

# MY ROAD TO THE HELPING PROFESSION

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*This article tells of the author's journey (currently in progress) to the social work profession. Her initial contact with professional helpers and helping agencies occurred when the author and her husband sought to adopt African American children from Colorado county departments of social services who claimed to be "in desperate need" for adoptive parents of color. Their painful experience with multiple failed adoption processes is described. Although not specifically focused on the Brown vs. Board of Education decision, this narrative raises the question of whether the vestiges of racism continue into present day practices of child welfare agencies that discourage qualified parents of color from adopting children of color.*

My road to the helping profession is long and winding. It is the combination of failed adoption attempts; life in West Oakland, East Oakland, and Berkeley, California; the Black Church; self-efficacy; private school education; my birth into the revolutionary movement of the 1960s; education at a predominately white university (where I was one of 250 Black students in a population of 23,000); and a low tolerance for BS from people. I am an African American woman, a Christian, and I was born a Black Panther in 1964.

The combination is explosive. It is coupled with intense moments of prayer and deep thoughts of anger about a society that continues to mistreat and displace poor people and people of color. It was my utter disgust with my family's personal experience with Colorado's adoption system and my view of the placement of children of color in permanent homes that made me believe I'd experienced a "calling." I do not know if my experiences are any greater than white families' adoption experiences, but what I do know is that my journey through Colorado's bureaucratic adoption maze led me to social work, eager to put my Black Panther foot in Colorado's social services' behind! God put something on me, as the old people used to say, and made me believe a difference can be made. Quite possibly, I was not meant to be an adoptive parent. Maybe I was meant to take my place as a freedom fighter and fight the powers that keep children of color out of permanent homes — our homes.

## **Our Initial Adoption Attempt—Urban County "D"**

When my husband and I began the process in the early 90s, the Department of Human Services in County "D" was singing the "we need families of color because the majority of children available for adoption in Colorado are in an ethnic minority category" song; but each day, week, month, and year my husband and I were involved in the adoption process, I would ask myself repeatedly what is so complicated about adoption and why is it so hard for us to adopt a child of color? I would keep asking myself this question throughout the entire process. Why has this state taken what I believed should be such a simple process and turned it into such a mess? Black families had been helping to raise or were raising nieces, nephews, grandchildren, younger siblings, even neighbors' kids for years. Adoption should be a simple process. All this extensive application process, these training classes, the videotape viewing, paying for mother's hospital fees and living expenses, waiting to learn if birth parents could successfully complete parenting classes, unwanted inquiries, and unnecessary comments were more than I could comprehend. Now, my views about Black families being able to adopt Black children do not mean that Black folks are "automatically conferred with the ability to be successful as adoptive parents" because we've raised nieces, nephews, grandchildren, younger siblings, even neighbors' kids. It simply means that our displacement throughout American history and our

tribal ancestry have made us good at stepping up to the plate and very capable of fulfilling this need.

As a lay person with no understanding of social work or social service agencies, I held fast to my belief during my family's adoption experience that we (African Americans) were quick in our community to make a difference where needed. At least that's the way I remember growing up. It was clear to me that our unity is what helped us survive hundreds of years of slavery, kept us fighting after cases like *Dred Scott vs. Sanford*, kept us strong through our so-called emancipation, and enabled us to keep our heads up high after being labeled a fraction of a man. Our unity is what gave us the power to face death as we watched our friends and relatives hang from trees or easily trampled by the power of the Ku Klux Klan in the early 1900s. Our unity kept us marching through Jim Crow and made us believe in our own power—Black Power. So, if our children were in need, as expressed by Colorado's various departments of human services, and we know how America feels about us, why couldn't Black families adopt Black children quickly and easily in the state of Colorado? Who else would want our children?

"'Take this baby,' she said..." How simple my life would have been if my husband and my first attempt to adopt had been as simple as Taylor Greer's had in Barbara Kingsolver's novel, *The Bean Trees*. How utterly romantic to have a child in need waiting for you when you pull up to an auto repair shop on your life's journey; then you take her and go on your merry way. Now that's the way it should be, right? Need expressed and need met. Of course, there should be background checks, trainings, meetings, possibly a few other steps, but the road to a safe, permanent, welcoming home should be unwinding for children in need, shouldn't it? I mean, the *Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997* was designed to move children quickly to safe, suitable, loving homes within a minimal

period of time. Is that unreasonable? This law focuses on establishing specific time frames for terminating parental rights; is designed to guarantee health insurance coverage for children with special needs; should force child welfare systems to be accountable for the children trapped in faulty systems; charges states (counties) with creating innovative permanency placement strategies; and promotes foster care as a temporary system and not a system children should grow up in and out of. This law, signed by President Clinton, even offers states incentives to find adoptive or permanent homes for foster children. And I didn't even need to be a social worker to understand the premise of the law. So, what was the problem? I guess I should be grateful for the multiple problems we experienced in Colorado because these problems were the catalyst for my application to the University of Denver's Graduate School of Social Work.

