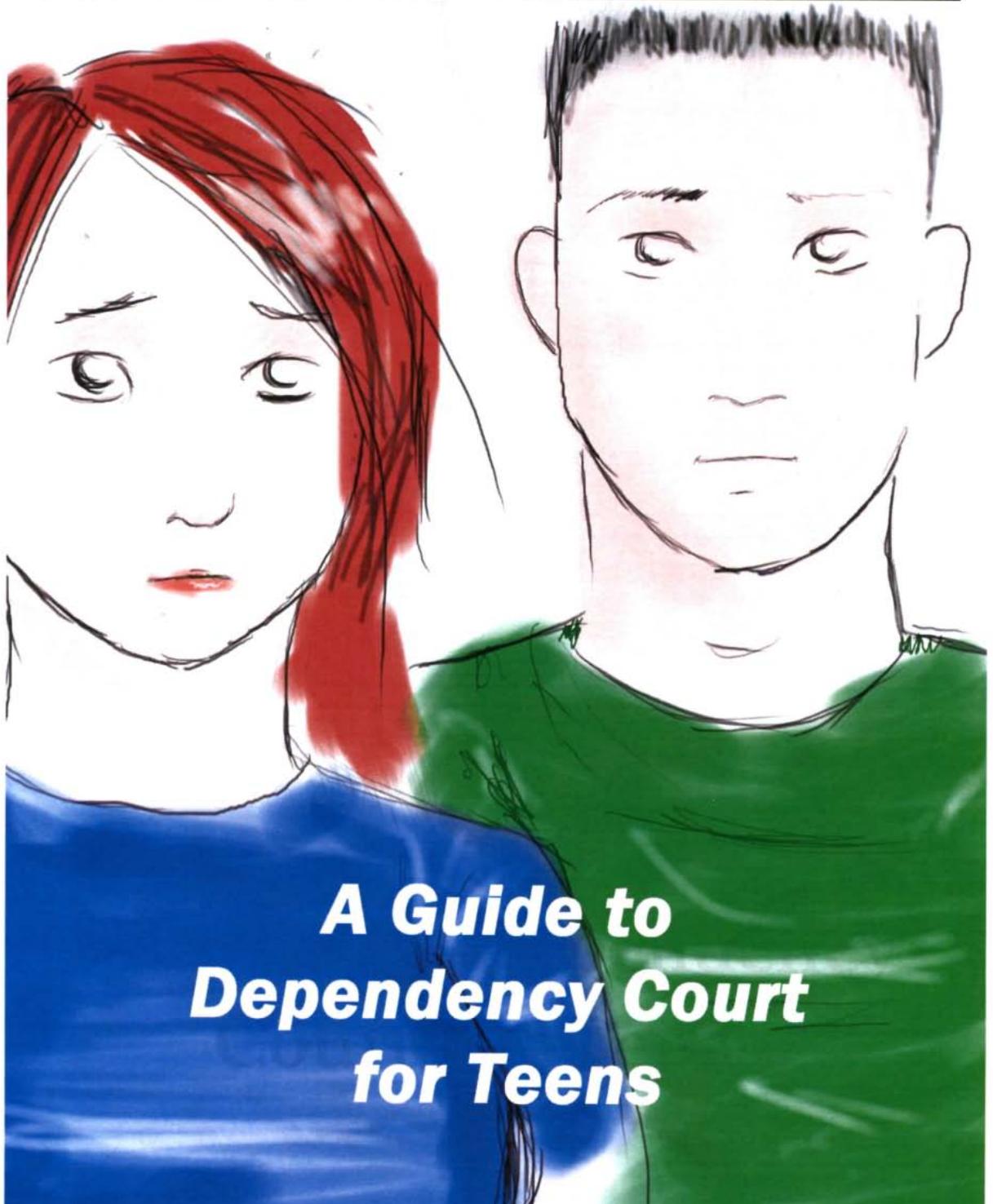


My Future Depends On It!



***A Guide to
Dependency Court
for Teens***

So you know your family is having problems, but why did someone come and take you away from your home?

