



In the over two decades that Charla has worked with families in a child welfare setting, she has witnessed firsthand the power of family connections in shaping children’s identities, security, and well-being. As an advocate for kinship care within Tribal child welfare, she says that family extends beyond parents and siblings—it includes aunts, uncles, cousins, and the broader Tribal community. These deep-rooted connections offer children a sense of belonging, the opportunity to learn their language and traditions, and access to culturally grounded support systems that foster resilience.

One case that stands out in Charla’s experience involved a sibling group of three children whose mother had passed away due to domestic violence. The children, members of their Tribal Nation, faced an uncertain future. Their maternal relatives lived far away and had a strained relationship with the mother, leading to distant ties with the children. Meanwhile, their paternal grandmother resided on the reservation but lacked the same financial resources as the maternal side. A legal struggle began, with the maternal family trying to move the case to the State court, where financial status would take precedence over cultural continuity. Ultimately, the Tribal court upheld the importance of the children’s heritage, placing them with their paternal grandmother and keeping them in their community.

This decision profoundly affected the children’s healing. Remaining within their Tribal family provided them stability, continuity, and access to essential services, including culturally informed medical and mental health care. It also protected them from the all-too-common experience of Native children being removed from their communities, a separation that can lead to lifelong trauma and loss of identity. Charla knows that when children are surrounded by their people, they grow up knowing who they are and where they belong.

However, advocating for kinship care is not without challenges. Charla has navigated the complexities of working between Tribal and non-Tribal agencies, which often operate under different legal frameworks and priorities. Delayed decision-making, communication barriers, and restrictive policies frequently hinder the best outcomes for children. She emphasizes that overcoming these obstacles requires collaboration, transparency, and respect for Tribal sovereignty. Building trust means showing up consistently—not just in times of crisis but in everyday interactions that reinforce partnership and shared purpose.

One critical step toward strengthening kinship care is reexamining the requirements that Tribes must meet to access kinship program funding. Native families can face barriers like housing insecurity and food instability that make it difficult to provide for their relatives. Charla believes that if Tribes had less restrictive access to funding, more children could remain with their families rather than enter the foster care system, where they risk losing their cultural ties.

Through her lived experience, Charla has seen the long-term impact of prioritizing family and cultural preservation. Charla’s story is a testament to the power of family-centered care. She hopes more professionals will actively support kinship placements by adhering to Indian Child Welfare Act regulations, honoring culture, and fostering authentic partnerships with Tribal communities. Because when children remain connected to their roots, they don’t just survive—they flourish.



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