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Miami pro bono attorney works to reunite teen with his aunt

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Rayven Wright

After his parents lost their parental rights, “Jake,” 15, began the battle to find stability and permanency in a forever home.

While living with his parents, Jake had been exposed to violence and drug use and experienced severe neglect. Jake was placed with his maternal aunt, but in November of 2014 he was taken from her home against his wishes, separated from his siblings and other family members, and placed in temporary foster care.

Although Jake and his aunt wanted to remain together and pursue adoption, they faced strong opposition from the Guardian ad Litem, the Center for Family and Child Enrichment, and the Department of Children and Families.

Attorney Zach James of Meland Budwick, P.A. found Jake’s case through Dade Legal Aid’s Put Something Back program, which pairs low-income clients in need of legal representation or assistance in areas of civil law with lawyers willing to donate their services pro bono. After learning about the dispute between government agencies and the child in December of 2014, James decided to tackle Jake’s case.

> “There are countless individuals who desperately need but cannot afford attorneys,” James said. “Lawyers have both an ethical and moral obligation to provide legal services to the poor, to protect those people’s rights and to give them a voice in our justice system.”

James gained court approval of a case plan for Jake’s aunt. This plan outlined several tasks for her to complete to prove that returning Jake to her custody would be in his best interest. Upon completing these tasks, James was able to negotiate visitation

time for Jake and his aunt.

James then filed a motion to approve placing Jake in his aunt's home permanently. There was still pushback from the government so the case proceeded to trial. After days of testimony from many experts and fact witnesses, the Court moved to allow Jake to move back into his aunt's house.

Jake is looking forward to be reunited with his aunt who is now in the process of applying for his adoption.

After dedicating more than 100 hours to Jake's case, James remains involved to ensure the transition back to his aunt's house goes well for Jake, whom James describes as a remarkable young man.

> "Most of the pro bono clients I have taken on have had many rough breaks and are usually in a pretty bad place by the time I step in," James said. "Seeing their appreciation for someone who is simply trying to help them without asking for anything in return, and seeing how this small gesture can give these people so much hope, is fulfilling beyond words. I know that 'Jake' has a bright future ahead of him, and I am truly grateful for the opportunity to have helped him and to have him in my life."

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