

Vanessa Thomas Interview Transcript

Reviewer: Thank you for meeting with us, Ms. Thomas. As you know, we're part of the team that's come into your state to review the state's child welfare program. Javier's case was picked at random for review, and we're the reviewers who were assigned his case. We've had a chance to review his case file and need to talk with you just to get a little more information—and your perspective—on several things. Of course, we're not here to critique the positives, or any negatives, of Javier's case. The information from his case review will be compiled with all the other information being gathered this week. Then feedback will be given to the state on areas in the child welfare system that are strengths, along with areas that may need improvement. The goal is to ensure that families and children being served, and those who'll be served in the future, will have good outcomes. As a frontline foster care caseworker, we know you have one of the hardest jobs in the Department. So, we're interested in what your experiences have been in working Javier's case. Do you have any questions at this point?

Vanessa Thomas: No questions, but please call me Vanessa.

Reviewer: Thanks, Vanessa...we'll do that. I'd like to tell you the other people we're interviewing on this case. We'll be interviewing Javier, of course, Mr. and Mrs. Gomez, Mr. Shaw at Gateway Group Home, and the Dover foster parents. As you talk with us today, please let us know if anyone else comes to mind that you think would be important for us to interview. Let's begin by starting with safety. We realize you weren't the investigation worker, but can you tell us about what happened that caused this family to come to the attention of the Department and Javier to come into care?

Vanessa Thomas: Sure. In mid-September last year, there was an incident where Javier's guardian uncle, Mr. Gomez, hit Javier with his fist and caused an injury. The police came, and, when they saw the situation, they called CPS. Mr. and Mrs. Gomez were really upset with Javier because he was coming out as gay, and that's not something they could accept. Javier was refusing to go any longer to counseling through their church that they had set up for him and was going to go out with friends one night against his uncle's will. So, Mr. Gomez got angry and was trying to control Javier, and he hit him with his fist—he gave Javier quite a shiner. Mrs. Gomez didn't try to protect Javier. Both Mr. and Mrs. Gomez maintained that Javier brought what happened on himself with his behavior, and they refused to accept any responsibility for his injury. They also refused to have a safety plan so the Department could try to avoid taking custody. After Javier had been to urgent care, the worker did a risk and safety assessment, and it showed that risk was high and Javier wasn't safe staying in the home. So the Department took emergency custody of him that evening, and he was placed in a fictive kin home.

Reviewer: Do you know if Javier's sister Maria was included in the safety assessment that was done that day, and did the worker make sure that she was safe to stay in the home?

Vanessa Thomas: It's my understanding that the investigation worker didn't include Maria in the formal safety assessment, but Maria told her she didn't fear for her safety, so apparently the worker felt okay with that. This was something we talked about at the case transfer staffing, and my supervisor instructed me after that to meet with Maria alone and assess risk and safety for her. So I did that shortly after I got the case. I talked with Maria for quite a while and felt like she was definitely safe in the home. The Gomezes used to spank her when she was younger, but they haven't hit her in years. They discipline her now by taking away privileges or grounding her.

She's a pretty compliant child and gets along well with her aunt and uncle. Also, both the people that were contacted as collaterals during the investigation said that there weren't any safety issues for Maria.

Reviewer: Can you tell me about ongoing risk and safety assessments for Javier and whether those were formal or informal and how they were documented?

Vanessa Thomas: At every visit with Javier, so at least once a month, I talk with him about whether or not he feels safe where he is and at school. He always assures me that he does. I always document this in my case notes. I also usually do walk-throughs of wherever he's staying and make sure there aren't any safety issues in his surroundings. After he moved to Gateway, in addition to always asking Javier, I would ask staff there from time to time if he had indicated he felt unsafe in any way; he never had. In all three of his placements, they've kept a good eye on him and made sure he was safe. In January, so about 4 months after Javier came into care, I did another formal risk and safety assessment of the Gomez home. It showed that Javier wouldn't be safe if we returned him there because the Gomez's hadn't made any progress addressing their issues. They still totally blamed Javier for everything. Formal risk and safety assessments are approved by my supervisor, then they're kept under the "Risk/Safety Assessment" tab in the case file. When Javier was on the run those two times, I was really concerned about his safety and made a lot of contacts to try to find him. I went to the mall and a skateboard park and watched for him, and I made over a dozen calls to try to find him. The police found him at the mall the first time after 4 days, and, the second time, his birth parents called the second day and said he was with them, so I picked him up there. Luckily, nothing bad happened to him while he was on the run.

