



STORIES

Providers are trusted members of the community.

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Wanting to be my own boss.

I believe it was in the late, I think the mid-nineties, the early mid-nineties, something like that, from '94 to '96 when I started. I started because I was tired of working for people and I wanted to figure out how I could be in business for myself. I had a one-bedroom apartment and I wound up getting certified to do child care in that one-bedroom. I never did it, still, I had the certification and didn't do it. Then I got pregnant and at that point I was into in-home health care, taking care of people in their homes with disabilities, who needed assistance. Once I got pregnant, I tried to leave my daughter with a couple of people for child care. One of the people that I left her with when I went to pick her up, I had been calling this lady, like every day, me and her dad was calling to check up on her and stuff, and the lady would say she was fine, there were no problems. One day I went to pick her up and my daughter's face was just swollen and red and her eyes were so and she was just screaming. At that point, what's wrong? Her provider, who happened to be my daughter's cousin's best friend, I didn't feel like she was doing anything to her or anything, but I didn't understand why she wasn't telling me. She was like, she does this every day. I'm asking you every day "how is she doing?" and you're telling me she's fine. So, at that point, I packed up all the stuff and I just couldn't, I called my job that day and was like, I don't know when I'm coming back, I've got to get this child care thing together because my baby just didn't seem to be happy there. So, I talked that over with her dad and I don't think I can go back to work. I don't think I'm going to be able to function at work, knowing that she's just off the train like that. He agreed and we agreed that I should stop working for a while. Then at that point, okay, let me see if my certification is still together because maybe I can do that. That's what kicked it off.

Child care and foster care often go hand in hand.

I had one daughter. Then, I started doing child care, and then I was already licensed to be a foster parent as well. I had gone and done that and didn't take any kids in. Then once I figured out I was going to be at home, let's take a stab at that too. So, I started doing child care and foster care out of my home. That went on for 16 years, 17 years, for the child care. I did the foster care for like five, I think.

“So, here I am still doing child care.”

I had told the people my mom recently passed away in January. I told them that I was done doing child care and I just don't want to do that anymore. I'm not going to be bothered. I don't know what those people heard come out of my mouth, but they put me on temporary leave. So, I'm getting calls from people, "Do you have any openings for child care?" I'm thinking I told these people, I don't do it anymore. So I would just say, no, I don't have any openings right now. I was, well, maybe because of Corona and stuff it's just taking a while to know it was that they only put me on temporary leave. Then when Corona, you know, they started figuring out we need child care providers. I think that's what happened, there's no way we can let you off the hook right now. Then I started getting calls for more kids and then I got hurt on my job too, a year before my mother died and all that played a part, and I was still trying to go to work. I'm a CNA as well. I

was still trying to go to work and it just wasn't panning out, it was too much pain for me. So, here I am still doing child care.

Caring mentors inspire new providers.

I think I am a professional. I think it happened pretty early for me. Probably like once I started, maybe a year or two into the game. My clients made me professional, pretty much my clients, and I've been professional for about 18 years or so now. The consistency with the parents and the children. That's pretty much what does it for me. You go to work every day. You show up on time, you pick up on time. It gives me room to keep up a routine with the kids and be professional with them.

My neighbor across the street from me when I moved on the block, I was telling you, I stayed on for 16 years. I think when I met Karen, she told me she was like 60 or 63. I had just moved on the block, and I think at that point I was knocking on 30 or so. I would tell my mom, it's this old lady that lives across the street from me. When I tell you this lady, because her kids would come, I think anywhere between six and 7:00 AM, Karen would have gone outside, shoveled the snow, had the coffee, and been waiting on the arrival of the kids. I was like, Oh my God, I can barely get out of the bed. How's she doing it? My mind was like, Nicki, at this point, you're stalking a woman. You really need to get yourself together. I just can't understand how she's up. She's cutting the grass, she's planting flowers, she's got the kids lined up at the door to watch the garbage truck. I'm watching all that, just those little things. I was like, I need help. I need somebody to speak this into me or something, touch my forehead or something, you know? She was a good model, and then there was another lady down the street from her, Donna. I can't remember Donna's last name for anything but she did child care too. They were so on the ball. I was just like, Jesus, help me.

Providers plant seeds of care and trust that last.

