

Speech of Leanne Claussen, CEO, Parents on a Mission, from the Global Day for Parents 4/6/19 and the National Child Safety Conference 24/6/19

Good afternoon, Minister Farmer, honored guests, ladies and gentleman, my name is Leanne Claussen. I'm the Founder and CEO of Parents on a Mission and the creator of Leanne's Gift. I am also a proud Mum of 6 **amazing** young people and have 10 years of lived experience in the Child Protection system in Qld.

So, what is Leanne's Gift? Why have I created it and why do I and many others, believe that its of **vital** importance that every parent entering the Child Protection system in Qld needs to receive it.

Leanne's Gift is an information pack for parents, that Parents on a Mission have produced, that fills a very important need for clients of the Department of Child Safety. So what is this very important need? We all know that there is a huge gap in the knowledge base between clients and their workers. Unless you've had a case with the Department before, you have no knowledge of how the system actually works. What do you do when the Department remove your children? What happens at court? How do you write an affidavit? How do you handle seeing your children for only a short time, with such a long time in between contacts? What do you say to them when they beg you to take them home? These are just some of the questions that are answered by me in Leanne's Gift.

Now, there are, as we all know, other sources of information that parents can access to find out some of these answers, but, clients at the beginning of their case are not in the mental or emotional headspace to access this information, so Leanne's Gift, has been purposely designed to bring all of that information together, in one place, so that parents don't have to find the information that they need. My self-help book has been written by me, a fellow client, someone who they can relate to, someone who has been in their shoes and has come out the other side, completely transformed by the experience.

So, what's in Leanne's Gift?

My self-help book – A self-help guide to working your way through the Qld Child Protection System

The Handy Guide for Homeless Women

Free Qld Government Publications about Child Protection, Legal Aid, domestic violence etc as well as information for their children

Information from various community organisations

Tissues

A letter to their family/friends/support people

A notebook.

A Club Create Membership Brochure

So, how did I go from the typical angry, frustrated and disempowered client, to the person you see before you? To answer that, I need to take you on a short journey through the last 10 years of my life.

My children were removed from my care in 2009 and for the first 5 years all I did was fight the Department. This got me nowhere and I started my search for helpful organisations and programs, which all ended up being stepping stones on my journey, which I have listed on the screen behind me. First, I found Kyabra and participated in their Parent Trail Program. The Parent Trail program is aimed at parents who identify living with mental illness and for me, this was living with depression. This program helped me to engage with other parents in a positive way and I learnt a lot about myself. I then found the KNIT program, which is now called Life Skills, with David Rolls, at Logan East Community centre. This program helped me to understand how behaviour is formed and changed in the brain and how trauma affects children. I was then told about the Family Inclusion Network, a place where parents voices matter. They accepted me as I was, even though I was full of anger and resentment. I then started to participate in the FIN forums. This was an essential part of my journey. Sitting in a room surrounded by other clients was a life-changing experience. I finally had people that I could connect with that were going through the same thing as I was. So, I started to work with FIN on different projects related to giving parents voices to the Department.

I was still going through the system but contributing my voice about my experiences really helped me to feel like I was contributing in a positive way.

By 2015, I had been in the system for 6 years and I was having a very difficult time with the Department. However, this led me to a huge epiphany, which changed my life and the lives of my children.

So what was my epiphany?

Well, by the end of 2015, I was exhausted from fighting so hard and I wondered how I was really going to get through this, as my children are in care until their 18th birthdays. So I decided to write down a list of what I wanted and what I wanted was what all parents want; I wanted my kids back but after fighting for so long, I knew that wasn't going to happen. So, if I couldn't get them back home, what else **did** I want? After I took everything away, I was left with one sentence: **I wanted to have the best relationship I could with my kids**, regardless of whether they came home or not. Then I tried to figure out how to do that. I had been doing everything you would expect, going to every contact and being there for them as much as I could but I wasn't involved as much as I wanted to be, because I could only see them once a month, which put me in the background of their lives, being more like an acquaintance instead of their parent. So, how could I be more present in my children's lives? The answer I came up with stunned me.

