

Tisha Ortiz
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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 are going to be focusing on one youth's story in foster care. 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.

Danielle McCurry: We are fortunate to have with us today Tisha Ortiz. Tisha is a former foster youth from Imperial County and has a unique story about transitional services. Welcome, Tisha, and I'm so glad you could join us today.

Tisha Ortiz: Thanks, again, for having me. I really appreciate being here.

Danielle McCurry: Great. So, I want to start at the beginning of your story. So, what was your family like growing up?

Tisha Ortiz: I am the, the youngest child out of six. I didn't get to see them after age four when I entered the system. I went through a lot of different types of abuses – sexual, verbal, physical, a lot of mental abuse as well. Things were very erratic, a lot of homelessness. There was times where it was, kind of, I was unaware of really what's going on around me. A lot of things that I saw that I don't think the little kid should see. A lot of drugs. Just a lot of violence in general. Even like with school, I wasn't really in school most of the time. I was kind of just, I don't know, on my own at a very young age, because of like all the little things that happened between me and my family.

Danielle McCurry: Yeah. And it sounds like you said at age four, you went into the foster care system?

Tisha Ortiz: Yeah, at age four after, I was taken away because my parents' drug addiction controlled everything, and they had trouble feeding me regularly. Their, their addiction with methamphetamines, kind of, took over and they forgot to feed me or, kind of, make sure that I was okay, that there's shelter and, you know, little things just to make sure that your toddler was okay. And I entered the system basically, kind of, like, skin and bones. I had no idea how to eat. I was, a lot of times I would not eat for a long periods of time until I was in severe physical pain because that was when I, kind of, realized I was hungry.

Danielle McCurry: Uh huh.

Tisha Ortiz: And, it would be days till I actually ate.

Danielle McCurry: Wow. And so, what was your first experience like in foster care? Was it an emergency home? Was it a, a regular foster home?

Tisha Ortiz: Well, when I first entered the system, I actually went to the county receiving home, it's called Betty Jo McNeese Receiving Home. It's a shelter type place for kid, kids who are like from babies all the way till 18. And, I stayed there, and I was placed with my first foster family at age 4. It took a while before I, kind of, like, felt like family. I would often call them by their first names and about a year or so, I finally started to call them, them "Mom" and "Dad." And, I really enjoyed living with them. They helped me get used to eating regularly, eating vegetables, you know, little, little things that a kid should know.

Danielle McCurry: Mhm.

Tisha Ortiz: They actually even taught me Spanish as well. Being half Mexican, I really appreciate that. Learning a, a new language and everything. And I, I still use the, speak Spanish to this day, so it's nice.

Danielle McCurry: And you were with them from age 4 to?

Tisha Ortiz: I was with that foster family from age 4 to 8.

Danielle McCurry: Okay, and then were you back with your family?

Tisha Ortiz: Yes, I was reunified with my parents between ages 8 and 12. My parents were divorced at the time. My mom had just recovered from a brain tumor and she had cancer and surgery to remove it. They first thought she wasn't going to survive it, but she ended up surviving and then they reunified me with my mother. And I, I went back and forth between both parents.

From ages 8 to 12, my father was in men's homes and jail a lot, so a lot of times when he did have custody, he would basically hand me over to a neighbor or someone who he would pay to take care of me. And abuse happened when I lived with people like that.

And with my own mother, she suffered from mental health issues. And, she couldn't exactly take care of herself. She had a caretaker who would feed and help her clean, take her place; so, the caretaker would often was the one who was feeding me. And when the caretaker would leave, my mom would be extremely abusive. Oftentimes, her mental illness made her think that I was the devil or a demon and that God was telling her that I need to be punished. And there was a lot of bad things happen when my mom was feeling that way. Just taking out the trash, if I would forget, I would be severely beaten and then called the cops on because I wasn't taking out the trash and I was being defiant. Even though I was locking myself in my room because I basically just was beaten up by my own mother and had bruises and cuts everywhere.

And police didn't really intervene; they just, kind of, handed me off to someone else and handing me off. Every time an incident happened between my parents. And it wasn't until I was 12 years old that I told the social worker at the receiving home who was driving me back to my mother's, that if I were to go back to my mother, I would be dead. My mom was going to kill me. And they decided at 12, that I was going to stay in the system until I was 18.

Danielle McCurry: So, it was really you at twelve-years-old advocating for yourself?

Tisha Ortiz: Yes. It was, it was basically life or death at that point. And even though some things that weren't very pleasant in the system, I'm grateful that I'm actually alive today.

Danielle McCurry: Mhm. Mhm.

