

# She Was A Foster Kid. Now She's A D.C. Judge Overseeing The Foster System.

By: Martin Austermuhle  
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WAMU/Martin Austermuhle

Gray is a magistrate judge in D.C. Family Court, overseeing the foster care system she was once a part of.

**Pamela Gray** has served as a magistrate judge in D.C. Family Court since 2002, and in that time she's dealt with some of the toughest cases a judge can face: the abuse and neglect of children. She's seen children enter the foster care system, and she's helped them find ways out of it.

For her, November is usually a time for celebration: It's National Adoption Month, and this Saturday D.C. Superior Court will play host to the **29th Annual D.C. Adoption Day**, where 25 kids are set to have their adoptions finalized.

It's also a moment for personal reflection. Working to ensure children's welfare isn't work she expected to do, but in a way, it's the work she's lived to do. That's because she's now overseeing the foster care system she was once a part of.

"You know, I never planned to be a judge and in fact I was a criminal defense attorney with the Public Defender's Service, and I actually didn't like judges very much," she admits. "But when the court created the Family Court and the magistrate judge positions to address issues of children in the abuse and neglect system, I was very interested because I grew up in foster care."

What was once an unsettled childhood is giving her a deeper insight into the work she does every day, she says.

"I feel that I have a message for children and parents," she says.

## 'A typical foster care experience'

Gray was born and raised in New Jersey, but little about her upbringing was normal. She says that for much of her childhood she and a sister jumped from home to home, what she refers to as the "foster drift." It was, she admits in hindsight, the "typical foster care experience."

"Being fearful about what was going to happen, not knowing how long I was going to be in a particular home, not knowing whether I would be separated from my sister or not, not knowing where my parents were or what the circumstances were. Not understanding things," she says.

When she was 9, Gray and her sister settled down in a foster home they would remain in through high school. Though she remembers her foster father as a "wonderful man," her foster mother was less happy to play parents for Gray and her sister.

"There were some abuses. There was physical abuse, there was some food deprivation. The thing that kept me in that home was being with my sister. There were times that I wanted to leave, and there was a time I did leave. I ran away at age 15," she says.

Gray returned, but says that the years of remaining in the foster system had made her a "troubled kid." But with the support of her sister and some dedicated teachers, she graduated high school.

## An unmoored life

That alone can be big accomplishment, say experts on foster care.

"The research tells us that nationally only about 50 percent of kids in foster care are graduating high school by age 18," says Kate Burdick of the Juvenile Law Center, which **advocates** for changes to the foster and education systems to better serve foster kids. "When children who are in the foster care system have to change living placements, they unfortunately often have to move to a new school district. From a common sense perspective, you can understand why having to change schools that often would have an effect on your academics as well as your positive relationships with your friends and mentors," she says.

Burdick says the prospects of completing college can be even more daunting, let alone attending law school like Gray did. That's because kids in the foster system can feel unmoored by not having the stability of a single set of parents or a home. Gray says she knows the feeling.

"You know you have a mother. You know you have a father. You know you have other relatives. But you don't where they are, and you don't know why you're in this situation. And what you end up feeling is you're not wanted. There was something wrong with you," says Gray.

And though she succeeded where many other foster kids may not have, the weight of her upbringing still weighed on years afterwards.

"I grew up feeling like, 'If my own family didn't want me, who else would want me?' I felt that way for years, into adulthood I felt that way. So even in relationships, adults relationships, I felt that way. 'OK, why would this man, why would this person be interested if my own family didn't want me?' Those feelings of lack of self-worth linger," she says,

## 'None of it is their fault'

Gray says Family Court and city agencies try as best they can to reunite kids with their parents, and this is the hope for many children in the foster system. But if that doesn't work, they try to find adoptive parents. This year, there were close to 1,100 kids in foster care in D.C. The city set a goal of finding 245 of them permanent homes. So far, 86 have yet to be matched.

Kathleen Jackson is an editor who lives on Capitol Hill, and 10 years ago she adopted three foster kids. She says she was initially moved to foster and adopt by NBC4's Barbara Harrison and her "[Wednesday's Children](#)" segment on foster kids.

"They come into foster care, and none of it's their fault," she says of foster kids. "They've completely lost everything. And they need people that are willing to open up their homes to kids who have baggage. And they have baggage. Those kids that come in with baggage, they'll help you work through your own baggage."

Gray agrees that any adoption, whether of a foster child or not, can be a challenge, and she tries to be realistic about it when she talks to hopeful parents. But she encourages families to take the opportunity.

"It's important if you have the room in your home and you want to give children a place to live and love and stability, to do it, and do it with eyes wide open, no expectation of what you're going to get in return, because it's about the children. But it is so worth it," she says.

Gray should know: This summer, she and her husband adopted two kids. And just as she celebrated the opportunity to give the two children -- now 4 and 7 -- she says she celebrates every time a child is brought together with a new family.

"We do a celebration every time there's an adoption in my courtroom, every time there's a reunification or guardianship in my courtroom. That is so important that children have permanency, that they have an opportunity to be a childhood with people who love them. So when people say to 'Well, I don't want a celebration,' I tell them, 'That's what I live for, frankly.' To see this result."

*Kathleen Jackson, featured in this story, runs an annual pajama drive for kids in the foster system and in shelters. Information can be [found here](#).*