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When a Youth Worker Turns Policy Wonk

A service provider finds advantages and adjustments in her shift to advocacy.

By Nell Bernstein



Lemley: "Half the time, I think I'm censoring myself too much, and the other half I feel maybe I've been too direct."

Oakland, Calif. – A few years ago, Amy Lemley spent her days working with foster youth and telling people about them: Charisse had her baby, Donnie signed his first lease. Today, she stands in a conference room filled with business-clad service providers and real estate developers, and talks about the giant PowerPoint slide behind her that asks, "What is THP-Plus?"

Don't worry, this story is not about the PowerPoint presentation – although the slides explained an innovative transitional housing program that Lemley is trying to implement. It's about Lemley's own transition from nonprofit entrepreneur and service provider to policy wonk and political operative.

While youth work routinely includes public advocacy, Lemley is one of the few who have left the front lines of service delivery for a full-time mission to improve those services by working the corridors of government. Her journey shows why some people make the move, what they bring to the task that others can't, and the adjustments they have to make.

"It is challenging," says Robin Nixon, who began her career running programs for homeless and foster youth, and is now director of the Washington-based National Foster Care Coalition. She says that immediately after she took her first advocacy job, as youth services director at the Child Welfare League of America, "I felt like I was going from this real community activist job to spending a lot of time at a desk."

Nixon soon became convinced that it was the right move. She stresses, however, that more youth workers need to get at least somewhat involved in public policy; at many meetings about proposed changes in youth funding and services, she says, she's the only person in the room with experience in youth work.

For Michele Byrnes, who works with Lemley at the John Burton Foundation for Children Without Homes, Lemley's case underscores that very point: the importance of making sure those who have worked with youth on a day-to-day basis have a role in public policy discussions.

"Amy is one of the most effective advocates I know, because she has a very developed understanding of how policy actually impacts youth," Byrnes says. "It's a unique perspective, having run a program for eight years."

On the Front Lines

Lemley's passion for helping foster youth stems in part from growing up in a place where, as far as she could see, there were no foster youth.

That would be Cherokee, Iowa, a town of 4,000. "It was a close-knit community where people took care of each other," Lemley recalls "If you skipped school, the owner of the general store would call your dad."

Her dad was a veterinarian, her mom a nurse – "June and Ward" Cleaver types, she says. That community "became my ideal vision – all parents having the resources and support they need to be successful, so they don't need to access foster care."

The plight of foster kids became the focus of her graduate work in public policy at the University of California at Berkeley, where her analytical intensity earned her the nickname "Laser-Beam Lemley," says Deeanne Pearn, her former classmate.

Soon after graduating, Lemley set out to solve the problem she had examined in her thesis: the shockingly high numbers of wards of the state who are discharged to homelessness, welfare dependency, unemployment or jail. In 1998, she and Pearn founded First Place, located in Oakland, Calif., to serve emancipating foster youth in Alameda County.

Each year, 4,000 young people are emancipated from foster care in California, and the state Department of Social Services has estimated that 65 percent of those face immediate homelessness.

When First Place didn't have enough room for all the kids who needed a place, Lemley negotiated with landlords and funders for more housing. She doubled the number of units she had at her disposal – then tripled it, then quadrupled it. The more youths she moved off the streets and into housing, the more came knocking at her door.

By 2005, First Place had grown from serving four youths to serving 60. The more it grew, the more Lemley realized the limitations of the private-sector model for helping foster youth in the transition to adulthood. Private agencies like hers, she saw, could never accommodate the flood of young people. She just had her thumb in the dike.

"It became clear to me that this is a public responsibility," says Lemley, whose bobbed brown hair, black-framed glasses and intensely thoughtful manner still give her the look of a graduate student.

"Foster care is the public agency that removes youth from their homes, doesn't reunite them or get them adopted, and discharges them into homelessness. So we need to turn back to that public system and hold them financially accountable."

But how?

Speaking Out

Lemley's first chance to influence state policy came in 2001, when California Youth Connection – a statewide advocacy and self-help network made up of current and former foster youth – campaigned for legislation to create THP-Plus. The program provides state funding for counties to build and run transitional homes for emancipating foster youth, and to provide them with supportive services like mentoring, job training and educational opportunities.

The First Place was called on regularly to help make the case. Lemley found herself frequently driving the 80 miles to Sacramento to testify before state assembly and senate committees. Soon, she made it her mission to publicly argue that "former foster children deserve more than a black garbage bag" for their belongings when they leave care.

