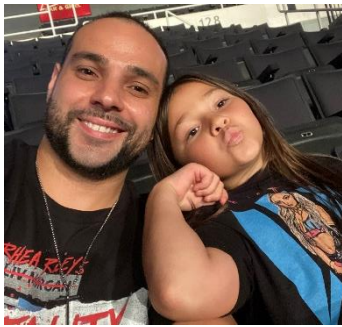


Father's Bond: A Reunification Story



As Joe sat beside his 8-year-old daughter at a recent WWE event, her eyes sparkled with excitement. In a moment that melted his heart, his daughter, an ardent wrestling fan, turned to him and exclaimed, "This is the best day of my life!"

For Joe, that moment was a reminder of how far he had come. Sharing this passion with her not only deepened their bond but highlighted the importance of being present in her life.

That moment with his daughter was more than just a simple outing; it was a powerful reflection of Joe's journey and growth. It was a day they will both cherish forever. After battling addiction with substance misuse, his reunification with his daughters in August marked a turning point for him. Being there for them, seeing them happy, reaffirms his commitment to staying sober.

"It was her first big event. She was the happiest little girl. Those little moments like that, this is her best day because 'dad you took me here.' Seeing the look on her face and those little moments is what it's all about."

Joe took the steps he needed to live a sober life. He did intensive in-patient treatment, more than was required by the court, and said he also learned how to cope with stress in healthy ways.

Joe is close to both of his daughters. He said the strong, loving and consistent relationships he has built with them are the motivation that drives him forward. This month, October, is his eighteenth month of sobriety.

Joe refers to his daughters as his "queens" and that is how he treats them. His daughters can go to him for anything, but especially his fourteen-year-old, which fills him with pride. With his older daughter, he's instilling the benefits of a good work ethic now.

"Our bond is so close and so strong that she can confide in me basically anything. She started going to the gym because I go to the gym a lot. That's what I want to rub off on them, I want them to get into that lifestyle of let's work hard now and play later. Just always trying to build them up."

Joe detailed a reunification that was painstakingly rigorous at first. The process became much smoother, he recalls, when he began to acknowledge that he had a problem and stopped blaming others. He admits it took time to get there but he eventually felt seen, heard and



Joe and his 14-year-old daughter goofing around.

respected by his DCF-assigned social workers. In turn, he started seeing the DCF workers he interfaced with as partners instead of adversaries.



Joe and the girls getting some dinner.

"At first I wasn't a big fan of DCF. I felt like the victim, like they weren't listening to me. It was January of this year when I got really involved and my perspective changed. I said [to myself] I'm the one who made these decisions, I'm sick of being the victim and I'm owning everything."

Over time, Joe just accepted everything he needed to do to achieve reunification with his daughters - the drug screenings, the classes, the court appearances - and it just came to be his lifestyle.

Joe realized, "[DCF] wanted to make sure 'he's doing well enough to care for himself so that he can care for his daughters'. It led to a great relationship. I put in the work and they saw that."

"Once I said 'I'm doing this to better myself, DCF isn't the enemy', the grass has been greener on the other side."

Lily Julian, Joe's DCF caseworker, agreed and said Joe's cooperation and commitment was one of the reasons his girls were placed in his care and custody sooner than the timeframe typical for reunifications.

"He's someone we could really partner with which is why the girls were reunified so quickly. To see him follow through and do everything he needed to do was great, it's what we all love to see."

Lily said she has a lot of experience working with people in various stages of recovery, "When I worked with Joe, I could tell he was 'there'. He was absolutely in recovery, there was no denial. Not only did he take accountability, but he knew himself so well that he knew what his triggers were and what he needed to avoid."

"He knows what's really important to him right now which is his girls and healing the brokenness that happened in their lives the past couple of years."



Joe with his daughters pre-reunification. Social worker Lily Julian took the photo during a supervised visit.

Lily said the focus on positive "fatherhood culture" in her office and across the department played a role too. That work includes having fathers at the table as involved and capable caregivers from the start when DCF becomes involved with a family.

"It's really about engaging the fathers from the get-go and keeping that engagement going. All of the things that Joe did, his cooperation, led to our assessment of saying 'this dad is really appropriate, the girls want to live with him. Let's send them home.'"

The girls' daily presence in Joe's life is a reminder of how different life could have been and a realization that he got what he had always hoped for: a father-daughter bond that he never wants to sacrifice.

"The bond my kids and I have is incredible. They run to me for anything, sometimes just for a hug. They just have so much love in their hearts. I love that. I hope there's other parents, especially fathers, out there who get to experience the same bond."

"I'm excited for the future and excited for the kids. I can't wait to keep building our relationships and I'm excited for that journey."