Anyway, after my romanticized view of what the adoption process should be and my belief that Black families can make anything work, I convinced my husband that natural birth was out and adoption was in. Not only did I convince my husband but I also tried to convince all of my friends, relatives, and everyone I met. I was on my own personal crusade to save Colorado's African American children. I would tell my girlfriends, "Now you know we have always taken care of each others' children, so we need to stop trippin' and get out there and make homes for our babies." I'd constantly tell people, "Don't nobody want our children but us, and ain't nobody gone' love our children but us!" My conviction alone should have gotten several children placed. But adoption in Colorado is not like our (African Americans') traditional communal way of raising families with grandparents living with children and their children. Or aunts and uncles sharing their homes with newly wed nieces and nephews, or generations of family members living under one roof all sharing in the responsibility of the family's

care. In African American families, we used to truly believe and live "It takes a village." But the reality of being American has changed that and us quite a bit. So, you can love Black children all you want, but when it is all said and done, their fates are in the hands of a faulty system and that faulty system makes permanence virtually impossible.

Persons wishing to adopt in Colorado will learn that most counties have the same criteria: adulthood as defined by age, agreement of one's spouse to join in the process, stable employment, stable living conditions, no criminal records or histories, willingness to deal with loss and grief issues of children, willingness to seek professional help, and so forth. No physical forms of discipline may be used with an adoptive child. If the adoptive child has had excessive grief and loss, the adoptive parent must be willing to learn about how to effectively deal with issues of grief and loss. The counties also recommend that adoptive parents learn about attachment issues and child development.

Now those requirements seem simple enough to me, but our adoption experience in Colorado was an unbelievable process. Adoption in Colorado was not timely, efficient, or for the timid. It required flexible expectations, like a contortionist; tolerance of rejection, criticism, and ridicule from those working in social services agencies; training sessions that would scare the Incredible Hulk; the ability to delay parental gratification; willingness to meet the special needs of case and social workers who are overworked and underpaid; tolerance for ambivalence; negative behaviors from social service agency administrators; an undying sense of humor; and the patience of Job. At least that's what we experienced and to our untrained eyes, that's exactly how it appeared after *three years* (!) of attempting to adopt in Colorado, to no avail.

My husband and I began the adoption process in Colorado in 1996 when our daughter was five years old. Over a period

of three years, we worked with three counties in Colorado. The processes included adoption preparation classes for approximately three months to learn about the realities of adopted children. I called them scare tactic classes. They were conducted with large groups of families, couples, and individuals and were designed to weed people out, to eliminate the faint. You've heard of Scared Straight? During the course of the training classes, we were asked to share our prejudices, talk about our religious convictions, exchange phone numbers, dig through the dungeons of our childhoods, review old dating experiences, talk about our siblings, examine our professional lives, assess our educational pursuits, compare our living conditions, argue our cases for wanting to love a child and provide him or her with a stable home, talk about our hobbies, listen to others talk about their hobbies, question one another, and form bonds with our slowly diminishing group. I almost gave up when we were forced to endure regular adoption class potlucks designed to encourage eating different ethnic foods. Does eating other ethnic foods or foods prepared by others make us better adoptive parents? Does it help us work through our prejudices? Does it help us understand attachment issues? No. It's just more bureaucratic BS keeping us from the children that need us! There were times when I wanted to scream, "Let's cut to the chase!" Why do I care if this couple has three bedrooms or four? Why do I care if that man rides a motorcycle? Besides, I have no idea if girlfriend washed her hands before she got all up in that macaroni and cheese you want me to eat and right now, that's my focus.

We were required to provide letters of recommendation from friends and colleagues, autobiographical essays, family portraits and family trees, and pages and pages of personal information. We had to undergo background checks, fingerprinting, and completion of documents verifying our character. We signed disciplinary agreements and opened our

homes to home inspections and re-inspections. We even listened to recommendations about home decorating. We welcomed excessive visits from approving or disapproving social and caseworkers, and subjected ourselves to medical examinations, health verifications, and shots we had not had since we were children. We provided employment verifications and financial documents. We listened to comments about our pets, even questions about our water source. We managed to pass, but there would be no prize. There would only be a series of nightmares.

