

Daniella Tafoya
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Kelly Meehleib: Welcome to the Judicial Council's Center for Families, Children & the Courts podcast series on Juvenile Law. Today, we're focusing on the youth voice. Oftentimes, the youth voice gets lost in a system of judges, lawyers, social workers, and advocates, all trying to determine the best interests of the child.

This podcast was intended to present the youth's story of their time in the foster care system. To preserve the integrity of their interview and the youth's voice, content editing was not done. Only editing to smooth the podcast for the ease of the listener was completed.

We were fortunate to have with us today Daniella Tafoya. Daniella is a former foster youth from San Bernardino County and currently attends San Diego State. Welcome, Daniela. I'm so glad you could join us today.

Daniella Tafoya: Thank you.

Kelly Meehleib: Okay. Who was in your family growing up?

Daniella Tafoya: My mom, my dad, and my three older brothers.

Kelly Meehleib: Three older brothers?

Daniella Tafoya: I have five, but primarily my three brothers were in the home.

Kelly Meehleib: Okay. And how many times were you placed in foster care?

Daniella Tafoya: About twice.

Kelly Meehleib: Twice? Okay, let's start with your first experience. When were you first placed in foster care?

Daniella Tafoya: I was maybe about five years old, maybe younger.

Kelly Meehleib: And, do you know why you were placed in foster care?

Daniella Tafoya: My dad was, I think he had custody of us at the time, it was just me and one other brother, and he would leave us alone a lot. He was also, had a substance abuse problem, so that first time I remember being alone with my brother, he must have been seven, maybe a little older, and there was a knock on the door, and, I don't even know who it was, but they ended up taking us away.

Kelly Meehleib: So, both you and your brother?

Daniella Tafoya: Yes.

Kelly Meehleib: Okay. And any of your other siblings come with you?

Daniella Tafoya: No.

Kelly Meehleib: And where were you placed?

Daniella Tafoya: It was, I think it was like an emergency type of place, it looked like a group home.

Kelly Meehleib: A group home?

Daniella Tafoya: Mhm.

Kelly Meehleib: And how long were you placed in foster care for the first time?

Daniella Tafoya: The first time? About a week, maybe two weeks.

Kelly Meehleib: Okay. So, you were there two weeks and then what happened after that?

Daniella Tafoya: After that, my dad received a pretty lengthy prison sentence for drugs and my mom gained custody of us, full custody. So, my mom along with my two other brothers, so it was four of us in her care.

Kelly Meehleib: Okay, and so then you said there was a second time?

Daniella Tafoya: Yeah.

Kelly Meehleib: What was life like for you before you went into foster care the second time?

Daniella Tafoya: My mom had a lot of boyfriends and husbands. So, there's a lot of traffic in and out of the home, a lot of domestic abuse, a lot of neglect. There would be a lot of times where I would get home, and this is me at like maybe seven or eight, and nobody would be home for days. So, I would go next door to my neighbors or I would try to find resources for myself. My brothers, we didn't learn how to really take care of each other, it was more of, we were trying to care of ourselves.

Kelly Meehleib: Okay. And so, how old were you when you entered foster care the second time?

Daniella Tafoya: Nine, nine-years-old.

Kelly Meehleib: Okay. And what was your understanding as to why you were placed in foster care again?

Daniella Tafoya: Domestic violence. Yeah, my mom and her husband at the time, yeah.

Kelly Meehleib: And your brother was removed as well?

Daniella Tafoya: Yes.

Kelly Meehleib: The same? What, and any of the other?

Daniella Tafoya: The same one.

Kelly Meehleib: You said there were four, right, that she was-?

Daniella Tafoya: Right.

Kelly Meehleib: So, you and one other brother?

Daniella Tafoya: Yes.

Kelly Meehleib: And, how long were you in care for the second time?

Daniella Tafoya: About eight years.

Kelly Meehleib: Eight years?

Daniella Tafoya: Yeah.

Kelly Meehleib: Okay. How many foster homes did you live in?

Daniella Tafoya: Over ten.

Kelly Meehleib: Over ten?

Daniella Tafoya: Mhm.

Kelly Meehleib: What about relatives, did you ever get placed with a relative?

Daniella Tafoya: Yeah, my grandma right away, maybe not right away, but a couple weeks after we were placed in care, she took us in. And then, she had health problems and personal

problems, so we were put back in foster care. I have a distant aunt who lives, she lives up north and we were with her for a little while. But it was like 12, 14 hours away and it didn't really work out.

Kelly Meehleib: So, what was your relationship with your relatives during that whole time? Did you get to see them? Did you get to talk to them? Did you get to visit?

Daniella Tafoya: Somewhat, not really, no. I would, we have some type of contact, maybe during the holidays. I have one of my oldest brothers, he would take us in for like Christmas sometimes, and he's like 16 or so years older than I am, so he was established. We actually lived with him for a little while; he took us in as well, but we decided to go back because it was all so far away from everything we had known.

Kelly Meehleib: Right, right. And during that time how many schools did you attend?

Daniella Tafoya: Roughly 10 to 12. There was times where I wouldn't be in school at all because we were waiting. I think this is before that AB bill had passed where this child had to be in school, so they required documents that I didn't have. It just took time, my immunizations, so there's a lot of periods where I just wouldn't be in school.

Kelly Meehleib: And, were there any important adults in your life at that time? And if there were, who were they and how did they help you?

