

Youth Voice: Krystal

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Kelly: Welcome to the Judicial Council's Center for Families, Children & the Courts podcast series on juvenile law. Today we are focusing on the youth voice. Often times, 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 the 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.

Today, we will be talking with Krystal, a former foster youth in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. She is 24 years old, a CSEC survivor, and a new mom.

Krystal: Well, my mom, my mom, basically, was using drugs throughout her pregnancy. So, I was removed from her from, at the hospital. And then, I was bounced back and forth. My grandma tried, my grandma, my mother's mom, had got me. And then, I was removed from her a few times because my mom was in the household, and she wasn't supposed to be.

So, I kept getting took for those reasons, spent a good amount of years living with my grandmother when I was younger. I was still, I still had a social worker my whole life, I've had social workers forever. But, I was considered, like, Kin-GAP, when you're in care with your family and relatives. But, I was removed from her a lot because of my mom's presence and other stuff.

And then, as I started getting older, I was just really rebellious, so my grandmother couldn't really handle the type of kid I was turning into, so it required. And I was running away, I thought I was the boss, I thought I was grown, you couldn't, nobody tell me nothing, it was just crazy. So, I was moved, and I was put into different group homes, foster homes, just, you know, bouncing back and forth throughout the system. I spend a good amount of time running away, like, I ran away from everywhere I went. Stuff like that.

And then, that's when, I was 16 is when I went to Kirby. I got arres, I, I was actually, yeah, I was 16. And I had got released to my dad through probation. That's when probation took over and just placed with my father. My father ended up physically assaulting me, but really, really bad to where he got arrested for it and went to jail for it.

And instead of them op-, reopening a DCFS case like they should have, they put me back in jail for my own protection and kept me under probation. Like, technically, in a situation like that, DCFS should have been contacted and they weren't. I was just, like, I felt like I was being consequence for being a victim cause I was back in juvenile hall. By the time I had got released,

I got released to my mom just because she had a room for me to live in; that's all they were worried about.

So, I got released back to her. When I was 16, I, I went to jail, like, in March. My birthday's in February, I had just turned 16 when I went to Kirby. And then I got out in that same year, December, I was only there for nine months. So, I was in there till December. And then, that's when I went with my dad. And then in February is when me and my dad had got had, had that, had the situation, so I only stayed with him for a couple of months. And then in February that's when I was in jail. And then I got released to my mom right before my 17th birthday. So that's why I was staying with my mom.

And then, you know, my mom's drug habit was just, it wasn't allowing her to care for me and be a mom, so. And it was making, it was forcing me to have to. During this time, I was struggling with transitioning out of the prostitution lifestyle; and so, it was kind of forcing me to have to go. Cause I needed food, I needed to eat, you know, I needed to have a phone, I needed to have just different things, I needed clothes, a lot of stuff that she just wasn't worried about. So, I had to kind of figure out a way for myself.

And I was trying really hard not, I was trying to get away from the lifestyle because of just the dangers that started coming with it. I tried to escape it and I wasn't allowed to. That's when I asked to go back to a group home to allow me, at least, to get my basic necessities taken care of without me having to worry about that.

And so, after that I went to a group home. And then, I ended up emanci, I ended up becoming a AB 12 youth. So, at 18, I became AB 12, and I had went to a transitional housing. And then, I ended up moving to permanent housing. And then, so I technically was emancipated at 21 after AB 12 ran out.

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Kelly: Krystal shared her perspective on the importance of making connections.

Krystal: A lot of the times, you know, we make, some, some youth, which I am also one of those youth that were fortunate enough to gain permanent long-term relationships with, you know, service workers or different people who are in the industry, but that doesn't always happen. And, that didn't really start happening until I started getting old enough to, you know, start building those relationships myself.

But when I was younger, you know, a lot of times, you may have a genuine staff member or a genuine social worker, probation officer or anyone, trying to be genuinely, you know, genuinely, whether it's love you, care for you, have your best interest because nobody else is. But, like, you know, when you're younger, you don't really look at it like that. So, I feel like this system shown

me unconditional love, it probably wouldn't be, like, unconditional love exactly, but it would be more so, just having like a rock, having somebody solid that.