All the time. They like took care of me like I was one of the children. Cute story, I would take my daughter to school and pick her up. I remember when I first moved on the block, Karen came over, "I just wanted to ask you if it was okay if I plant some flowers in front of your house, I like to see pretty things, you know at my door." That's the only way it's going to happen. I don't do any gardening. So she takes my daughter, she comes and gets her and she shows that they do the garden and plant flowers together. Well, one-day Essence gets in the car and she's like, "Look, mom!" She shows me this little piece of a tree branch, in my mind that's what it is. She has a tree branch taped to a piece of paper. I was like, that's nice, and listened to the story about it. I'm done with it now. I don't know how many years later it was, but I pulled in the driveway and I opened my van door and this tree just whacked me. I'm like, where did this come from? She's like, "Mom, that's my tree!" Your tree? When I tell you this girl planted a tree, right in the flower bed, in the front of the house. I'm like, Essence, that can't be, I don't think that can be there. I told the landlord, he's fine with it to this day, that tree is huge, was uprooting the concrete. I was like, Oh my God, it was the funniest story ever because I didn't know she had planted it, but because

Karen had shown her how to do it, I guess Essence took it upon herself one day, went outside and planted her tree right there at the front door. To this day, it's still there. They cut part of it off at an angle.

Providers are trusted members of the community.

I think because my reputation precedes me, I had a girl in my inbox the other night whose baby I kept a couple of years back and I don't know what's going on now, but she was like, "are you still doing child care?" and I'm like, yeah. I'm waiting to hear back from her. I think that's because of my reputation and I'm a community person. It extends far further than just child care for me, with the foster children, with the child care, with the community organizing that I do. I'm just that person. So that's why. Not only that, it's because of the importance of kids. I often tell people, if you give them what they need, they'll give you what you want. It's real simple for me. Certain things are the foundation to helping them grow into what you want them to be. Consistency and professionalism and how you carry yourself and what you show them, all of that's pretty important to me and effective.

Broken trust with regulation.

I don't even think I have received many referrals from [identifier removed]'s in my years of doing this. YoungStar's pretty hands-off to me. They aren't really in it to me. They've given me two great garbage cans. That's pretty good because I really liked those but that's about it. I stopped trusting [identifier removed]'s a long time ago. A long time ago. I opened the door to them one day when I was off. I had had a slumber party with my relatives the night before, but I wasn't working. I didn't feel there was a need to hide anything. I opened the door and let the lady in and that was the worst mistake of my life. The lady wrote me up like I was working right then and I was off for a couple of days. I told her that. After that I was done. I was like, oh, okay. I thought you were okay, but now I know what it is. So no, I don't have a lot of affiliation with them at all. As I said, my reputation precedes me. I just mistrust CYA with everything that I do.

Getting protection from the child care union.

Back in the day, there were a lot of providers that were going through things with [identifier removed]'s and they were on this witch hunt to try to get into your home and write you up and find what they could. That was wrong. I understand that. But if you're going to do that, then help us figure out how to make it right. Serve as our accreditors to people who want to see us succeed so that you can succeed but I wasn't getting that. I always say, the Lord sent this girl to my door one day from California. She said she was there to start a union, try to drum up a union for child care providers. She showed me her ID and everything that she had to check credentials. I turned around and got my shoes on and walked right out the door with her and took her to every child care provider's house I knew, to get them signed up for that union, and we formed a union that way. That's when things started changing because we had people that we could call when they would, you know, witch hunt us and trying to attack us. That's how we felt, attacked. We had people call them to help us out and they did. I was also grateful and that's when things

calmed down and people started having different approaches and outlooks. Because there were people in the office, I wouldn't even talk to them.

“I'm glad I covered my tail and had something to show them because they were looking.”

I felt like if you were going to come in there and, and just write me, cause I knew at that point. I had a one woman. I remember one time one of my parents she came to me and this baby was greedy. He had his own feeding schedule when he expected to eat. Of course, what do you do? You feed the baby. This girl came in and told me she wanted me, the doctor said he was overweight. I think the baby was like maybe eight, nine months and she was like it was overweight. Overweight? He's chunky, yeah, but whose baby isn't chunky? Feed him one ounce, every two hours. One ounce, every two hours. Maybe she's not understanding what she's saying. So I'm like, do you mean two hours? I make two ounces but that ain't gonna cut it, not with this baby for what I know. So I said, I'm gonna need you to write that down. I gave her a notebook and had her write it down and sign it. That was just instinctually, something told me to do that, even though I knew if I didn't feed that baby the way he felt he needed to be fed, he was going to scream his head off, up in there. I was feeding him the way I normally did. I think it was two days later, [identifier removed]'s came and knocked on the door and said that the lady had called in and told them I was not feeding her baby and she's with them, I said, I'm glad you're here. I opened, I let them in. I went and got my notebook and all my files and everything and let them see. This lady, something's going on because it wasn't just her. It was her and her mother who had called in and said this. I had never met that one before. I was like, I don't even know her. I don't know what was going on mentally with that woman, but I terminated the care after that because I don't want any part of what that's going to pan out to be. I'm glad I covered my tail and had something to show them because they were looking. I even questioned her to make sure she understood what she was saying.