This is the story of Sophie and Jackson Davis, two teenagers who are in foster care and had to learn the ropes, just like you.



Sophie, Jackson,
I'm sorry I had to
bring you to the office, but there
is a lady here
that needed to talk to
you before you
got on the bus.

This is Ms. Edwards,
and she works with the
Department of Children and Families
as a Child Protective Investigator.



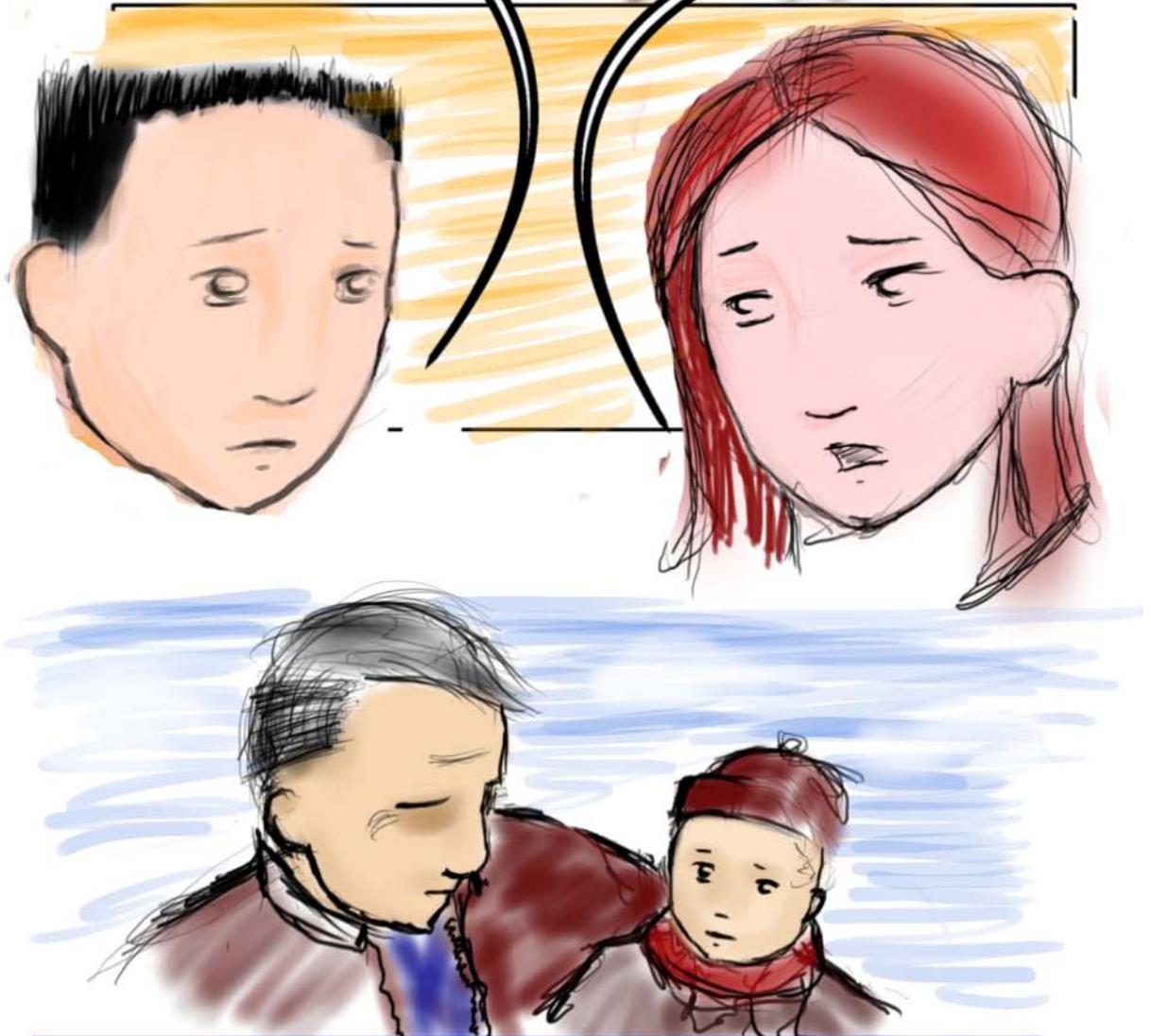
Hi kids.
While you were in
school today, your parents had
to go to court. The law
says that parents have to properly
supervise their kids, protect them from
harm and make sure they have a
safe place to live and enough
food and clothing.

