

Anna Woodward

02.01.2021

Written Testimony in support of House Bill 2149

My name is Anna Woodward, formally Anna Marcotte. I am a Licensed Clinical Marriage and Family Therapist (LCMFT) with the state of Kansas. I graduated from Kansas State University with a BS in Psychology, a BS in Family Studies, and an MS in Marriage and Family Therapy. I worked with Family Preservation in grad school and then in the Foster Care field (Youthville/KVC) as a Reintegration Specialist for 8 years.

In 2019, my husband met a woman and her 9-year old son, who were squatting in a building he managed down the street from his small business. He and many other business owners on the street got to know this child (TJ) very well over the course of several months as he roamed the streets during the day without her knowledge/supervision and the police were often called to her "residence". Eventually, in June 2019 my husband was forced to evict the woman, by the request of the building owner. The mother informed him that she was able to find a home for herself but not for she and TJ. Over the course of the previous month, my husband and I had taken TJ to baseball games, movies, dinner, etc. to get him out of his unstable home, even if for a little while. So, when his mother said she did not have a place for him to live, we offered to let him come live with us through the summer, until she could find a suitable place for the two of them. I had her sign a Power of Attorney (POA) so we were able to take care of his needs while he was with us. Almost immediately I scheduled a pro-bono appointment with a friend who was a dental hygienist as TJ had an infection in his mouth and did not have insurance. As it turns out it had been there a while and he ultimately, he had to have one of his permanent teeth pulled, at the age of 9.

One month later his mother came back to us and told us she was not in a good place yet and asked my husband if we could care for him for a couple more months. My husband told her that it was not fair to TJ and that we would keep him but for an entire school year so that he had some stability and it would give her more time to find stable work and find stable housing. We had her sign another POA through August 2020. Throughout that year we enrolled him in football (where he excelled), obtained a medical card through the state so we could get him caught up on shots & annual exams (he had not had shots since he was 3 years old and was not in compliance with the school), enrolled him in school (his mother had not had him in school his second semester 3rd grade year so he was behind), provided clean clothes (when he came to us none of his clothes fit or they did they were torn/stained so we had to start completely over), provided a steady home environment with his own bed/own room, and provided stable housing. When we got him, he was at Maslow's lowest level in the Hierarchy of Needs.

Fast forward to July 2020... over the last 9 months, TJ had talked to his mom maybe at total of 8 times and had not seen her since November 2019. We tried contacting her several times to let her know that the POA was set to expire and wondered where she was at with getting him back. I had 7-8 different

phone numbers she had used to contact us over the year and was unsuccessful in reaching her. So, in August when the POA had expired, we had no choice but to put TJ in state's care as we no longer had any legal authority over him.

Putting TJ in foster care turned this very loving, sweet, thoughtful, joy-filled child into an emotional wreck. By this point he was moving up in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and had gone from being behind in school to getting straight A's his last 2 quarters in 4th grade. He was feeling stable, he was feeling secure, he was *happy*. Then, we had the TOC hearing. At the TOC hearing we were informed that due to a "prohibitive offense" by my husband 15 years ago, TJ was going to be removed from our home. My husband and I cried. The judge could see our tears over the TV monitors. My husband has only cried one other time since I've known him. They said that as soon as we could get this "offense" expunged TJ could return to us. I immediately took the rest of the day off from work, my husband filled out the paperwork, we filed it with the Johnson County Court, made several phone calls and emails to find the right person, and paid the fine – all within 12 hours of court.

After court the worker called me and asked if we had a family member TJ could stay with until this was taken care of. My mom volunteered as she had cared for TJ many times while he was with us. TJ packed up his stuff, I cried, and I sent him to live with my mom in Topeka. He was doing well – we got to see him and talk to him often – and then 2 weeks later I got a call from his worker saying that the school in Lenexa would not let him come back there until he actually lived in Lenexa, with us, even though the kids were doing all online schooling at the time. I cried again. This was not fair. This was not fair to TJ. They were going to make him start school in a new city, that had already started in person classes, so he again was going to be behind the 8 ball. Hadn't this kid been through enough change in his 9 years of life? Then, by the complete grace of God, a teacher at TJ's school in Lenexa asked about him. The principal told her what was going on and the teacher said she was a licensed foster parent and asked if she could take him into her home until we got the expungement so that he could attend the same school. This was a complete blessing because it also allowed us to enroll him in football again, with the same team as last year. So, I picked him up and took him from my mom's home to the teacher's home. New house, new people, big adjustment.

