

I Never Dreamed...



An Adoption Perspective

Real Stories by Real Parents

FAMILY FOCUS ADOPTION SERVICES

Offices in Little Neck, Newburgh, and Albany, New York

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www.familyfocusadoption.org

I never dreamed...

I never dreamed it would be so hard,
that I would grow so strong, and that
I would have such an amazing kid.

I never dreamed how natural it was to
become a parent (after being terrified of
not being able to measure up!).

I never dreamed I could look at my children's
faces and forget that they were adopted.

I never dreamed that becoming a mother via
adoption could be so rewarding and bring so
much happiness to our lives. It feels so natural.

I never dreamed I could love someone as
my own who I didn't meet until he was
14 years old!

I never dreamed, with all the amazing opportunities
I've had personally and professionally, that I would
say that the most real and meaningful and fulfilling
thing I have ever done has been becoming and being
my son's mother, so much so that I am adopting
again.

I never dreamed I'd love him so much and
be so proud of his every accomplishment.

I never dreamed I'd adopt a teenager
and be so thrilled as he's become a big
part of our family.

...that your heart can actually grow...

I never dreamed that I *never* would regret my decision to adopt. Raising any child is a challenge and doing so by myself has its own unique character. Yet even during our most difficult moments I have thought about this and still known that adopting Alyx was the best thing I've ever done. Being Alyx's mom has fulfilled me in ways I never imagined and my life is much the richer for having had my daughter in it.

I never dreamed that when we held our adopted
daughter's newborn in our hands, we would be
struck by all that we had missed in our daughter's
early years - and at the same time would be so
grateful that we were given a chance to watch our
grandchild grow.

I never dreamed I could be so fulfilled.

I never dreamed again after adopting my daughter.
I am now living my dream.

I always dreamed of being a mother but I
never dreamed it would be so rewarding
and exhausting at the same time.

...bigger than the size of your body.

From Our Public Programs Director...

When I was twenty-three years old I worked at an institution for emotionally disturbed children. One early Sunday afternoon two of the young teens got into a fight. I broke it up, and had them deal with whatever the issue was and shake hands. The rest of the day there was no problem between them. That night, after the kids went to bed, I heard a loud scream from one of the dorms. I ran in and found that one of those boys had punched the other in the head while he was sleeping. I had never seen anything like that, and it was just about the last straw for me. These kids, I was certain, weren't being helped by us. It was time for me to go.

An hour later, when all was settled, one of the chaplains came by and asked me how things were going. Wrong question at the wrong time. I gave him an earful. I told him that we were wasting our time; that despite all our best efforts, the kids weren't changing for the better. I believed that they were all going to grow up to become child abusers, wife beaters, alcoholics, drug addicts and criminals. Oh, I spewed frustration and hopelessness that night.

And the chaplain said that he wanted to tell me a story. (Now nearly four decades ago, I can't possibly quote him, but I do remember the heart of what he told me). Years ago, he began, a young teenaged boy had been accepted at our institution. However, just prior to his admittance, his mother had changed her mind and moved down south with him.

Good, *I said*. That kid was far better off than he would have been in a place like this.

The chaplain told me that I had a point; that actually the boy had grown up to be quite famous. Ha, I was right.

The chaplain continued: It is your contention, Jack, that if that boy came here, he definitely would have been worse off simply from being here?

Yep, exactly right, *I so arrogantly replied*.

Well, he told me that boy grew up without being in any institution, and he was certain that I would know the name:



Lee Harvey Oswald.

Know the name? I nearly fell out of my seat. President Kennedy had not yet been dead ten years. The chaplain went on.

Jack, *he said*, if Oswald had come here, you might be exactly right: he might have grown up to be a wife beater, a drunk, and so forth. But we might have drained him of enough of his anger that he might not have killed Kennedy. And, if he had not, the entire history of the world would be different than it is tonight. But – *and this was the sentence that changed my life* – nobody would have ever known it. You'd be screaming about how bad Oswald was, never knowing the truth of the bad that had been avoided.

How could my now-very-humbled-self argue?

The chaplain told me that I had a decision to make: either I recognize the truth of the good that we do, no matter how it appears or I recognize that I was in the wrong field. Not only do we reach these kids, he told me, but we reach them very deeply. Not only do they change, but they change dramatically from where they would have been without us. The evidence is often unseen, but never unreal. It is the history of the world that would have been different, not just the history of one child. Either I decide that I have such belief or I needed to move on.

I stayed.

Needless to say, he gave me a context I've never forgotten. Over the years, I have confirmed his story, but it doesn't matter if it's true or not. The point of it has become the truth of my life.

The writings that follow come from people who never dreamed - on the day they opened their hearts, their minds, and their lives to young human beings who didn't deserve the lives that they had been given - that they would, or even could, possibly end up where they are now. Each of them changed and each of them developed the belief that my beloved chaplain had demanded of me. Some of their stories are very painful, some not. But all are about belief in the wholeness of innocent, young, and abandoned-through-no-fault-of-their-own foster children. These stories, then, are really the stories of the adults.

