

Podcast for Keeping Kids in School and Out of Court: Kristina's Story: Reflections from a Former Foster Youth

Kristina Tanner: Foster Youth Advocate, California Youth Connection

Hon. Stacy Boulware Eurie: Judge, Sacramento Superior Court, chair of the Chief Justice's Keeping Kids in School and Out of Court initiative

Mervyn Degaños: Host

Mervyn Degaños

This is a Judicial Council of California podcast on the Chief Justice's Keeping Kids in School and Out of Court initiative. This is Kristina's story.

Kristina Tanner

I'm Kristina Tanner. I am 19 years old. I've spent the last 13 years of my life in and out of the foster care system and probation system.

Mervyn Degaños

For as far back as Kristina can remember, her aunt and uncle were her mom and dad. They adopted Kristina and her eight siblings when Kristina was a baby. Her aunt and uncle had two biological kids, which meant in all, 12 people were stuffed into a three-bedroom house. Kristina was happy. Some of Kristina's favorite memories are of her family all together on weekly game nights. Whether it was the Game Cube or a board game, the siblings played out rivalries through competitive hijinks.

Kristina Tanner

We would all be arguing with one another like: "You cheated. You did this. No, that's not what happened." And I think it was kind of just like my parents saying in the middle of it, telling everybody to calm down, like "it's just a game." And we're all just taking it way too seriously and having a great time with it. But it was always fun to watch my older sister, older siblings getting into fights with our parents about like "this is not just the game. This is life or death! Like, this is a whole week of bragging rights."

Mervyn Degaños

It was joyful, rambunctious, chaos, all managed by a loving mom and an along-for-the-ride, Dad. These were the good times. Then her mom, the only one she'd

ever known, died. Cancer. Kristina was six. She remembers her dad spiraled into depression. His hands-off parenting slid into neglect. He'd stay in his room for days, occasionally coming out to feed the kids. Sometimes he'd yell or beat them. Most days, though, the older kids were left to tend to their younger siblings.

One day, Kristina's older brother got the idea to pour lighter fluid on his sibling's jeans and light it. It was a harmless laugh, up until he tried it on seven-year-old Kristina while she was wearing pajamas. Unlike jeans, the fire didn't go out quickly. It burned Kristina. She toughed it out for a few days, but she wasn't healing right. One day at school, she asked to see the nurse. When the nurse saw the burns, they asked what had happened. Kristina refused to say. She was scared of what they might do to her family. They pulled Kristina's older sister out of class. Her older sister is the one that told them about the lighter fluid. Kristina was angry. This was nobody's business, but her family's. Kristina didn't get to go home that night. Instead, she and her sister were placed with a caretaker designated by Child Protective Services.

Kristina Tanner

This lady lived in a trailer in the woods, where it was super sketchy. Like, I've never been out of the city. And you're going to bring me out here to the middle of nowhere. And then with this lady who, who knows, had a creepy shed in the back. Like, that's where my mind went when I was seven years old. Like, who knows what's going to happen to me tonight? But at least I'm with my sister, right?

Mervyn Degaños

The woman was older, in her sixties.

Kristina Tanner

I'm pretty sure she prayed for me like 60 times that night, like in front of my face. And I was just like, I don't know what you're doing.

Mervyn Degaños

The next day, she went back to her second-grade classroom. Her teacher shushed kids who tried to pry into what happened. Other than that, to Kristina, things seem pretty normal. Right next to her elementary school was the middle school where her siblings went. When school was over, she did what she'd always done before.

Kristina Tanner

So, I walked to that side of campus, and I hopped in my dad's car because he was still picking up one of my other siblings. And then one of the teachers came out

and she was like, no, that's not the car you're getting into. You can't go there. But I had no idea that I was doing anything wrong. I thought I was just going to go home. And they were like, you need to hop in the van that's parked in front of the office. And I was like, you want me to hop in a van? And I don't even know who's in there? I'm okay. I don't need that. Like, I could see, I was very just logical. So, it was like that doesn't make no [sic] sense.