The judge decided that your
parents needed to work on some
things so that they can properly take
care of you. For now, you're going
to have to live somewhere else while
they work on making a better
home for you.



Will we be able to stay together?

Where will we go?



A child protective investigator is someone who investigates child abuse. Sometimes they work for the Department of Children and Families (DCF), and sometimes they work for the local sheriff's office. Foster care is meant to provide a safe home for you when your parents are unable to take care of you.

A FEW REASONS YOU MIGHT GO INTO FOSTER CARE:

Your parents need help from other adults to learn skills that will help them be better parents.

Your parents don't have a safe place for you to live.

Your parents aren't able to take care of you right now.

Your parents need help from a doctor before they can take care of you again.

Your parents have a drug or alcohol problem and need help.

Your parents are experiencing a family crisis (death of caregiver, loss of job or housing, etc.).

**REMEMBER:
IT'S NOT YOUR FAULT!**

Normally we will try to place you with a relative, but your parents said they don't have any relatives or friends of the family who are able to take care of you right now. We asked your parents to let us know if they remember any relatives who might be able to care for you. If you know of any, please tell us.



We have found a home for you to stay with a foster family. The foster family doesn't replace your mom and dad. They are just going to take care of you temporarily while your parents try to fix their problems. The foster family has space for both of you, so you'll be able to stay together.



What if we don't like the foster family?



Will we ever get to see our parents again?





You'll have to stay with the foster family, but I'm sure they'll do everything they can to make you feel welcome. It will be different for you, and you'll always have my phone number or your case worker's phone number to call if you have problems with the foster family or you don't feel safe in their home.

The judge has ordered visitation, so you will be able to see your parents once a week for now. As your parents do the things that the judge orders them to do, the judge may increase the visitation so you can see them more often. I will make the necessary transportation arrangements for you.



Will we still get to go to this school? All my friends are here.

Yes, the foster family lives in the same school zone, but you'll have to ride a different bus.



Absolutely! You have the right to attend your court hearings. The next hearing is coming up on Tuesday at 9 a.m. You may have to miss some school, but it's very important for you to be there.

Can we go to court to see what's going on?



New people you are going to meet while the court is working with your family:

Department of Children and Families (DCF) Employees

This is the state agency that investigates child abuse and provides services to families who need help.

Child Protective Investigator

This person works for DCF or the local sheriff and investigates the problems in your home. He/she has received special training to spot abuse or neglect.

Children's Legal Services Attorney

The attorney who works for DCF is usually called the Children's Legal Services (CLS) attorney, but might also be called an assistant attorney general or assistant state attorney. This attorney files the legal paperwork that starts the case about you and your family in dependency court. He/she talks to the court about what the state thinks is in your best interest.

Caseworker/Case Manager

This person coordinates services for your parents and you while the court is involved with your family. It is important for you to work closely with the caseworker and tell him/her what you need and want. The caseworker attends all of the court hearings and tells the court what types of services you and your family need. Your caseworker also prepares reports for the court about your family.

Guardian ad Litem (GAL)

GALs are specially trained adults appointed by the court. They gather information about you and tell the judge what they think is in your best interest. They also tell the court what you want, so be sure to talk with them. If you don't have a GAL, ask the court for one.

Foster Parents

Foster parents are trained and licensed adults who care for you in their homes until the court says you can safely return home.

Parent's Attorney

This is an attorney who works with your parents to help them through the legal stages of the case.

Attorney ad Litem/Child's Attorney

Not every youth gets an attorney appointed, but in some cases, the judge will appoint an attorney for you. If you think you need one, ask! If you do have one, it's important to tell your attorney what you need and want. This attorney represents you and has a duty to keep what you say private, unless you say it is okay to tell.



