

6 Tips for Working Well with Judges

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Years ago, when I was first appointed to the bench, I was approached by our state CASA program's executive director, Marcia Sink. She was seeking my support of having CASA volunteers in the child protection hearings over which I was responsible. She, and the volunteers she trained, went on to teach me the value of having an independent and committed guardian ad litem for each child. They also taught me what good practice in court could, and should, look like.

I genuinely value the CASA volunteers with whom I have worked over these many years and hope this short note will be of help to new advocates around the country. I also hope the tips will help other readers understand what volunteers do. Although these recommendations may seem obvious to some, they form the heart of what a CASA volunteer does both in and out of court.

1. Know the child(ren).

Above all else, meet the children as soon as you can. Get to really know them as best you can. Communicate with them at their level so they will understand who you are and that you are there to help them. It will take time to earn their trust, especially for those whose trust in people and systems has been broken, likely more than once. If you do not know the children for whom you are responsible, it is difficult to know what is truly in their best interests. Only when they can trust and respect you will you truly be able to advocate for them.

2. Know the parent(s).

Working on child abuse and neglect cases necessarily involves working with the child's parents. You need to learn their strengths and challenges as parents as well as get to know them as people. Seek to understand how it is that petitions were filed against them so that in turn you can better advocate for and help the child. Just as you work to earn the child's respect, you should earn the parents' trust and respect as well. Do not be their enemy or be perceived as hostile to them or infringing their rights. Rather, you are there to advocate for their children, whether that supports or leads to reunification or to something else. You and the parents have a common goal of wanting what is best for the children. Ultimately it is the judge who decides. Help make the parents feel confident that you are a competent and caring advocate. When parents are doing well, be generous with your praise. When they are struggling, let them know their children need them to do better.

3. Communicate with everyone involved.

Whether preparing for court or other events on behalf of the children, you must communicate with a host of people: the child protection agency, service providers, attorneys and many

others. Make yourself known to them. Read their reports. Know where you are in agreement and where you differ. Communicate your concerns, positive or negative. In anticipation of court hearings, ensure that everyone has your reports well before so that your perspectives can be carefully considered by everyone, including the court. You have been appointed by the court to take on an immensely important responsibility: fulfill it to the best of your ability.

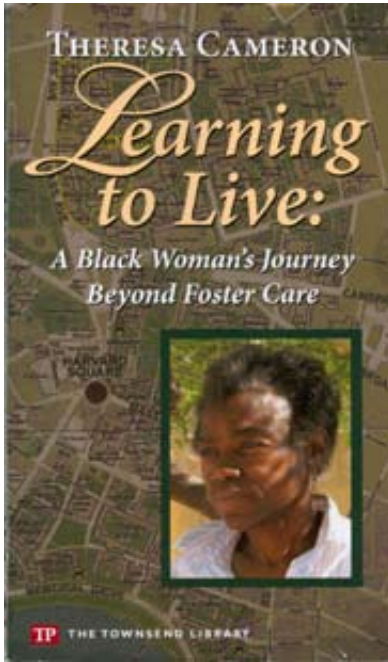
4. Model professionalism.

At every step of the way, take the high road. Be respectful, patient, courteous, open-minded, informed and kind. Hearings can be difficult, particularly when progress is not being made or when many divergent and conflicting views are expressed. It is important to remain calm, listen carefully, assimilate information, sift through what is important to the child and present clear recommendations that are in the child's best interests. Every time you come into contact with anyone involved in a case, let them leave with the impression that you are confident, competent and caring. How you interact with everyone, both in and out of court, teaches others, including the child, the values and behavior you would like to see demonstrated.



Judge Carbon watches Angelina Kanellos sign her adoption papers on her 7th birthday in April 2009.

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Learning to Live: A Black Woman's Journey Beyond Foster Care

By Theresa Cameron; Townsend Press: West Berlin, NJ, 2009; 278 pages; Nonfiction townsendpress.com

Theresa Cameron's first book, *Foster Care Odyssey: A Black Girl's Journey*, detailed her early years as a foster child schooled by Catholic Charities. This sequel begins with Cameron leaving foster care with little more than her high school diploma, a shabby suitcase of well worn clothes and a burning desire to prove that she is somebody.

Education proves to be the key to Cameron's success and her life's anchor. Encouraged by a group home counselor, Cameron applies to Boston College, where she is accepted and receives a four-year scholarship. But having being taken care of by the mostly white Catholic Charities system in Buffalo, she is completely unprepared for a virtually all-black student body and the racial climate in Boston at that time. A lifetime of foster care

and a lack of bonding also leave her socially awkward and unable to trust anyone enough to form intimate relationships. Finding new social situations agonizing, she decides to return to Buffalo just half a year after her arrival in Boston.

Cameron then enrolls impulsively as a sociology major at the State University of New York (SUNY) at Buffalo. She soon drifts to Copenhagen, Denmark, as a foreign exchange student. Her expectations of enjoying a constructive year abroad do not turn out. So she returns to SUNY to finish her degree.

After growing up in poverty and witnessing the consequences of the era's budget cuts to social programs, Cameron has the desire to create decent, affordable housing for low-income people. Challenged by a friend, she applies to Harvard University. To her astonishment, she is accepted as a doctoral candidate in design.

Cameron chooses housing for children with AIDS for her thesis. She studies various long-term care facilities; the layout of their buildings; how they provide services for seriously ill children and their parents; how the building codes affect construction; and the problem of NIMBY, which prevents construction of facilities near private homes. With hard work and help from her colleagues and the support of her academic advisor, she successfully defends her thesis and graduates.

Cameron's life is a vivid illustration of the importance of education in allowing alumni of foster care to ultimately succeed. She has taught at several institutions and became the first African-American to be tenured as a professor in the College of Design at Arizona State University. 📖

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5. Advocate passionately.

Remember always that you speak for the child. The child is the focus and your principal responsibility. Ask questions. Respectfully expect answers. Hold everyone—the agency, parents and yes, the court—accountable. All of us have roles and responsibilities; help all of us to ensure that we fulfill them. Be independent and courageous, even if in doing so you may not be popular. The child for whom you are advocating will be expecting, and deserving, no less.

6. Ensure the child's presence in court.

If you are in a jurisdiction that invites children to court, ensure they attend when appropriate. If your jurisdiction does not yet include children routinely, ask that they be able to attend on a case-by-case basis, and encourage system-wide consideration of this practice. When they are not present in person, bring a new picture to each hearing. This helps the court appreciate the impact of each and every decision, knowing that children are counting on us to ensure their safety and permanency.

On behalf of my colleagues on the bench in New Hampshire and around the country, know that we deeply appreciate all the time and energy you devote to serving this incredibly important role. 📣

You may read another article by Judge Carbon in the March 2009 issue of The Judges' Page, available at CASAforchildren.org/judgespage.