Mervyn Degaños

Kristina did what anyone would do if strangers were trying to drag you away from your dad.

Kristina Tanner

I was kicking her. I was hitting her. I was throwing a tantrum, for sure, because I didn't know what was going on. Like, nobody told me. I feel like if someone told me, even though I was young, I would have understood, and I would have got it. But the fact that nobody told me about it, and then they just assumed that I wouldn't go with him was mind blowing. That that was kind of my realization: this is not going to be what I thought it was going to be.

Mervyn Degaños

That afternoon was the beginning of a confusing time for Kristina. She bounced from foster placement to foster placement. Some were worse than others. No place seemed right to Kristina. No one seemed interested in what Kristina wanted. One home in particular seemed dangerous. So, when her social worker came back for a checkup, Kristina said something about it.

Kristina Tanner

I was like, no, I'm not ready to have you leave. I need to talk to you, but I need to do it outside. Not really sure exactly what I said to her. I was also nine, so there was like I just said, I didn't feel comfortable. I remember saying that multiple times. I don't, I'm not safe here.

Mervyn Degaños

She didn't even ask why you were uncomfortable.

Kristina Tanner

Yeah, it was too much time out of her day, you know? It didn't...that would have took [sic] more time for her to be like, hey, why are you saying the things you're saying? It was more of her trying to just do her job really quick and get home. I think it was three months later, after I brought that to my social worker's attention

[that] I got sexually abused by this man. And this continued because, even when I told my social worker this is happening, this is exactly what's happening, her exact words were: "you are just a kid trying to make up a story so you can get this guy in trouble." And I was like, that's not what's happening. And that kind of started my "I don't care what happens anymore." There's no way I'm working with these people who have no care in the world what happens to me. So why even put in effort to do anything they say or want?

Mervyn Degaños

From then on, Kristina felt like she was on her own. The adults in her life obviously didn't know what was best for her, so she figured she'd figure it out herself. She was an elementary school kid determined to do what she had to survive. She started running away from her foster placements.

Kristina Tanner

I think I was more angry at the fact that nobody was telling me what was happening with anything. And I was like, well, I can just go with my dad. So, most of the time I was staying at my dad's house at the time. And then, any time CPS or the cops came to my house to look for me, I would go and hop into my neighbor's backyard. And they had their shed that was open, so, I would just stay in there until the coast is clear.

Mervyn Degaños

During this time, Kristina was being moved from foster placement to foster placement.

Kristina Tanner

The houses that they were putting me in, they were just not like houses that should be foster parents. But yet, I was being put in them. And so, I was kind of just like, I'm done. I'd rather go live on the streets.

Mervyn Degaños

Whenever she ran away, Kristina hustled to survive. For a while, she was dealing drugs in exchange for a place to sleep a couple nights a week, and for some spending money. One day, she got hungry and stole a sandwich from a convenience store. She got caught and ended up in the juvenile justice system. She was a ten-year-old treated like a criminal. Kristina was familiar with juvenile justice. Her older siblings had started to get in trouble and ended up before a judge. Kristina, competitive with her siblings as she was, was determined not to follow them down the road to juvie.

Kristina Tanner

Like as soon as they hit foster care, I was like, damn, I'm going to be better than all my siblings because I didn't want to end up in that situation.

Mervyn Degaños

But running away, stealing, probation violations, truancy, did put her in court again and again.

Kristina Tanner

For me, it was kind of just like a punch in the gut every time I walked into court. So, I was like, damn, here again.

Mervyn Degaños

Through it all, probation, foster care, homelessness, truancy, she'd be put in support programs that Kristina didn't find helpful.

