

## A Look Inside Sharing Power Podcast: Episode 4 Transcript

Robert (Tony) Parsons:

Hey everybody, this is Tony Parsons with the Capacity Building Center for States, co-host of this amazing podcast series by and about people with lived experience in child welfare and about their partnerships with leaders within those agencies. You know, in the last couple episodes I talked with folks from Nevada about power sharing and how authentically engaging youth and young adults makes our system better. But in this next episode, you'll hear from my co-host Jamie Brooks in a conversation with a couple of our friends from New Hampshire. So literally the other side of the country about how partnering with parents, is making the difference in that child welfare system. So without further ado, here's Jamie and our friends.

Jamie Brooks:

Welcome back everybody to this episode of Looking Inside Sharing Power and Child Welfare Podcast. Today I have two guests who have been working together for a few years. Mark Rolon, who is one of New Hampshire's family leaders in child welfare, and Geraldo Pilarski, the administrator of New Hampshire's Parent Partner Program. So welcome to you both. I'm so excited to have you here and to be having this conversation. I've really been looking forward to hearing about all the good work you've been doing. So, Mark, we can start with you. Do you want to tell us a little bit about your work in New Hampshire as a family leader?

Mark Rolon:

Sure. I guess I should give a little bit of background. I'm happily married. I better get this right. 25 years. [laughs] This year is 25 years. I have four kids. About two years ago, really, because of mental health issues, one of my sons got involved in the juvenile justice system. Through the course of the time he was in the system, I thought there were mistakes made by a lot of different parties. Eventually, we got through it, but I was an upset dad. I was [laughs]... I had choice words for a few people. But it

was at that time when I was, I had had it. We had closed out the case, but I was invited by my son's probation officer to talk to Geraldo and join, at the time, was their Better Together team in New Hampshire. They wanted to hear my story. And I guess that's how it all started. I went to a meeting. When I got to that meeting, I was nervous. [laughs] I couldn't understand why they would possibly want to hear anything I had to say cause none of it was going to be good. But I was intrigued. I was like, I'll go check it out. I don't have anything to lose. So I went to that

first meeting. I got to that first meeting. There was staff there. There was, more importantly, a lot of other parents there. Other fathers, other mothers. There was really no pressure. I was sharing at my convenience. I listened to other people share their stories. And I realized that I wasn't the only person. Right away, I found pieces in other fathers' other parents' stories that related to mine. And I was able to share. When I was able to share, I found a certain amount of healing in that. And probably just right there from the start, I felt better, and I realized that maybe there's something to this. Yeah. I started I guess you could call my career with the state. [laughter]

Jamie Brooks:

Yes. So, thank you for that, Mark. I'm so glad you were able to sort of overcome some questions. Why am I here? Do I belong here, things. And go to that table and sit and, offer your expertise because that's so important. And Geraldo, what about you? How would you sort of sum up your work for the last few years in New Hampshire?

Geraldo Pilarski:

Yeah. Jamie, thank you for inviting us. And I'm just so honored to be on this space, sharing this space and with my colleague Mark. It's been a phenomenal journey. I can tell you that my involvement with the Division for Children, Youth, and Families started 15 years ago when I started working for the state. And so now I serve as an administrator, and I oversee all of our efforts to integrate people with lived experience and family voice, and kind of systems change at all levels. So we have a lot of different programming and activities, and I have the honor and privilege of seeking out colleagues at the ground level to help us identify the Marks of those family leaders. And so, the last 15 years have been really profound because we've been able to slowly build an infrastructure and then learn the art and science of helping parents build up their courage, initially, to come to events and then build their skills. And then get involved. And so, collectively, we've been co-creating a lot of things that we can share more a little bit later, but this has been really a life-altering experience for me to work in this particular role of partnering so closely with the people that once were receiving services from the Division to now, really see them thriving just like Mark, and become these really powerful leaders within the system here.

So, I'm really happy to have this conversation about power sharing, about the journey, about all the things that need to be in place for us to do this in an authentic way

and to really leverage the family expertise, the family leadership to truly transform systems so they can better respond to the kids, the young people, the families. So, thank you.

Jamie Brooks:

Yes, thank you both for being here. You hit on so many things Geraldo that I just want to dig more into, including the time and the patience that it takes to make change in the system like this and how really working with the agency and partnering with people's lived experiences has really made that happen. So, I'll start with you, Mark. But what is does power sharing mean to you?