What about our clothes and all of our stuff?

Can you get my iPod?

I will go by your house and ask your parents to pack a suitcase for you.

I will try to get that when I go by your house. Can you write down a list of what else you want me to get?

Okay, let's go meet your new foster family.



I know my family had problems, but I don't want to be here. What if these foster parents don't like me? What if I don't like them? I just want to go home.

What if I don't like the food? What if they're mean to me? What if I never see my parents again?



Welcome. We're glad you're here.

Sophie, Jackson, these are your new foster parents, Maria and Tom Garcia.

I want to go home!



Some youth live in group homes instead of with foster families at some point while in foster care. A group home usually has 8 to 10 youth with house parents who run the home, cook, take the kids to activities, etc.



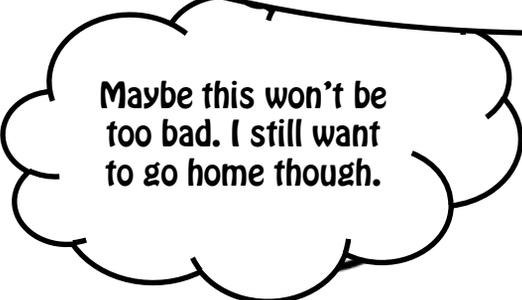
Let me show you where your rooms are. Then, after dinner, we'll talk about our house rules and how our family works so you can be comfortable while you're staying here.



If you have a favorite food, please let us know and we'll try to fix it sometime.



We do not have many rules, but there are some basic requirements that we all must live by. The rules include that you have to go to school, and you have to be in bed at an acceptable time. If you need to go somewhere besides school, you have to let us know where you will be so we know you're safe. We all do chores to help out around the house, and you will have chores too. Ms. Edwards just brought your suitcases by, and you can unpack after we finish dinner.



Maybe this won't be too bad. I still want to go home though.



Can I call my friends on the phone? I want to ask, but I'm too scared.

Your foster parents want to know about your likes and dislikes and other things about you so they can help you feel more comfortable. You may talk about any topic you choose with the foster parents.

Some of the topics may include:

**What kinds of food do I like?
What do I like most about school?
What activities do I participate in?
What is my favorite T.V. show?
What kind of music do I like?
Who are my best friends?
What do I like to do on the weekends?
What kinds of chores do I like? What kinds do I hate?**

What should you ask your foster parents?

**What are the other house rules?
Where do you work?
How can I get hold of you if I need to find you?
What do you like to do on the weekends?
Do you have any pets?
Can I eat anything I want without asking?
Is there anything cool to do near your house?**

Your foster parents cannot give you legal advice. You can discuss those issues with your caseworker or GAL.

A FEW DAYS LATER . . .



How is it going? Do you like your new foster family?

I guess.

When do we get to go home?



Well, it depends. Many times DCF, you, and your parents will agree together on a case plan which will be considered and approved by the judge. If you do not agree, then the judge will help decide what needs to be included. The case plan tells your parents the things they need to do before you can go home. Some of those things might be quick and easy for your parents, like getting an evaluation done at a doctor's office, and some might take longer, like taking parenting classes. I can tell you that the judge wants to help you return home as soon as possible, and if that can't happen, then the judge will help you find a permanent home.

There is a court hearing tomorrow for your case. Do you want to go? It's important for you to be there.

Will our parents be there?

Yes.

Then we want to go.



What should we wear to court?

Everyone in court will be dressed up. Lawyers wear suits, and you'll probably feel more comfortable if you dress up a bit too.



