

Kendra Wright's Testimony in Support of HB 4009

Oregon House Judiciary Committee

2/13/2018

My name is Kendra Wright and I am the mother of Selene Jeanette Lasky, who is 12 years old. Although I am Selene's biological mother, and although she calls me mom and I am actively involved in parenting her, I am not her legal mother. My parental rights were terminated in 2012. At that time, I was serving a sentence at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility for non-violent crimes that were related to my drug addiction. I was sentenced to 60 months.

I was able to be a safe and loving parent to Selene for about the first five years of her life. I worked hard, and when I wasn't working I spent my time with Selene. I found I was able to manage these responsibilities; it felt natural to me, and I had a lot of family support, especially from my grandmother.

When Selene was about five years old, I went through some traumatic events. I had gotten married, and a short while after the wedding I found out that my husband was having an affair. I didn't know how to deal with that. I also had some serious health problems, and I started to suffer from depression. I felt overwhelmed, as a single mom trying to deal with these personal struggles.

Around this time, I started using drugs to cope. I lost my job. I got increasingly depressed. Then I lost my housing. During this time, I made arrangements for other people to look after Selene. DHS got involved. My grandfather called and told me that I couldn't have any contact with Selene until further notice, and that I needed to call DHS.

I tried my best to work with DHS, but there were a lot of barriers that I wasn't successful at overcoming. I got sober for a while, but still struggled to meet the expectations. When DHS decided to move towards a plan of adoption for Selene, I was devastated and I relapsed. The cycle worsened from there. I got involved in criminal activity to support my addiction. In July of 2012 I was sent to Coffee Creek, and the state filed a petition to terminate my rights. I had a trial, and I lost. My rights were terminated in December of 2012.

Things started to get better when I went to prison. The whole time I was using drugs, I pined after being a mom, pined after being a normal family again, but I didn't know how to get back there. At Coffee Creek, I could see reality, not muddled by drugs. I could see all the damage that I had created. At the same time, I was able to start being solution-focused. I saw that I had a huge opportunity to do something different.

It took a while. I got signed up for Pathfinders, a parenting and cognitive thinking class. Then I got involved with the Family Preservation Project, and everything really started to turn around. I was able to become a full person again. I felt supported and cared about; I felt like I mattered. It took time to re-build my relationship with my daughter. I finally got permission from DHS to have Selene come and visit me, and my grandmother started bringing her every other weekend. The first couple of visits were awkward. Selene was seven and a half by then, and I hadn't seen

her in 18 months. She didn't know how to be with me. She didn't know if she could sit on my lap, or hug me. Then, she started to warm up to me again. On the second visit we got to go outside – that broke the ice, we were laughing and playing. It was amazing. Things only improved after that. We slowly re-built our relationship. I let Selene take the lead and I followed, as visit by visit I regained her trust.

During this time, I appealed the judgment terminating my rights. We lost the appeal in February of 2014. My grandparents could have moved forward with adopting Selene, but they kept waiting, because they didn't agree that Selene should be adopted. My grandparents had wanted guardianship, but they weren't given that choice. They wanted to take care of Selene for as long as she needed them, but they also believed that, if I could get better, it would be best for Selene to be reunited with her mom. They knew that Selene did not want to be adopted, that she was attached to me, and that forcing an adoption was confusing and emotionally difficult for her. And they could see that I was working hard and making progress; they believed that I could stay on that track, and get out, and be successful.

In May of 2014, we filed a motion in the trial court to ask that the judgment terminating my rights be set aside. We wanted to present evidence that all of us – me, my grandparents, and Selene – agreed that it would be best for Selene to be in a guardianship, instead of being adopted. We wanted to tell the judge that forcing an adoption on Selene would actually be emotionally harmful to her. We wanted to show the judge that I was making significant progress in addressing my issues while in prison, and that I was re-building my relationship with Selene. We also wanted the judge to consider a recent psychological evaluation, which gave me a positive prognosis. In October of 2014, we had a hearing on the motion to set aside the termination judgment. The judge held that the law did not give him the authority to set aside the judgment based on the child's best interests or a change in circumstances. He did not permit us to present evidence about what Selene needed, how I had made progress, or even what our family and Selene's caregivers thought would be best.

