

guardianship:

Mealea

LIFELONG
FAMILIES
CASE STUDY

Mealea, a 14-year-old girl of Cambodian descent, came into Casey's care with a permanency goal of adoption. She had been placed in foster care at age 10, when neighbors found her alone on multiple occasions with no food, while her mother was out "getting high."

Dorothy, one of Mealea's former foster parents, helped her return to her Casey foster home after the girl had run away. Mealea wanted to reunite with her birth mom, Chan, but Chan blamed Mealea for the involvement of the child protection system and maligned her daughter to family members.

During her first meeting with Mealea, the Casey social worker explained the teaming process and Mealea's role in planning for her future. When told she would need to identify the important people in her life for her Permanency Team, Mealea expressed relief that she would finally have a say in what happened to her. The Casey social worker also met with the state worker to give her an overview of Permanency Teaming, address safety concerns about Mealea's desire to reunify with Chan and review Mealea's case records—to learn about Mealea's past trauma, losses, current and past relationships, mental health treatment services, interests, and talents. Worried about Chan's prior drug use and current choice of partners, the state believed that Mealea might not be safe with her mom. After the safety parameters discussion and hearing of Mealea's strong desire to be with her birth mom, the state agreed to revisit the reunification option, while pursuing a concurrent goal of adoption. The Casey social worker suggested that they work with the team to develop a concrete plan addressing Mealea's safety.

The Casey social worker met individually with Chan, Mealea's aunt and uncle and her current foster parents to explain Permanency Teaming and each person's unique role in the process. Mealea also identified her former foster mom, Dorothy, her therapist, attorney, and her Casey and state social workers to be on her Permanency Team. Dorothy's niece, Polly, and Chan's best friend, Alana, also joined. Mealea's birth father, Veasna, expressed interest in having Mealea live with him, but did not want to participate in team meetings. Engaged in her planning, Mealea requested that the Cambodian flag be placed at the top of the meeting agenda and co-led many of the team meetings, expressing excitement to have everyone around the table.

Over time, it became clear that Chan, who gave birth to a son during the process, was not interested in reuniting with Mealea. Chan was jealous of Mealea's attachment to Dorothy, although Dorothy had consistently supported Mealea's quest to reunify with her birth mother. The Casey social worker and the team helped Dorothy to see herself as a significant mother figure to Mealea and understand Mealea's need for adoption or legal guardianship if reunification was not possible. With the social worker's help, Veasna also came to understand Mealea's needs and realize that he would not be able to parent her full time. Joint meetings with him and Mealea helped her understand how she and her father could stay connected. Mealea agreed to attend a family dinner organized for her by Veasna at a local Cambodian restaurant. Dorothy and the Casey social worker helped Mealea prepare for and process the emotional impact of reconnecting with family she had not seen in many years or was meeting for the first time.

Joint sessions with Chan and Dorothy helped the two build a stronger, more supportive relationship and clarify their unique mothering roles in Mealea's life. Chan eventually gave permission for Mealea to become a legal member of Dorothy's family. During a large team meeting, Dorothy voiced her love for Mealea and offered to adopt her, while reinforcing her support for Mealea's ongoing relationship with her birth mom. Mealea expressed readiness to accept Dorothy as "my second mom," but said she didn't want to be adopted.

Mealea's therapist expressed concern for Mealea's mental health if there were continued delays in achieving legal permanence. With the team in full agreement, Dorothy became Mealea's legal guardian. Dorothy continues to support Mealea's contact and relationship with her birth family, while also continuing to voice her wish to adopt Mealea as her legal daughter, whenever Mealea is ready.