Kristina Tanner

I don't want any of this. I don't want to do any of this. And then when I don't do that, I'm considered defiant. If I had that support of, "hey, if you don't want to do it, let's figure out different ways to do it" you know? We're not just saying: "hey, you need lots of support. Here it is." And like throwing it at me. I didn't know why I had to do 93% of those things. But at the same time, either way, I probably wouldn't want to do them. But just having that support and those people to talk to would have been helpful. And I wouldn't have ended up running the streets and doing what I did.

Mervyn Degaños

But then she met some people who changed everything. We'll get back to Kristina's story in a minute. But first, let's talk to an expert about the role of courts in the lives of kids like Kristina and what programs like the Keeping Kids in School initiative can do to help. One program that's working with the courts to help people like Kristina is led by the California Chief Justice, Tani Cantil-Sakauye. It's the Keeping Kids in School and Out of Court initiative. The program, sometimes called KKIS for short, is designated to address chronic absenteeism, exclusionary school discipline policies, and other issues that can negatively impact students' educational outcomes. Among its goals are to increase graduation rates and reduce youth contact with the juvenile justice system. One judge that's played a key role in keeping kids in school is here to lend her expertise.

Judge Boulware Eurie

Judge Boulware Eurie, Sacramento Superior Court, Chair of the Chief Justice's Keeping Kids in School and Out of Court initiative.

Mervyn Degaños

Judge Boulware Eurie was appointed by Governor Schwarzenegger and was the presiding judge in Sacramento's juvenile court from 2010 to 2018. She has chaired the statewide Keeping Kids in School and Out of Court initiatives since it started in 2013. At the heart of Keeping Kids in School is a holistic, multidisciplinary approach that sees the courtroom as just one part of the system impacting a child. One facet of the initiative is to ask what led a child to be in court instead of a classroom. One of the most straightforward goals is to bring together the professionals who have a stake in keeping kids in school, people like social workers, lawyers, psychologists, school superintendents and principals, teachers, probation officers, and advocates. When the professionals have longstanding relationships, they can ensure fewer mistakes are made.

Judge Boulware Eurie

When you have professionals that are working together, when you have regular team meetings where you can say this youth has indicated this to me, I'm not sure if I believe this person, but hey, Clinician/Therapist/Advocate, would you mind touching base? You don't have to disclose anything that you shouldn't, but when you have a team approach, you're also cross-checking and then the professionals can work together to root out issues, problems, dangers, vulnerabilities.

Mervyn Degaños

To have this kind of collaboration requires sustained relationships.

Judge Boulware Eurie

They have to be ongoing. It doesn't start with one child walking in the door, and it doesn't end when the last child leaves. Unfortunately, there's always going to be another child coming in. So, it's incumbent upon us to ensure that we're maintaining those relationships.

Mervyn Degaños

That requires regular meetings among professionals. Those meetings also offer a chance for cross-learning.

Judge Boulware Eurie

And cross-learning means we're going to learn together, but we're going to have a judge seated next to a child advocate, seated next to a superintendent, seated next to a probation officer, seated next to a behavioral health professional. When you have that kind of cross system learning and that learning occurs simultaneously, it becomes a bit more natural to sustain those relationships and partnerships.

Mervyn Degaños

But Keeping Kids in School doesn't stop at professionals. Its holistic approach includes family, community members, coaches, mentors, and other nonprofessional stakeholders. In Kristina's case, that might have even included her older siblings or her father. The more everyone in a child's life is trying to keep a kid in the classroom, the greater the chances are [that] a child would graduate and stay out of the court system.

Judge Boulware Eurie

Most children can't do anything on their own. They are reliant on parents and grandparents, guardians, uncles, and aunts to comply with court orders. So, yes, you have a single individual in front of you who may be under the age of 18, but the efficacy, the appropriateness, the opportunity to successfully comply with the court's orders, requires a reliance on the adult in that child's life. So, while those adults may not be subject to the jurisdiction of the court, it's important to engage them so not only do they, along with their youth, understand what is happening, but there's able to be an appropriate and frank conversation of who's in charge of what to ensure that this child can comply.