Tisha Ortiz: But, as well, the system had some of its own issues.

Danielle McCurry: So, now you're 12-years-old, you're back in the foster care system. What was that experience like and did you, were you in any group homes or just foster homes?

Tisha Ortiz: So, from 12 to 18, I was in a lot of different homes. I stayed in the shelter until the day after my thirteenth birthday. And then, I ended up in a foster home for a few months, a very loving family, very supportive. They adopted a lot of their, of their foster children, and they took me out to family vacations and, you know, presents for the holidays, and, you know, it was, it was really nice. I even had had a bike that would ride to school and was it was nice. Unfortunately, I only stayed there for a few months.

They had found a step-sister from my father's side who's at least 18 years older than me, and they, it started off as like a home visit for Christmas and it turned out to be a placement after I was already, like, visiting. And, I never went back to the foster home. I ended up staying in Arizona, Phoenix, Arizona, for a whole year while my sister was trying to figure out what, what to do with me. They try to, you know, they end up giving her guardianship and she was debating on adoption, but from the, the abuse that had happened from eight to twelve, I was starting to show some mental health issues, some behavioral problems. I was very traumatized, and my sister's family didn't understand that. And, some of the things that they did to me were very abusive. And, to this day, they still don't think any of it was abusive. Locking me up in closets or rooms and locking me up in a house all day while everyone else leaves and I'm to stay home and not touch the TV. Only thing can do is, allowed, is to sit on the couch or clean and wait till everyone gets home. So, after a few weeks of having that type of treatment, I, my mental health issues started to get worse and I basically wanted to die, wish everyone else was dead. I just hated life. And, they end up basically dropping me off at children's psychiatric facility, and I was abandoned there for a whole month before CPS came and picked me up and drove me all the way back to California.

And from there, I ended up in group homes where I was abused by staff members, starved, treated very poorly. Staff members allowed other kids to beat me up because of my sexual orientation. I, there was one group home where I stayed at three different times. I was kicked out that, from there three different times, but a lot of abuse happened. And, there was another group home where I stayed for two years in Temecula, where I was severely over medicated and they were telling the social workers that I was getting therapy, but I wasn't actually getting therapy, I was getting case management services. And, I never got to deal with the abuse and trauma that was going on and the added trauma from being in the system in the group homes, feeling locked up and just a lot of bad things.

It was very different from when I was older from when I was younger, being in the system. A lot of things where it's my fault I'm in the system, I'm a bad kid.

Danielle McCurry: Huh.

Tisha Ortiz: And not even thinking about, like, I had a lot of that things happen to me. And, no one really wanted to listen to what happened. They just like, "Oh you're, you're, you're old enough he should have already been talking about that." And they basically waited until the very last minute and realized that I never got help for the abuse that happened to me and try to link me up to services. But, it was, kind of, already too late.

Danielle McCurry: Mhm.

Tisha Ortiz: Very short period of time to, kind of, help me. And, it wasn't until more recently actually I got, kind of, any help.

Danielle McCurry: Mhm.

Tisha Ortiz: Which I would recommend for kids who've gone through trauma, is DBT, which is Dialectical Behavioral Therapy.

Danielle McCurry: Mhm.

Tisha Ortiz: To kind of change behaviors that are linked to trauma.

Danielle McCurry: Mhm.

Tisha Ortiz: To let your brain knows it's, it's not, you know, in that fight-or-flight crisis mode.

Danielle McCurry: Mhm.

Tisha Ortiz: And, kind of, I wish I had that when I was younger.

Danielle McCurry: Right.

Tisha Ortiz: And, it would have helped a lot in my early adulthood.

Danielle McCurry: Right. Well, let's talk about that a little bit. You get placed with your sister.

Tisha Ortiz: Mhm.

Danielle McCurry: That doesn't work out. You get placed in a hospital. What kind of communication was happening? How much were you seeing your social worker or communicating?

Tisha Ortiz: I, I didn't see a social worker until I came back to California. I did have a social worker call me maybe once or twice when I was living with my sister, but my sister was in the same room, we're in the same car. So, I'm not able to talk about what's really going on. And, when they finally did get me a therapist when I was living at my sister, the therapist would relay everything back to my, my sister.

Danielle McCurry: Mhm.

Tisha Ortiz: So, there was no privacy to talk about anything that was going on or what I felt uncomfortable about that was going on, anything, any abuse, it just kind of would go back to me that, "Oh, like, you told someone." And, "Oh, you're such a liar. That never happened."

Danielle McCurry: Mhm.

Tisha Ortiz: "What are you talking about?"

Danielle McCurry: Mhm.