We end this booklet with the response of Andru Edwards, one adopted boy, grown up. I'm certain it will move you. It moved us enough to name our primary public adoption program after his parents: The George Budabin-Kathy McQuown Waiting Child Program.

*Jack Brennan
Family Focus Adoption Services*



Gilbert

Gilbert's life was a Children's Village miracle story. We were told from the very beginning that Gil would need institutional care for the rest of his life. His problems and handicaps were enormous: he couldn't read; he went berserk almost, if not, daily; he required tremendous physical restraint; he was a hypochondriac; he had been on daily psychotropic medication for years; and he pulled knives on staff often.

But, at 12 years old, Gilbert decided he was done with institutions – and once he got out, he stayed out. It's not that the professionals were off-the-wall; but they underestimated the power of the spirit and the strength of our free will. When Gilbert announced to me one Sunday afternoon, seven years ago, that he was moving in with us – I laughed at him (that was the last time I ever got away with that).

There's no way, I told him, that Children's Village would even consider it – as long as he continued to pull knives on people. So Gilbert said, "Okay, I'll stop." And just like that, he did.

The following July (1979) Children's Village sent him up on an extended visit for six weeks, without his medication. In mid-August he moved in for good. And for the next two years we ran "Children's Village" for Gilbert. Suicide threats, suicide attempts, berserk fits of temper occurred repeatedly. But Gilbert never failed to take responsibility for any of that. He accepted the consequences and listened to and tried out alternative behaviors - always.

On August 13, 1981 I adopted him – my first. From that day until last week, I was called to his school to control him only once. Once. In 50 months. And even that was because he was told by his doctor that he might die from his scoliosis operation.

At his first Committee on the Handicapped meeting after his adoption, I pointed out that though his emotional problems were still enormous, the fact was that he had separated them from interfering with his school behavior and therefore they could no longer be characterized as a handicap. Susan _____ and the Committee agreed.

Gilbert was transferred from an emotionally handicapped to a learning disabled placement. Gilbert was very proud of that because it was a decision made by his record and not influenced by his personality. And because it was unanimous.

He did well in that program - he attended his first regular classes and even earned his first high school credits. In June of 1984, he received a junior high school diploma – the exact same one that three of his brothers had received before him. We were now to a point beyond the wildest expectations that even *I* had ever had for Gilbert.

The Committee on the Handicapped that summer transferred him from his LD program to a regular high school program with only resource room back-up. And he entered a BOCES

vocational program in the afternoons. BOCES brought a commitment to his schoolwork that we'd never seen. At first he tried different programs; but he quickly settled upon child-care as



what he wanted. Naturally, after me. The projects he made were incredible – the creativity and conscientiousness he showed in making Thanksgiving hats, and sewing Cabbage Patch dolls, and cooking Play-doh from scratch were beyond my belief. He wanted to be a day-care worker aide when he graduated and he was determined to be the best one he could. Most amazing of all for me was that I never even met his BOCES teachers. There was no need. He was a regular kid in a regular school program.

In 1982, Gilbert had his first job. He was a counselor-in-training at the Town of Newburgh Camp Chadwick summer program. I did my usual Gilbert-informational-orientation for his boss and left the numbers I could be reached at every minute of the day. But there was no need – I was never called.

At summer's end, I asked the boss for an honest evaluation – I needed to know what employment hope there was for Gil – and Mr. R_____ told me, “Any boss would love him. It takes time to explain to him what you want – but he won't let you go until he understands. And then there's no need to ever speak to him again. I'll take that kind of employee any day of the week.” I was very proud. And relieved.

The following summer he was sick and in his cast and so went to summer school, rather than work. But in 1984, he did volunteer work again – working with autistic children. Gilbert! He had a tendency to get distracted, but that was the only complaint I heard.

And then this summer, totally on his own, he got a job at Regal Bag. He hated it, he moaned, he groaned, he complained. But he went every day. He made almost \$1,000. He was proud and I was happy – Gilbert could actually be independent. Never, ever, did we dream – even three years ago – that it was possible.

Gilbert had his driver's permit, though he was scared to drive, and he was determined to get his High School diploma. At the end of this school year he would have had only one credit to go.

These accomplishments – each and every one since his adoption – were miracles. Anyone that knew him even 5 years ago, let alone 10, had no choice but to recognize that.

But they don't fully describe Gilbert. They don't touch upon his sensitivity to pain and suffering – his love for animals and plants, and even bugs. They don't speak of his hysterical sense of humor, his constant threats to put *me* in the old folk's home, nor about the life in him. They don't speak of the things Gilbert taught me much clearer than even my teachers in the seminary, in college and at Children's Village ever did – about psychology, about commitment, about free will, and about love. They don't speak of the unique communication that went on between him and I – nor the demands and expectations he had for his brothers and for me in regard to this, *his* family.

When he was in intensive care after his successful back operation, his brothers went to visit him. He was in great pain and facing nine months in his half body cast. My son Val told Gil that he himself would never have subjected himself to such misery, just to straighten out his back.

Gilbert said to Val – in the condescending way he used with all of us – and I quote: “I didn't do it for me, Val. I did it because I love Pop.”