Mervyn Degaños

Creating a working group of courtroom actors and community stakeholders is critical, but it can be difficult and takes time. The stakes, however, couldn't be higher for the kids and the courts, especially when you consider what tends to happen to a child that ends up in the justice system.

Judge Boulware Eurie

When I think about a child, a student who has been suspended or expelled is six times more likely to repeat a grade, five times more likely to drop out, three times more likely to have contact with the juvenile justice system.

Mervyn Degaños

The numbers are stark, and the consequences are applied disproportionately to black students.

Judge Boulware Eurie

In 2017-2018, black students were about 5.6 of total enrollment, but 15% of suspended students.

Mervyn Degaños

Judges are uniquely positioned to lead efforts to reduce the chances a child repeatedly ends up in court, to stop a spiral that might have impacts years later, and to take advantage of an opportunity to create a healthy community.

Judge Boulware Eurie

What we can do on the front end with our youth will impact and hopefully reduce the numbers that we see on the back end in our adult criminal divisions. It's an opportunity not just to reduce the rates of folks coming into our court system, but again to strengthen communities overall.

Mervyn Degaños

Changing the trajectory of the community can start with folks in the justice system changing their behavior and mindset towards children from that community, especially those that end up in court. A changed mindset is critical, whether you're a judge, social worker or probation officer. Judge Boulware Eurie gives one example.

Judge Boulware Eurie

I think one of the concepts that applies across the spectrum is word choice. How important language is. Kids listen to everything, even when we think they aren't paying attention. So how you frame a question, your tone of voice, your word choice in reports that tend to last the life of a case, when you're characterizing a child's behavior, when you're characterizing how mom has behaved. Kids hear it, they see it, and they internalize it.

Mervyn Degaños

Kristina's case is another good example. When she complained to her social worker, the social worker told Kristina she was just a kid trying to make trouble. Without intending to, that social worker told Kristina that she was on her own—that Kristina's assessment would never matter. It was a huge part of why Kristina started running away and becoming “defiant.” Why would she choose to be accountable to a system that told her it didn't care about her? One dismissive comment by a social worker wreaked a world of havoc.

Judge Boulware Eurie

We have to be judicious, in some respects, with our words, in understanding and checking ourselves about implicit bias. One parent might have “presented an argument against something” versus a parent “was angry.” Those may seem to be unimportant characterizations, but they start to cast a shadow on how that child in that family is seen. So, one of the things I would say, first and foremost, is being very mindful and understanding that words matter.

Mervyn Degaños

Along with being mindful about tone and word choice, a key skill any practitioner can develop is noticing a child and being curious about their behavior without making any assumptions. For Judge Boulware Eurie, the foundation is listening, listening to the other professionals in the courtroom, the community, but most importantly, to the people for whom the stakes are the highest.

Judge Boulware Eurie

The first thing to do is to listen to youth and to parents. It's uncomfortable for some. Often, if not most often, they're their own best experts and they're also honest. They are going to be able to tell you what their challenges are. They're going to be able to honestly, oftentimes, tell you where they need help. So, first is creating space for a youth voice in a genuine way, not in a superficial way.

Mervyn Degaños

Judge Boulware Eurie offers one hypo, based on her experience.

Judge Boulware Eurie

The file says it's John Smith. John is a minor. John comes into my courtroom. I say: “good morning, John.” I can see John wince a little bit. John looks down. I say: “John, how would you like for me to refer to you?” And John says: “I would prefer that you call me Lucy.” So, on a completely unrelated topic, when we think about youth who are disproportionately impacted by some of the policies, one of those groups are our LGBTQIA youth. And not making an assumption because our standard boxes are male/female; John versus Sally. Just starting off a hearing by saying: “good morning, and how would you like to be referred to?”, creates a space and an opportunity for that child to be seen and treated as they see themselves. So, when I learned that, it's now standard practice. I ask all of the persons appearing before me, youth or adult,...