*The only way to improve my relationship with my kids and be more like the Mum I wanted to be was to improve my relationship with the Department and I had just spent years fighting the Department and now I had to figure out how to work **with** them.*

I had a very hard road ahead of me. I worked hard to transform my relationship with my CSO. It was difficult but it actually worked. I **chose** to become the very best parent that I could be within my case plan. It was a change in my mindset, as the old quote goes, 'You can't change others, only yourself'. So as I was changing my mindset, I started to see my CSO in a different light. I realised that she was invested in what happens to my children. She really cared about them and we started to really connect because our interests were aligned. My children benefitted enormously from this change. I felt more connected with them and they got to see us working together for **them**.

I actually changed my relationship with my CSO so much, that she told me that she was finding it difficult to work on my case. She said the reason that it's hard for her, is that the person who's in front of her now, is no longer the person in the casefile, however she still has to **treat** me like the person in the casefile.

The second thing that happened was just the most amazing thing; While I was working to improve my relationship with the Department I was also participating in the pilot program of PLTI with FIN. I learnt to use 'I over E' (intellect over emotion), learnt

civic skills and learnt to take an idea and make it a reality. I had told my CSO about my course and I had improved my relationship with my CSO to the point that, are you ready?, when I was graduating from PLTI she actually asked my service centers' Manager if she could bring my children to my PLTI graduation (which was on a weekend,) and he agreed. My CSO, wanted my children to see me achieve something positive. Wow, what a change. How powerful is that?

So, now I found the answer to the question: how do you have a good relationship with the Department and I knew that I had to share it with others. ***I had to share that the key to your relationship with your children is your relationship with the Department. To step out of your story, put aside your differences and focus on your common ground, the children.***

So, I started to share my knowledge at the FIN forums and started advocating for parents. I knew that I had to share my knowledge as I could actually see that it was helping others. So, that's when I started to write my self-help book. I wanted to get this information out there and thought of all the information that I could have used at the beginning of my case. That's how I created Leanne's Gift, which includes my book and all of that information.

I also talked to Department workers about the issues they face with parents and they tell me that there are three major areas where they experience problems with clients:

1. At the beginning of the case
2. Communication with clients
3. Attending contacts, meetings and appointments

I wrote my self- help book for parents but have written it in such a way, that it addresses the Departments main concerns with clients. Thereby making Leanne's Gift not only a guide for parents but a useful resource and tool for Department workers.

Leanne's Gift is my way of giving back. I want to leave a positive, powerful legacy behind. Parents on a Mission has created over 100 bags to give to parents for free. We have had some amazing feedback from parents. One parent said that she stayed up until the early hours of the morning, underlining the sentences that meant the most to her, which made me cry. Another parent said that the information is so important, that she believes that every client of the Department would benefit from receiving Leanne's Gift.

I want Leanne's Gift to empower parents when they are in their most disempowered state. Knowledge is power and we want to empower parents so they know how to navigate this very difficult system.

For parents to receive this information from another parent, is something we are really proud of and giving parents Leanne's Gift is something that we want to do on a large scale. Our goal is to have the Department come on board, so that Leanne's Gift can be mass produced and be given to every client entering the Child Protection system in Qld.

Through help from my mentor, Karen Dawson Sinclair, I have been able to get the word out about Leanne's Gift throughout Qld. Leanne's Gift has been given out by organisations such as Logan Together, FIN, Kyabra, The Family Place, FIN Townsville and The Southwest Community Legal Centre. We hope that more organisations come on board as more people find out about us.

There are many other parents out there, just like me, who have been able to transcend the normal client experience and who want to help and empower others. I believe that so many parents would benefit from peer mentorship.

Parents on a Mission know that we are just starting out and we need your help. Today we put the call out for others to become Parents or People on a Mission. If you would like to find out how you can donate Leanne's Gift to parents, please visit our website: www.parentsonamission.com.au

I hope by hearing me speak today, you see the value in Leanne's Gift. It's a resource for parents but it will also help the Department to understand what parents are really going through.

Parents on a Mission believes that if you empower parents, you will eventually empower their children and if I can help just one parent, move from anger to understanding, from fighting to working together, then I have done my job as a Parent on a Mission.

I would like to thank Peak Care for inviting me to speak today and if my journey has touched your heart in some way I urge you to join us. Help us to empower parents everywhere.

Thank you