You know, I was a very, very, very rebellious teenager. Like, it doesn't even make sense how rebellious I was. You wouldn't even. Nobody would have thought I would be the woman I am today. And that's a fact.

But, it's like, you know, being rebellious, like, a lot of the times, it makes people feel helpless. Like, people try to help you, they try to be there for you, they try to support you. But, because I'm going through my own personal issues that you may not be able to really understand, you're not able to reach me and, you know, get to me how you want to. So, it does, it sometimes, people it scares people off, they run away. Sometimes people are really so loving and so genuine that it hurts them to continue watching you hurt yourself so they just, they just back off.

They had nothing to do with it, you know, they just give up. And, I think that, you know, that's a way that unconditionalness, you know, whether it's love, care, whatever, can be shown. As somebody just really understanding that we go through things that we don't even understand, especially in our situations and we just need somebody we could just ride it out with us. Like, good or bad, you know.

And, a lot of the times for service workers, attorneys, judges, probation officers, like, a lot of the times, I know y'all can hear me. So, y'all might not think, y'all might not think that what you're doing is doing something, you may not think it's helping, you may not think you're getting anywhere with the youth. But, I promise you, keep planting those seeds because little things that you do, it, it, you may think it goes unnoticed, but you're literally planting little itty-bitty little seeds that are gonna get watered over time. And eventually, later on in life, they really do blossom and make a difference in a youth's life.

Kelly: Krystal also discussed some of the challenges with consistency that youth face in the juvenile system.

Krystal: As far as the system goes, judges, attorneys, it's like, if you, I don't even know how much of it is able to be changed or if it's just how it goes. But it's like, if you think about it, we don't really, attorneys are changed all the time. You know what I mean, it's not like the system is consistent enough to where we're even able to build a rapport with this individual because we get bounced around and moved, so much.

It's not like, *Oh, we're gonna still be able to keep in contact.* Yeah, if you think about them or, or if they think about us and they reach out to us or come find us, yeah, I mean that's cool. But systemically wise, you know, a lot of the times yeah, we stick to judges, we have the same judges for a long time. So now, we have the same attorneys, a lot of times you don't, a lot of times for whatever reason, cases change, law things happen, things happen behind the ground

that we don't really understand, but it's just how it is, it's just how it has to go. We're just dealt to deal with it.

So, if my attorney happens, you know, I started liking my attorney, she's advocating for me right? She's building a rapport with me, and then for whatever reason, something in the background causes her to have to get snatched, you know. And now, I have to deal with a whole 'nother attorney, that's a problem alone right there. That creates a problem for a youth and for the next attorney because now, you know, I might be acting funny with you because I want my other attorney. So, it messes up a relationship that's able to happen because of things that we don't understand.

And that's another thing that has to do with trust. It's like, how can we sit here and build a relationship with a social worker or with a probation officer or with a judge or with an attorney when we don't know when you're gonna get snatched out of our life?

It has a lot to do with my own personal self because I'm dependent on these professionals, these people around to help me figure out what I'm going through. But I can't even build a relationship long enough with somebody before they get took, they get pregnant, they gotta go on a leave, they get switched out, they change a job, they quit. It's just always something that prevents that individual from being consistent in my life to actually help me get where I need to go. Like, I can't even follow up with the same person. I get a new person, now I got to update them on all the things I don't know about, just so they can understand what to do moving forward. And that's a lot for a youth. A youth don't got patience for that. They're not even mature enough to do that sometimes.

The judge will say, "Good morning. How are you?" Maybe, maybe nod your direction or something. The judge ain't going sto-, "Hello, Krystal. How you doing today? You're doing good?"

Like, you know, I understand we have attorneys for situations that, you know, for legal perspectives, things like that, but the judges aren't just talking to the kids and asking them. No, they're talking to the attorneys, you know, so whether.

And, and then, I just feel like, like I said that's for when judges don't, they don't make it personal. They don't try to, you know, it's. It would help to say, "How are you doing today?" You know, ask us some questions. The questions you're gonna ask the, the, the attorney, you know, sometimes maybe you're the main decision-maker here. You, you know, maybe you should ask me yourself, you know. "How, you know, how's the foster home that, that you're in? You know, are you happy there? Is everything going on okay?"

Like, you know, you, how am I gonna build a with a judge when I don't talk to that person? You can't do that. You have to communicate, numero uno. Okay? So, you're not communicating, that's just, it's not gonna get anywhere.