Our attempt to adopt through "D" County ended unpleasantly. Each month our caseworker would visit our home. She'd sit in the same spot at our kitchen table and ask us how things were going. We'd provide the same answers to the same questions each month. We'd search for bogus topics to discuss to justify the hour she was required to visit with us. Each time she'd assure us things were good. We'd done well with our home study and she promised to let us know as soon as she found a suitable match for our family. She never took her coat off and always appeared uncomfortable. After the ninth or tenth visit, my husband asked her what was up. She replied, "I never get any African American children across my caseload." She never got any African American children across her caseload (!) and it never occurred to her to talk with other caseworkers who might get African American children across their caseload or share our names with caseworkers who were looking to place African American children?

I refused to argue with her because as far as I was concerned, she was unconcerned and ill prepared, so the next day I decided to call the department and complain. "Make me understand this lack of African American children when they (African American children) are your greatest number of children in need," I demanded. I called the state as well. My repeated phone calls that week to managers and directors did provoke some action. That

following week my husband and I received a phone call from our caseworker's supervisor. She thought they'd found a great match for us and wanted us to come in right away. We made an appointment and met with our caseworker, her supervisor, and a four-year-old girl's social worker. We took our adoption/family photo album, our marketing piece, to the meeting and we were excited. It was explained to us that this little girl had been living with a family for four years (her biological great aunt and uncle) but was being removed from the house because of some type of violation. No one could explain what type of violation. They also indicated that she had a sore on her thigh that never healed. When we asked about it, no one really knew what it was, but we were told "it was under control" and there was medication for it. Most of the files we were permitted to read were sketchy; nevertheless we were excited.

The next step was to see her in person. I recommended we bring our daughter to the office so she could get a chance to meet her. That idea was quickly shot down and we were told that we could meet at a McDonald's to "observe her." Well, since my daughter would not know who she was, I recommended we bring her and encourage her to play with "that little girl over there." That was out of the question. So my husband and I met after work at a McDonald's near her home. We don't like Mickey D.'s, so we ordered two orange drinks and sat in the Playland. Yes, we sat in the Playland with no food and no children. Just two adults staring at a little girl playing and each time she looked our way, we turned our heads. We sat there for about 45 minutes. Now what do you think was running through the minds of the other parents and adults in the Playland? I know what would be running through my mind if I saw two adults in the Playland staring at little children, with no children of their own and no food.

After the little girl finished eating and playing, her social worker sent her to get her shoes. Quickly, the social worker slithered

over to our table and said, "What do you think?" Uh, we did not have time to answer before she then added, "You have 72 hours to make a decision. I need to hear from you by 7:00 a.m. Tuesday morning. You can leave a message on my voice mail." She quickly slithered off and she and the little girl left McDonald's. Five minutes later, my husband and I left too, wondering what had just happened. Were we really just in a McDonald's Playland trying to decide the fate of a child?

To make an extremely long story short, we could not make a decision in 72 hours and opted out. Why were they willing to remove this child from her extended family? Away from her cousins, aunt, uncle? Away from the family she'd been living with for four years? These were biological relatives she'd been living with since birth. There were biological cousins in the house that this family was also caring for and she'd grown up with them. This was a family that was not abusive, but had some "violation" that no one was willing to talk about. Could this "violation" be fixed? Was the house in need of repairs? What was this never-healing sore? Is this how the county treats the children in its custody? What was really going on here? Was this what happens to African American children in the county's system? They say these children are not a part of their caseloads and then they snatch one from her family to cut down on the complaints?

### **Our Second Adoption Attempt—Suburban County "J"**

I was so disappointed with this urban county that I called another county in the area, located in a suburban area, to learn if this behavior was the norm. When I explained my situation to a director in their adoption division, she told me "J" County desperately needed families of color. As a matter of fact, they needed an African American family immediately for an infant boy.

Now here's the kicker. Colorado's counties are not networked and they do not

share information with one another about prospective adoptive parents. They do not share information about children in need. It does not matter that there are children in this state who need families. It does not matter that a simple photocopy or transference of a file could expedite a process. What does matter is that one county owns the paperwork, has paid to have it processed, and sharing it requires lots of begging and pleading. *The Adoption And Safe Families Act of 1997* indicates that geographic barriers are to be addressed and should not be a hindrance to the adoption process. Well, my experience told me someone seriously missed the boat or neglected to read this part of the act. So, we went through the process again—fingerprinting, home inspections, background checks, the completion of documents verifying our character, disciplinary agreements, home inspections, health verification, yadda, yadda, yadda.

