partnerships for improving and restructuring families, and they trust other providers. They understand they are only as good as the other organizations around them. Additionally, they have worked hard to find ways to put families back together. I have been at these meetings, heard all the requirements that need to be met, and I see all the people involved in that system. We will have community members and anybody they know figure out how to get little Johnny back to his mom. I like that spirit of cooperation and partnership, and I have tried to mimic some of those things in my own business.

What are some of the weaknesses?

There is not enough time or money to do everything that needs to be done. At our organization, we have tried to connect people to housing. Often in the reunification process, the parent would say “Okay, all I need now is an apartment.” Assisting families with housing is one of the Department of Social Services’ responsibilities but unfortunately there are not enough resources. Our organization helps to fill that gap in transitional housing, because lack of housing resources can stop reunification.



Even with partnerships that help address resources, there is always a crisis in building a strong workforce. There is turnover within the Department of Social Services because it is challenging work. Some recent graduates come into the field without recognizing that the job is serious. Folks have a lot of issues and concerns. Unless you have cared for your own needs and traumas, you will not be ready to address the needs of your families. Our workers face so much vicarious trauma and so many opportunities for burnout. We must be sensitive to building and then holding onto a good team.

June is National Reunification Month

For more information see www.ambar.org/nrm



Describe some efforts you have made to improve child welfare practice in your area?

We consider ourselves an organization of barrier busters. Parents are often challenged to get things like identification or transportation. We help them get these resources, writing grants for funding so that parents can access supports like bus tokens. We provide supportive services like meditation and yoga because not everyone can do just counseling or therapy. We find anything that can motivate someone and help them in that process.

We also fill in the gaps where there are things that the Department of Social Services cannot do. We have been strong in our dental work programming. Even as an employed person, I do not have good dental insurance and I have had to pay a lot of money for anything that I need. It is even worse for the families that we serve. I have received approximately \$15,000 in funding for dental work this year so far, and this year is not over yet. People say, "Why are you fixing teeth?" When you fix people's teeth, you improve their world. I talk to parents and family members who cover their mouth when they talk. They are shy talking to me because of their teeth. It is the biggest return on investment that I have ever made because I can say about 95 percent of our families funded for dental work are gainfully employed and fully reunified. Their lives have changed because they have a smile, and it gives them confidence. A smile is a gamechanger.

Everything we do is about busting barriers. About a year ago I had a parent come to me saying she wanted to work again, but she had outstanding traffic tickets and lost her license. We worked with her through our program to pay half her tickets as she made progress toward recovery. By the end of the program, she paid for her tickets in full, and she was at work. It is about finding ways to meet people at their level of need. We can craft a program that provides individual support so that they can be more present for their family.

What advice would you give to other professionals who work in child welfare? Or to individuals considering working in child welfare?

I would encourage them to make sure they have two things. First, seek a balanced life. It is easy for this job to move into the day and then the night. We get off work at five o'clock, but for many, work does not end at five o'clock because problems do not stop then. We have families that will call my staff at what one might think would be inopportune hours, but

June is National Reunification Month



For more information see www.ambar.org/nrm



sometimes those are the hours that matter. To handle that, you must be able to step away from the work and you must have something that fills you up.

Second, take care of your own mental health. Much frustration among people in the field stems from unaddressed mental health needs. See a therapist and learn some new coping strategies so that you can truly be present for the people that you serve. Personally, I care for my mom. Sometimes I realize I have not thought about my mother in the last six hours because I am consumed with my work. I have a support network that supports us both when I can't be fully present. But if you do not have your life organized and full of support, it is hard to find that balance.

Years ago, one of my responsibilities at the treatment center was to tell families when their children were HIV positive. The first time I did it, I was awful. My supervisor pulled me aside and said, "Jocelyn, you're crying more than the mother." I asked for counseling to reorient myself. That early experience helped me put things in place and understand that I am going to be faced with some serious stories in my career. I must be ready for how deep they are.

What advice would you give to judges, agency directors, legislators, governors, or the president about how to improve the system?