So, that's one thing that it's like my judge? Yeah, he was consistent because he had my case. But, it's nothing really special about it like that. You know what I mean? It's just like, I'm going to court. The funnest part was, you know, taking the ride and playing with the games upstairs, waiting to get called, leaving with a teddy bear. You know, you, you're not, like, your judge ain't just talking, sorry, your judge is not just talking to you. You know what I mean? And just building a relationship with you. It's, it's not what happens.

And then, let's just say for instance this attorney situation with, with, with the youth. What if there's no relationship there? The attorney's unable to even get all the information that they need from that youth to even advocate for them properly.

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Kelly: Krystal had this to say about her experience with judges during her time in care.

Krystal: I, when I was, got on probation, I had an attorney, was a whole different ballgame. So, with my probation, I switched attorneys, switched judges. Then, I started having a judge and an attorney that was consistent where like I kept getting in trouble and every time I go, it's the same attorney, same judge. So, they, kind of, they knew who I was. And, they weren't playing with me because I was a hot mess. And I had a lot going on and my judge was the kind of judge that if you doing what you're supposed to do, he is your best friend. When you not doing what you supposed to do, he's going hard, because he, he, his, his goal was to actually teach you a lesson.

But, guess what? He spoke to me, though. Whether I was in trouble, whether I wasn't. He spoke to me every time I walked into his courtroom, asked me how I was doing. Yes, my attorney still spoke for me. But I also had a good relationship with her because she was just so personable, like she was just, you know, she felt like, she just made me comfortable. She, you know, would talk to me regular. She wasn't using big, hard words, talking to me all dull and dry, and just paper. She would actually talk to me, ask me what happened, you know, and ask me more of the things that people usually look for in paperwork. You know, so that made a big deal.

Now, for instance, there's another situation where it's same judge, same people. I ended up getting released from Dir, Dorothy Kirby, it used to be a level 14 placement. They kind of converted it into like a camp now. So, when I was there, I had got released.

When I got released, I had got released, I was strictly probation. I got released to my biological father. When I got released because I was, you know, like, with my family, I had a, I had a, I don't know what the probation officers' names are. But, you have a field probation officer, who is like one that's, you have a probation officer that deals with youth that are in group homes and stuff. And then, you have a probation officer that deal with kids who are in home, like, with their families. So, when I first got out, I had a probation officer that type when I first left camp.

And then, once I had actually asked to go back to a group home because I had got took from my dad, and then placed with my mom again. And the situations were not right for me and kept forcing me to go back to the street lifestyle that I was, I was trying to escape from. So, I had asked to go back to a group home.

So now, I got put back into a group home, it changed my probation officer. So, you see what I mean by how circumstances, you just, it just literally changes everything? So then, mind you, the probation officer that I had when I got out was also my probation officer when I was in camp. So, I already had a relationship with him, already knew him.

So, by the time I got to a group home and I got switched probation officers, I hated my PO. Like, she was just so mean, it just seemed like she hated her own life and was taking it out on me. That's really how I felt, like, it was just crazy. And then, she was, excuse my language, but she was hating on me. Like, she was hating on all the good things I had going on.

So, for instance, when I got placed into this group home, my judge, because I asked him, I spoke to him directly, let him know my situation. Around this time when I got placed on a group home, I was working two jobs, two part-time jobs. I was 17. I was working two part-time jobs. One was an internship and one, I was working at this place called Homeboy Industries. People, most people know about it. But, and I was also going to school at Homeboys. Homeboys has a school on their site.

And so, the group home that I was going, that I got sent to was all the way in Northridge. So, my judge, I was on probation only. This is not, this is not a common case where you can ask, talk to your judge or talk to your attorney and your judge and make an arrangement for your judge to court order you to take public transportation from Northridge to LA by myself, have my own cell phone. Yeah, those were the two main things.

So, my probation officer, the new one, when she got a hold of that, she was like, "What? No." Like, it was too much, this is not normal. "Probation kids, I know where to find you. You're here. You, you're not allowed to go out of sight." It just wasn't normal for her.

