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By Patricia Wen, Globe Staff, 8/25/2003

## An ally emerges

Mimi Rovito, 56, is a petite woman with a passion for helping troubled children and families. For the past 17 years, she has worked as a therapist at the Wayside Youth and Family Support Network, just outside Waltham's central shopping district. A former high school English teacher, she thought she could do more to help families as a social worker.

At the end of October 2001, Rovito was in her office when the receptionist called to say an unkempt woman in her 30s had just walked in off the streets, looking distraught. Rovito asked that she be shown in immediately.

Barbara came to the point almost as soon as she sat down. She said she was in agony about some choices she had to make about her children.

"I have to make some decisions," she told Rovito. "And I can't wait anymore."

Barbara had recently been jolted by news that her boys might be adopted into a new family. Joe and Art had told her that social workers, the previous month, had taken them to an adoption event in Boston, and that several couples had shown interest in them. Barbara and the boys took that as the first clear sign their lives might forever be apart.

Until then, she had put the idea of adoption out of her head. For a full year she had reason to know that she might lose the boys - the legal process of terminating her parental rights had actually begun in October 2000 - but it had always seemed unreal.

Now, suddenly, it was very real. The social workers said adoption now was the best "goal" for the boys.

As she sat in Rovito's office, she pleaded for help with the excruciating decisions that lay ahead. How could she fight the state? Did she have the strength - or a chance?

The two women would meet nearly every week from then on. Barbara almost never missed her weekly appointments, and if she had to, she called Rovito ahead of time to explain why. Such exclusive attention from a therapist felt like an indulgence compared to the "crowd" therapy she had at Lipton.

She began to see Rovito as her first true ally in the state's mental health system. They talked about Barbara's relationships with her parents, her boyfriends, her sons. They focused frequently on the 1993 rape, which Rovito saw as "this violent act that tipped the scales" in Barbara's life.

Mostly, though, they talked about Joe and Art, about whether Barbara really felt she could care for two children when she struggled so to care for herself.

"I know you want to be a good mother to these children," Rovito said.

The likelihood of adoption continued to grow. By the spring of 2002, it was clear that a couple from a suburb of Boston wanted to adopt Joe and Art. In fact, the boys had recently moved from their Groton foster home into this family's home. It would remain their "pre-adoptive" home until Barbara's parental

rights were severed - if they were - either against her will by a judge or voluntarily as part of an agreement.

She often asked herself, How could she let anyone call Joe and Art their ``sons?" These boys were still hers: Joe, now 15, whose fast-growing body looked more manly by the day, whose voice was deepening. And Art, now 11, still very much the skinny, energetic, quiet boy.

``I'm going to fight," she kept thinking to herself.

In the fall of 2002, she told Rovito she was invited by the state to take part in a relatively new mediation program, sponsored by Massachusetts Families for Kids in Boston. Its goal was to broker a kind of plea bargain: voluntary surrender of her parental rights in exchange for limited access to the boys after they were adopted. She knew that if she went to trial and lost, the court would probably deny her any chance of seeing her boys - at least not on any regular basis.

Barbara could not bear the idea of losing contact with Joe and Art. Rovito listened to Barbara's fears and talked to her about the mediation option.

That fall, with a trial date looming in the Worcester County Juvenile Court, Barbara tentatively agreed to terms of an agreement. In return for ceding her parental rights, she would be guaranteed two visits a year with the boys, each lasting at least two hours. Plus, she would be assured of some mail from the boys. Barbara's request was that she get at least a birthday card or a Mother's Day card from them, plus some pictures and their report cards.

Only one decision remained: Should she sign the agreement?