

Manuel & Lisa Gomez Interview Transcript

Reviewer: I'm not sure how much detail you've been given about what this is all about. We're part of a large team that's come into the state to review the functioning of the state's child welfare system. We select a certain number of cases at random, and those cases are read as a part of that review, and people involved in the cases are interviewed, if they agree. Our purpose is not to try to change anything about your case, but to learn from you what your experiences have been with the Department—what you think the Department did well and what you think it can improve on. That way, we can try to make experiences better for children and families who are served by the child welfare system and try to help ensure that things turn out well for them. We really appreciate your letting us come into your home to talk with you. We want to assure you that anything you tell us will be confidential and won't be shared with the caseworker. We'll appreciate your being honest and upfront with us, but if we ask you anything that you don't want to answer or that makes you feel uncomfortable, just let us know. My partner will be taking some notes, and that's so we won't forget anything because we'll cover quite a few things. Do you have any questions at this point?

Manuel Gomez: No, no questions. And I just want to remind you I have to leave for an appointment in about 45 minutes.

Reviewer: Thank you for that reminder, and we'll certainly be mindful of the time. To begin with, we understand that Javier and Maria are your niece and nephew, right? And that you have guardianship of them? Can you tell us about that?

Manuel Gomez: The children actually belong to my wife's brother, Jonathan Diaz, and his wife, Rosa. They've had lots of problems with drugs for a long time. We've had the children off and on since they were babies. When they were 3 and 5, I believe, we finally took guardianship of both of them after CPS had removed them from Rosa and Jonathan. They've been with us since then, so we're like their parents.

Reviewer: So, can one of you tell me why the Department is involved with your family?

Manuel Gomez: I'll save my wife the embarrassment of answering. It's because I hit Javier one night when we were having an argument; this was about a year ago. He was disrespectful and disobeying us and was going to leave and meet his friends when we told him he had to stay home. I lost my temper and hit him in the face. I know I shouldn't have hit him that hard. My niece Maria got really scared when she saw that her brother was bleeding, and she called 911. So, the police came, then they called CPS. They took Javier to the doctor, then, when he came home, we all decided it was best if he went somewhere else to live. Javier is homosexual, and my wife and I just can't tolerate having that in our home.

Reviewer: Did the worker work with you around any safety issues so maybe Javier could stay in your home? Did she offer any services?

Lisa Gomez: We really felt like it was better for Javier to go. The worker offered to work out a safety plan so maybe he could stay, but, at that point, we were completely fed up, and we said, "Just take him." We were so disgusted with him by then that we didn't want him to live here with us anymore. And you know, his sister really misses him, and we miss him, too, but our home is a lot more peaceful now.

Reviewer: Did the caseworker talk with Maria that night to make sure she was okay?

Lisa Gomez: She talked with her to find out what happened, then Maria went in her room, and I don't think the worker talked with her anymore. When the case was transferred to Vanessa, the current caseworker, she came and talked with Maria in her room and made sure everything was okay with her. We knew it would be. Maria's a really good girl, and we don't have any problems with her.

Reviewer: Okay, let's move on to case goals. We understand that Javier first had a goal of reunification with your family, is that right?

Manuel Gomez: Yes, that's right. Everything happened so fast, and we were getting so much advice from our relatives that we thought maybe things could work out, and Javier could come back home. We did those assessments that Vanessa set up, then they said we had to go be trained on how to be better parents. And that I had to learn how to manage my anger better. We talked about it a lot with each other. At first, we thought we might do it, but, really, Javier's the one with the problem, so why should we have to get services? So, we decided not to do anything else. Vanessa talked with us about it a lot and really tried to talk us into having services. She said we could help pick the person or agency we went to and the day and time that we attended. But I don't care what they think—Javier brought most of this on himself with his homosexual tendencies and the way he acts. We don't believe in that, we'll never believe in it, and a lot of people agree with us.

Reviewer: So, Javier's plan was changed from reunification? What can you tell us about that?

Lisa Gomez: Yes, after we said we weren't going to do those services, my understanding is that they talked to Javier a lot about either a plan of adoption or OPPLA. I can't remember what OPPLA stands for, but it means he'll stay in foster care and work on being independent and on his own after he turns 18. Apparently, Javier thought OPPLA was the best goal for him, and we agree. He likes Gateway, and they do a good job with him. There's only one thing we don't like about them, and it's that they have those LGBTQ groups. We don't go for that at all. But since he's in the custody of the Department now, we don't get to make those decisions about what he can and can't do.

Reviewer: How often do you visit with Javier? And where do the visits take place, and how long do they last?

Lisa Gomez: We visit with Javier about one time a month. Usually it's both of us, but sometimes my husband isn't able to come. Most of the time, we visit him at Gateway. He's come to our house 2-3 times when we've had other relatives over. Sometimes Maria's with us, and sometimes she's not, depending on what she's got going on. And I'd say the visits usually last about 45 minutes, maybe a little longer. We enjoy visiting with him at Gateway. They have a nice room for that and a nice outdoor area.

Reviewer: What do you do during the visits?