Mark Rolon:

I guess what power-sharing really means to me is having a voice at the table that makes policy, practice, and procedure decisions about my family or families like me. Being able to make a difference. I guess that, it's a responsibility. I would say that's what power-sharing means to me.

Jamie Brooks:

Yeah. Thank you. I love that. It's somewhat simple, right. Just being a voice at the table and part of the decision-making, but also, it's not always as easily done as that. Geraldo, what do you think? What would you say power sharing means to you?

Geraldo Pilarski:

So, I have been reflecting a little bit about that. I think power sharing is one of the most important pieces for the child welfare system to be working on. I think there are different levels. For example, at the practice level, it means a workforce that is able to go and sit in with the family and really build a strong, trusting relationship and then facilitate change. Now that's a shift from what many families experience, which is people come in, they take over, they start telling us what to do. And many times, what they are court-ordering us to do has nothing to do with our real issues here in our family. At the program level, it means us continuously having the courage to change and transform our services, our programs, our practices. So that means bringing in people with lived experience at the table as partners to co-create and to redefine and to continuously change that.

And at the system level, this power-sharing means people having roles where they are impacting decision-making in a real, meaningful way. And so, I see that as something that it is continuously nurtured. It takes a lot. It

takes people, all of us recognizing our own power. And it takes us, also, having the right understanding about power. I found helpful, for example, the little framework that exists out there, and it helps me sort of think about power. Which is, you can approach power in a very toxic way and destructive way, and this is the power over. You can also think of power as the power from within. And today, Mark and I will share a little bit about the Better Together and a lot of the things that we do to move people that feel so disempowered, especially our caregivers and our young people, to recognize their power from within.

And when that happens, when you get to that place where you say, yeah, actually, I have some power, then we can move into the power with over situations. And that is that powerful moment where now we're ready to really engage through authentic partnerships. And so to me, it is that, and the paradox of that is that the more we then move into the power with and the more we share power, then the more powerful we become and the more we're able to collectively impact the positive changes that we want to have. The worker that truly listens to a parent helps the parent sort of really feel safe so they can recognize what the challenges are. They are more likely, to, then, really gain power in a collective way with that parent to now help the family overcome the challenges versus the worker that comes in and is all-powerful. Now the family's afraid. They have very little power to change the unsafe reality of that family.

To me, that's the paradox, and I have had a number of conversations with our families I think it's really really important that we understand the nature of power, whether it's toxic and destructive, and whether this is something that's going to bring life and really be transformational. So, to me, that's a little bit about what I understand for power sharing.

Mark Rolon:

I'd kind of like to add in too, when I say a voice at the table, to me, that voice is basically an implement of change. And there's lots of different ways that you can have that voice. There's lots of ways you can do it. I mean, it's not just sitting at a board meeting or talking to the legislator. I mean, that's part of it. But it's talking to parents and easing their way through the system. It's going to meetings and sharing your story. It's meeting with Commissioners and directors and making the recommendations. There's so many different ways that you can have your voice heard. You go to staff meetings. [laughs] I know you have to have

something in place so that you can do that. But I mean working with new hires. There's so many different ways to bring parent voice to the forefront. It's not just going to one meeting once a month or something like that. There's so many different ways to be involved.

Geraldo Pilarski:

And Mark, I'm glad you are mentioning that. And so, to me, this has been sort of a little bit of the journey in New Hampshire like for the last 15 years. We just really understood the value and the power of having family leaders in child welfare at the table as partners in co-creating changes. But how do you do that? How do you build that infrastructure? How do you impact the culture shift that needs to happen? So I can share that, like 12 some years ago, we were really beginning this process. and I remember talking to the field staff as well as some other colleagues in the state of New Hampshire, and people would say, I cannot think of a single parent that I would be comfortable having in these settings. And the way you're describing now, it's like, OK, in New Hampshire, we have parents helping interview candidates, and serving as training partners, serving as consultants, and being with the Commissioners and directors in meetings co-creating changes and all of that. So, it is just fascinating to look back and say, well, how did we move from our colleagues within the Division, our staff, saying, I cannot think of a single parent, to this moment now that you are describing. Hey, we're impacting real change.

So, one of the things that we did... And I think Mark, I'm going to be really curious to hear your thoughts on the Better Together. So we brought to New Hampshire Better Together curriculum, which is a two day's intensive training where we bring the parents and the staff and community partners and it is a profound way to really look at what's happening.