Gilbert never told me that – probably figured it was none of my business – but Val needed to hear that. And Gil knew he did.

I loved Gilbert. I miss him terribly. I can't conceive of my life without him.

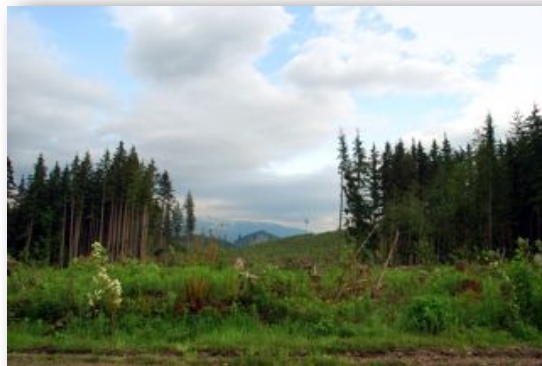
I don't know why he jumped off that bridge last week. But I don't need to know: Because I know Gilbert and I know that whatever complicated motivations he had – surpassing them all, he had a motivation springing in some way – from love. He was never able to operate any other way. Why should it change suddenly last week? I believed in him. I loved him. And standing before all of you today, I must say: I TRUST HIM.

- Jack



I never dreamed...

...I would adopt teenage boys. I loved babies, and dreamed of having my own babies, most hopefully girl babies. They would be babies that I would raise, watch grow, and see myself in their eyes, faces and mannerisms. They would be undeniably my children, an extension of me, and I would be connected to them indelibly. Their blood and mine would be linked; their DNA and the core of who they were would be inextricably part of me. I was young and had many years to dream this dream.



Then, what seemed like seconds later, I turned thirty-five, was still single, and forty was approaching fast. I decided I could give up the blood connection, as long as I could still have babies. But, I would have to spend my life's savings, travel to another country and in the end, I would only be able to have one child, as I could not afford two. Also, I would have to put that one child in day care for sometimes ten hours a day, five days a week. I would have no rest and no help. It would all be me. As much as I planned and worked it through, adopting a baby, for me, was not coming together.

But my desire to become a mom grew stronger every day. Then I heard about an eleven-year-old boy who was available for adoption. His twelfth birthday was approaching fast and in the foster care system, especially for boys, age twelve is "no man's land" in terms of adoption. The cuteness has worn off, the behaviors get more serious, the edges seem sharper and everything is less "adorable." Yet, I had no child and he had no family. I was scared, shaking scared, but I was now thirty-nine years old and decided it was now or never. Adopting through the foster care system meant I could hold onto my life's savings. There were other bonuses that would allow me to work on a part time basis, so I could be home when he came home from school. Something inside me said, "This is it. Go for it."

And so, I met Chris, who would soon be my son. He was small, thin and with a bad reputation for explosive anger. We visited for a time and things just seemed to flow together. About nine months later, he became my first son. I quickly became a soccer mom, baked cookies for the school bake sale and attended a myriad of school functions including more basketball games than I would ever dream of attending. I hit the floor running, as they say. Some time later, when Chris was almost sixteen, I decided to adopt another child. This time, a fifteen-year-old boy named Matt. The age didn't seem to be an issue anymore. I felt that Chris was my son through and through, and I

knew that Matt could be my son too, just as quickly. I decided they could be friends, support each other, and age-wise, it was perfect, as Matt was about one year younger than Chris. Like Chris, Matt was very athletic and was quickly involved in the school's track and cross-country teams. Also, like Chris, he was very smart and could provide Chris with an intellectual counterpart when playing games or reasoning through an issue. It seemed to me like the perfect match.

The truth was that they hated each other. Since Matt was only about eight months younger than Chris, they were in the same grade in school, in many of the same classes. They clashed at almost every opportunity, unless they were planning some scheme against me. Then they collaborated so well together. But I knew we would get through all that and we all moved forward. We got a bigger house and we got through each day together. We were a family. There were good times and bad. I got tougher and learned to say "no" more decidedly. The days became weeks, became months and then became years.

Now my sons are both in their twenties and living on their own, a short distance away. They are friends and seek each other out for advice and companionship. They are my pride and joy and I can't imagine my life without them. We get together, talk and sometimes still yell. We have memories and stories together, like any family, and often talk about "old times." We are a family and although our DNA is not entwined, we are intrinsically connected. I wouldn't have had it any other way.

- Camille



I never dreamed...

...I would adopt a son one month before his 17th birthday. When Ken and I got together and decided we wanted to have children in our family, we quickly realized that adoption was the way to go for us since, being two men, neither of us was going to be able to give birth.

We began, as many families do, with the very narrow and limiting understanding that ADOPTION EQUALS BABY. So we began searching for an adoption “stork” that could deliver that baby to us, and through a series of circumstances, arrived at FAMILY FOCUS ADOPTION SERVICES. That’s where we found out the considerable cost of adopting a newborn, which was prohibitive for us, and the waiting period, which was discouraging. We inched upward, thinking, “How much different could it be to adopt a toddler instead?”