Our last attempt to adopt in Colorado made me want to puke and made my husband almost give up. We were in the process of adopting this eight-month-old boy whose mother had already lost parental rights for her two older children and was in the process of having her parental rights to him terminated. This was "J" County where we were told a baby boy needed an African American family desperately and they'd not been able to find one for him. His mother's parental rights were going to be terminated in about three weeks, so we rushed to get our paperwork to the county, obtain new fingerprint cards, sign new documents, get new home inspections; answer more questions about our lives, and so forth. It was difficult, but we managed to make it happen.

The process that would end in a few weeks dragged out for a few months. Our last phone conversation with his social worker indicated that the judge presiding over the case had decided to give biological mom one more chance. Mom was "doing better" and the county had been ordered to pay for domestic

violence classes for her new boyfriend. Pay for domestic violence classes for her new boyfriend? Hello! Don't get me wrong; I sincerely believe in crisis intervention. What I could not get my brain around was why so much emphasis was being put on mom's new boyfriend. What I wanted to understand was what were the provisions in the system that helped determine when children should or should not be reunified? Was there a formula? What made the county department of social services or the judge want to invest again in a mom who'd already lost rights for two other children and invest in mom's new abusive boyfriend (not the baby's father) versus our family who met the stated criteria for adoption? Was it based on "three's the charm?" What thought had been given to the fact that three siblings were probably going to be permanently separated, two who'd known each other and spent some time together? What was the criterion for terminating parental rights? When was enough, enough? When were parental rights terminated to assure that children were adopted and permanency occurred? Who created the guidelines about adoption, because no one was following The Adoption and Safe Families Act? What happened to placement within a 12-month period? I wrote letters to everyone I could find protesting this "last chance" and everyone kept spouting off this reunification garbage like it was holy wording. Here we were—a stable, well-educated, loving family with the means and DESIRE to care for this baby—but we were dismissed quickly so mom's new boyfriend, with a history of domestic violence, could be redirected. We began the process for a new Colorado county, but they were not even interested in the past paperwork. They wanted us to begin again.

### **Our Third Adoption Attempt—Nevada**

What I learned from our Colorado experiences was that finding homes for children in need was not first and foremost, but reunification was key. After three years

of switching counties and listening to reunification rhetoric, we abandoned Colorado and began researching other states we believed were more concerned about finding solid homes for children of color. Eventually we ended up working with the state of Nevada when our daughter was eight. Getting our paperwork to Nevada was easier than working with three Colorado counties. Since we'd written so many letters and made so many phone calls in Colorado questioning the system, each county was all too happy to be rid of us. They sent our paperwork to Nevada quickly and eagerly.

Boy, time flies when you're having fun. We prepared to adopt a toddler with special needs. Instead of scare tactics, Nevada provided us with specialists and helped us make contact with all the people currently involved in our prospective adoptive son's life: his occupational therapist, his speech therapist, and his physician. We were flown to Nevada to meet for an extended period of time with him and his foster parents. We visited with them and were able to mutually interview each other. We shared our family experiences and they shared their family's experiences. Sure, there was processing time for our paperwork, but since we'd essentially completed the process twice, almost three times in Colorado, we had everything—fingerprint results, central registry results, home inspection certifications, foster parent certifications, course completion certificates, smoke detectors on every floor, household escape plans that would make any fire marshal proud, health verifications, new vaccinations, signed disciplinary agreements from Colorado to Nevada, autobiographical essays, family portraits from each of the three years we were tied up in Colorado's system and from prior years, two home studies, even some home decorating ideas.

Nevada's plan was a series of meetings, one of which would involve our prospective adoptive son's social worker bringing him to Colorado. We did our homework while back in Colorado and located programs through-

out the city to help meet his needs: speech therapists, occupational therapy programs, pre-schools for children with disabilities, and so forth. Long story short, we ended up pregnant in the middle of the process. Since I'd had major complications with the birth of our first child and I was over 35, my husband and I decided to postpone the adoption. This recommendation also came from Nevada. We all thought it best so I could get through the pregnancy and birth as easily and safely as possible.