One of the core modules of that is called the puzzle. And you have done the puzzle with people. We literally do a puzzle. And what that stands for is the power differential. So the first step is we've got to have conversations, we've got to acknowledge that in child welfare, there is this tremendous power differential. How do we work through that? So you have been there. You've done puzzles with people. You have engaged in those conversations and doing the puzzle and then debriefing and really acknowledging the power differential. And then having those dialogues really is kind of a really important step.

So, I'm curious. You recently attended an in-person Better Together in the northern region, and you saw that. You were part of that. So, thoughts on that? And how is that helping parents?

Mark Rolon:

What I really liked about the puzzle it's not just parents because we have staff. When the shoe is on the other foot, and the staff is put in the position that the parents are usually in with the pressures, and there's no help. [laughs] It really makes a difference. I think that the main purpose of this puzzle is to change the perspective, to change the way you look at a situation, to change the way you deal with people. It's one thing to ask a family to do this, do this, do that. And that family may or may not have the capacity to be able to complete those steps. If you turn it around and put the worker in that situation where all of a sudden they have to complete that stuff, it makes them sit back and think. Wow, maybe there's another way we can work together to get this accomplished. And it's a pretty powerful exercise.

Geraldo Pilarski:

Yeah. So, it starts there. It starts with that recognition. And it's that shifting role and kind of grounding staff, and really understanding the realities of families. And so, what's happening there is just a ton of things that are happening, in terms of people connecting dots. The paradox of that is once we start really unpacking that puzzle together, everybody gains power because we're now sharing power. I have seen parents say I'm finding healing now. I'm really understanding the complexity of the child welfare work. I have heard from staff saying, I'm never going to approach another assessment the same way. It's like there is a real change there that happens. And one of the most important things that I think that is happening for family leaders is that I have seen parents, and there has been like over 800 of them in the last 12 years that have come through that process. It's always so moving to me to see them moving from a place of potential shame, anger, hurt to a place of healing. Recognizing that actually they had done something really powerful for their family and reclaiming their own story. And coming out of that analysis, that process, that dialogue with a tremendous power.

And I'm going to say one example that really still moves my heart today and warms my heart is one parent that came. Now, this is the first day. She's driving home, and she's saying to us on the second day, I'm crying. And I'm like, oh my gosh.

Tell me more about that. And she's saying, but Geraldo, it was the cry of joy because, for the first time, I felt like I'm human again. And I let go of that shame. I realized that actually I did something really important for my family. I made all these changes. This parent has grown as a strong, strong leader. But I heard her recently, and she said without that Better Together, without coming to that experience, reclaiming my own story, I would have not taken a career path within Child Welfare. Today, she is the director of our field support model in New Hampshire.

This is somebody that is sitting with Commissioners and directors and is really on that advisory board and really helping at a very high level us making important changes. And to think that a lot of that started there. And many, many, many of our parents, just like you, Mark, who are thriving. And you are a powerful leader in New Hampshire, a powerful voice. Many of them came through that. And we call that the paradox of vulnerability. The Better Together is so, so special. People feel so safe there, and people open up, and people talk. It's like the real deal. I have seen parents becoming really vulnerable to say this is what was really going on. There is that sense of accountability, and then there is that sense of saying, hey, these past decisions, what happened, what people did to us, and all that hurt, doesn't need to dictate where my family's going to go, where I'm going now.

To me, this is sharing power. This is one of the ways that New Hampshire is sharing power is. Creating those safe spaces is really enabling and facilitating so people can reclaim their lives, reclaim their humanity and then be able to really thrive.

But I am curious about you. Like how was that for you and what have you seen? I know you've seen so many parents in that setting.

Mark Rolon:

Currently, I belong to the Better Together team, I'm on a Father Engagement Action team, I'm on the Juvenile Justice Reform Commission. I belong to Parent Partners of New England. I belong to three different subcommittees. I probably attend regularly about 10 other groups. None of it, none of it would have been possible without that first meeting in Better Together. It is so important. Like I said, I was such an angry father when I came in there. And I was suspicious. I was wary. I had a perception... I never had a very good perception of DCYF. And then, when my son went through it, it didn't get any better. So to have me come to this initial meeting [blows] there were so many

thoughts going through my head, but I went. I went to that meeting. Now, that meeting, right away, we were told it was a safe space. You could say whatever you wanted. You didn't have to say anything. You could just show up and listen. There was no pressure. That was very important, number one.

Number two, there was a lot of other parents there. That is super important. You have to have somebody there that a parent can relate to. Doesn't have to have the same story. It doesn't have to be the same situation, but it's a parent there that's had an issue with the system and wants to find out somebody that they can relate.