Being a provider means being a social worker too.

One of my clients is from Puerto Rico. So she may not know. I took into consideration that the weather, she doesn't know about Wisconsin's weather. She kept on bringing these kids with no coats and I'm like, Oh my God, we're in a pandemic, flu season, these babies need coats. They have the coats for kids thing. I literally took her down there to go through and she just can't believe that they're telling her "get whatever you want it, whatever you need". She keeps looking back at me like, "do I have to pay for any of this?" I'm like, no, come on. Keep going through.

Extra work and expense with the pandemic, but some help from the state.

COVID has made me think differently about it in that. I try to keep my numbers down because I don't want too many people in and out of here. Then you have to think about the numbers of who they've been in contact with when they leave and come back and all that. So it's affected

me that way. It's affected me as far as sanitizing all the time and disinfecting all the time. Because if you ever thought you were doing it, then you're doing it like three times that amount now. So it's affected me in that way.

I'm about to have Stanley steamer come in and do a COVID clean into my carpet. I've never done it, I have my own carpet cleaner, I would just do it myself, but now I feel the need to do that.

They have COVID grants that are available, that you can apply for that they've been given to the providers for things like that. I've been very grateful for that. I just went and picked up a box of PPE stuff for me and my dad and my daughter to wear, if we needed the face shield and a mask for us and the kids, and things like that, and hand sanitizer. They've been good about that through this, so very helpful. They've also given you enough if you need to pay your rent because you haven't had children, so that extra has helped a lot.

Racism is another burden on providers of color.

The way I operate, that's a whole different ball game. That can not affect my child care because that means it would affect my children and that's a no-no over here. My reputation precedes me. Everyone knows that already. So no, the racial disparities part it doesn't affect me. As far as my kids, my child care, and things like that in my mind, maybe it does. Maybe I'm not giving it that credit though and I'll give it that power in this area.

It has a big impact on me, but I'm an active person too so I also have an effect on it. I'm 48 in the game of racial disparity now, so at some points you're aware of it, but you're numb to certain things. You look like somebody, you look like somebody too, so I've been encountered with that. If that's all we're doing is talking about who looks like somebody that did something, so do you, so I deal with things a little differently at times. I understand that and my mindset has always been like better than me period. What you can do, I can do too. So I try not to. It's very unfortunate that we keep losing so many, but I think once we change how we think that we could crush that too. It's just that some of us aren't thinking the way we need to be thinking to do that.

To support providers, we need to give more support to parents.

I think more support for parents. More support for parents would be helpful in this field because I find that especially now, I don't know what this is but like my dad says he heard me said one day, I had my baby because I wanted my baby. I think a lot of people have children because "oops, I had a baby" and you're not prepared. You're not for thinking. You're not so sacrificial, you're frustrated, it can turn into resentment. You're not thinking about the, what ifs? What if this doesn't go right? What if that doesn't go right? I think they need support and a lot of them might need even mental health support to make the situation better. Everybody would like for it to be a perfect world and you could raise your child in a two-parent home and have these benefits and that benefit. Oftentimes that's not what happens and it's hard to deal with.

I am a second parent for children and families experiencing difficulties.

I had a mom back in the day. Oh my God, this girl was on so many drugs. It was bad. She was a friend of one of my family members and I didn't pay about my late fee. So she would show up on time. But when she got there I would be like, I can't give you these babies. I'm glad that it went the way it did because today looking at her, it makes me want to cry, how she has changed her life and turned itself around. Just yesterday she walked her daughter down the aisle to get married and I was looking at the pictures today. I can't believe that. That shows, even her son, he had ADHD to the 10th power. I would have to make him sit here "come here come here, just sit here with me. And it would be driving him crazy.

I get to see them. I get to see that. There are these kids that, my dad, they came over. What was the last summer holiday? Labor Day, Memorial Day or something. They looked for me to come over and eat and cook. One of them, he's like almost seven feet tall. I said, do you love me, Darell? He says, "yeah Ms. Coop, you know I've been loving you since I was a little runt". I was like, that's a daycare baby.

I appreciate it. I do. I remember I got him, his mom was in jail. His mom was in prison and I was keeping him for his grandmother. His grandmother had taken the kids and she had her own set of twins and one that was one year under them. So she had a set of twins and then one that was one year younger than the other one and she lived right next to me, connected to me in a duplex. I don't know what was wrong with these little boys. They would just get up and just start up a bar fight in the front room, banging "go get him, come get him". I bust-up in that door and say, hey! They stop and freeze and look. I separated them and made them sit there and then I would bring one home with me, it was crazy, but we got through it. We got through it.