FAMILY FOCUS explained to us that there were no toddlers to be had, but always the independent spirits, we had to find out for ourselves. The Internet quickly proved it. We were later to discover the reason for this: when the little ones in foster care get freed for adoption, they are often adopted very quickly by their foster families. The risk of being a foster parent, of course, is that most children won’t be freed, and you will have to say goodbye to them when they are reunited with their birth families. That was not a risk we were willing to put ourselves and our family through. Heck, we thought, neither one of us can quit our job to stay home and care for a toddler anyway. So we began our “stretch” even further upward, and considered school-age children. I even got a job that started and ended early, in preparation for meeting the little one at the bus at the end of the school day.

Weeks turned into months, and then nearly two years, as we set the bar higher and higher, coming up with age cutoffs that seemed sensible at the time, but looking back, were pretty arbitrary. Let’s consider up to second grade. What about ten years old? I suppose we can think about pre-teens. Well, thirteen is just barely a teenager. All that time, we painstakingly combed through the photolistings, what I like to refer to as the “Sunday Best” blurbs and photos of the children who are in care, waiting for families. And all of the stories had a similar ring to them: children passed over by folks who were looking for tots and toddlers, or for kids who were “easy.”

Then one day a message on our answering machine told us that there was a child listed

that we simply had to look at. “Get ready,” the worker warned, “he’s a little older than you were thinking about.” So we entered the photolisting number into our computer, and up popped Gary. A handsome, blue-eyed boy with a faraway half-smile, a bright orange shirt, and a birthday that told us he was fifteen! We looked at each other, thinking we didn’t have it in us to consider parenting such an “old” child. But the worker had seemed excited, thinking Gary would be perfect for our family. So we read his story. He seemed like a great kid. But it was the last paragraph that brought tears to our eyes. It said that Gary had faced difficult challenges in his life, but despite it all, he would not give up on his dream to have a family that loved him forever.

That’s the thunder-clap moment we realized the truth about adoption. It wasn’t just about fulfilling our need to have a child. It was about becoming parents to a child who desperately wanted – needed – to find a family. Gary *needed* parents. We had the desire, strength, and commitment to *be* parents. A perfect match. Age didn’t matter. History didn’t matter. Behaviors, medications, special schools didn’t matter. All that mattered was us parenting him. Gary wasn’t giving up, so we couldn’t let him down.

Study sent. Meetings held. Visits begun. Gary moved in with us on lucky Friday the 13th. It wasn’t easy, not by a long stretch! It took nine months - months of joy and of anger, of frustration and discovery; tears of grief and tears of elation; learning to be the parents Gary needed, trying to make up for all those who had failed him before, asking him to trust us, to believe that this time it was different. It took nine months before Gary asked us to be his parents. It took mere seconds for us each to say yes. It took another six months for the court to finalize our adoption. Exactly one month before his 17th birthday.

And the worker had been right: Gary is perfect for our family. Perfect because he is, and always will be, our son.

- Rich



I never dreamed...

...I'd be the mother of a kid in prison. My husband and I adopted five kids. Our youngest son joined our family at the age of fourteen. Right from the beginning, he appeared to be a street-wise kid, who thought he was much older than fourteen. Extremely bright, he wanted the best of everything... sports cars, money, beautiful women and a great place to live. He would tell us all the time that he was going to be "famous," and would get angry and upset if his father or I tried to talk to him about "reality." He wanted no part of working hard, starting at the bottom, nor attending college to get a good education. It soon became clear that he had many gifts; he was mechanically inclined, inquisitive, extremely bright, but the one gift he used the most was his ability to superficially connect to people. He used that gift to get what he wanted from anyone he met. When first meeting him, other people would describe him as an intelligent, helpful, good boy, who'd had a really bad start in life. In reality he was a liar, a thief and a con artist. He lived by his own set of rules, which did not match the ones the rest of the world lives by. Cameras, money, tools, all started disappearing from the house. Even though no one was at home, our poor dog Spanky must have taken them, since there was no way my son would ever take responsibility for his own actions. Our son was and still is a survivor. A survivor of abandonment, abuse, neglect, in a world that is "not fair." He learned early on there was no one that was going to take care of him. There was no one he could trust. I often told him that it seemed to me as though he was going down the wrong track, and I was afraid that one day he would find himself in jail. When talking about this possible scenario, I always told him that if in fact he went to jail, there would be no way that his father and I would pay for a lawyer or try to get him off. I did always tell him that we would visit him in prison. He always told me he was not going to jail.