Third, you have staff there, and there has to be tools. Whether it's Ice Breakers or like the puzzle that, he said. Things that you can do together to ease the conversation, to help people be more comfortable. And going through those initial meetings, that was it, I was a changed person. I went from being an angry dad to knowing that, hey, these people are interested in what I have to say. Now, I don't know what's going to happen in the future, but if they're going to keep inviting me, I'm going to keep going. And I'm going to see where it goes.

And it's just [blows] it's a feeling. It's a feeling that's hard to explain. Just a complete 360 change. It's from mad to encouraged to yeah, yeah, yeah, I want to be a part of this. And I don't know who came up with this program. I don't know if it was KC programs, I know Geraldo had a big part to do that, but they all played their part. Geraldo called me ahead of time. First, my JP, that my son's probation officer had a little meeting to tell me a little bit about it, but I kind of was like, whatever, you want me to go to another meeting. But then Geraldo called me. He had more of an in-depth conversation, and I said, OK, well, I'll go. And then I went in there, and right off the bat, I met two other fathers that I clicked with right away. And it made all the difference in the world. And once you get your foot in the door, I think you'll find that if you want to put in the work, there's no shortage of work. [laughs]

Geraldo Pilarski:

Yeah, Mark, as you talk about that, you came to mind another parent that went through this process. And I recall she continued to come back and be part of our programming and be a partner at the table. And there was one day that she came and she's emotional. She's in tears. She's saying I just want to say that 20 years of therapy didn't do to me what being part of this Better Together, the Parent Partner Program has done to me. And I look at her,

and I said, OK, how do you know. Because now I'm moved. This is extremely powerful for someone to say. And she said, you know, I went home, and I hugged my daughter. And as I'm hugging her, she hugged me back, and she's hugging me stronger. And then she says, Mommy, I like this hug. It feels different. And this mom started to cry, and she said, I knew right and then that, for the first time, I was emotionally available to my daughter.

So, it is this. And I think Child Welfare states and jurisdictions have a responsibility as well as a huge opportunity to create these safe spaces for people to come for staff, for parents, and community partners, and all of us, to unpack these challenges. To look at power differential. To look at what is happening to us and to look for possibilities, and to co-create solutions. That is a real possibility here and also a real responsibility. There are different ways to do that.

We, New Hampshire, brought in this particular process because we were panicking when that staff said, I can not think of a single parent. So, doing that has impacted our agency culture. Today, we have parents at every level, as you know.

So, I'm curious. You are seeing parents doing all kinds of things, and you yourself are involved in so many things. What are some of the roles here in New Hampshire that either you have been a part of or you've seen parents taking on that, for you, really signify that real, meaningful sharing power? Like, we're not just talking the talk. Really, here there is some real, meaningful sharing power.

Mark Rolon:

Alright. I also wanted to add that, after that, through my time with this program, not only have I been able to help implement change. Let's call it that. But I have become a better father. Because I'm learning as I go along too. Because when I jumped into the system, I didn't know anything about Child Welfare other than what my lived experience was, and I learned some of the guidelines when my son was on probation. But the more I'm involved, the more I learn all these different concepts. And I think I'm a better dad, a better person now for him.

Geraldo Pilarski:

Hey, Mark, I just want to say that's really, really, really powerful. And you know what, the 800 plus parents, the 4,000 plus staff, over a thousand community partners, that's what everybody's says. The transformational power of us coming together, honoring each other's humanity, engaging that process two intensive days where we

unpack those challenges. Everybody's saying that. The staff are saying I have become a better staff. I really need that. And that's what we call the paradox of vulnerability. The more we're willing to command and really recognize our shortcomings. I mean, you haven't seen a staff there defending crazy practices that are disempowering parents. Right? What you have seen is they become very curious, and they want to learn how can I do this differently. We recently had this Core Better Together for newly hired staff. And there was one staff there, and that was exactly her question. This is sharing power. It's all of us coming to this space, willing to be transformed. And the paradox of that is the more we do that and over time, the more powerful we all become. The more we regain our own power within, the more we are substituting the power over with the power with, the sharing power. The collective power. and to me, that's wonderful.

But I'm sorry. I interrupted you. I know you were on a roll there with your thinking.