“Good morning. Your name on the file is this. How would you like to be referred to?” And I think that is so important—to be curious. But we know curiosity takes time. We know with heavy dockets, folks and families waiting in the lobby,

attorneys trying to move through their cases, taking the time takes time. But I would also indicate that that curiosity lends itself to the opportunity to communicate and strengthen ties with stakeholders.

When you have an open and fair, legally and ethically responsible relationship with those attorney groups who regularly appear before you, you're going to have the space and the relationship for your attorneys to say: "Hey Judge, heads up: Lucy's new on your calendar. Lucy's not named Lucy. You see that person as John. But this is what you need to know." There are opportunities, again, with everyone staying within, and committed to, and upholding their own professional, legal, and ethical obligations. But to still have that sense of curiosity, that sense of patience, and that sense of holistic well-being, that we can still effectuate our business in an appropriate way.

Mervyn Degaños

Judge Boulware Eurie also points out that communities talk. When the word gets out that a court takes them seriously, community members can feel free to share information and collaborate in ways that actually increase courtroom efficiency. To get these kinds of outside-the-courtroom effects, judges can also be leaders in the community to give kids a better chance of staying in school. Judge Boulware Eurie gives the example of Judge Donna Groman, Vice Chair of Keeping Kids In School.

Judge Boulware Eurie

For many, many years. Judge Groman was the supervising judge of Los Angeles's Juvenile Justice Court. She, through her collaborative, worked with the L.A. Unified School District and they removed reliance on "willful defiance." 2013 this happens [and] it leads to modification in the actual ED code. And that's an example of one judge coming to the table with students, with parents, with educators, with law enforcement, saying: "how is it that these children seem to be facing exclusionary disciplinary practices with this one unique identifier: 'Willful defiance'? What is that? Is it appropriate? It's not. Let's do away with it."

Mervyn Degaños

Figuring out what is effective and appropriate, though, can be tricky. It's not always clear what's working and what's not, what's helpful and what's harmful. That wisdom, though, can often come from the child who's before the court. It's something central to Keeping Kids in School's approach. And it's how Judge Boulware Eurie closes out all her cases. She'd give the child the last word and asks them directly.

Judge Boulware Eurie

“What can we do to improve for the child who's coming after you?” Whether it's the judge, the bailiffs, the defense attorney, the prosecutor, county council, any and all persons in the room, because we wanted to learn. And that wasn't something we always did. And sometimes, I'm sure there were youth who said things that they thought we wanted to hear. But again, we often find kids are brutally honest if you just give them the opportunity to speak. So, we learned, and we learned through their eyes, not because of some artificial pat on the back that the professionals were giving to one another.

Mervyn Degaños

I mean, it seems like it takes a tremendous amount of confidence and strength to have a kid basically just tell you how it is, and what you did wrong, or what you could have done better.

Judge Boulware Eurie

It's humbling work and if you're not prepared and confident enough to hear those hard criticisms, it's going to be a tough job. You can't deal with kids and not be ready to hear some things that you didn't see coming or really sort of make you stop in your tracks and think: “I can do better next time. And thank you for telling me that.”

Mervyn Degaños

Listening to Judge Boulware Eurie, it's striking how it's almost exactly like listening to something Kristina said to me over and over again when we talked about her experience.

Kristina Tanner

I only think people hear is that: listening to the youth. Ask them questions. Ask what they want. If you just ask us and give us the opportunity to tell you, you'll learn a lot more about us than someone sitting in a room for 5 minutes a day checking off boxes.