We appealed that decision too; we lost, and petitioned to the Oregon Supreme Court for review. While we were waiting to hear from the court, I was released from Coffee Creek, after serving 39 months. By that time, I had completed treatment and had participated in many programs. I had worked as a carpenter for two and a half years, and I had maintained clear conduct for my entire sentence.

In September 2016, I found out that the Supreme Court had not accepted review of our case. At that point, we had exhausted every option available to us. I told my grandparents that it was their choice whether they wanted to go forward with the adoption. All this time, they were the ones raising Selene and dealing with DHS on a regular basis. They were so exhausted – they just wanted a normal life for Selene. So they went ahead and adopted Selene, and the DHS case finally closed. I do want to mention that the DHS workers I had at the end were supportive of my relationship with Selene. They even said they thought guardianship would have been a better plan.

After I was released from prison, I moved into clean and sober housing, and almost immediately I got a job working at a detox center. I worked in the kitchen and was promoted to lead cook. I am now a peer support specialist for people with mental illness, through an organization called ShelterCare. I love my job. There's a strong sense of community, it's like a big family. We help people who are homeless and suffer from mental illness. Our objective is to help them be successful in their lives.

I am also the mom of a new baby now, so that takes up a lot of my time. There is so much joy in my life! I work, take care of my kids, and I also do a lot to give back to my community and share my experience. I am part of the re-entry taskforce, and I frequently speak on behalf of women in prison, and children of incarcerated parents. I advocated for the legislature to provide funding to the Family Preservation Project, and I was involved with the Children of Incarcerated Parents Bill of Rights, which I am so thankful that this legislature supported in 2017. I was also part of a documentary about incarcerated mothers in Oregon, called "Mothering Inside."

Throughout all of this, my relationship with Selene has kept getting stronger. Today, Selene is a dynamic, creative, and sensitive 12-year-old. She pushes boundaries like all 12 year olds, but she is respectful, and kind, and listens to what I have to say. I see her on the weekends. I attend all of her school events and performances. I invited her to be a part of the birth of her sister. We are very close. We hike, we go to the video arcade, we go shopping, we get our nails done, we hang out and watch movies. We go bowling, fishing. It's all so normal! I am so glad that I have my life again.

From the time I got out of prison, and even while I was in prison, my grandparents and I co-parented on all the major decisions involving Selene's life. We treated the relationship as if I were one parent, and they were the other. But Selene was also adopted by my grandparents, and that changes things. They are in charge of raising her. She lives with them, they are her day-to-day parents, they are the ones who get her report cards, and the telephone calls from her doctor – they are legally responsible for her.

If I had been able to get my parental rights back, I would have wanted to parent Selene full-time again, and I know that's what she would have wanted as well. At this point, I can say with confidence that I would have been able to do it. My struggle has not been overcoming all of the barriers to re-entry that people talk about – my biggest struggle is not being able to wake up my daughter to get her ready for school every morning, and not being the one to tell her to brush her teeth before bed. I don't get to do those things. That's the hardest thing. Everything else about getting out of prison has been cake compared to that. I don't think it should be that way. I think that Selene and I should have the option to have the life that we want to have together, legally.

I know that Selene is the person who is most affected by this. She just wants me to be her "regular mom." Instead, I'm this person who she still *calls* mom, who's a big part of her life, but who she doesn't get to live with, who's not her regular, full-time parent, because she is adopted by someone else. Selene says that she just wants to be like all the other kids. There's shame, and confusion, and questions that go with her situation – it's a reminder that something went really

wrong in the past. That her mom was in prison and couldn't take care of her. That her grandparents had to adopt her. It makes it harder to heal.

That is my story, and that's why I wanted to testify here today. I know not all children are as lucky as Selene and I—not all children have grandparents who are willing and able to step up to care for them, who are patient and kind and believe in their child's ability to make a change the way my parents believed in me. For those children who are bouncing around in stranger foster care, this bill is even more important. Thank you.