Mark Rolon:

[laughter] It's all good. Let me see. I do so many things. I suppose I should start off by saying I kept coming. I kept sharing my story. But one day, I was at home, and I had only been involved with the Better Together and the Father Engagement Action team a few months, and I got an e-mail from the Office of Public Information. They were putting out a brochure that was going to go to parents, explaining them their rights and things of that nature. Processes if they got involved in the system. And they wanted my input. I looked at it, and because I'm on the Juvenile Justice Reform Commission, I happen to have a copy of the Senate bill on me. So, I knew what the brochure was trying to explain to the parents. I kind of read through it, and to me, it was very nice, but it didn't say any of the things I thought it should have said, so I replied. [laughs] I said, look, I think this is a good first draft, but I think you should list this and this and this and this and make sure that the parents have this information. They replied back to me and totally rewrote the whole brochure. It was at that point. I will tell you now that I said I am 100 percent in. These people are listening. They made the changes, and that was a little example. Since that time, there's so many different ways. In just the two-plus years that I've been there, I've seen programs such as Strength To Succeed, Road Maps To Reunification. Programs created through the input of parents for parents, for

families go from pilot programs to now part of the service array.

There's CBVS, Community-Based Voluntary Services for aftercare. After your case is finished, you sometimes... I have a colleague that loves to say you know it's when your case ends is when the real work begins. The parents have to have somewhere that they can help them during that time when DCYF is no longer in their life. We need resources. We need extra support. These are programs that were created with the input from parents.

Now, if you want to get into the training aspects, I do something called an investigation simulation, where parents such as myself, we have a couple other fathers, some other mothers we play a simulated role as a father being investigated or a mother is being investigated and it's that complicated case involving children and drugs and all this stuff. But it's required training for new hires, and it gives that new hire a chance to come into a real-world situation.

I will tell you from my point of view, I take my role... I know some of the other parents do. We take that role real seriously, very seriously. We want that new hire to have an authentic, real-world experience.

And I have gotten feedback after these simulations where they went, that was one of the most powerful things I ever had to do, and I will never forget that out of all my training.

There's so many. We have advanced practicums. We have forums where we give speeches. I am a participant in Job Fest. I sit on a panel with one or two other people where we interview prospective new hires. So, I know that New Hampshire has made a commitment to introduce parent's involvement into the system to staff, potential new hires from day one. They show you before you're even hired that, hey, we work with parents, and you better be willing to do that. We're changing. This is a movement. There's so many things.

Jamie Brooks:

Can I? I just want to say, I think you guys have given so many amazing examples, and I think as a listener, hearing some of the outcomes you've had. Parents feeling so empowered to be leaders in their state, and for staff to feel just satisfaction in their job that they're actually able to help a family do things differently. Which is what I think they all go into wanting, and how that could really lead to maybe not as much turnover if people have satisfaction in their

job. And so I'm curious as listening to all this, I've seen places that want to do this, and they sort of start and falter. They may not understand what it's going to look like, how it's all going to play out. It might be a bit messy in the beginning. Are there things you could think of, especially you, Geraldo, when this Better Together or any of these other things were starting up in New Hampshire, what was it that really had people buying into it? And were there people who were somewhat resistant, and then you saw maybe change over time and them seeing it work?

So, any examples about maybe how it was challenging at times to get these kinds of things started? Because I think a lot of places would love to be able to do this to the level you're talking about.

Geraldo Pilarski:

Yeah. So that's a great question. So, this was like 12 years ago. We're starting this process. I had been with the State Division now for three years. So I've been in service now for 15 years. I have been a district office regional supervisor. So, I was overseeing like a team of 60 staff. And we had begun to test some of the things that could help us improve family engagement. And one of the things that I was doing was having a family engagement team where we're bringing in young people and family, parents, to really help us understand that. And I remember looking at a mother and asking, so, what happened with her kids. She started crying. She said I went on a binge day after day. And I asked her what could we have done differently? And she said if I could see my kids.

So what we did right there and then we said, OK, let's test this idea. It's not a million dollars idea. You know it doesn't cost that much. It is simply shifting the way we work with families. And we work it out. There was a research worker that was working with foster parents. She immediately said, hey, Geraldo, I would love to be part of that change piloting this.

And as I place a child with the foster family, I'm just going to tell them, bring the children tomorrow. and we're going to tell this assessment worker, OK, you are going to tell the parents, please come to the office. You're going to see the kids. And we started testing that. And it was like, Oh my gosh. So, we are now moving ahead in New Hampshire. We really want to improve family engagement.

And the Division Director, Dan, asked me. He said, Geraldo, I know you love Nashua and the district office, the work you are doing, but I need somebody here to really

create a program for parents here in New Hampshire. We need the family voice. And I was so honored to be invited to do that.