Tisha Ortiz: Kind of, like, gaslighting.

Danielle McCurry: Mhm.

Tisha Ortiz: And, even my own sister, when I went to the group home, back when I came back to California, she contacted the group home to warn them about me, that was such a horrible kid and this and that and that's, kind of, I feel, one of the biggest reasons why that group home mother treated me so wrongly. Because she didn't believe any of the abuse that happened to me.

Danielle McCurry: Mhm.

Tisha Ortiz: And would tell me that, "Who cares? There's people who have had it worse than you."

Danielle McCurry: Mhm.

Tisha Ortiz: That were in a, a dog cage.”

Danielle McCurry: Mhm.

Tisha Ortiz: And was like.

Danielle McCurry: So, you really didn't have or didn't feel like you had for sure any support system, anybody advocating for you?

Tisha Ortiz: I did have like what they call, I guess, a “support team.”

Danielle McCurry: Mhm.

Tisha Ortiz: But they didn't really communicate with each other, so things would, kind of, like, fall through the cracks.

Danielle McCurry: Mhm.

Tisha Ortiz: Cause someone would be working on something, but another person would be working on a different issue but ne-, never communicating with each other.

Danielle McCurry: Mhm.

Tisha Ortiz: To see what was going on. And a lot of the support I did get was at the very end.

Danielle McCurry: Mhm.

Tisha Ortiz: When I was almost about to emancipate.

Danielle McCurry: Okay. Before we go there, I just want to ask did you have any court experiences and if you did, what were those like?

Tisha Ortiz: Yeah, so for me court, I liked going to court because that's when I got to saw-, see my parents. Even though, you know, bad things happen when I was losing my parents, I did want to see them. I just was scared to live with them. They weren't able to take care of children on their own. The drug abuse, the mental illness problems, kind of, took over their lives, and it wouldn't be safe for me if, to live with them long term. But, getting to see them, at least, was, I loved it, I loved seeing my parents and getting to talk to them. And, a group home I had in Temecula actually refused to take me to my court dates, and the judge had to subpoena me after I had complained about not being able to go to court. And, the group home wanted to refuse, and

they had to like call the group home and tell them that, you know, “You're in violation of a court order if you don't bring her.” So, they brought me. The court got extended to the next day. And, they didn't want to stay with me, so they end up leaving me at the county shelter, the receiving home for foster youth, and told my social worker to drive me back after court was done.

Danielle McCurry: Mhm.

Tisha Ortiz: But for the most part, when I did go to court, I would just sit there. Everyone would talk. It was like “Yes” / “No” kind of thing, not much of a conversation. When I, around the time of graduating high school, the conversation was like “Oh, what are your plans?” They finally started, kind of asking me.

Danielle McCurry: Mhm.

Tisha Ortiz: And, I was like, “I want to go to college.” And they got excited about my plans for college and. But for the most part I wasn't part of the process. I was, kind of, the background, I didn't have a say. I was, kind of, quiet and timid and, kind of, just let everyone do everything for me. And, like, if I didn't agree with anything, I just, I did-, I didn't speak up for the most part.

Danielle McCurry: Mhm. Mhm. So, it sounds like for you, court, the value of court was the ability to see your parents.

Tisha Ortiz: Yes.

Tisha Ortiz: For those few minutes.

Danielle McCurry: Yeah. Were you offered any services? We're talking about, now, how you've, you're about to age out of the system, or at least at that time age out of the system.

Tisha Ortiz: The services I received were more around like mental health, trying to link me up to services for when I was going to move up here to the Bay Area from El Centro for college. And, they basically gave me a bunch of paper with different resources. And, it's like, “Here. When you go up there, you know, look into these.” And, I was basically on my own, having to try to navigate that whole system. And, they told me about Renaissance Scholars, which is a program that works with foster youth navigate through college. But yeah, for the most part, I was, I was just given some information, I was told to handle it on my own.

Danielle McCurry: And expected to walk it out once you got into that area?

Tisha Ortiz: Yeah. Yes.

Danielle McCurry: Do you remember ever completing a Transitional Independent Living Case Plan (TILP) or having those conversations?

Tisha Ortiz: Around the time of graduating high school, I remember my social worker wanting to fill something out, which I believe was the TILP. It is just a bunch of random questions and I, we didn't really go too much in depth about it. They did try to help me get some money, but that end up falling through. And, but yeah, for the most part, it wasn't a really big plan. I just, they were more focused, *Okay, she's going to college. That's basically what she's going do. So, she's done after that*, kind of thing.

Danielle McCurry: She's going get that box checked?