Reviewer: What about ongoing risk and safety assessments of Maria?

Vanessa Thomas: Since I determined at the start of the case that Maria was safe, and the collaterals agreed with that, I really didn't do ongoing risk and safety assessments of her because my supervisor and I felt there wasn't a reason to. She was fine and didn't seem to need anything. Sometimes when I visit Mr. and Mrs. Gomez, Maria walks through the house, and I can see that she's okay. Also, the time I met with her alone early in the case, I gave her my phone number and asked her to call me or the child abuse hotline if anything ever happened to her or if she felt unsafe in any way, and she said that she would. And I know Javier would let me know if she was ever unsafe; he talks to her all the time.

Reviewer: Let's move on to Javier's placements. First, can you tell me the efforts that were made to find a relative placement for him?

Vanessa Thomas: I really would like to have placed Javier with a relative. Four relative possibilities were identified early on, and the investigator talked with each one of them. There was a maternal aunt, a paternal aunt, the maternal grandmother, and a paternal uncle. No one was able to take Javier, for different reasons, but they told the worker they all wanted to stay in touch with him. And they have. The possibility of a relative placement was discussed again at the family team meeting right after Javier came into care, and no other relatives were identified. It's also come up in court hearings. I also asked Javier's parents if there were additional relatives to be explored, but they couldn't identify anyone who hadn't already been contacted. In early January, when I was looking for another placement for Javier, I contacted the four relatives again and asked each of them if their situations had changed so that one of them might be able to take Javier. They all said things were the same, and they couldn't be a placement for him.

They each promised to notify me if anything changed in terms of their ability to become Javier's caregiver.

Reviewer: Javier has had three placements so far, right? Can you tell us why he was moved from his two foster home placements?

Vanessa Thomas: Yes, Javier has had three placements. He was first placed with Ms. Lopez, who was fictive kin. We had to move him from there, though, because she got a job across the state and had to relocate. His second placement was with the Dovers, and that one didn't work out too well. He ran away from that home twice and ended up refusing to live there any longer because he felt they didn't accept him because he was gay. They also asked that he be moved. Then he was placed at Gateway, and that's worked out really well for him. He likes the staff and the other kids there, and he's pretty involved in their LGBTQ groups. The staff there is really committed to Javier, and we've all signed an agreement that he'll stay there until he's at least 18. After that, he has the option of staying there and living in one of their transitional living apartments.

Reviewer: Were efforts made to find a LGBTQ foster home for Javier?

Vanessa Thomas: Yes, I asked the resource home unit about that both times that Javier had to be moved. We do have LGBTQ homes, but both times they were all full and couldn't take any more kids.

Reviewer: Tell us a little more about Javier's placement with the Dovers. What kind of information about Javier was shared with them before he moved there...did they realize Javier was coming out as gay? And what efforts were made to find a placement for him where you knew that his sexual identification would be accepted?

Vanessa Thomas: I gave the Dovers a lot of information verbally about Javier before he went there. I think I told them about his sexual orientation, but maybe that was after he was there. Anyway, they definitely knew about it. And you know, I'm not sure if the resource home unit knew, before Javier was placed, how the Dovers felt about having gay youth in their home—I didn't know how they felt at first. Sometimes it's so hard to find homes for teenagers; it just comes down to having to take what's available at the time and hoping you can work anything out that comes up.

Reviewer: Tell us about any assessment and work done with the Dovers and Javier after you realized Javier wasn't comfortable there.

Vanessa Thomas: After Javier ran away the first time, we all sat down together and talked about how he could fit in better there. We talked about how he could make the family more comfortable if he didn't act or talk about being gay, particularly in front of the children.

Reviewer: Was any specific work done with the Dovers to help them be more accepting of Javier, or were any supports put in the home to make the placement more stable for him?

Vanessa Thomas: Well, I guess I didn't, not at that point. With the holidays coming up and everything, I just wanted to smooth things over and wanted Javier not to provoke the family until we could figure out more what we should do. I really think that if Javier hadn't run away that

second time, we would have worked things out. They just weren't willing to keep him after that, except for a few days until we found a new placement.

Reviewer: Let's talk about Javier's permanency goal. Can you tell us about the two goals he's had and the decision-making around assigning those?