As I started working with the staff and my colleagues in the field, and I said, we're going to be bringing parents. That's when I heard from, from a staff. "I cannot think of a single parent." And there was a lot of resistance, as you said. So this is a little bit of the background, and this is when we said we need to conduct an Agency Readiness Assessment. And it was a really wise decision because we brought in consultants from outside, created a safe space, and really engaged the staff around what were those fears. And there were a lot of legit fears. Like we don't want to traumatize parents. Are we really ready for that? Do we have methodologies to create a safe space? This is when we then approached, KC, said do you know of anything? And they recommended Better Together, which has become a really powerful methodology.

So do an Agency Readiness Assessment. Try to really bring in a method, a process that is going to make it safe is going to bring healing. And then, we proceeded to work on really building a strong infrastructure. We call that the Parent Partner Program, which is the larger umbrella. And it has a budget. I oversee that budget. So we provide compensation to all of our parents. So, parents like Mark come in. They become vendors for the state. And then they are contributing. So, we want to honor their time, their unique expertise.

So you want to build that infrastructure. We have a Family Empowerment Team in every regional office. Those teams are now really moving into like recruiting the new parents. So, you have to have a process to continuously identify prospective parent leaders. Family leaders in Child Welfare. And then ensure that you provide them the appropriate spaces to reclaim their voices, find their power from within.

And then we develop policy. We created a number of roles, and we continue to do that as the agency continues to evolve. And so, this is where I would start. It is bringing in what is called a capacity-building approach, looking at all those dimensions of capacity.

And then bringing people in. bringing people in and really engaging in a co-creation process.

Jamie Brooks:

Thank you for that. Mark, what about you? You were going to jump in anyway, but I think you might have come in, and

it was a bit more established there. But other places that you saw maybe some people not really understanding the role with people with lived experience at the table. How did you...

Mark Rolon:

Well, there's always people like that especially... I know the program now had its roots over a decade ago, but we still have a lot of long-term workers that are having a little trouble adjusting to the system. And they are a little reluctant to change. I wanted to mention really quick that we do receive a small stipend for our meetings, but it's not anything that I could live off of. It's a very nice surprise when it comes in the mail, and I appreciate it, but I don't do this for the stipend. The stipend, as far as I'm concerned, is a token of their appreciation, that type of a gesture. So I don't make a salary. [laughs] I just wanted to touch on that.

But yeah, change. Change takes a while. Change, you have to start with baby steps. And baby steps, repetition, and slowly. Like, I just recently started going to staff meetings. And when I went to that staff meeting, I'll tell you what, I probably recognized three faces out of the 20 that were in the room, and I go to a lot of meetings. So there's so much room for growth, but you stay at it. You stay at it. I'm sure ten years ago, they could not imagine that they would be at the place that they are now.

I mean, two years ago, I couldn't have imagined if you had said that I was doing this job, I would have laughed. I would have said not a snowball's chance in, you know. [laughs] And now I sit down at a table with the Commissioner of DCYF and judges, state police, and lawyers. And it's because I wanted to be involved. It's because I came to the initial meeting and I said, wow, I have a chance to make a difference. And I decided to pick up the ball and run with it.

Geraldo Pilarski:

So, these are all the ways that we kind of really strived to get to that authentic power sharing. But I'm curious, Mark, if you could think back in the several years now you have been involved. What were the examples when you felt maybe like tokenized, and it wasn't real versus the times when hey, this is real? You just mentioned one example that it seems this was real power sharing. So, thoughts on that?

Mark Rolon:

Well, like I said, it was a couple months before I really thought that I was really making a difference. But the more I came... You know, when you go to a meeting, you can

tell if people are engaged. If they're there to just hear you speak or if they're paying attention and they're listening, and they follow up with questions. There's different attitudes there. And I could tell people were paying attention when I came. That was encouraging. I have an example. Like I said, I sit on the Juvenile Justice Reform Commission and not just there. The same thing with when I do my work with the state. I'm treated as a colleague. I'm not a parent that's there to visit and give my input. I am a colleague. I am an equal partner at that table. And it was the respect that I was given that I knew I was being taken seriously. I can't remember... I should say there is so much I am learning. [laughs] I am also looking at this as a learning opportunity. I don't have degrees in sociology or any of that. I'm learning how the system works, from the tiers of intervention to how it works in the House and the Senate bills and budget management. All of this stuff I'm getting a crash course in. so I try to measure myself, and I'm never afraid to ask questions. But I'm not afraid to wait and see if it's answered a little more down the line. [laughs] But I think it's that mutual respect that I have received.