Tisha Ortiz: Yeah.

Danielle McCurry: Yeah. So, you weren't really talked to about, or offered anything for independent living?

Tisha Ortiz: I had had no idea about it. I was told that there's foster care services in Oakland. I was ILP and Beyond, Beyond Emancipation, was told to go see them if I ever needed it.

Danielle McCurry: Were you ever asked about the important people in your life as a teenager?

Tisha Ortiz: Not exactly. I felt like there was a few people that, I guess, were part of my team. But I didn't, I wasn't really kind of close to them; they were chosen for me. And, for the most part, I, I struggled trying to figure out who was important to me as a kid. And, I had a lot of people who were, like, just basically came in and went. And, so, it was not a lot of stability.

Danielle McCurry: Mhm. And so, now, despite all of that, you've got a great future, and you got some great things going on. Let's talk a little about college, you're in college.

Tisha Ortiz: So yeah, so I came out here for college in 2010, the day after my 18th birthday. I had about like three weeks before school started, so I was in the dormitories before everyone else, and it was kind of cool. I struggled with homelessness pretty... The first few months of turning 18 in the dormitories, I was accused of something. It was a rumor. And, back then I didn't stand up for myself. I just, kind of, like, if someone accused me of something, I was so used to the foster care system, like, *"Oh, you did this wrong, you're going to get in trouble and we're going to move you a different placement."* But, when you're 18, an adult, that doesn't happen.

If you get in trouble and you don't stand up for yourself, you're in trouble. You lose your housing. And, I almost potentially lost school, got kicked out of school because the rumor that they said could of came with jail time. Even though I had nothing to do with it, and, I think, they figured that, but since it was like causing so much drama, there was like a lot of people were starting rumors about me. Because I was this weird kid and, you know, I was having problems with my mental health. And, it was very easy to say *"Oh, she's on meth. She's on heroin. She's*

dealing. That's why she's up all night.” And, it's like no, that was not the case at all. So, I was very fortunate that they gave me the choice on leaving on my own accord or bringing it to the school through the Judicial Affairs. So, I was scared, and I said, “I'll leave on my own,” not knowing I could have stood up for myself and told everyone, “This is a rumor. This isn't what's happening.” So, I, I became homeless. Being off and on homeless for the first two years of college, I end up failing out of school, had a 0.9 GPA. I kind of had about a six-month period of time I was like *Do I really want to be in school?* And I ended up reenrolling in a community college, Ohlone, in Fremont. And when I did like one or two classes for about two years and got reaccepted to CSU East Bay in Winter 2015 and about to graduate Spring 2018. And, I'm almost at a 3.0, so from a 0.92 or 3.0. I'm graduating this spring. Get it, I want to get my GPA over a 3.0 that way it looks good for when I start applying for a law school.

Danielle McCurry: Excellent.

Tisha Ortiz: I plan to take about a year so off after I graduate my bachelor's and start studying for the LSATs and do work and then go on to law school.

Danielle McCurry: Excellent. Finishing strong. So, let's talk a little bit about your work. That's given you lots of great opportunities and experiences.

Tisha Ortiz: Yes. I, I really appreciate my job, my work, my co-workers, the National Center for Youth Law. Since working with them, I felt like I've seen a lot of growth. My first and only job I've actually ever had. They're very flexible with working with me and my school schedule. And, with them, I'm a Former Foster Youth Advocate, so I basically advocate on issues around the foster care system, child welfare, and I do a lot around mental health advocacy and the child welfare system to, kind of, reduce the overreliance of medication in the system, and, kind of, bring better tools to help kids heal from trauma. So, actual therapies instead of, like, a handful of pills.

Danielle McCurry: Yeah. Yeah. And we talked about this a little previous to you getting out of the system, about a support system. But, who's your support team now?

Tisha Ortiz: Huh. So, it's very different from when I was younger. I've actually chosen my support system. I would definitely say my coworkers, Anna, Bill, Leisha, have been a huge support for me. The National Center for Youth Law, just everyone there. I have some good friends that I've been able to have for more time than I was, when I was younger. I moved around so much, so friends came and went. And so, it's kind of nice to have friends for long periods of time. And Renaissance Scholars at the CSU East Bay campus helped me navigate through all the troubles I've had through college and, kind of, like, helping me stay on track and motivating me that I'm almost at that finish line and just, you know, really working with me. So, it's, it's been amazing. And the supports I have with my, my own mental health team now that are actually more helpful than they were when I was younger. I started a dialectical behavioral therapy which is amazing. But yeah, the my support team is a lot stronger now.

Kelly Meehleib: 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.