Lemley began holding informal forums, where community members met First Place clients and learned about their experiences. She pitched stories to local media, made appointments with state and local elected officials, and formed the Alameda County Foster Youth Alliance, a community coalition that remains active today.

"I watched Amy evolve into the go-to person on advocacy," says Gail Goldman, an Oakland-based community planning and development representative with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. "If you needed someone who could make a presentation that was both factual and personal, you called on Amy."

Lemley routinely tapped her experiences as a provider to boost her advocacy. "When she envisions a new program or policy, she can name youth it would impact, and incorporate that information into her policy and advocacy work," says Byrnes, who helps coordinate the Burton Foundation's statewide effort to promote and implement THP-Plus.

THP-Plus passed in 2001. Advocates cheered – then watched in disappointment as the program had no impact. Because THP required 60 percent in matching funds from counties to get the state money, no county implemented the program until 2003. That happened only because Lemley raised matching funds from private foundations, then signed the money over to Alameda County.

Critics accused Lemley of letting the county off easy by cutting it a check. Shouldn't the money flow the other way, they said? Lemley responded that this was just a first step.

Then she met John Burton.

Following Her Heart

In a city filled with lawmakers who try to stand out, Burton – supposedly the model for his friend Warren Beatty's hyper-honest politician in the movie "Bulworth" – stands out in Sacramento. Known throughout his career as a more-than-vocal advocate for the poor and the powerless, Burton spent 44 years in elective office, in Congress and in both the California State Assembly and the Senate, where he spent six years as president pro tem. His legacy ranges from protecting old-growth redwoods to ensuring the availability of scholarships for poor college students.

After term limits forced him to retire in 2004, he launched the Burton Foundation, a nonprofit aimed at preventing youth homelessness and helping homeless kids.

By that time Lemley – who is married to the chief of staff for an Oakland City Council member – had had a baby and left The First Place. She had decided that her real place was in advocacy work.

"Amy was very effective as executive director, but as the organization grew and needed more attention, she began to get bogged down with the administration," says Pearn, now director of development and community relations at First Place. "I think her heart was on the advocacy side. She needed to be freed up from the day-to-day concerns of running an organization, in order to focus on the advocacy and legislative piece."

Lemley was introduced to Burton by a fundraising consultant for First Place. They hit it off, with Lemley telling Burton that his foundation should develop a clear policy agenda that begins with the problem of foster kids becoming homeless.

She joined the Burton Foundation as a consultant, then went full-time in the new position of policy director.

Her first step: Help to get THP-Plus completely state-funded. Thanks to her years of grassroots and policy work, she had no trouble marshaling a show of force. If she tried to get 25 advocates, providers and young people to a legislative committee hearing about the bill, 50 showed up.

When the initial state appropriation came in too low, she organized supporters to win extra funding for this fiscal year, and a higher total ($15.9 million) is proposed for next year.

But while public speaking comes easily to Lemley, the hard part of her new job has been working behind the scenes.

Adjustments

"If I'm learning anything, it's that if I'm going to be effective in the long term, I need to speak in a way that builds common ground," Lemley says. That sometimes means not laying out all of her feelings about perceived injustices.

"In my old job, I didn't have to worry about that, because we [in the youth field] were all already in agreement," she says. "I could be more of a grassroots radical."

Now that she's trying to build consensus and win political support, she says, "I have to be more nuanced in my communication style. … Half the time, I think I'm censoring myself too much, and the other half I feel maybe I've been too direct."

Burton says Lemley's years in the trenches help make her effective in the corridors and hearing rooms of Sacramento. "What her experience brought her is a knowledge of how policies enacted by government don't always work the way they are supposed to in the real world," he says. "That understanding makes her very valuable as an advocate, because she can tell people, 'Well, that's really a good idea, but you can't implement it for this reason or that reason.'

"You've got somebody with practical experience explaining to theoreticians why their theories won't work unless you put some teeth into them."

When people ask how she just walked away from direct service, Lemley bristles a bit. "I didn't go and become a hedge fund manager," she says. "I took one step on the continuum of making change. I still feel very connected."

The First Place is a major provider of THP-Plus services, which keeps Lemley in touch with it regularly.

But while Lemley exhorts audiences like the one in the conference room in Oakland to help expand the state commitment to emancipating foster youth, she ultimately wants to make programs like THP-Plus unnecessary. She wants to get the state out of the parenting business by providing enough resources for youth and parents.

It's an ambition born of where Lemley began her professional life, standing with teens as they teetered toward 18, feeling nothing short of terror, then watching the dissolution of whatever substitute family they'd been granted by the state.

"When I am speaking," she says, "I have the responsibility of all those years with the young people, of knowing their reality."

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