Vanessa Thomas: Javier's first goal was reunification, and it was established before the case transferred to me. The guardians initially indicated that they'd consider services, and Javier wanted to go back home if things changed. Unfortunately, things didn't work out that way. After the Gomezes had their assessments, they were resistant to participating in the services that were recommended. I tried and tried to get them to engage in services, but they eventually flatly refused and said they didn't want Javier back. So, at about 5 months into the case, Javier's goal was changed to OPPLA internally, and the court okayed the OPPLA plan at the periodic review hearing a couple of weeks later. I did a lot of work with Javier to make certain he understood what OPPLA meant and that he really grasped the difference between an OPPLA goal and adoption. His therapist worked with him, too, but he stayed pretty firm that he wanted an OPPLA goal. He said he was too old to fit into another family, and he was dead set against adoption, at least for now. He also really liked being at Gateway. He did want reassurance, though, that his plan could be reconsidered if he changed his mind.

Reviewer: Did the Department make inquiries about any Native American heritage Javier might have, in the event that ICWA might apply in his case?

Vanessa Thomas: Yes, the investigator asked Javier about it the night he came into care. Later she asked the Gomezes. Both Javier and the Gomezes verified that Javier doesn't have Native American heritage. It also came up in court in the first two hearings, and the response was the same.

Reviewer: Tell us about Javier's visitation with his aunt and uncle.

Vanessa Thomas: The Gomezes have ended up visiting with Javier about once a month. I've tried repeatedly to get them to visit more frequently, but they just haven't been willing. They've seen Javier at the office, at Gateway, and he's been in their home a couple of times when there were other relatives there. Visits have gone okay overall. They usually last about 45 minutes, sometimes maybe an hour. The Gomezes talk to Javier about what's going on in his life, activities he's involved in at the group home, what's going on with the relatives, and things like that. It's important to Javier to see them and still have a relationship with them, even though he knows he'll never go back there. They want to maintain a relationship with him, too, particularly because of his sister.

Reviewer: What can you tell us about Javier's contact and visitation with his sister and extended family and other people?

Vanessa Thomas: Maria and Javier see each other once or twice a month, at least, and they call and text on almost a daily basis. The Gomezes have an arrangement with Gateway, and they drop Maria off there for visits, or Javier sees her sometimes at the Gomezes when they have family gatherings. She and Javier go to different schools, but the schools are near each other and have overlapping activities, so they see each other there some, too. All in all, they've stayed in close touch, which has been good for both of them. Several of Javier's relatives stay in pretty frequent phone contact with him, and he sees them from time to time. They either pick

him up for visits, or he goes to bigger family gatherings. I've asked Javier if I need to do anything to facilitate that contact, but he's told me that they're all doing a good job of staying in touch. He does his part, too. Javier and Ms. Lopez, his first foster parent, talk by phone 2-3 times a month. They've known each other a long time and were really fond of each other, and he misses her. She had a trip planned here, and she and Javier were going to see each other, but that fell through. Hopefully, she can reschedule that. I talked to him about going to visit her, but he didn't seem comfortable with that. He said that we should wait until the end of the summer, then talk about it again if she hadn't come here by then.

Reviewer: Did Javier see the Gomezes and Maria this month, September, as well?

Vanessa Thomas: Oh yes, they've had visits this month. Javier and the Gomezes visited once at Gateway, and Maria was with them. She and Javier also saw each other another time in September.

Reviewer: We saw in the case file that there appears to be some sort of relationship between Javier and his birth parents. What can you tell us about that, in terms of what kind of relationship they have and how often they've seen each other or had contact since you've had the case?

Vanessa Thomas: Even though the Gomezes have had custody of Javier and Maria for 10 or 11 years, the birth parents have stayed in touch, and Javier sees them from time to time. Mr. and Mrs. Diaz have struggled for a long time with substance abuse issues, and I think they've been in and out of the kids' lives over the years. I met with them twice fairly early on, and they were both clean, but struggling not to relapse. Javier says he'd like to live with them, but they're not in any shape to take care of a child right now—by their own admission.

Reviewer: So, you met with Mr. and Ms. Diaz twice since the case was opened? Can you tell us more about what was covered in those visits?

Vanessa Thomas: I just talked to them about what their circumstances were and if they thought they could ever get it together enough to have Javier come and live with them. The first time I met with them was when Ms. Lopez, Javier's first foster mother, was moving out of town, and I needed to find another placement for him. The second time was after he'd been at Gateway about a month, I think. He was doing well there, but my supervisor and I thought it might be good to have the parents as a backup just in case, particularly because the Gomezes weren't working to have Javier returned. But they still said they weren't in a position to have him come and live with them, and they didn't see things changing for the foreseeable future.

