

The Joys and Heartbreak of Foster Care

Multiple Perspectives from Foster Parents,
Service Providers and Former Foster Youth

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Part I

Chapter 1: Pumpkin's Arrival

“Aww! She is so cute! Where's her mother?”

Hmmm...I wasn't really sure how to answer that question, coming from my husband. How do I say, 'I'm her mother...and by the way, you're her father.' Well, at least for the weekend. Rather than explain, I just looked... and smiled.

His facial expression immediately changed. “No you didn't. Why would you do that? You know I'm going out of town in the morning.”

“I know,” I replied, growing more and more aware of how much of a bad idea this could be. My last experience with my first foster child was an absolute disaster. I was told he was the cutest blonde-haired boy, three years old, big blue eyes... and that was true. But something wasn't right. He actually scared me.

When my husband and I were in foster care classes, the facilitator discussed returning a child that wasn't a “fit”; I thought, who could do such a thing? After all these kids have been through, who would dare give a child back? Well, I found out. On the third day, I called the social worker, told her I was bringing Christopher back, that I couldn't take him another day. She argued that she would be in court for the next hour, and maybe she could send a worker over to help me with my ‘parenting skills.’ The whole time we spoke, Christopher lie stretched on the kitchen floor, screaming like a wild animal, rolling into the trashcan, and kicking the counter edges hard enough to break a toe.

I could hardly hear the social worker's suggestions, but anything other than her saying, “Bring him back immediately,” well, I just didn't want to hear. I was saturated with his tantrums, and tried to explain, this child, this beautiful boy who sucked his thumb so much he had created a perfect arch in his teeth, had assuredly been raised by a pack of wolves in the Alaskan terrain and

was barely human. I was convinced of this. While she explained, I put the receiver of the phone to Christopher's mouth and let him bellow his irritation directly to her. She was clearly not amused. I told her that by the time she finished court, I would be on her front step. As I hung up the phone, Christopher looked up at me, eyes completely dry, and said, "Mommy, do you want me to stop crying?"

Mommy? Something maternal in me cracked, and I wondered, questioned what I was doing. I shook my head, "No, if it makes you feel better, you can keep crying." And back he went to screaming, kicking and rolling, as I went to gather his few belongings. It was so incredibly hard to drop him off at the brick office building, to see the recognition of the social worker in his face, to hear him say, "I'll stop crying! I'll be good!" But it was too late. I was exhausted, scared, and at my wit's end. I had never felt that way before. Not towards a child. But I literally feared for my safety, he was so out of control. What was I thinking? And here I was again.

I had agreed that Thursday night, on the third call, to accept a foster child, making it clear that I would accept this child only for the weekend. I had made it perfectly clear that I had to work on Monday morning, and they were to pick this child up at precisely 8a.m., and please, do not be late. This was going to be the opportunity for me to retain or surrender my foster care license, depending on how things worked out with this child.

A tall, slender social worker with frizzy auburn hair rang my doorbell, a toddler clutching one of her large hands, a binder in the other, and a plastic garbage bag of clothes that reeked of cigarette smoke tucked under her arm. I had imagined what this little girl would look like, but I was so completely unprepared for what I saw. Long, disheveled hair hid big brown eyes, fear had recently been etched onto her face, and she held a death grip on the social worker's index finger.

She was 2 ½ years old, wearing clothes for an 18-month old, and she was absolutely determined she was not staying with me.

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I sat on the carpeted floor, the couch supporting my back, while Zoe sat a safe distance against the love seat. The Lion King movie seemed to appease her as she took note of her surroundings. Anytime I would try to talk to her, she would lower her head, look up with distrustful eyes, and say, “No!” After a few side glances and growls, I thought maybe it was best to just let her relax after all she had been through today.

Soon after, my husband, Deric, arrived home from work. In the midst of packing for his trip to Maryland, he tried to make brief conversations with Zoe as he moved from room to room gathering shoes, belts, and a jacket for the northern weather.

“Hey, cutie! What’s your name?” he asked.

“No!” with a grunt, a growl, and a scowl was the reply.

Deric walked into the guest room where he kept his clothes. Walking through the living room, he gave her another wave. “Hi, cutie! Do you have a real name?” he asked again.