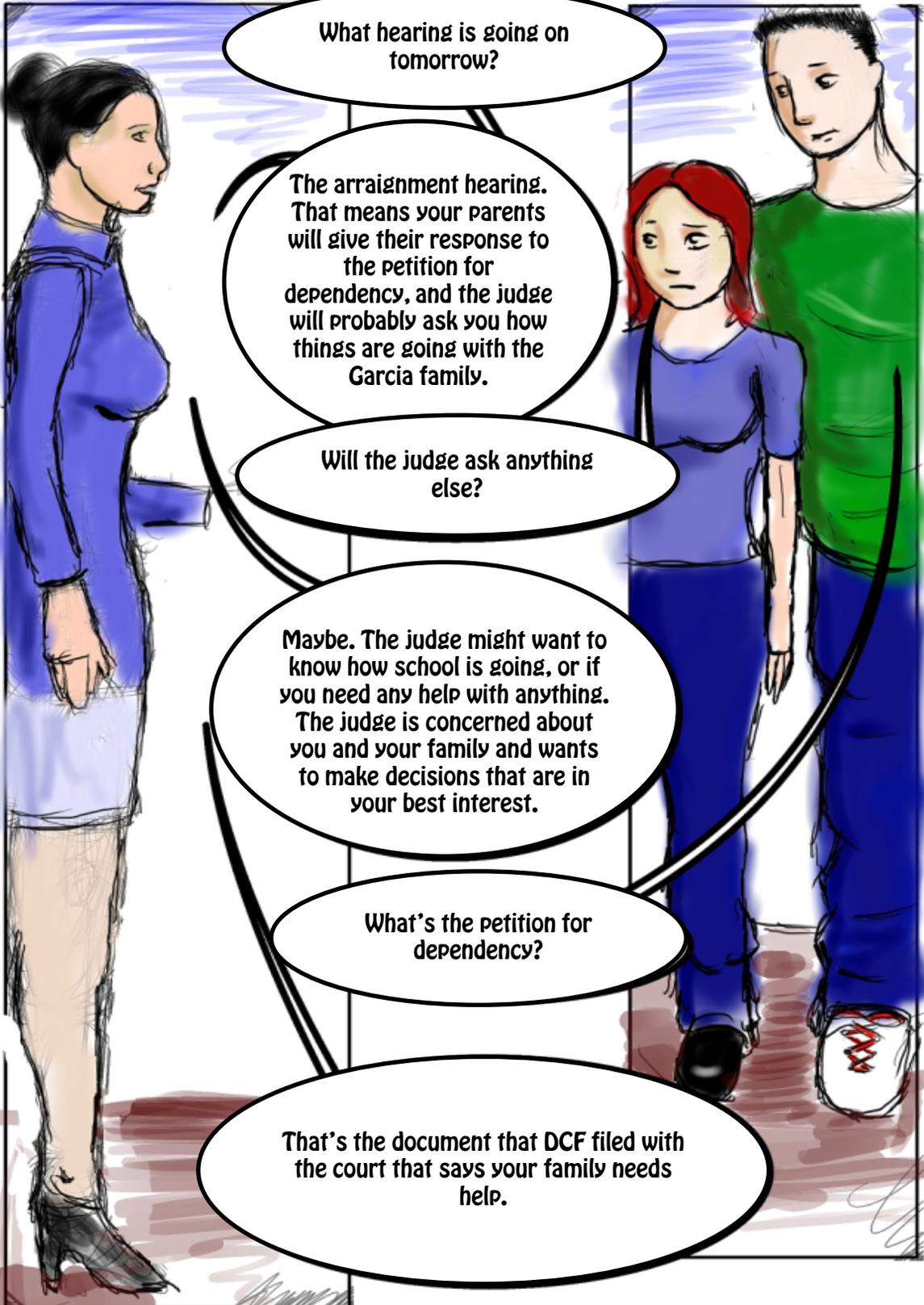
I'm a little nervous

That's okay. Lots of people get nervous. You'll have a chance to speak to the judge if you want to, so write down any questions you have before we go. Remember to be on your best behavior in court. Court is very formal, and nobody speaks unless the judge gives them permission. When speaking to the judge, say "your honor." Be respectful and use good manners when addressing the judge.

What happens if the judge asks me a question and I don't know the answer?

No one expects you to know everything. If you don't know the answer, just say, "I don't know."





What hearing is going on tomorrow?