TJ was at the teacher's house for 5 weeks and 2 days. Once we got the expungement, they let him come home. He did ok there but coming home felt like we were starting all over. It took all of us a while to really get back into a routine. We eventually got back to "normal" but then his dad came back into his life and while he is/was happy, it threw a wrench into his world. He was being told he was going to be "reintegrated" with his dad so he started acting out toward both my husband and I... I suppose it was a little bit of "I'm leaving soon so I don't have to listen to you", trying to distance himself from my husband and I and our families so he wasn't disappointed/sad when he left us, and normal 11 year old hormones. It was a rough patch for all us. TJ's grades started slipping – my straight A student started getting C's. He was backtalking, being disrespectful and my sweet loving little 11 year (by this time) lunged at me, like he wanted to grab me, when he was mad at me one day. He had so much anger inside of him and he had no way to deal with it. This was not the child that had come to live with me 18 months ago.

Fast forward to December 28, 2020 and we get yet another “surprise” ... they want to pull TJ from our home, again. DCF had completed their own background check in Kansas in Missouri and found a “prohibitive offense” by my husband 11 years ago in Missouri. I begged them not take him and to let him stay with us while we worked on getting it expunged. I was told he had to be out “tomorrow”. Luckily, the teacher was willing to take him back so that he again, could stay in the same school with no disruption. By this time, he had been in the same school for 2 school years and the teachers loved him, he was making friends, was becoming a leader among his peers, and he had a “girlfriend”. He was again, moving up in Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. We packed his stuff, talked to him about what was happening, and listened as he cried that he didn’t want to leave us, leave his room, leave his cat “Lizzy”.

This time with the teacher did not go as well as the last time. Within the first 24 hours he had backtalked her, disrespected her, and had even physically grabbed her arm when she took the TV remote away from him because he wasn’t listening. The first time he left we were able to see him several times a week due to football and weekend visits. This time, due to the pandemic and due to the nature of her job, we limited visits to just weekends. He was always so happy to come home and so sad to go back.

We are a faith based, spiritual family and have prayed for TJ through all of this. What I never could understand is why, after having a steady home for 16 months where all of his needs and then some were being met, did he have to be removed from our home not once, but *twice* because of things my husband did over a decade ago. This was not fair to TJ. In his 11 years on Earth he has seen more things, experienced more things, and lived in more places than most people do in a lifetime. My husband owns his own business, is a productive member of society, heavily involved with the community he works in and is on the board of his small town. He is a pillar in his community. But more importantly to me, he is an amazing father and role model to TJ. He taught TJ how to play football and golf, he laughs and plays with TJ, he prays with TJ, and they have such a great relationship/bond that he has those very important “talks” with TJ (like how to handle your feelings being hurt), and he teaches/shows TJ what it is to be a man, a provider, a husband, and a father. They absolutely adore one another and as a wife and a mom it melts my heart to see the two of them together every day.

As a Reintegration Specialist in the foster world so many years ago, it makes absolutely no sense to me why you would take a child who is stable, healthy and happy out of a home, not once but twice, because of something an adult did a decade + ago. If we are truly looking out for the best interest of our children, then you absolutely must do away this law about previous “prohibitive offenses” or at least make the timeframes more reasonable. It is hard to find good foster parents, let alone great ones and my husband is one of the best. We don’t do this for the money – we took TJ in and provided for his every need without any financial help from the state or either of his parents. We are doing this because we love him, and we want to see a child who has had such a traumatic life, become a successful, productive member of society. Taking kids away from people who love them and invest in them is just “not right” (per TJ).

So please, on behalf of all the kids out there who need stability, love, and care... do the “right” thing.