



FAMILY REUNIFICATION DAY: Judge Leonard Edwards (Ret.)

Isn't it about time that we started celebrating the reunification of children with their birth families? Shouldn't our court and child welfare systems celebrate the successes of parents and children who have worked hard in the face of adversity to overcome the problems that brought them to the

attention of the child protection system? As our Courts of Appeal have repeatedly stated: "The paramount goal in the initial phase of dependency proceedings is family reunification." (In re Precious J. (1996) 42 Cal.App.4th 146, 1472). The legislature has defined the child's best interest as reunification throughout that phase unless the dependency court finds that reunification would be detrimental to the child. (In re Elizabeth R. (1995) 35 Cal.App.4th 1774, 1787). This means that the parents need to overcome the substance abuse, domestic violence, mental health, homelessness, and similar problems that caused the child to be placed in danger and then removed from parental care. These are daunting problems, but with the assistance of social services and with concerted effort, parents can succeed. Indeed, in some counties more than 1/2 of the parents regain custody of their children after removal.

We have been celebrating adoptions for years. Our notable colleague, PJ Mike Nash of the Los Angeles Juvenile Court created Adoption Saturday years ago, and it has become a national event in November, with courts around the country bringing hundreds if not thousands of children before the various courts to achieve a permanent placement through adoption. These are wonderful events. Everyone dresses up, photos are taken, the media may be present, gifts are given (usually teddy bears) and there are smiles all around. All of this makes sense. When a child formally achieves a permanent home, it is time to celebrate - and we do.

But why not celebrate when a family is reunited? My experience is that there is even greater excitement in the room when families are reunited and when dependency is dismissed.

Children feel as though they are going back where they belong. Parents are overjoyed with the return of their children and simultaneously proud of what they have accomplished in addressing the problems that brought their children to court.

What would a Family Reunification Day look like? It could be in a picnic setting as in Des Moines, Iowa, the first known jurisdiction to hold a Family Reunification Day, back in June of 2007. That event was funded by the Department of Health Services. The park was not on a bus line which made transportation difficult. Several other organizations co-sponsored the event which included games, face-painting, rides, and

food. A juvenile court judge joined the festivities and said a few words. A parent's attorney at that even noted that

while adoptions are necessary and wonderful, we don't have much of a chance to celebrate reunification. It is important to recognize that we do some really good things in these courtrooms, and reunification is the outcome we hope for.

Family Reunification Day should be an event in every community. The Los Angeles and Santa Clara Juvenile Courts have already announced they will hold such an event. It will not be difficult to do. Juvenile court judges can work with the Children's Services agency to convene a larger group of community-based organizations, service providers, and the professionals and volunteers who participate in juvenile court proceedings such as attorneys and CASA volunteers. All that is needed is a local park or auditorium and a little planning. The families will enjoy the celebration because it is a tribute to them and all the work they have done, and this type of event reaffirms the positive direction they have taken in their lives. And the community will understand that reunification is the primary goal of the juvenile dependency court and the child protection system.

PLANNING YOUR RETIREMENT a deskbook for California Judges Second Edition

Elizabeth A. Baron

Now Available -2nd Edition
by Justice Elizabeth A. Baron (Ret.)

Contemplating Retirement? All the information you ever need to navigate the often confusing path to planning for retirement is included in this new, improved handbook, including information on procedural requirements, financial considerations, employment alternatives, health issues and the advantages of being retired. As an added bonus, all the forms contained in the book are also on a CD which comes with the handbook. Whether you're planning for retirement now or the near future, this handbook is a great resource...order your copy today! **\$44.95** (w/ tax & shipping)

Name _____
Address _____
City/State/Zip _____

Return with check to: California Judges Association
88 Kearny Street, Suite 1850, San Francisco, CA 94108