Finally, in his senior year of high school, we began to hope. Our son decided early on to join the Marine Corps. His father and I kept telling him that this was the best thing he could do. There are a lot of benefits to joining the military and certainly his father and I thought that perhaps he could finally learn how to live within a framework of rules. Within a week, he wrote and called us to let us know that he was being discharged. He found a loophole that allowed him to be discharged, all the while maintaining that military people are crazy, and that a life like that was not for him. Once he was back home, living with him became unbearable. He went out and came home whenever he wanted. Once, he left for three weeks and travelled to California, never

calling us until he was ready to come home. He eventually moved out and lived with other people, crashing on couches and borrowing money from anyone and everyone he knew. Of course he never paid back any of debts, and left a lot of broken bridges behind him. Eventually he called us because he needed to talk. He explained that he hit bottom and asked us if he could move back home. He wanted to straighten out his life. He had a job and he wanted to save his money. By now, he had no car and no license. Any car he ever owned was never good enough and he would use it four-wheeling until it was destroyed, or have one of his friends torch the car for fun. His license was suspended as he had speeding tickets from each and every town in Orange County. Setting down the house rules - he had to work, give us money to go towards his tickets, and let us know what time he would be home at night - my husband and I agreed to let him move back home. He managed to live with our rules for ten days. Within four months my husband and I knew that it was time for tough love. We could no longer enable him to continue this life of his... this thinking of his, that he was entitled to anything he wanted, had to stop. He had not been able to abide by any of our rules, and had lost his job within two weeks of moving back home. So, we requested that he pack up his stuff and move out. He sat on the chair in his room for over three hours, not coming out or responding to us. He appeared to be shocked, and when he again told him to pack, he did not believe us. Finally he made a call to a friend of his to come and pick him up. I'll never forget how "lost" he looked when he walked out the door. After he left, my husband and I had no idea that we would wind up spending days, weeks and months living with our own "guilt." We felt guilty because we thought that we were no better or different than all the other adults our son ever had in his life. How can parents throw their kids out of their house, knowing that they had nowhere to go? We justified our actions by recognizing that we had to take a stand, and that stand was going to be painful. We were his parents, and it was our responsibility to do something that hopefully would wake him up.

Four weeks later, our home was broken into, and our LCD television was stolen. Our son was located by the police and agreed to be fingerprinted... what a surprise, the fingerprints outside our living room window matched. My husband and I talked and we decided the best thing to do was to press charges. Our thought was that maybe he would go to jail for a couple of months and he would finally wake up. Three months later, while reading the morning newspaper, I found an article about an armed robbery that took place at a local convenience store. It appeared that my son decided to use a BB gun to get a few hundred dollars. He also had a grand night on the town shooting out the windows of thirty cars, in three different towns. My husband and I felt sick as the phone calls from family and friends started to pour in. Our son, the one with an IQ over 140, now sat in the county jail. It was interesting that the same night he went to jail I had the best night's sleep in years. It was the first time that I went to sleep not having to worry if the police would be pounding on my door. I was always afraid that he would be killed, or someone else would die in a car accident.

I felt that, for now, society was safe from my son, the one who abided by no rules, and I, as his mother, felt relief that my son was safe from himself. My husband and I went to the jail to visit him, and when he came out and saw we were there, he appeared to be shocked. I don't think he remembered that I said that we would visit him if he wound up in jail. Although, he would have liked for us to hire him a lawyer, we kept to our word. He had to deal with the consequences of his own actions. Our son received a stiff sentence... 3 ½ years in prison and an additional 5 years post-release supervision. He was nineteen years old when he went to prison and he'll be twenty-eight years old before he gets his life and his freedom back. It could have been much worse. The man at the convenience store was not physically injured, but I am sure emotionally injured forever. Seven months after my son went to prison, I received a call that my daughter, who was working as a cashier in a liquor store, was in the process of being robbed at gunpoint. The emotions - fear, anger, helplessness - all came flooding into me as I rushed to her store in a snowstorm, wondering if she had been shot. My daughter, the mother of four of my grandchildren, could have been dead. First hand, I have seen how emotional injury can affect an entire family. I was, as you can imagine, extremely angry with my son. I am, however, thankful that during the last 2 ½ years, my son appears to be learning, and finally recognizing, that we are and always will be his parents. He appears to be learning that there are other people in this world besides himself. He is upset that his brother and sisters don't write to him, but he also recognizes that he damaged his relationship with his brother and sisters and it will be up to him to fix it.

When my son gets out of prison, he will be coming home to live with us, his mother and father. My husband is extremely hopeful and is looking forward to spending time with his son. He believes that he has changed. Each day I pray that somehow he really has learned a lesson, and that he is ready to feel free enough and trust me enough to be his mother.

- Mary



I never dreamed...

...I would become the mother of a child with multiple personality disorder.* When my daughter came for her first visit, she brought with her an imaginary friend named Sara. We were told that she had this “friend” and thought it cute - at first. My son had had two imaginary friends when he was around three years old and my other daughter had one as well when she was little, so I didn’t think this odd, even though our new daughter was almost nine years old. It was only after she moved in with us that I started to notice that there was something disturbing about the intensity with which she played with Sara. There was something different in the way “they” spoke and laughed and played board games, not to mention how my daughter seemed to disappear into another place where she could hardly hear me if I called her. Then at times I would hear Sara speak back to my daughter in a slightly different version of her own voice. Or sometimes I would hear her say, “What?” as if she didn’t hear Sara’s responses while they played and talked and laughed. It was both interesting and scary how often she had Sara with her in the beginning; however she was clearly very happy and relaxed when they were together.



