



The Nehring's Story: Involve All Allies to Determine Best Interests

Allen Nehring's first experience with the foster care system has left him with "an ache in my heart."

On Oct. 21, 2016, his heart was full of joy. Four months after being licensed as a foster parent in Midland County, Allen and his wife, Jean, were told that an 11-year-old girl he calls Tiny would be leaving care with relatives and moving in with them. "We were happy to receive her, and she was excited to move in with us," he said.

Not long after Tiny moved in, the couple was told by the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) in Midland County that the mother's parental rights had been terminated and the father's rights were in the process of being terminated, opening the door to possible adoption. "We were ecstatic," Nehring said.

Nehring's story, like that of the other speakers at the Feb. 28 FamilySpeak at the state Capitol, was about to take an unwelcomed turn. The purpose of Tuesday's event, hosted by Michigan's Children, a statewide advocacy group that works to ensure that public policies are made in the best interest of children and their families, was to hear caregivers tell what had brought them into the system, how their expectations differed from their reality of parenting, their challenges, and to make recommendations for changes in policies and programs to make the system work better for their families and others.

"Tiny is a great kid," he said. "She loves to help out around the house, doesn't mind having chores and hates her homework ... but didn't ever lie to us about ever having homework to do. ... She almost always smiles."

But no child is perfect, he admits. "Tiny has PTSD. It is easy enough for Jean and me to avoid, but we don't know what all her triggers are and we had a few issues. No kid comes without baggage in foster care, and her case was no different," he said.

During this time of adjustment and while they were waiting to hear the outcome of her father's termination hearing, Nehring tried to speak with Tiny's legal guardian ad litem (LGAL), but was only able to leave his phone number, and despite both he and Tiny's attempts to make contact, they never heard back.

Consequently, he felt blindsided when he discovered that a hearing petitioned by a lawyer for Tiny's father, had taken place and that limited guardianship had been granted to him. The DHHS had been informed of the hearing less than 24 hours beforehand. Nehring and Tiny again tried to reach the LGAL, but their phone calls were not returned, he said.

Nehring took every course he knew to reverse the decision, filing a grievance with the State Bar of Michigan, talking with the foster care review board, the state Office of Children's Ombudsman, University of Michigan and Eastern Michigan University legal assistance groups and his own lawyer. He was told that there was nothing he could do and that an appeal would be unwise.

On the day after Christmas, 2016, Tiny moved out.

"When something like this happens, you get your heart torn out," Nehring said. "She could have been my daughter. ... (Yet) she was then taken from us. Where is her best interest in all of this?"

He doesn't blame the DHHS. He feels that the process fell apart because of the LGAL's poor communication with the current foster placement and the DHHS. They chose not to include recommendations from Nehring, Tiny's family members that had been involved with her care, DHHS and Tiny herself to leave her in the Nehring's care and not move her again.

He doesn't want this to happen to others foster parents who have crucial information and perspective to bring to bear on changing placements for kids. He recommends stricter requirements and oversight for LGALs, and that their pay be increased to better accomplish their work. He suggested that without adequate pay and oversight, some LGALs lack the motivation, connections and expertise to represent the best interests of the children they are responsible for.

The Nehring's are disappointed, but have not given up the will to help. "Despite it all, we keep room on our license open for Tiny, should she end up in care again. We await our next call for foster children."