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A family's long road to a happy ending

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**BODY:**

Becky M. sat huddled in a dark camper shell while, 25 yards away, her youngest son was crying. She was helpless, and alone.

In a few short months, Becky's life had fallen apart.

It started when she gave birth to a premature boy who doctors discovered had the illegal drug speed in his tiny body.

The afternoon Becky gave birth, her boyfriend was arrested on a parole violation for using drugs. All seven of her children - including the newborn - were soon taken from her home and placed with her parents. Becky was evicted from her apartment and moved into the camper shell behind her parents' Corona home. It had no electricity and no water.

Her speed habit had finally led her to this: a life without family, support or a home. She sat in the dark and listened to her father tending her young son who was crying for attention.

While her baby wailed, Becky made a vow to turn her life around and make sure no one else would ever again be the one to comfort her sons.

No one expected Becky to succeed. Not her social worker. Not her parents. Not her boyfriend. But Becky, a strong-willed woman with an infectious giggle and broad smile, proved them wrong. Now, social workers praise Becky as a model of success for other parents who have lost their children because she took responsibility for her

downfall and made use of the services offered by the county.

Becky has become a poster mother for an agency that has been struggling to wash away its image - created in part by a critical 1996 review - as a beleaguered and overburdened system that created serious risks for abused children and the social workers who look after them.

These days, Becky - whose last name has been omitted as part of a court agreement that allowed coverage of the normally confidential case - looks at Child Protective Services as the valuable system that helped turn her life around.

But it wasn't always that way.

Surprise success

By all accounts, Becky was a stubborn and petulant woman when social workers first took away her children.

"Basically, she was a shrew," said Larry Grimmert, Becky's social worker. "A big, obnoxious, overgrown teen-ager. "

For nearly a year, Becky fought with her social worker. Fought with her parents. Fought with her attorney. Fought with her boyfriend. All in an effort to wrest her children away from government agents she felt had no right to interfere with her life.

Grimmert would dread checking his voice mail and hearing Becky's voice. She always had an excuse, he said, or a problem.

The bickering did nothing to help Becky's cause, and her social worker was unimpressed. In one report, he noted that Becky had failed to spend any time in the drug treatment or parenting programs provided by the county.

"There is evidence that the mother failed to make use of these resources, preferring to spend energy avoiding change while attempting to convince the social worker that she was participating in programs," he wrote in a memo to the court.

With 10 years' experience in Child Protective Services, Grimmert figured this case was a loser. Becky's history gave him little hope.

She started experimenting with drugs at age 15 and had her first child four years later. She loved to hang out with gangs and occasionally ran with one herself. She'd hardly ever held a steady job and her first husband was in prison on a drug charge.

Then, Becky hit the bottom and decided to get back up.

That night, sitting in the camper shell and listening to the cries of the infant she couldn't help, Becky stopped making excuses

and started making changes.

"I swear they did a brain transplant," Grimmett said of her transformation. "We're talking a 180-degree turnaround. "

Becky entered and completed an intensive 90-day in-patient drug program. She convinced her boyfriend, Rick G., to enter the program and he graduated in early January. Both took parenting classes and received counseling for mutual domestic violence. At home, Becky made peace with her parents.

The only person left to convince was her social worker.

Tears of joy

Sitting in the crowded Juvenile Court hallway, Becky leaned on Rick's arm reading the social worker's report with tears streaming down her face.

In the 46-page document, Grimmett urged the court to begin returning Becky's children to her care, 18 months after they had been taken away.

"Rebecca has begun the process of establishing a drug-free lifestyle which will allow her the ability to care for her children as a nurturing, functioning mother," he wrote. "The changes exhibited during the past five months attest to her commitment to a process of sobriety and stability that had not existed previously in her adult life. "

Inside the courtroom, Commissioner Martin Swanson read over the report while Becky and Rick sat holding hands behind their attorney.

Finally, Swanson looked up from the papers and rattled off some legal language only those most familiar with the system understand.

"Ma'am," Swanson then told Becky, "essentially all we're doing today is making all the necessary arrangements. As soon as you get a favorable home evaluation, the children will be placed back with you. "

Once again, Becky couldn't hold back her tears.

"Thank you," she weakly told the judge before hugging her court-appointed attorney.

Six weeks later, Rick graduated from the drug program. The couple began to talk in earnest about how to find jobs and a place to raise the children.

For the couple, graduation day marked not an ending, but a beginning.

Gone is the controlled, drug-free environment that helped both

stay clean. Instead, temptations from old friends still doing drugs or running with gangs await.

The couple made a vow to keep each other clean and to be patient, a difficult task for the parents of seven boys.

"I felt so happy," Becky said the day Rick completed the program.

"Finally, everything is going to fit into place now. "

At her parents' home, where the seven boys were staying, the couple celebrated the day with their children. Rick spent the afternoon fixing the kids' bikes, giving them piggy-back rides and becoming re-acquainted with his family.

"I appreciate my kids now," he said as they ran in and out of the house, sneaked away with candy, and called out for attention.

"Before, I took them for granted. Before, they were a pain in the ass, to be honest. " Holding the "serenity coin" he received from the drug program as he left, Rick could now boast of at least one success in his life.

"It feels like I've done something right, for once," he said.

Once Rick dealt with his embarrassment, he came to terms with the system, especially the drug treatment program, My Family Incorporated, where he and Becky beat their addictions.

"They may sound mean or cold-hearted, but they're looking at the big picture," he said. "I owe them a lot. "

For Becky, the turnaround came when she accepted that it was her actions that forced social workers to take her kids away.

"If you're in denial of all of those things, you won't get the help you need," she said. "I'm grateful to MFI. I'm grateful to the system. "

Since graduation day, Becky has enrolled in classes in hopes of becoming a medical technician and has been trying to find an apartment for her and her kids. Rick has held a series of temporary jobs in search of a more permanent one.

Still, many hurdles remain. Both know that drugs will always remain a temptation that they have to avoid. They have to keep their tempers in check. And they have to agree on where to settle with their kids.

The road is uncertain, Becky said, but at least they are in the driver's seat.

"We're not waiting for things to happen," she said.

**NOTES:**

See sidebar "Living a social workers worst nightmare" and "Wheels of justice grind slowly for families in crisis"

**GRAPHIC: PHOTOS** [Caption] 1. Greg Vojtko; The Press-Enterprise; Becky M. hugs her attorney, at right, with her boyfriend, Rick G., standing at left. Becky M. just found out her sons are being returned to her care by a Juvenile Court commissioner.

2. Greg Vojtko; The Press-Enterprise; Becky M. and boyfriend Rick G. await word in Juvenile Court about whether they will regain custody of their children.

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