I later learned from my daughter that there were times when she had many people talking all at once inside her head, and in fact she said it was often noisy. That also explained why she often covered her ears when she was frustrated and couldn’t focus. She would also shut her eyes tight, and at times she tantrumed beyond belief, whether it be at home or in school, often repeating the same thing over and over depending on what she was upset about. Oh the tantrums.... Actually, “hissy fits” were what we were told she had, which in my opinion is far too cute an expression for all hell breaking loose (we would run to shut the windows in the warm weather in fear that our neighbors would call the police if they heard her screaming). At some point early on we started sessions with a therapist who specialized in people who had been sexually abused. I didn’t know where this would lead or if it would even help – but I had to tell her new school (she was thrown out of the first school she attended) that we were doing something - and I certainly couldn’t tell them what I suspected – that our daughter might be a “Sybil” of sorts...

The day I learned the names of my daughter’s other “people” was truly amazing. We were in the waiting room at the therapist’s office and for the last few weeks there had been a box of plastic toy animals on the floor. This was unusual as our therapist dealt

mostly with adults. My daughter had noticed this box sitting there and had been dying to play with them, but we never had enough time. This day however, the client before us was talking overtime so I said okay when she asked to take them out of the box. She slowly looked them all over and then took out a large, dark, ferocious looking lion and said, "This is Fierciful," pointing out to me that he *really* is a lion.... She then slowly took out another and then another, putting certain animals aside, suggesting that they represented the others. I didn't move a muscle knowing without a doubt that this was a HUGE moment, that my daughter was telling me the names of her others whom I suspected existed for so long inside of her. I prayed I would say the right thing, ask the right questions. We already knew about Sara and then Brittany, whom I met some months later (another of her regular playmates). But now there was an animal? A lion named Fierciful? And there was also a boy named Vairon, two baby lion cubs named Cries A Lot and Crybaby (they only cry), and the core self, the self with whom we deal with most of the time who is called by my daughter's name, but with "Strong" before it. And I have learned just how strong my daughter is...

As time has gone on, I have grown to recognize my daughter's "people" when they each "pop up," as Vairon, for example, often calls me "old lady" and speaks in a "punk" sort of way. I often hear my daughter chatting (always happily) with Brittany and Sara as they are close in age, although I've been told that Brittany is older by a year or two. And Fierciful, the lion who is the part of my daughter who is most responsible for the tantrums, is angry all the time, and according to her, he is the guard of the memories, as he was "the first to exist."

I have had many conversations with my daughter regarding her "people," or selves, since I became her mother. It was one day, after years of living with us, that she bravely disclosed to me the sickening details of the horrific and prolonged abuse and torture she endured at the hands of her birth father. This all starting when she was only a baby. She told me that day that she didn't understand why this all happened, and I helplessly sat there with no answer for her, except to recognize her astounding and incredible courage. During that same conversation she further described a day when she chose to face (yet again) the horrors of her birth father rather than jump out her bedroom window, as unbelievably, she needed to hear from me that she did the right thing. I again recognized her bravery, and told her she made a huge choice that day, which was to survive, and which is far more difficult to do then to give up. And because of that choice, I received a wonderful gift – which is her.

I can't even begin to realize the depth of my daughter's helplessness, her loneliness, the shattering of her life and seemingly her very self at that time. Her "Strong" self, Sara, Fierciful and her others, all of whom I believe are extremes of the different "selves" we all have, are a protection created by my daughter, which is no less than brilliant. She does not become her "people," her people are her. And, although my daughter, now age

fifteen, continually struggles in the world, she is determined, empathetic, loving, courageous, and above all - she is whole.

- Jo



*When I read this to my daughter to ask her permission to use her story, she listened until the end, and then quickly told me she didn't like what I had said right in the beginning. I asked her if she meant "multiple personality disorder." She said yes, she didn't like the word "disorder," because it made her sound like there was something wrong. She then informed me, "It's more of a *talent*." As I said... she is whole.

I never dreamed...

...that there were children who were so self focused that nothing and nobody appeared to matter to them. I certainly never dreamed that I would ever adopt such a child. The world I came from was one where people cared for one another, more or less consistently. It was a world where other people's feelings mattered. Even a world where one allowed the feelings of others to influence one's own behavior. Being nice was an important measure to strive for.

It was a world of reciprocity; a world where one good turn deserved another; a world of give and get. One loved other people because they loved you, and vice versa. It didn't matter who started it – that was the way of all good relationships. Fair was fair; a relationship had to be 50-50 to succeed and everyone knew that, and furthermore everyone accepted that. Guilt was an important, and legitimate, motivating force in relationships, a power that one could always call upon to impact the other when being reasonable was not working.



Of course, I had heard of unconditional love: it meant that I would love you unconditionally, assuming of course that you would stay within the boundaries that would allow me to do that; and I could expect the same of you. You would love me unconditionally as long as I behaved in such a way as to deserve it. It never once dawned upon me that “assuming of course” and “as long as” and “deserve it” each meant “conditional.”