I had one meeting where an executive secretary came up to me and said I'm so glad you are sitting at this table because you're not afraid to tell it like it is. And a lot of different people with their professional crowd around them, they're a little measured in what they decide to say. My first year, or it wasn't even a year because I started in, I think, November. And two months later, that December came around, and I was asked to speak at the end-of-the-year celebration. I remember saying, three months ago, I was a dad at home, just not knowing what to do dealing with my son, and today I'm questioning the Commissioner of DCYF on budget concerns.

I mean, it's unbelievable. [laughs] The opportunity is there. You have to give it a chance. Does everything always go the way you want? No. You get pushback. Pushback is normal pushback. It's healthy. It helps you. I might say something, but when I say something, I try and make sure I have a why am I saying this. I have some backup with whatever I'm suggesting or saying. But it's the respect. It's a mutual respect that keeps me coming.

Jamie Brooks:

It's so amazing. I think you guys have said so many stories and anecdotes and things that's just so powerful to listen to. And I think my final sort of question or thing to think about... You could both maybe comment on is, how do you define the success or measure if it's successful? It

doesn't maybe always match up with what funders may typically be looking for. But we know the success is there because of the parent leaders and all the work that you're doing. And I was thinking about your comment about 20 years of therapy didn't get me what being respected in this position did. and I know that to be so true for self-worth is to have a voice at the table. So, what do you think about what comes to mind with measuring success or how you just define that in general?

Geraldo Pilarski:

So, Jamie, I think that's really, really important. So I'm always asking myself and my colleagues and our family leads in child welfare, our community partners this important question and saying, OK, how are the lives of children, youth, and families changing? Like, let's look at what's changing for them, and is it moving the needle? Are families now describing more empowerment experiences versus disempowering experiences? Are the young people feeling heard? What is changing in their lives? And are parents also feeling like Mark? You mentioned, Mark, I feel like I'm a better parent now. What does that look like? And that they have this space to really examine that. Are our relationships changing? And so, there are different ways that we can be looking at this most fundamental question. Are the lives of children, youth, and families becoming better? Are families stronger? We can look at some of our data.

And Mark mentioned an important program that we co-created with our Family Leaders here. It's called the Strength to Succeed. This is our peer support model. And there are recovery coaches that are assigned to parents with substance-related disorders and helping them reunify. And once we started running the data, I remember our data colleagues in the state being like, wow, Geraldo. We had more reunifications. And as we connected with our folks running permanency for the state, they said, in every case now, we're seeing that the one factor that supported that is the peer support. It's having the Parent Partners, the recovery coaches connected.

So, clearly, this really galvanized. And I remember people saying, OK, we've got to expand this peer support model. And indeed we did. We moved that earlier into the assessment phase. And Jamie, I'm going to be really, very honest. In my many years working in the social work field in different countries... I worked in Brazil, Japan, and then in Chicago, Illinois, and then here, in New Hampshire. Throughout my all career, the one element that I see is the

powerful driver for transformations has been the family voice that shared power with the people that we serve. That's really the powerful force for change and transformation. So that's kind of my perspective. It always warms my heart when I hear Mark talking and saying it's been a couple of years now. A little bit over two years, but I already see so many changes. And I already see those things. So I'm curious, Mark, if you want to elaborate a little bit on what are those changes and how do you measure that we're actually succeeding and moving in the right direction?

Mark Rolon:

I think when I came to Better Together, all I want to do is if I can help one family. If I can stop them from going through what I went through, then everything I do is a success. Now, change is huge. It's a huge project. And in my opinion, you have to have buy-in from the top to reform from the bottom up and change everything. And I think, right now, that system is doing that. I have seen change. I've seen recommendations of parents. Parents that came in with stories. Out of those stories came ideas. And out of those ideas became policy. And that is huge. I have a vision for DCYF because we have a terrible public opinion. I hope someday you call the fire department because there's a fire. Call the Police Department if somebody breaks into your house. I hope that if you need help, people can just pick up the phone and call DCYF. I want it to be a strong community service. That's my vision, and I'm hoping that everything we do... and it seems to be going that way. Trajectoring that way. [laughs] I don't think trajectoring's a word. But headed that way. And that's why I keep coming, and that's why I do what I do. And I'm hoping for the best. [laughs]

Geraldo Pilarski:

Thank you, Mark. I'm inspired by you, by all the other leaders. And this gives me also the motivation like all of you collectively also give me more power. And so I have a practice here in New Hampshire where I'm invited to a meeting, maybe with the division director or folks. And then I immediately say, OK, so you know, I'm bringing with me at least one parent because that's when we really make it real. And to me, that's also like my own way of kind of sharing power and ensuring that I'm not just speaking for parents, but I'm creating a space to really elevate that voice. That expertise. So, thank you.