Lisa Gomez: We just talk about different things. We talk about school, his drama group, the relatives, what Maria's up to, those kinds of things. We don't get in arguments about things like we used to here at home. Sometimes we'll check with Gateway staff about something that we

want to know. They're really good about making sure we have a nice place to visit, and they help us with scheduling the visits.

Reviewer: Have you seen Javier this month?

Lisa Gomez: Yes, we saw him a couple of weeks ago. Maria was with us.

Reviewer: Did Vanessa encourage you to visit Javier more often, or did she think once a month was enough?

Manuel Gomez: She wanted us to visit more often. She was always talking to us about visiting more so we could have a better relationship. But you know what? Once a month rolls around pretty often, and I have my work, and my wife is real involved with our church, so we feel like we do enough to see him once a month.

Reviewer: Tell us about the contact that Javier and Maria have.

Lisa Gomez: They see each other a couple of times a month, and they call and text all the time. I know Javier's not the only person Maria texts, but we're always having to tell her to get off her phone and do her homework.

Reviewer: Thinking back now, did the investigating caseworker ask you if Javier had any Native American heritage?

Lisa Gomez: Yes, I do remember her asking us about that. Javier doesn't have any Native American blood.

Reviewer: Did the Department ask you about relatives to be considered as possible placements for Javier?

Lisa Gomez: Yes, the first caseworker contacted all the relatives we told her about, and no one was able to take him. I know Vanessa asked them all again a few months later, and they still all felt they couldn't take him. There really aren't any other relatives on either side—not adults, anyway—for her to talk to. I understand from my brother, Javier's father, that Vanessa asked them, too, but he and Rosa didn't know of anyone else besides the ones we had already told them about.

Reviewer: Has Vanessa invited you to Javier's doctor's appointments, school events, and other things like that?

Manuel Gomez: Yes, she invites us to things from time to time. But like I said, my wife and I are busy, and, since we see him every month anyway, we haven't gone.

Lisa Gomez: But remember, Maria and I did go to his play in March. We enjoyed it.

Reviewer: How has the Department assessed your needs?

Manuel Gomez: When Javier had been in foster care just a few weeks, the Department had us go for psychosocial assessments. We had to do in-depth interviews and fill out a lot of

questionnaires. And I guess Vanessa assesses our needs when she visits us every month. We talk about what we're willing to do and what we're not.

Reviewer: Tell us about services that the Department has involved you in.

Manuel Gomez: They wanted us both to go to parenting classes, and they wanted me to go have anger management services. But you know what? Now that Javier's not with us anymore, I don't get angry very much. And there's nothing wrong with our parenting. We're not the ones with the problem...Javier has the problem. Vanessa's tried and tried to get us to do these services, but we've taken a stand.

Lisa Gomez: She's also talked with us several times about going to PFLAG meetings or going to some of Javier's counseling sessions, but we're not doing that, either. I agree with my husband. It's Javier's immorality and the choices that he's made that are the problem, not us.

Reviewer: How have you been involved in case planning overall?

Lisa Gomez: Actually, we've been very involved. There was a family team meeting at first, then there've been case planning meetings from time to time. We always agree to our tasks and sign the case plan, and everyone who attends gets copies. Vanessa also talks with us about our tasks on the case plan when she comes to visit.

Reviewer: How often does Vanessa visit with you, where do the visits take place, and how long do they last?

Lisa Gomez: She comes here to our home every month, without fail. She stays about an hour, and we talk about Javier and how he's doing, how we're feeling about him, and she talks to us about needing to be more accepting of him and about participating in services. And we always say, about the services, "No, we're not going to do that." But she keeps trying. And it's okay that she comes. She keeps us informed about Javier, and we know we need to keep the lines of communication open with her. She's been really helpful about some things. We just have a difference of opinion when it comes to how we view Javier.

Reviewer: Did Vanessa make a visit this month, in September?

Lisa Gomez: Yes, she came around the middle of the month.

Reviewer: Have you had any concerns about Javier's education since he's been in foster care?

Lisa Gomez: No, no concerns. Vanessa told us about how his grades dropped for a while last year after he ran away, but it sounds like he worked hard to bring his grades up the last semester. He's a charmer, and his teachers have always liked him.

Reviewer: Along that same line, have you had any concerns about his medical or dental care?

Manuel Gomez: We know he's gone to the doctor and the dentist and eye doctor because Vanessa asked us if we wanted to meet them for the appointments, which we haven't done. We've always taught Javier to take care of his health—and his teeth—and I hope he's continuing to do that.

Reviewer: What do you think about the therapy that Javier's getting at Gateway?

Lisa Gomez: He tells us he really likes his therapist, and he seems well-adjusted to Gateway, so I guess the therapy has helped him. What we don't approve of, like we said, are those LGBTQ groups he goes to. We've let Gateway and Vanessa know we don't approve.

Reviewer: I'm sure you know that Javier's on medication for depression. What can you tell us about that?

Lisa Gomez: He doesn't seem depressed to us anymore, so maybe it's helping. He really complains about the medicine a lot, though. He says it makes him tired and makes it hard to think. Since he's been on it a year now, we wonder if he still needs it.

Reviewer: Mr. and Ms. Gomez, I see that we've been talking to you almost 45 minutes, and we know you have other things to do. Thank you so much for letting us come here and visit with you. You've been really helpful, and we do appreciate your time.