But, because I had like, my, my judge knew where I had came from and knew where I started and knew what I was dealing with. And the change that he saw in me as far as my head was on straight, I was actually working, I was back in school. He, he saw what I was working towards. So, he granted me that to allow me to stay consistent.

Why pull me out of a good school when I'm doing good when I've never done good before? I've never been consistent. I've always been snatched out of school. I've always changed schools throughout my whole life. And now, I'm in a situation where everything's consistent, everything's going good for me. I'm on a good path. I'm on a track to graduate. You know, it's a lot of good things, I'm making money, I'm working, I'm getting good work experience. You know, I'm, I'm, it's, it's allowing me to stay out of the street life.

So, my judge was completely supportive of that; my probation officer was not. She didn't like the fact that I had a cellphone. I would turn it in to the group home when I got there, but when I leave, for safety reasons, they allowed me to have a cellphone. She wasn't okay with me taking public transportation. She wasn't okay with me being in a group home in, in Northridge and going to school all the way in downtown LA, or in Boyle Heights. She wasn't okay with me working all the way that far – she just wasn't okay with nothing I had going on.

So then, there came a time, where I, you know, I have, you have disagreements with people in the group home. And, I got written up for getting into it with a staff member. And Homeboys had wanted me, they wanted to fly me to New York for five days with a couple other people, basically, to do a speaking engagement at Syracuse University for at-risk youth between the ages of 13 to 17.

And I was like, “Oh, I'm going. To New York? Oh, I'm going. Yes. Sign me up. Hands down.” So, when I, basically, I had to get a court, a minute order that allowed me, cause that's, I'm flying, I'm out. I'm, you know, on the plane. I'll be gone for five days. I won't be nowhere near California. So, that's something you have to get a court order for cause, little youth like me is on probation, so you got to get permission.

So, when I had to tell my probation officer, of course she was not with it. She said, “New York? Oh no. You're on probation, sweetie. You cannot do that.”

And I was like, we already had problems, so I already wasn't feeling her anyway. So, I was, I went back to my school and I was like crying “My PO's not going to let me go. Like, this is the once in a lifetime opportunity. Who just goes to New York?”

So, my school, it's crazy. My school, it's at Homeboys. During my work shift, they allowed my, the teacher's aide that works for Homeboys, to transport me to my court to. They drove me from LA all the way to Sylmar, literally, during my work hours. And, I was able to just pop up on my judge and luckily, my attorney was there. I told 'em what was going on.

And I'm like, “Look. She's not trying to let me go. Like, I really, this is like a once in a lifetime opportunity. I need to have a money, a mini-, minute order.” I was gonna say money order.

Kelly: (Laughs)

Krystal: And then, so when he told me, he was like, “Okay,” He was like, he's like, “Sure.” He's like, “Anything, anything that contributes to your future in a positive way, I'm going to support it.”

That's not normal for a judge. Judges don't do that. Like, they don't even allow you to just pop up, like, “Oh you're just here?”

Like, they have a full calendar. To squeeze me in, listen to what I'm talking about, grant me what I'm asking you for that's going to a whole few states over, you know what I mean, for the reasons I'm going for? That is just, that's a story that you're not gonna hear every day. You're not gonna hear that from every youth cause we don't get that all the time. We just don't, for whatever the reasons are.

So, when I got this minute order, my attorney, I mean my PO contacted, I didn't tell them about it though, okay? I'm not gonna lie, I did not tell my, my group home. I didn't tell my sta-. I didn't tell nobody that I had this minute order. I had it right in my pocket. I didn't tell nobody about it. You know why? Cause they was gonna have time to go and mess it up for me. So, I did not tell them until the day before.

And I was, "Oh, well, I'm gonna be like."

"Why? What are you doing? Are you, are you running away?"

I'm like "Oh, no, I'm going to New York."

They're like, "Krystal, no you are no; you're probation."

I said, "Oh well, this money order, I mean, this, this minute order says otherwise. Like, my judge said I can go. And he's the boss in this situation. So, I'm going."

So, the next day I was leaving like more towards the evening. That next morning, my probation officer and her supervisor drove to my court and tried in person tried to convince my judge to pull this minute order, literally.

And my judge was like, "No. Why?"

Like, you know, and then they had like a situation where it was like, they didn't, they didn't, it wasn't an argument, but it was like a, a, a conversation of opposite opinions for sure. But guess who got the final say though? Not that probation officer. So, guess who went to New York though? Krystal. I sure did.