“No!” she hissed with passion and determination. “Unhhn! No!”

I just looked at her, blankly. Well, she wasn’t crying, she wasn’t screaming, she wasn’t having a tantrum, and she certainly did not make my heart race with fear and uncertainty. I could handle this toddler attitude for a weekend.

More unanswered hellos were traded, until finally, Deric gave up and said, “Well, I’ll just call you, Joe. Your name is Joe. Hi, Joe!”

Zoe did not like that at all. She screamed, I jumped, and Deric walked away with indifference. When Deric came back with an armful of clothes, he waved again. “Hi, Joe! How

ya doing, Joe? You okay, Joe?” and continued walking to the bedroom. Zoe growled and whined in exasperation, then ran into the adjoining dining room, hiding underneath the table behind the pillared table leg. She positioned herself perfectly to observe Deric’s every movement while still being able to watch the Lion King on the big screen tv. It became a test of wills, and Zoe finally realized she was outmatched. While I had given in to the fact that she wanted to be left alone, Deric was relentless in smiling, waving and calling her by her new name, “Joe,” at every opportunity. Finally, the growls stopped and Zoe made wide-eyed contact with Deric. He stared back at her, not realizing the bond that was being formed.

The next morning, we got up early to take Deric to the airport. Zoe sat quietly, strapped into a car seat, while I drove the grey Nissan Armada and Deric checked his itinerary from the passenger seat. We arrived at the airport, I unlatched the hatchback from inside, and Deric jumped out to retrieve his weekend bag. Zoe strained to look over the back seat, then struggled to glimpse Deric from the window. I rolled the window down to appease her senses. As Deric kissed me goodbye, he closed the passenger side door. Then he went to Zoe’s window and said, “Bye, Joe! See ya later, Joe!” In spite of herself, she waved back, but didn’t say a word.

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“Well, what are we going to do with ourselves today?” I thought. It was Friday and I had called out from work. Although hurried, the social worker had left a three-ring binder labeled Child Resource Record the night before; I hoped it contained all the necessary information required to get me through the weekend.

I opened the binder; it was practically empty, but held multi-colored folders inside. The first yellow folder was labeled Section I – Medical/Psychological/Social. A typewritten list stated this folder was to be used for Consent to Treatment and Release of Medical Information

forms, Medical and Dental Appointments and Doctor's Notes, and Child Psychological Evaluation (if applicable). I imagined Christopher's future yellow folder being completely filled with cautionary notes from all manner of psychiatrists and social workers.

I flipped to the next folder. Section II - Birth Certificate, Social Security Card, Immunization Records, Medicaid Card, and Child's Picture with Identifying Information on Back. The only item in this green folder was a picture of Zoe printed on computer paper the night she was removed from her home. I turned the paper over, looking for identifying information, and the paper was blank. Figures. I guess I was hoping for instructions on what to do with a toddler, but there were none to be found.

Continuing to search the rainbow of empty folders, the next was Section III – School/Day Care Records, Report Cards, Individual Education Plan (IEP). This blue folder gave me a clue that I would need to enroll Zoe in some sort of day care, as I couldn't take off from work indefinitely. Oddly, that had never really occurred to me. I didn't know the first thing about finding a child care provider. Could I really leave her at a school? Would she think I wasn't coming back? The thought of leaving her, just while I went to work, upset me. I remembered how much I loathed preschool at the Little Red Schoolhouse, and I wouldn't wish that on anyone. Still, I had to find someone to care for her during the day. Why hadn't anyone called to check on this child?

Next, Section IV – Legal. This purple folder was meant for Pre-Disposition and Disposition Orders, Case Plans, Judicial Review Reports and Orders, Delinquency Documents, Provider Input forms. I had no idea what any of this meant.

Lastly, I flipped to a red folder labeled Section V – Forms: Contact logs, Foster Parent Travel Policy, Inventory of Child's Possessions. Hmmm...child's possessions? That trash bag

full of clothes that were too small and smelled of stale cigarettes? I fully intended to wash them and donate them to the nearest Salvation Army. Mr. Bunny, however, was special, and I knew the way Zoe cradled him and nibbled on his little stuffed paw that he was a treasured possession she'd never part with.