Reviewer: Did you assess Mr. and Ms. Diaz's needs or talk to them about services or case planning?

Vanessa Thomas: Well, not really, as they weren't a placement possibility for him.

Reviewer: Did they indicate to you that they needed or wanted anything?

Vanessa Thomas: The only thing I can remember for certain is that they wanted to be able to see Javier more, and I encouraged them to do that. I think I gave them the phone number for Gateway.

Reviewer: Have you specifically promoted Javier's relationship with his birth parents in any way?

Vanessa Thomas: Well, like I said, I encouraged them to stay in touch with him. When Javier ran away the second time, he ran to them. As far as I know, that's the only time he's seen them since I've had the case, unless he's just run into them somewhere. He could have seen them at some of the family gatherings, but, if so, he hasn't mentioned it. I also don't think they ever went to see him at Gateway. I remember they mentioned their car doesn't run very well, so that's probably why they haven't been to Gateway to visit him.

Reviewer: Can you tell us how Javier's needs were assessed?

Vanessa Thomas: They were formally assessed by a psychiatrist through a mental health assessment after he came into care. On an ongoing basis, his needs are informally assessed by me at least monthly when I talk with him and observe him and talk with his caregivers and his Gateway case manager. I also consider feedback from the school and his therapist. Javier had a life skills assessment last December right on time, 3 months before he was 16. We also discuss his needs at case planning meetings.

Reviewer: Can you tell us about the services Javier got, outside of educational, medical and dental, and mental health? We'll talk about those a little later. We particularly want to know about independent living services, or any other services outside those three I mentioned.

Vanessa Thomas: Javier's really into drama. Gateway and I have encouraged him to stay involved with that—although he didn't need much encouragement! He's in a community youth drama group that he's been in at least 2 years. They performed their play in March, and he did great; he had one of the lead roles. By the way, Mrs. Gomez and Maria came to that performance, and it meant a lot to Javier. Then in July, he went to a week-long drama camp in another city. He loved that experience and wants to do it again next year. In late February, Gateway staff and the IL specialist and I sat down together and developed Javier's Transitional Living Plan. We let him take the lead and prioritize which service he'd like to have first. Unfortunately, Gateway's IL Coordinator position was vacant for a few months, and Javier pretty much didn't get services during that time. They hired someone at the first of June, and Javier's had some really good classes and field trips. I understand that the coordinator left at the end of August, though, so I don't think Javier got any services this month.

Reviewer: We see that the service Javier gave top priority to in his Transitional Living Plan was employment and that the Department was supposed to find a mentor to work with him around that. Can you tell us if that happened?

Vanessa Thomas: I guess we kind of dropped the ball on that. The IL Specialist and I were going to connect Javier with a mentor to help him fill out applications and practice interviewing, but that never got done. I'll try to remember to get with the IL Specialist on that right away.

Reviewer: How were the Gomezes' needs assessed?

Vanessa Thomas: I referred them for psychosocial assessments early on and went by those a lot. I thought they were well done and that the services recommended were accurate for their needs. I also assessed their needs as we went along by talking with them and observing them, seeing how they interacted with Javier, and considering what they felt their needs were.

Reviewer: What did you do to engage them in services?

Vanessa Thomas: I'm afraid I didn't have much luck. Every time I saw them in the early part of the case, I'd try to get them to participate in the parent training and anger management services that were recommended. They thought about it for a couple of months, then flatly refused. They kept saying that Javier was the one who needed services, not them. I always talked to them about the need to accept Javier for who he was and tried to get them to attend a PFLAG meeting or participate in some of Javier's therapy sessions with him. Gateway works with parents or guardians, and Javier's therapist would have been happy to work with them. They repeatedly refused all the services they were offered, but I'm still trying.

Reviewer: How did you assess the foster parents' needs?

Vanessa Thomas: With Ms. Lopez, it was easy. She and I talked about what she needed. She was really competent, and she just needed the basics: the maintenance payment, clothing voucher, and help with transportation. With the Dovers, it was harder. They needed those things, too, but they also needed help stabilizing Javier's placement.

Reviewer: We've already talked about the Dovers and what happened with Javier's placement with them. Do you have anything to add to that?

Vanessa Thomas: In looking back now, I guess I should have worked with the Dovers more on their attitude toward Javier. I just wanted the placement to hold, though, until we could really figure out what to do. I thought that after everyone got past the stress of the holidays, then we'd really tackle the issue.