But, I'm just telling the story to kinda explain a relationship with my, you know, with my attorney, with my judge, that's just completely not normal. It should be normal, but it's not. It doesn't happen like that. Judges are usually overwhelmed. They have a lot going on. They're just like, they, in order to make their job easier, they put it all on the PO. Like "The PO said no, I'm, I'm a support the PO." And, that wasn't my situation because my judge was the bomb.

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Kelly: We asked Krystal if she had any advice for judges, attorneys, social workers, and probation officers who are working with youth that are currently in care.

Krystal: A whole lot, okay? But I'm a be nice, I'm be nice. I'm gonna give it to y'all easy, okay? I just think that you guys should just remind yourselves that you guys are only go-to people, you guys are our main backbones, without you we're not going to be able to accomplish a lot of things that we are trying to accomplish, whether it's going home, whether it's getting a visit, whether it's being able to see somebody, whether it's being able to get a job, whether it's being able to, you know, anything that it is that we need to do. You know, we can't go to our parents and ask for permission. We have to come to you guys, you know. And, I need you guys to also remember that you picked this profession, okay? You chose to be our attorneys. You chose to be our judge and our social workers and our probation officers and our advocates.

So, when you get frustrated or impatient or irritated or you getting cussed out by one of us, you signed up for it. I'm sorry they don't pay you enough for it, but you signed up for it. And I just need you guys to really remember that, you guys, in the system, you guys are all we have, period. Whether our parents or our family come out here and do what they have to do to get us out or not, you guys are all we have. We cannot get nowhere or do nothing without your say-so, without your court order, without your permission, without your say-so, without, you know, you're advocating for us.

So, I feel like whether a youth is parenting, not parenting, in care for their own reasons, for a parent's reason, like, just remember that you are temporarily substituting our guidance, you're substituting the love we're not getting, you're substituting the attention that we're not getting from our parents. Like, you guys are our everything. And whether we don't know as youth, going through the things that we're going through, we don't know to appreciate you on a level that we need to appreciate you because until our life go, gets to a place where we're able to not have a blurry vision, we're not able to understand how much you're really doing for us. We're not able to understand how much you really care. You know what I mean?

All we see is the paperwork, the consequences, the, you know, the, the stack that we have, our files – that's all we see. And then, you know, y'all come to see us once every thirty days, once every blue moon. You only come to see us when we in trouble. You know, you're not coming to our graduations, you ain't coming to our student of the months, you're not coming to all the good stuff. You're only here when it's bad, you know. And you have to remember that.

So, anything you can do to enlighten, to make somebody, to make a youth feel like, you know, like you're, like you really actually care, do it. Go the extra mile, take that extra step, bring a candy when you go to your visit, bring a toy, bring a teddy bear, bring a journal, I don't care, but just do something to make us feel like we have somebody. Because when we get in the system, we're lost, we're confused. As kids, we don't understand how the system works. All we know is we're not with mommy no more, we're not with daddy no more, we're not with our family. We're, we're out of our comfort zone. We're dealing with strangers who may want us, may not want us,

they might just want us here because of the check. You never know what kind of situation that we're in, you know.

And, a lot of the times we're scared to be honest about things because we're scared of consequences. We're so used to all you guys do is consequence, consequence, consequence. Try to build a relationship. Try to at least make us feel like, you know, you want to get to know us. Like, you actually care about what we're going through because we need it.

Our parents, they, they, you know, they, they in they own messed up worlds right now where they can't give us that. And, like I said, you signed up for the job, so you know, just remind yourself that you picked it, you went to school for all them years. You did that. You went through them hard interviews, you went through that background check. You did that to be here. So be here. Be present. Be current. Be positive. Be open-minded. And be consistent please. Please, please, please.

Enough people running away from us because we're bad, we're getting annoying, we're, you know, rebellious, we're reckless, we're, you know, just all these things. But, we need somebody solid. And you guys are in the perfect positions to be that solid person. So, please just be that and do that, and you will see a huge difference in us as youth. We will definitely, definitely appreciate it. And, thank you.

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Kelly: The Judicial Council's Center for Families, Children & the Courts works with courts throughout the state to improve outcomes for children and families 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.