Mervyn Degaños

Judge Boulware Eurie has seen the power of listening to and learning from youth in her practice. And that power of listening to and learning from youth is something that changed the direction of Kristina's life forever. Let's get back to Kristina's story. Adolescent Kristina: truant, runaway, and defiant in the juvenile justice system. After bouncing around the system, she ended up in a group home

that changed everything. Most of the staff found her too much to handle. They argued the home didn't have the resources to deal with her. Two staff, though, stuck up for her and said Kristina would come through. Kristina remembers one conversation in particular. The home was on a camping trip. Kristina, most days, ended up in trouble. While other kids roamed and played, Kristina would be stuck in her tent. One staff member took Kristina aside.

Kristina Tanner

So, we left the group of, like, with all of them. And it was just me and the staff for a whole day. And we pretty much just talked about what do I want to do with my life? I was always like: "I'm just trying to prove the system wrong. I'm always just trying to, you know, fight back with the system and I'm trying to better the system." But I really didn't know how to do that in a productive way. I kind of did that by yelling at everybody and just having an attitude about everything and just, you know, being a normal teenager, but just really rebellious and really like, just not listening to anybody. And she kind of really opened my eyes by saying that: "you could do all the things you want to do, but the thing is that you just have to figure out how you can do that in a professional manner."

And so, she kind of really opened my eyes to, you know, having a voice and having, you know, being able to, you know, still be successful with the dreams that I had and also be able to change the system for the future generations of foster youth. And I [had] never really seen that as a possibility because I never felt heard until me and her [sic] had that conversation.

Mervyn Degaños

In other words, the staff member did the very thing that Judge Boulware Eurie in Keeping Kids in School emphasizes. They listened. That sincere exchange with the staff member opened Kristina's eyes to ideas that many of us take for granted.

Kristina Tanner

Like school is never really an option for me before I went to that group home. But that became so much clearer that I could totally do whatever I wanted to do with my life.

Mervyn Degaños

This group home was a foothold. For the first time since she'd been in the system, she had people in her corner. They believed she had potential and listened to her crazy dreams of changing the foster system. Kristina started improving, getting better grades, being more professional. I mean, you're going to court at the same

time as this is happening, is that right? Like regular check ins? Yeah. What was the court's role in that? Were they getting in the way or were they helping?

Kristina Tanner

I feel like the court, most of that time, once I hit nine years old, to like 15, pretty much saying you only have two options in life. And it was really either you're going to get locked up again, or you're going to end up dead on the street, if you continue doing what you're doing. And so, like that, really, every time I went to court, that's what I heard. And I kept believing that that's what I was. So, I might as well just go do it now.

Mervyn Degaños

Soon after, a new judge entered Kristina's life. This was the second foothold. This judge ran her court differently than Kristina's other judges. She said things other judges didn't.

Kristina Tanner

"You're going to do things with your life." She always told me that. She's like: "I see the potential that you have. And I see the potential that a lot of people don't see, including your social worker and your, you know, the bosses. I see that potential. But at the end of the day, these are the things that you need to change in order to be that." By also being, you know, it's like a, you know, tough love kind of situation.

It wasn't like, you know, she was going to be like: "yeah, you're doing great." And then not really talk about the negative. She always brought up the challenges I was having, but always ended it with a good thing, which was a lot different than what I have ever experienced because normally we just ended with the bad.

Mervyn Degaños

Up until this point, Kristina had gotten used to a routine when she appeared before a judge.

Kristina Tanner

They'd read off the court document. They would talk to the lawyers and the lawyers would talk back to them. And then they didn't really ask me any questions. I would just sit there.

Mervyn Degaños

With this new judge, things were different.

Kristina Tanner

And this judge really was like: "I'm not talking to your lawyer. I don't want to talk to your lawyer. I want to talk to you and see what you're doing, what you're up to. I mean, I already have the information in front of me on what other people think you're doing. What are you doing?" And so, I think that was the difference. It was like: "I see that you see me." And she really made me feel like I was heard for the first time in a courtroom.