The arraignment hearing. That means your parents will give their response to the petition for dependency, and the judge will probably ask you how things are going with the Garcia family.

Will the judge ask anything else?

Maybe. The judge might want to know how school is going, or if you need any help with anything. The judge is concerned about you and your family and wants to make decisions that are in your best interest.

What's the petition for dependency?

That's the document that DCF filed with the court that says your family needs help.

Some questions the judge might ask you when you are in court:

Do you know who everybody is in the courtroom?

Do you understand why you are in foster care?

How do you like your foster home?

How are things going in school?

Have you started thinking about college or vocational school?

Who can you talk to if you have questions about your case?

Have your visits with your parents been going well?

When was the last time you went to the doctor or dentist?

Is there anything the court can do to help you?

Do you have any questions?

The court that hears cases about child abuse and neglect is called “dependency court.” Each case will have several hearings. What are the different types of hearings?

Shelter Hearing – A hearing when the judge decides if good reasons exist to remove you from your home. Your parents have the right to be heard and present evidence.

Arraignment Hearing – A hearing at which your parents/legal guardians respond to DCF’s petition for dependency, which is the paperwork DCF files to begin the case. The judge also reviews issues related to you, such as placement and visitation.

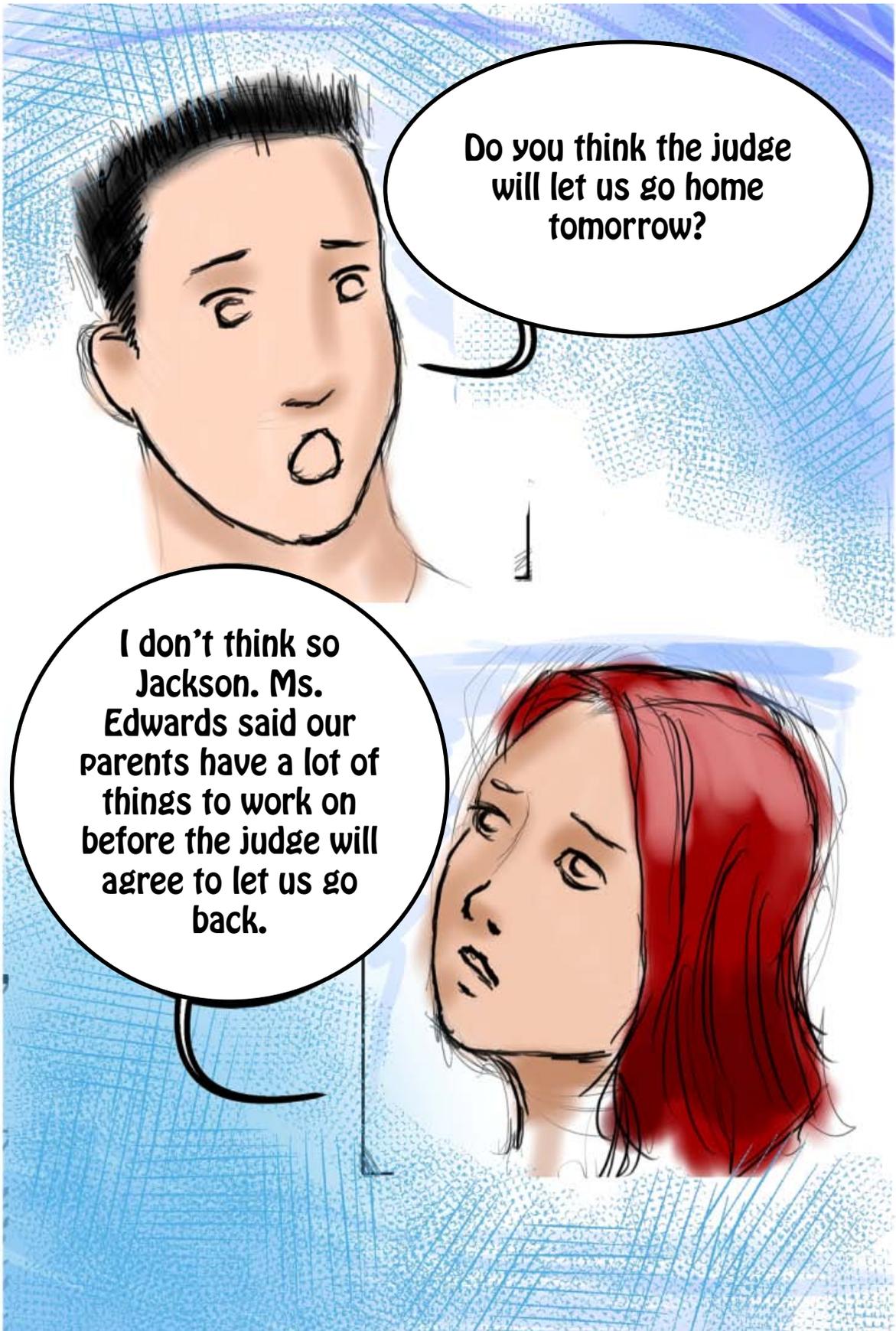
Adjudicatory Hearing – The attorney for DCF must prove that safety risks exist in your home. Both DCF and your parents can call witnesses and present evidence.

