

Wenatchee mother shares journey to regain custody of her children

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Candace Walle, center in pink, shares her story at the Family Reunification Day at Methow Park June 23. Tracy Brandt stands left of her. Walle's boyfriend, Victor Herrera, stands on the right with Walle's children Zachary Chambers, 11, and Ariana Chambers, 8.
[World Photo/Gabriel Garcia](#)

WENATCHEE — Candace Walle, 33, said she experienced lifelong trauma going in and out of Tennessee's Department of Children's Services (DCS) programs when she was a kid.

Her mother and her mother's boyfriend abused her and by the time Walle was 15, her mother didn't want her anymore so she surrendered her to Child Protective Services, Walle said.

The now-Wenatchee resident Walle moved to Omak from Tennessee in 2016 when she was 26 to live with her husband at the time to work on their marriage. But he was abusive and a drug addict, she said. She turned to illegal drugs to numb the emotional pain from her marriage and childhood trauma, she said.

By February 2020, Walle's life fell more apart. In Bridgeport, the state took custody of her three children, now 13, 11, and 8. She was addicted to drugs, she was homeless, and still married. The whole family was couch-surfing with strangers who abused drugs, she said. Walle said while being high she didn't think straight and she just wanted shelter for her family. She also left her husband around this time, but is still legally married to him. She has a court date in July to finalize her divorce, she added.

"I didn't know I was putting myself and my kids in danger at the same time," she said.

'I realized I was missing out so much'

Her children's school eventually reported Walle to the state Department of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF), she said.

To get custody of her children again, Douglas County Superior Court ordered Walle to remain sober, go to narcotics anonymous sessions and trauma counseling, and complete parenting and domestic violence courses, according to Walle.

But it was hard for Walle to stay sober in the beginning because DCYF Child Protective Services took her children away on her birthday, she said. She was in a state of depression and would occasionally fail weekly drug tests, she said.

The first time she saw her children was a year later in 2021 for a supervised visit. She said seeing her children again helped her pull herself together to work harder.

“After not seeing my kids for the first time in a whole year, I realized I was missing out so much, and I didn’t want to miss out anymore,” Walle said.

Walle volunteered to go to rehab for seven months. She said it was challenging the first three weeks going through “cravings,” but the cravings and withdrawal gradually ceased.

In April 2020, she met her current boyfriend, Victor Herrera. She said Herrera was her biggest emotional support system when her children were away. The couple moved into transitional housing together in Wenatchee and he reminded her why she needed to stay sober.

Reunited

Walle was reunited with her family last year; and as of June, she is 21 months sober.

She shared her story June 23 at a Family Reunification Day event in Kiwanis Methow Park to inspire other parents to get their kids back.

The [Washington State Supreme Court Commission on Children in Foster Care](#) proclaimed June 2023 as a statewide celebration of Family Reunification Month among courts and communities across Washington.

Walle said she was nervous, but happy to share her journey.

“I’m able to give help and hope to people who’s in my situation,” Walle said. “I was in an active addiction; I was homeless; I was in an abusive relationship; I still made it through and I still accomplished. I still got my kids back.”

The Methow Park event was hosted by the Chelan and Douglas counties’ Parents for Parents program (P4P). The P4P program helps connect parents waiting to be reunited with their children with other parents who have gone through the child welfare process.

Reunification is a celebration across the country in June of families reuniting and the social, legal, and health workers that assist them, according to P4P program coordinator, Briana Hinderer.

Parents in different stages of the child welfare process go to the event, whether they just have been separated from their children, are going through the process, or have reunited recently or years before.

“It’s very rewarding when we have a success when the parents are able to make the behavioral changes that need to be to make sure their kids are safe,” said Tracy Brandt, Chelan County Superior Court commissioner, who attended the event.

As the judicial officer who resides over dependency cases, he orders parents to engage in services before they can regain custody.

Brandt did not oversee Walle’s case, as it was within the Douglas County Superior Court, but said parents like Walle are courageous.

“They are very brave and they worked incredibly hard to make the changes for themselves and for their kids,” Brandt said. “Getting your kids back after having your children removed, it’s a lot of work. The list of services, the things that are expected is a lot for anybody, and then to have some struggles with addiction and mental health or some of these other issues on top of trying to maintain their lives, maintain housing and maintain all the social worker visits. There is a lot that is placed on these parents, so if they got their children back, they have accomplished a lot.”

Walle continues to go to counseling and narcotic anonymous meetings to take care of her mental health.

She said her children went to therapy and “graduated.” She said she doesn’t want her children to continue the cycle of trauma and get into situations like she did. She wants her children to know she is a strong person.

“I want them to look back and go ‘My mom never gave up. I can get through anything that I put my mind to.’”