### **Exploring Private Sector Adoptions**

Prior to getting involved with Colorado's and Nevada's social services systems, we did some research in the private adoption arena. Private adoption seemed like the easiest way to ensure successful adoptions, but private adoption fees were off the hook! In 1995, the fees ranged from approximately \$7,500 to \$30,000. We first reviewed a nonprofit, non-secretarian agency that placed children throughout the world. Their agency's programs included international adoption, interstate adoption, kinship programs, traditional infant adoption, foster care programs, and an adoption program especially for Black children. The fees for this service were about \$3,500 - \$4,000, not including the application fees, home study fees, preparation courses, and legal document preparation. The traditional infant program would allow the birth parent to choose the prospective adoptive parents. Adoptive parents had to be between the ages of 25 and 45, be married for at least two years, and agree to maintain ongoing communication with the birth parent after placement. There was also a designated program that allowed birth parents to choose a family with whom to place their child. All of this agency's programs required home assessments, pre-adoption training, and post adoption counseling services.

Other private agencies offered open adoption programs. Some brought birth parents and adoptive parents together to create

a plan for the child with medical and living expenses for the birth mothers and infants due upon billing. I don't think most insurance companies will cover those types of expenses. Another private agency supported the concept of open adoption but believed the adoption process should be limited to the gestation period. All of the private agencies offered orientation and required participation in an extensive application process. Some offered post-placement services and ongoing counseling, but all required home studies, adoption classes, preparation of court papers for relinquishment, and adoption hearings. How could we afford to "buy" a child, take care of that child's mother, take care of our own child, then save for college, invest for retirement, put something away for a rainy day, pay our mortgage, pay private school tuition, pay bills, expose this child to life's experiences, and, well, live? So either way, these systems appeared to be whacked!

But wait! Back to this reunification stuff. Children in public social services systems go to foster care and then reunification plans are put into place. In order for parents and children to be reunified in most states, parents may often have to attend parenting classes; submit to random urine analysis; meet with counselors, case workers, or social workers at agencies far away from their homes during work or school hours; appear before judges and GALs; engage in job training programs; participate in community service activities; and attend rehabilitation programs—any one or all of these without adequate childcare or transportation. Either way, the children are losing out. There are also parents who just don't give a damn and don't follow through and are given repeated chances. So, we have children shuffled from foster home to foster home and our prisons are bursting at the seams because our system is a failure and to top it all off, children who really need to be placed in permanent homes are not being placed.

### The Journey to Social Work

Up to this point, I was just an outsider looking in. I was not a social worker. This was my first experience with social service agencies. What did I really know at this point? All I knew at that time was we (African Americans) used to take care of our children, our children's children, our sister's children, our brother's children, our grandchildren, and now no one was taking care of our children, and no one was saying anything about it. And getting to our children in Colorado was difficult. Many of our children were being left with unfit parents, shuffled through the social services systems, and/or removed from solid homes.

What about all those children in state after state, county after county returned to unsafe homes? What about those children in state after state, county after county shuffled between home and different foster care placements with little hope of permanent and consistent care taking? What about children who are on the road to learning the world is a dangerous and unpredictable place? Social services are the worst offenders. What about children who are sexually abused at the hand of rotating-door boyfriends? What about children who learn survival skills that would shock military personnel? When is it clear that adoption promotes the best interests of a child? Is it ever clear? If our children need homes, let's find them homes, quickly.

After our failed adoption attempts, I began talking with a friend who was a social worker. She was passionate about what she did and worked long and unusual hours. She loved children and believed she was making a difference. She was also frustrated with the system and worked hard to find permanent homes for African American children. Returning to school seemed like the logical route for me to make a difference. So, I applied to the University of Denver's Graduate School of Social Work quickly after learning I was pregnant. I learned I was accepted on the date

my youngest daughter was scheduled to be born.

I did not want to open the letter the day it arrived. I retrieved it from the mailbox and left it on the counter until that evening. I had not gone into labor and a denial would have certainly sent me into hard labor. My husband opened the letter and read my acceptance to me. This had to be a sign. After all, what runs through my veins are the blood of Seales (my father's family), the strength of Waller women (my mother's side of the family), and the power of Christ.

I am learning every day more and more about what can be done. Most recently, I have been privileged to serve as a member of Lieutenant Governor of Colorado's Committee to Promote Adoption. I will do my best to make a difference. Going through the adoption evaluation process, obtaining a social work education (oriented towards macro practice), and working as a communication specialist for a private foundation are all points on my personal and professional journey that will enable me to make a difference in the lives of future adopted children and parents of color.



The Pierce family: Terry, Alexandria, Mercelle and Michael, with dogs Gizmo and Joy

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