Case Plan Acceptance Hearing – If the judge decides that you must remain in foster care, then at his hearing, the judge reviews the case plan. The case plan includes things that your parents need to do to make sure you are safe. The case plan and all changes to the case plan must be approved by the court. You should have a chance to look at the case plan, and you may even have things you must do.

Disposition Hearing – At this hearing, the judge considers reports, recommendations, and other evidence while your parents work to correct the problems that led to DCF’s involvement with your family. The judge also reviews the case plan to determine if it addresses all of the problems affecting you.

Judicial Review Hearing – (sometimes called a “JR”) The court reviews how you are doing and your parent’s compliance with the case plan. The court also decides if there needs to be any changes to the case plan or where you are living, and decides what should happen next.

Permanency Hearing – A hearing at which the court determines which long term option is best for you. A permanency hearing must be held no later than 12 months after the date you were removed from your home.



THE NEXT DAY IN COURT



All rise for the Honorable Judge Masterson.

Please be seated.

Good morning! Today I want to know how the Davis family is doing. Are the kids placed together? Are they getting to visit their parents? Are they in the same school?

After the hearing...

The judge asked lots of questions to make sure you and your parents had the services you needed. The judge then decided that there are still some safety risks with your family, so you will need to remain in foster care for now.



I'm sorry court didn't work out like you planned, but there will be another court hearing soon.

I really wanted the judge to let us go home today.

Before the next hearing, your parents will be doing a lot of work to make sure your home is safe and they have the skills they need to be really good parents.

I know.



Foster care can last anywhere from a few days to several months and possibly more than a year, depending on how long it takes your parents to complete the tasks listed in the case plan.

What are your parents doing while you're in foster care?

They might be:

Looking for a job

Dealing with a drug or alcohol problem

Finding a new place to live

Visiting doctors

Getting healthy

Finding child care

Getting things right with the police or the court

Learning how to deal with anger appropriately

Taking classes to improve their parenting skills

A few months later...



I thought foster care was supposed to be temporary, but we've been with Mr. and Mrs. Garcia for a long time.



You're right, but your parents still need more time to work on their problems.

How long do we have to be in foster care?



That depends. The next hearing is called a permanency hearing. At that hearing, the judge will decide what the plans will be for your future.

What are the options at a permanency hearing?

Reunification – The judge may return you to your family if your parents have fixed the problems that brought you into foster care.

Adoption – DCF may ask the court to terminate your parents' parental rights. This would mean you could be adopted by a different family.

Permanent Guardianship/Permanent Placement with a Relative – If you have lived with a relative or close family friend, you might be able to stay with them until you turn 18, or longer.

Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement – (This permanency option is rarely used. It is an option for you if you have special circumstances and can not use the permanency options above.)

Our story ends here, but just like Sophie and Jackson, things have happened in your life that you didn't want to happen.