So it was a shock to me to adopt an eight year old boy – just barely eight years old – who not only did not get it, but appeared to have no interest in getting it. Such children today are often diagnosed with the great bugaboo of the adoption world: RAD, or reactive attachment disorder. But thirty years ago, there was no such diagnosis. Kids like my eight-year-old were most often labeled “bad” or “impossible” because they “simply did not care.”

Of course, I should have known from the first night, the night of the day they left their mother: When this young boy came out from the bedroom he was to share with his barely ten-year-old brother to tell me – referring to that brother who was crying and crying for their mother, “Would you tell that boy to shut up? I can’t get to sleep.”

I should have known.

That eight-year-old did not care. He was, as I realized one very scary day, emotionally as cold as ice. He stole, he lied, he was sneaky – as sometimes were his two older brothers, whom I adopted at the same time. But his stealing, lying, and sneakiness wasn’t like theirs. Theirs was – the only word I could come up with back then – “human,” and his wasn’t. They would feel bad when caught or confronted; they would feel guilt and shame. But not him. He appeared to feel nothing other than bothered - by me, for holding him accountable.

Loving him was the hardest thing I have ever done in my entire life. Because he gave nothing back – nothing - ever. There were times, especially in the beginning years, when I felt helpless with him, and hopeless of ever being able to build a parental relationship with him where I mattered to him. Many times I wanted to just give up.

And one day, I actually did. I had him pack and prepared to bring him back to the agency. But as I drove out of my driveway – he was, perhaps, nine – I realized that I was giving up because he wasn’t giving back to me. He wasn’t allowing me to feel good about loving him, ever. He wasn’t making me feel loved by him.

And then the realization hit me: he was demanding unconditional love from me and wouldn’t tolerate anything less than that. He wasn’t buying into my world with all my nonsense beliefs about relationships. A parent’s love is unconditional? “Show me” is what he might as well have been saying to me.

I changed some that day. I turned the car around; I kept him; I struggled to believe in him. Then, four years after he came, I had to make the decision to finalize his adoption. I was advised by almost everyone I trusted to give him up. And I came to a crossroads: I could give up on him blame-free and (relief, relief) justified – or I could accept the deep, horrible, scary, and uniquely lonely pain that he caused me.

I made my choice and changed forevermore the day I did. I recognized that loyalty – while important – was not love; that reciprocity – while hoped for – wasn’t required; that controlling another person wasn’t relating to them; that “deserving of love” is a non-sequitur; that not only does “like” have nothing to do with love, but that love exists in a whole different place – far beyond – feelings; and that my now almost twelve-year-old was my son forever – because I decided that he was. And because I decided – not discovered – that I loved him.

I finalized his adoption; I pulled my hair out for the next six years. But I never once regretted adopting him nor loving him. He changed eventually, beginning when he was seventeen and a half. I watched him change; I watched him the day he *recognized*, for the first time, that he had done something wrong. He didn't just hear me tell him (read: scream at him) that he'd done something wrong; he actually believed it himself. I could feel the difference immediately.

Today, it is more than thirty years since that first night he came to live with me. I don't know that I could be more proud of him than I am. And I am grateful to him for teaching me the greatest lesson of my life: unconditional love means – for real - a love with no conditions. None. I thought I'd known that, but I had not. And I don't know enough people who do.

- Jack



George Budabin

Today the world truly lost one of its greatest assets when my father, George Budabin, succumbed to lung cancer and passed away. There is so much for me to say about this man, and there is no way that it can all be said.

George Budabin and his wife Kathy McQuown (known to me affectionately as Dad and Mom) adopted me when I was 16 years old. Having lived a life that, up to that point, felt very short on love and trust thanks to 12 years in the New York City foster care system, I had no idea what love in a stable and permanent home even meant. The issues that I had with just learning to trust that my parents loved me like they said they did were deep. Not that I didn't believe them, but rather, I frankly didn't understand it. It was a foreign concept to me.

Particularly difficult for me was the whole notion of having a loving father. I had never known my birth father, nor had I developed any sort of paternal bond with any of the male foster parents I had come across during my life. Here was a man trying to get me to understand that he was the real deal - admittedly, this would prove to be a difficult task for him, as I spent a couple of my teenage years trying to push him away. In retrospect, I think I was putting him to the test, trying to see what it would take for him to "send me back" saying he no longer wanted me. It happened many times in my life, and there had to be a breaking point where my new parents would do the same. Of course, that never came.

My parents loved me and my brother (who they adopted together) like their very own. They had four children of their own already, but from the day that they took us in, they made us theirs. There was absolutely never any separation of "our kids vs. the adopted ones." We were just "theirs."

My Dad has left an impression on me that will stay with me until the day that I die. He taught me what being a man was really about. He was the ultimate stand-up guy who you could trust to do anything he said he would do. He was loving, caring, and affectionate towards his children. He was a provider in every sense of the word. There were days when he would leave for work at 6:30 AM and not get home until 9:00 PM, exhausted. Still, he would eat his dinner and spend whatever time he had left with his children and wife until he went to bed, rarely just getting time to himself.

In more recent years, as I have grown into an adult, I really began to appreciate the man that he was. Always excited to just hear my voice and to hear about how things in my life were going since I had moved from New York City to Seattle, WA. I could always count on him for solid advice about life, love, and business.