Reviewer: Can you tell us how often you routinely saw Javier and the Gomezes? And what the visits were like?

Vanessa Thomas: I've seen Javier at least once a month since I've had the case. Early on, I saw him in his foster homes, then at Gateway since he moved there. Sometimes I take him out, and sometimes we stay there at the group home. I make a point to always see him alone and talk about what's going on in his life at Gateway and at school, if he's seen his relatives, how his drama group is going, how he's feeling about the Gomezes, independent living skills that he's getting, and things like that. And I always check on his safety. I've seen the Gomezes once a month, sometimes more when there's court or case planning meetings. In my regular visits, I always meet with them in their home, usually late afternoon or evenings so Mr. Gomez will be home. Early on, we talked a lot about their need to accept Javier's coming out as gay, and I also really worked with them to get them to engage in services that were recommended through their assessments. Once they decided for certain that they didn't want Javier back, though, they flatly refused to participate in services of any kind. I still bring it up from time to time, and they still refuse, but mostly we talk about how they're feeling about Javier, and their need to accept him like he is. I also keep them updated on what's going on with Javier that they might not know about. I've invited them to his appointments and other events, but they always decline. The only time they attended anything was his play in March and that was just Mrs. Gomez and Maria. I keep trying, though.

Reviewer: Did you see both Javier and the Gomezes this month?

Vanessa Thomas: Yes, I saw Javier at Gateway on the 21st. School is going great for him this year so far, by the way. And I saw the Gomezes in their home earlier in the month on the 16th.

Reviewer: You mentioned school this year. How did Javier do in school last year?

Vanessa Thomas: He's normally a B and C student, but his grades fell because of his absences from being on the run those two times. So, he and I met with the counselor, Gateway got him into their tutoring program, he started doing extra credit assignments, and his final grades were all Bs and Cs again. Javier's teachers really like him, and he has a great group of friends. Luckily, he's been able to stay in the same school through his different placements.

Reviewer: Do you talk with Javier about the struggles he has with his sexual orientation?

Vanessa Thomas: We touch on it from time to time, but I pretty much leave that up to group home staff. He and I talk about everything else, though. I just haven't felt comfortable talking with him very much about his sexuality; maybe I'd feel better about it if I were a male. I know I need to do better with this, it's just that I haven't had any gay youth—that I know of—on my caseload before. I told my supervisor I felt awkward about it and needed some guidance, and she said she'd look for some training that I could attend.

Reviewer: Tell us about what's been done to meet Javier's medical and dental needs.

Vanessa Thomas: Javier had medical care for his injury the day the report came in, and he had physical and dental exams the first month of placement. Soon afterward, he had a vision exam, just to be certain his injury hadn't affected that. He saw the dentist again for a check 6 months later and had his teeth cleaned. And he was sick not long ago and went to the doctor for a stomach bug. His yearly physical was due again this month, and he had it on the 10th. Which reminds me, I need to check and see if the doctor's office has mailed that report to me.

Reviewer: Tell us about Javier's mental health issues, his treatment, and his medication.

Vanessa Thomas: Javier had a mental health assessment last October by a psychiatrist, Dr. Pemberly, and he diagnosed Javier with mild depression and oppositional defiant disorder. He prescribed Prozac, so Javier's been on that for several months. Javier has weekly therapy at the group home to work on issues of rejection, adjustment to the changes in his life, and his sexuality. His therapist, Mr. Jamison, said he's made lots of progress.

Reviewer: What does Javier think about his medication, and how is the medication monitored?

Vanessa Thomas: Javier complains from time to time that the medication makes him foggy and lethargic, but my opinion is that it's really helped him. And it's monitored every 3 months through a visit with Dr. Pemberly, where he looks at the effect of Javier's medication and the dosage. Javier hasn't missed a checkup, and Dr. Pemberly hasn't changed anything.

Reviewer: We notice that your state policy says that if there's any concern about a child's psychotropic medication, the Department will contact the prescribing physician to discuss the concerns. Did you ever contact Dr. Pemberly about Javier's concerns about his medication?

Vanessa Thomas: No, but Javier's therapist suggested that I might need to. I told him that I felt that was his responsibility, since he had more clinical experience than I do. And Javier has certainly had the opportunity to talk with Dr. Pemberly in his med monitoring checks.

Reviewer: Thank you for talking with us, Vanessa. You've given us lots of helpful information. Since you're our first interview, if anything else comes up that we have questions about, may we call you?

Vanessa Thomas: Certainly. Please call my cell phone at 209-555-6723.