

CSocD 58

Zena Grimes' statement for Side event MMM

I stayed 6 years in the shelter system with my children.

When I was 21 and I had 3 children, we arrived at the Emergency Assistance Unit, a place you have to go before being placed in a shelter. We just had our bags, clothes and important papers and we stayed 10 days before we got eligible to go to a temporary place. I stayed 3 months in a shelter. We only had a room with bunk beds. I had a key but we had to share the bathroom and the showers. I had to tell my kids, "If you gotta go to the bathroom, wake me up. Do not walk out of this room by yourself." Because you never know, something might happen...

Then I was transferred to a shelter in Harlem where I had my own apartment, with cooking facilities.

When I arrived in Harlem, the first person I called was my Mom. I cried to my mother and I said, "Mommy, I don't know nothing about Harlem. How am I going to get around? What am I supposed to do? I'm 21 years old and I was born and raised in Brooklyn." I was thinking she was going to say come home. She didn't say that. She said, "Well baby you have to go wherever they send you and you have to try to learn how to get around." I felt that she threw me underneath the bus. Now I understand she did that because she wanted to show me what independence was about.

I had to learn how to get around, where to go food shopping, how to support my family. When you are learning, you do get lost.

In 6 years, we moved to 7 different places in the shelter system. In 3 different boroughs. The thing about being in the shelter is that you'll never know where they will put you at.

In the middle of that, we had an apartment but after 11 months, it burned. I lost everything and I had to start over again.

So many changes were a lot: the moving around from place to place, changing schools, meeting new people, dealing with certain childish things that children would just do to pick on kids. I never knew how my children would feel or how they were going to react. But I tried to make it easier for my kids to meet friends.

You had to deal with the caseworkers. They come upstairs to your room, to see how you keep your room. Sometimes you get up and rush to drop the children off to the bus then you got to go to this appointment and that appointment and you ain't getting back until 3 o'clock in the afternoon. Then they leave a note on your door "The room wasn't clean". Well what you want me to do? I'm only one person and you got me going here and there, like a chicken with no head.

I didn't feel respected by the social workers because they didn't know me and I didn't know them. I felt that they were just doing the job and that was it. It's about how you talk to people. Everybody has their good days and their worse days, but you don't take it out on other people. And sometimes it goes both ways.

Sometimes it's the client taking out on the social worker, sometimes it's the social worker taking it out on the client. I've had my outbursts and probably snapped on people and I have to come back and apologize to people because it wasn't their fault, it was mine. But some people don't apologize and say, "I was wrong." Some social workers look down at you because you're in the shelter.

It's the same with children. Kids who live in a shelter, because they got dirty sneakers, their hair is not combed, they are bullied. That makes kids feel uncomfortable and they don't feel secure and safe.

I remember a painful time. I was doing an application to get an apartment for us to call it home. One of my children was living with his grandmother, and the other one in a group home. A social worker didn't let me put them down on the application. For me it was like abandoning my kids because they can't live with me. They've still got to come home! I asked to speak to the supervisor and finally their names were added on the application.

My daughter Cassandra was living with her Dad because at the time that I was in the shelter. At the end of the day, she doesn't know me and I don't know her. So now, she thinks that I love my other kids more than I love her. No, baby girl I ain't never stop loving you.

When I finally found an apartment. I was happy. My kids were happy because they went to the same school.

It makes a big difference to raise a child not in the shelter system. My two younger kids had never been in the shelter system because at that time, I was already stabilized. The different struggles between the rest of the kids and the last three of my kids is big. Jasmine and Jessica don't know how it feels to go through changing schools, or having to go downstairs to the shelter when they donate clothes. But you can't do it when they're there because they won't want to wear it. You got to tell them, "Oh Mommy bought this for you and you got to wash it." And it's a really big difference between all my kids.

When I think of those years, the most difficult was to never give up. What gave me the strength was my kids looking up to me to get them a home and to support my family.

What also helped me was ATD Fourth World Movement when we were in the shelter in Harlem. Babette and Denis were doing Tabori workshops with the kids, drawing, computer, reading books. My kids kept asking me, "Mummy, can we go outside and see what they are doing." I said no, go and sit and do homework, I got to cook, go to the laundromat. I didn't want them to go because they were strangers to me. But they kept nagging till finally I just gave up. So, the first time they went, I went with them because I wanted to sit. Once my kids got the hang of it, they would sit there and read books. It was new to sit down and hear them read.

30 years of my life that I've been with ATD Fourth World. Babette and Denis told me: you are going to hear other people talk about their situation, their life. I got a chance to meet new people and I learnt from people just from hearing what they went through. My situation was not worse than I thought it was. My situation was better than what they went through.

Look at me now, I grew up. I grew up from 21 years old to 51 years old and I still stand today. 19 years standing and I never went back to the shelter system. I made that promise once I had my daughter Cassandra, I would never go back in there after that. You just got to keep your head up and move forward.