

Editorial

Foster child's journey: 'I just wanted to be a regular kid'

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I just wanted to be a normal kid. But foster children never feel normal. We always feel as if other kids know our histories, what ugly events led to our being pulled from our homes. In my case, I've felt different my whole life. Because my mom had a serious drug addiction, I was born exposed to cocaine and so as an infant, was taken away from her.

My mom had four other children as well and we were all placed in different foster homes. When I was four I was able to go back home, but because I never knew I had any siblings, it was very difficult for me being thrown back into this situation. By then my mom had had two more children and so there were seven of us. At first it was awful because my older siblings picked on me. I felt like a stranger – and my mom was a stranger to me. But soon I grew to love them.

Though my mom had gotten off drugs by then, she was still drinking and partying a lot at night. My oldest sister used to babysit us when my mom wouldn't come home, but I don't remember the bad times. She may have had a problem with drinking and drugs, but I always remember there was food on the table. But eventually the partying and the different men in and out of the home were cause for my siblings and me to be taken from my mom again. When I was eight years old, an older sister and I were placed together in a foster home while my little brother and sister were also placed together. The rest of my siblings – there were nine of us by now – were split up.

It hurt a lot and I would cry every night. It was horrible to not get to see each other. I wish there had been some way to keep us together.

I was placed in my first foster home for about nine months. Then we were sent to another foster family. I loved them and it was the first time I felt some normalcy and stability. But, after about a year, the agency that handled my placement was shut down and so new caseworkers from a new agency had to place me and my sister in another home. It was so hard because I felt I had had a connection with this family.

My next placement didn't go so well. Though at first my new foster parents wanted to adopt me, the process took too long, dragged on for three years and I think everyone finally gave up. Things deteriorated for me in that placement and by the time I was 15, I didn't think I could still be adopted. I didn't want a new foster family because I didn't want to leave my friends or my school, but at the same time I was very unhappy. My sister had been sent to live with another family when our adoptions fell through and I was very lonely without her.

At 15 I left and was placed with another foster family in Susquehanna County. I was there for three months. Then I was placed with a foster family in Wyoming County. In my tenth-grade year I was in three different schools! But fortunately, my final foster family placement was a good match for me and I stayed until I graduated from high school. I love that foster mom. She and I talk almost every day and she is like a mother to me now.

Today I have my own apartment, my own job, pay my own bills and am going to school at Luzerne County Community College. I am doing all right. But I hated growing up not having a stable family. It was horrible. All along I just wanted to be a regular kid. I wished I could have been with my brothers and sisters and I wish that I had had a permanent family sooner.

Jonika Bradford, 18, lives in Luzerne County and is engaged in the Porch Light Project (www.porchlightproject.org) which seeks reform of the Pennsylvania child welfare system to assure a "forever family for every child."