Often, we do not see people. We may read information about somebody and make judgments as to who they are. When I first started my housing program, I read files and already had an idea of people in my mind.

I met one young man who came in looking at disheveled. He was very angry, and his fingernails were painted black. I was not sure what to think. So, I asked him, "Tell me about your fingernails." It turns out that is how he connected with one of his children. They painted each other's nails! When I see him now, his nails are green or blue. He was just a dad, who had several kids, and the one way he could connect with this daughter was to paint fingernails together. When she sees him and the fingernails are still painted, that meant that he still loves her and has been thinking of her.

Sometimes people are quick to make judgments based on appearance or past mistakes. I stopped reading all that stuff. I just sit down and talk with people. Who are you? What are your needs and desires? By not having those preconceived notions, I can enter the relationship with them more authentically.

June is National Reunification Month

For more information see www.ambar.org/nrm



What programs/practices are most effective in helping parents reunify?

We need to focus on the whole family approach. I have seen the individual approach in practice, both originally when I was working with kids and then when I was working with the system. When I first began my company, I was working more with parents. Over time, I realized that working with individuals is great, but working with the family as a whole is even better.

We try to involve family members early. I always ask participants in our programs to tell me about their families. Who is their significant other? Who are their children? What are they like? What motivates them? People grow and change based on the ebbs and flows in their family, and we all exist in a family unit, even if it is not a blood relative. We offer comprehensive services for individuals in our programs because we want them to grow and be successful together. We also invite loved ones to celebrate our participant's accomplishments.

The whole family approach is particularly crucial when it comes to transitional housing. Many programs only serve women and children, but participants often have a spouse or other male family members. When the only option to reunify with their child is to move into transitional housing, excluding dads that previously lived with the family is simply not fair. Why would I want to put trauma of further separation on the family? We also invest so much in our moms and we want to make sure the entire family is growing together. In addition, we have single dads that need services, just like that young man I spoke about before. Now, if he were in our program now, he would be eligible for housing, and he could see his son every day. That is how it should be. There should be opportunities for the whole family, however you define it.

Are there programs/practices that are not effective and need to be changed? If so, why?

Practices that focus on the individual only and do not incorporate the family tend to fail. They may work temporarily, but they are less effective over time. When I invest in my families, it is not just for twelve months. I want to see these children graduate. I want to see wedding announcements. I want to see everybody get better. When we only focus on one part, then we just solve for a moment one piece of the puzzle.

June is National Reunification Month



For more information see www.ambar.org/nrm



We also must ensure that organizations and institutions have the right staff, which is difficult. I recognize that training is important, because there are a lot of antiquated practices that no longer work. There is so much knowledge and wisdom out there.

What preventative actions do you think would be most effective in avoiding the conditions that may lead to foster care?

More wraparound services are essential. I want to think about funding. I want to think about how to build systems where we can support families, whether that is more transitional housing, or grants for teen programming. There should be flexible spending that really allows us to work with families and communities.

We began planning our apartment community after seeing the devastation in our community. As I watched my babies get off the bus in front of our transitional housing development directly across from the dilapidated townhomes. I bought five of the ten townhouses on the block, and we renovated the homes from top to bottom. Now families have beautiful townhomes because I only create homes that I would live in myself. Our families do not want to leave. But now each of the other five houses on the block has begun the process of making improvements. All our houses have colorful doors and families who live in them are gainfully employed and stable. We have a community giveaway every other Wednesday where anything we have that is extra for us, we give to the community. Our families set up a table with extra Brussel sprouts, broccoli, and clothes, and interact with their new community. It creates a whole community approach—a community of care.

Do you think there are any public misconceptions about the child welfare system? If so, what are they?

People do not like child welfare because they do not understand the purpose of it. They also do not understand addiction or trauma. The more work we do to help them understand, the more they will also understand child welfare. Often there is only so much that the child welfare system can do, which is what I was saying earlier. They need partners to help unify and build healthy families.