Jamie Brooks: Yes, well, thank you both so much. Um I think we could definitely talk about a lot more here, but I appreciate your time. I am inspired hearing about all the amazing work that you continue to do. I loved hearing about how people with lived experience are being integrated. From the interview to the peer supports to simulations and trainings, it's amazing. So hopefully, you both will continue to do that good work in New Hampshire. And I'm sure we will see each other again soon. Thank you.

Geraldo Pilarski: Thank you, Jamie. Thank you, Mark.

[Phone Ringing]

Tony Parsons: Hey, Jamie.

Jamie Brooks: Hi, Tony.

Tony Parsons: You know, that was a really cool conversation you had with Mark and Geraldo.

Jamie Brooks: Oh, I know it was great. They had an awesome dialogue going. It was so funny because every time I was thinking of a question to ask them, they would answer it. So it was a lot of listening, but it was. It was so awesome to hear about everything happening in New Hampshire.

Tony Parsons: Oh, definitely like it sounded like they were having a really good time which always comes out and I think they're friends right? So I think that definitely made it better, but it was just really neat to hear from a father, right? And somebody worked with fathers because I don't have kids, so I can't imagine what they might have gone through trying to do some of that work. But it was a couple of things that Mark really said. I was like, wow, so simple but needed to be said.

And I want to get this right. I quoted this. He says it's baby steps, repetition and going slowly, right. This idea that when we're engaging parents, just like when we're engaging young people, it's going to take time, right. And we can't expect big things overnight. And we're going to have to go back and keep trying and keep trying like, something that I think is so intuitive. But I think we often overlook because when you turn like a magical age and you're considered an adult, I'm 28 will be 29 next month. And I'm "an adult". But people don't realize it takes a lot to

scaffold someone to where they need to be to really have the impact that they should have.

I really thought that was really, really nice. And then Geraldo kind of teed it up too by saying it's the infrastructure, right? What policies, procedures, plans do we have in place to make engagement easier and really make parents feel comfortable? Because I think in the child welfare system, we do a very bad job at making parents feel comfortable. You know, there's this almost just inherent bias against parents of any form. And so to hear two people who have lived through some of this and are working in this space really speak truth to power. It was like, yes. So if I ever become a parent.

And I have to engage in some of these places. You know, I feel like I have a little more of, like, a blueprint of, like, how I could go in and be in that space. So I really appreciated that.

Jamie Brooks:

Yeah, it was so great to just hear. I think you know that it has to be both sides. You need the infrastructure, you need the little things you need to make it easier for parents to do better. And that the same time providing the parents of the support that they need to make the changes that they want to make. The idea of empowering parents to have a voice, to sit at the table and feel respected and how that can really change a person's life. And how they feel about themselves, you know, and in turn, how their parent, how they are in the world. And it's so important. So I was just so excited to spend time with them. I could have listened to them for several hours.

Tony Parsons:

Oh yeah.

Jamie Brooks:

They have so much to say and so much experience. Yeah. So it was just, it was really, really great.

Tony Parsons:

Yeah, no, it was fantastic. And I think you touched on, it's this respect piece, I think that was an underlying theme. It's like we have to have respect no matter who we're approaching, no matter how we're approaching, but especially parents, right? It's a group within the system that kind of has never gotten it in any meaningful capacity. So I think that was really huge. And so, yeah, such a great conversation. I really hope that we can either have them back or they can do a follow up because I really want to hear more about how this program works. And you know, maybe other states can learn something, right. And they

can kind of implement it too, because the more that we share, best ideas and best practices, I think the stronger our system becomes.

Such a great conversation and to all of our listeners out there, I hope you learn something, you know, I hope you were. You walk away from this kind of inspired thinking. What can I do? Whether I am a parent or whether I am an administrator? What can I do to better authentically engage with people? And if this is your first time listening, super grateful you joined us today, but go back and listen to some of our earlier episodes. Share them. Talk to them with your friends. Right. We only share power when we're sharing understanding. And that's what we're aiming to do is to share some understanding through this podcast series.

And so we hope that you'll come back and that together we can make a stronger child welfare system. Thanks for listening. And we'll hear you next time.

Betsy Lerner:

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