Mervyn Degaños

At the group home's encouragement, Kristina tried a foster home again. It went well for a while. Her grades were high. She started doing extracurricular activities like basketball. Her new foster parents wanted to adopt Kristina, but she didn't think it was the right decision for her. When Kristina said so, she started feeling unwelcome. At the time, Kristina had a mentor who was a former foster youth.

Her mentor would drive her to and from school, so Kristina didn't have to take the public bus. She'd attend Kristina's basketball games. Soon they were spending almost all their free time together. That's when Kristina and her mentor got the radical idea of moving in together. When Kristina's foster parents gave her social worker a seven-day notice, basically kicking Kristina out, that's when Kristina brought the idea to the court.

Kristina Tanner

You know, you all tried your way of finding me a home that never worked out, and so it's my time to, you know, make the decisions now for my life. And I really feel like moving in with this girl would really help me. And this girl will be a benefit for me.

Mervyn Degaños

But there was a stumbling block. Kristina was 15 and her mentor was only a few years older. Just 21.

Kristina Tanner

The whole CDSS department, the whole, you know, child welfare system, they were like: "no, we're not doing it." All their bosses were saying: "No. This is ridiculous. You can't have a 21-year-old, a 15-year-old moving in with a 21-year-old. It's never going to work. You know, she's still going to college. She doesn't even have a place yet."

Mervyn Degaños

Kristina, though, had a team on her side, people who believed she might know what she needed.

Kristina Tanner

But my social worker really held her ground and fought for it. And we really took it to court. And this judge was like: "I've seen you grow, and I've seen you progress, and I've seen you do things great in your life. And I feel like if you really want this to happen and you really feel like it could be successful, let's try it." She definitely helped me, you know, find stability in my life and definitely was one of those people that fought for me. And that will always be a part of my huge success story when it comes to the system itself.

Mervyn Degaños

The thing is it did work. Living with her mentor, Kristina thrived.

Kristina Tanner

You know, she was the closest thing that came to a mother figure after my mom died.

Mervyn Degaños

Kristina graduated from high school. She got into Sacramento State. She's studying biology and enrolling in an EMT program. She wants to be an E.R. doctor someday. Maybe join Doctors Without Borders or help out less fortunate kids around the world. In the meantime, she's a full-time student, remote because of COVID. She works at an elder care facility, cooking, doing maintenance, and as an activities coordinator.

She also serves as a mentor in the same program where she met hers and at California Youth Connection, an organization that works to transform the foster system. She's got a dog named Ella and an apartment of her own, and she wants other kids in the system to have it better than she did.

Kristina Tanner

I think the biggest thing for judges to know is that youth are the experts. I mean, we have social workers, and we have CASAs, and we have people who come in and support us and try to help advocate for us. But at the end of the day, it's our own experiences, and we're the expert in our own experience and our own living situation.

Like, you know, like I say, youth's voice is so important. And I think a lot of the time judges and people just forget that aspect of, you know, we see it in a court report that you signed, we're fine. Like, no, listen to what they have to say. We, you know, it's like I say, every time I try to create change for the foster care system, the system was created so long ago that it needs to change to make it modernized and to modernize it's: "what does the youth need?"

What do we need?" We are the ones experiencing it. You're on the outside. We have to live it every day. So, if you don't listen to us, you'll never know what's really going on in the system and you'll never know exactly what's going on behind closed doors, if you don't listen.

Mervyn Degaños

Thanks to Kristina for sharing her story. Also, thanks to Judge Boulware Eurie for sharing her expertise. If you'd like to learn more about the Keeping Kids in School and Out of Court initiative, you can visit www.courts.ca.gov/KKIS.htm. The KKIS should be capitalized. Or you can search for KKIS California on your favorite search engine.

There you'll find more resources, including an interview with Judge Groman, who was mentioned earlier. This has been a production of the Judicial Council of California and me Mervyn Degaños. Music by Poddington Bear, Lobo Loco, and Wudang Rouge. Thank you for listening.