Daniella Tafoya: At that time, in foster care, my brother, he's four years older than I am, he was in care with me. He was and still is a really big part of my life, my protector. And then, I had foster parents that we both had lived with the longest where we even went back to them after we turned 18, both of us, they were able to provide a home for us, support, religion, a lot of great aspects that we didn't have. And then I have my older brother that I had talked about. I live with him now, so, but he has always been a type of support for me and somebody that I knew I can lean on.

Kelly Meehleib: And how was your court experience going through all of that? What was that like?

Daniella Tafoya: I remember being like taken out of school and it was just so boring, but I knew I'd be able to see my mom or I'd be able to see my dad or sometimes my other brothers. But it was boring. We didn't know what was going on. A lot of times we wouldn't even be called into the courtroom, so we would just be waiting in the court lobby for hours. When we were put in the courtroom, we weren't addressed. I specifically remember that. Mhm.

Kelly Meehleib: But you got to see your mom and your dad sometimes?

Daniella Tafoya: Yeah.

Kelly Meehleib: And so, is there anything that you want the court or attorneys to know or understand about this period of time while you were in foster care?

Daniella Tafoya: I would say maybe, with just my experience, I wasn't spoken to by judges, I wasn't addressed, and I would have liked to at least know what was going on because my social worker was, judge was everything. I, she told, I had every contact through her, not through anything else, anybody else. One thing I would want to tell the judges and attorneys just, yeah, be a little more present if they weren't because I was a long time, it was like over ten years ago for me.

Kelly Meehleib: Right. So, you just wanted to be more involved?

Daniella Tafoya: Yeah.

Kelly Meehleib: More informed about things that were going on?

Daniella Tafoya: Yeah.

Kelly Meehleib: So, it's my understanding that you went back to your mom right before your 16th birthday?

Daniella Tafoya: Yes.

Kelly Meehleib: And, is that what you wanted at that time?

Daniella Tafoya: It was, because I was tired of being in foster care. And I think that's like, when you're first taken away as a child, your goal is to go back, is to always want to return home. And it almost seems like you fantasize it so much, it becomes unrealistic goals when you end up going back home.

Kelly Meehleib: And so, did anybody ever talk to you about staying in foster care, adoption, or any other permanent plan?

Daniella Tafoya: No.

Kelly Meehleib: No?

Daniella Tafoya: Nuh uh.

Kelly Meehleib: So, what was your transition out of foster care like?

Daniella Tafoya: I returned home with my mom, and it was a lot of the same, unfortunately. So, when I returned, I was a sophomore in high school and it was, there was still a lot of neglect. I still had to figure out how to do things on my own and it was, it was a tough transition because there was, there was a lot of resources that I didn't know I could have been taking advantage of. I felt that I needed my social worker still. I felt like I was kind of just dropped back off into like my mom's care. I didn't know her as a mom anymore. I didn't trust her. So, it was, it was tough.

Kelly Meehleib: And what were your goals at that time? Did you have set goals?

Daniella Tafoya: I wanted to graduate high school. I worked at a local Sizzler restaurant in town. I didn't have any career aspirations. I just wanted to graduate high school. And then I always kind of lived day by day. I didn't know you were supposed to plan for the future. I didn't know any of that type of stuff.

Kelly Meehleib: But now, you're currently at San Diego State.

Daniella Tafoya: Yes.

Kelly Meehleib: How'd you get there?

Daniella Tafoya: I started the local community college here in San Diego. I am originally from San Bernardino, so I moved here with my older brother and his wife and kids, and I think what mostly got me here is my brother. So, I didn't have any personal goals of my own or myself to keep me accountable, so I didn't have anybody that, to disappoint really. I don't know if they had any expectations to me or not, but my brother when I moved in with him, he gave me all of these expectations, he held me accountable. So, it became the point that I wanted to make him proud. And then, along the lines, where I'm at now, it's, I want make, I want to become something, and I'm able to. But I had to learn how to hold myself accountable and it, it started with somebody else holding me accountable.

Kelly Meehleib: And what's your major?

Daniella Tafoya: Communication studies.

Kelly Meehleib: Communication studies. And what are your future plans?

Daniella Tafoya: I'm still trying to figure it out. I, I like talking to people. I like, maybe something with counseling, I'm learning more about the judicial system, so maybe something along that. Social work, probation. I mean it's, it's an open, it's an open book right now. I'm not really sure, but I'm leaning towards the helping profession.

Kelly Meehleib: Mhm. Well, that's very exciting. Is there anything else you want our listeners to know, judges to know, anything about your experience that would be helpful to them?

Daniella Tafoya: Like I had earlier addressed, something that had changed the-. my life and the route it was going, was somebody holding me accountable, somebody that would genuinely be disappointed if I were to mess up. I think judges, social workers, attorneys, you can be that for a lot of those kids and young adults because, like in my life, I had nobody that whether I did right or wrong it was always on me, nobody really cared. And so, when my brother was like, “You move in here, I have expectations for you.” And I knew that if I disappointed him, it would be bad and it made me really accountable, so I think a lot of these people in helping professions can be that mentor and support for those youth.

Kelly Meehleib: That's exciting. I just want to thank you so much for sharing your story with us today. Congratulations on all of your accomplishments.

Daniella Tafoya: Thank you.

Kelly Meehleib: The Judicial Council’s Center for Families, Children & the Courts works with courts throughout the state to improve outcomes for families and children in both the juvenile justice and child welfare systems. For more information, please visit our website at www.courts.ca.gov under Programs for Families and Children.