Remember that it's not your fault!

Also remember that your parents probably didn't want you to go into foster care.

Sometimes things happen in the lives of our parents that they cannot control, or they make unhealthy decisions that affect the lives of everyone around them.

It's okay to be angry, confused, sad, and upset.

It's important to find someone to talk to about these feelings and to help you understand how to deal with these feelings.

Contacts

Name of Judge:

Child Protective Investigator:

Name:

What they can help me with:

Phone number:

Cell number:

Email:

Caseworker:

Name:

What they can help me with:

Phone number:

Cell number:

Email:

Guardian ad Litem:

Name:

What they can help me with:

Phone number:

Cell number:

Email:

Attorney:

Name:

What they can help me with:

Phone number:

Cell number:

Email:

Education Advocate:

Name:

What they can help me with:

Phone number:

Cell number:

Email:

Other:

Name:

What they can help me with:

Phone number:

Cell number:

Email:

As a young person in foster care, you have the right to*:

Know your rights in foster care, to receive a list of those rights in written form, and to know how to file a complaint if your rights are being violated.

Be told why you came into foster care and why you are still in foster care.

Live in a safe and healthy home where you are treated with respect, with your own place to store your things, and where you receive healthy food, adequate clothing, and appropriate personal hygiene products.

Have personal belongings secure and transported with you.

Have caring foster parents or caretakers who are properly trained, who have received background checks and screenings, and who receive adequate support from DCF to help ensure stability in the placement.

Be placed in a home with your brothers and sisters when possible, and to maintain regular and unrestricted contact with siblings when separated (including help with transportation), unless ordered by the court.

Attend school and participate in extracurricular, cultural, and personal enrichment activities.

Have your privacy protected.

Be protected from physical, sexual, emotional, or other abuse, including corporal punishment (hitting or spanking as a punishment) and being locked in a room (unless you are in a treatment facility.)

Receive medical, dental, vision, and mental health services.

(* unless restricted by law or otherwise restricted by the court)

Refuse to take medications, vitamins, or herbs, unless prescribed by a doctor.

Have regular visits with biological parents, siblings, and other relatives unless prohibited by the court. If you don't want to visit, you must make your desires known to your caseworker or GAL.

Make and receive confidential telephone calls and send and receive unopened mail, unless prohibited by court order.

Have regular contact from and unrestricted access to caseworkers, attorneys, and advocates and to be allowed to have confidential conversations with such individuals.

Be told by your caseworker and your attorney about any changes in your case plan or placement and receive honest information about the decisions DCF is making that affect your life.

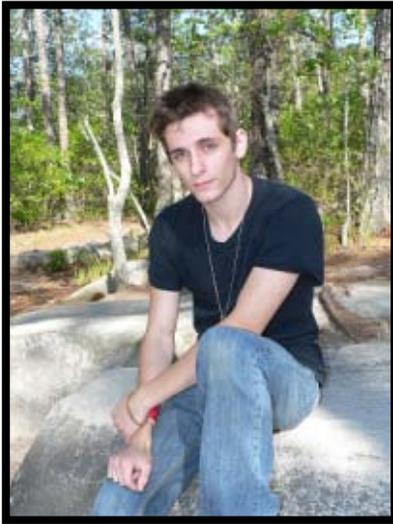
Attend religious services and activities of your choice and to preserve your cultural heritage. If possible, your placement should be with a family member or someone from your community with similar religion, culture, and/or heritage.

Be involved, when appropriate, in the development of your case plan and to object to any of the provisions of the case plan during case reviews, court hearings, and case planning conferences.

Attend court and speak to a judge about what you want to have happen in your case.

Have a plan for your future, including an emancipation plan if appropriate (for leaving foster care when you become an adult), and to be provided services to help you prepare to become a successful adult.

About the artist:



Michael Starling, Jr.

Michael is an aspiring artist currently attending college.
He resides in a small town east of Tallahassee, Florida.

His favorite hobbies are drawing, painting, reading,
playing musical instruments, and being active in local theater productions.

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