The bond that I think will be strongest between him and I, though, is the one we shared as fathers. When Alijah was born and he became a grandfather, I could tell he was just ecstatic. I couldn't wait until I could place his new grandson into his arms, which would happen a few months later.

The thing is, by having a son of my own, things all started to come into perspective for me, and I could truly see where my Dad was coming from. Of course he loved me. In the same way that I love my son to death. The kind of love that is simply unmistakable, unshakeable, and unquestionable. By the same token, I now get what parents truly mean when they tell their child that they are proud of them. When I watch Alijah do something new that he has never done before, or just experience the character that he is with an amazingly advanced sense of humor, I am just proud. Heck - I was proud of him before he started doing ANYTHING because of how hard he had to fight to stay alive when he was born at 1 lb. 13 ounces and lived the first two months of his life in Intensive Care.

When I spoke to my Dad the night before his passing, he had three things to tell me before he died. As he said them to me, it was as if I knew what all three would be before he even said them, because I quickly and involuntarily pictured myself in his position, with me saying three things to my son.

The fact that he first wanted to tell me that he was proud of me touched me in a way that I won't soon forget. He was telling me that he got the same amount of joy from being my father that I get from Alijah. That is when it clicked, and it's something that you can't truly understand from a parent until you have a child of your own. This man got joy simply out of having a relationship with me, despite everything I had tried to do to sabotage it early on as a troubled teen. When he looked at me or thought of me, it was with happiness. When I was away, he missed me. When I was near, he didn't want me to go. All of these things he didn't have to say verbally, because through my connection to my son, I understand it all. If I was even 10% to him of what Alijah is to me, I am truly happy to have given him that much joy in his life.

The second thing he wanted to say was that he wanted to thank me for loving him, and allowing him to love me. That is such a significant statement, because it really does mean something in our relationship. My Dad knew the trust issues I had growing up and coming into a relationship with him in particular, as men have never really done me any good in my life. He knew how difficult it was both for me to love him, and for me to allow myself to be loved without having that guard up. To be truthful, loving him was easy, even early on. The hard part was letting him into the walls that I built up around me. Don't get me wrong, they were necessary up until that point in my life. I would not have survived without sheltering myself. However, when I was finally safe with my new family, it took a couple of years to finally accept that as the case. My Dad never stopped trying to prove his worthiness to me. Time and time and time again, he was there showing me in all sorts of ways that he truly did care about me. Over time, I did allow him to love me as I loved him, and I know that made him so much happier to see that I accepted that.

Lastly, he wanted to thank me for Alijah, his grandson. When he said that, it took everything I had to not break down while sitting in the airport waiting for my flight to New York so that I could be by his side. You see, family meant everything to my Dad. Him thanking me for Alijah means more than it seems it does at first glance. Yes, he was thanking me for the fact that I had given him his first grandchild, no doubt. Deeper than that though, is the fact that he was thanking me for the relationship he was able to build with the only grandchild he will ever know. It was very important to me that Alijah got to know my father before he passed away, and after I found out he had cancer, there were two periods of time where my Dad and Alijah were able to

enjoy each others time. They fell in love with each other in a way that was so beautiful for me to watch. When I brought Alijah to NYC to visit his grandfather (or, "Ta-pa" as Alijah would call him for whatever reason) it literally took him less than ten minutes to become attached to my Dad. A couple of months ago, my parents came out to visit me in Seattle, and again, Alijah was attached to my father constantly. It was just amazing for me to see that. That would also be the last time I would speak to my father face-to-face, as by the time I got back to NYC, he had already been put on the respirator, and was unconscious. Even deeper still, though, is that when my Dad thanked me for Alijah, he was thanking me for being the father that I was to Alijah. He was telling me that I had done well in his eyes with raising his only (up to this point) grandchild, and that means the world to me. If I can be just a fraction of the father that my Dad was, I will have been a success.

Leave it to my father to think of a way to say so much to me in three little sentences. He was weak and couldn't say much, and yet, he did. In response, I was only able to say a couple of things back before he had to go, as breathing was becoming difficult for him. I told him that despite all we had been through, there was only one thing that I could thank him for - my life. Without this man, I have no idea what kind of person I would be today. What I do know is that I would not be anywhere near as successful in life, anywhere near as loving or accepting of love, or anywhere near as happy. This man took what was a broken, frightened boy and turned him into a man he could be proud of through unending love, patience, kindness, and a will to see me thrive. As I sit here trying (and failing) to hold back the tears, I can be nothing but thankful.

Daddy, you were the man in my life. You were a class act all around. I promise that I will try to uphold the standards you had, and will always try to think of the things you would say to me when making an important decision. I also promise that I will do everything in my power to make sure that your grandson, Alijah, remembers who you are. As he grows, I will ensure that he, along with any other children I may be blessed enough to have in the future, knows what an amazing grandfather he had - both by verbally telling them of you, and by showing them by trying to be the father that you were to me. You saved me, and you were my hero.

I love you dearly.

- Andru





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