

Intentions and Results

A Look Back at the Adoption and Safe Families Act

“I Want to Hold on to Them”

ASFA’s Impact on Teens

By the writers of *Represent*, a magazine by and for youth in foster care; compiled by Nora McCarthy with editors Rachel Blustain, Al Desetta, Kendra Hurley, Laura Longhine, and Autumn Spanne

Stories in this paper reflect the experiences of youth in foster care who have written for *Represent*, a national magazine written by and for teens in care. Teen writers for *Represent* have explored adoption, aging out, relationships with siblings and birth parents, and other topics related to permanency in dozens of stories.

Listen to Teens

Youth in care need permanency options that honor all of their connections. By Laura Longhine and Nora McCarthy.

Since the Adoption and Safe Families Act was passed over a decade ago, child welfare agencies have operated from the belief that kids should leave foster care as soon as possible for permanent, stable homes. Until ASFA, many kids were stuck in limbo in foster care, moving from home to home, never sure whether they’d return home after years separated from parents, or whether they’d live in foster care until 18 or 21, when they often left care with nowhere to go.

ASFA included a stricter deadline for terminating parental rights and financial support for adoption. Now, most kids nationwide are indeed leaving the system to permanent homes. In 2005, more than fifty percent of children who left the system reunified with their parents or primary caregivers, and another twenty-two percent were adopted or discharged to legal guardians. But most of these were younger children, not teens.

For teens, permanency is a much more elusive goal. In 2005 only 5,750 teens were adopted (11 percent of total adoptions), while almost 25,000 teens aged out of the system. That’s a lot of teenagers who are leaving the system without permanent connections to adults. As a result, former foster youth are very likely to end up homeless or incarcerated,

and without the education to find a decent job.

One barrier to permanency is the adoption process. Some teens do not want to be adopted because adoption can permanently sever connections to birth family, including siblings. Many teens in care don’t live with siblings but have legally mandated visits, and many also maintain informal contact with their birth parents, even if parental rights have been terminated.

Adoption laws, which were designed to protect the relationship between adoptive parents and infants, don’t reflect the importance of maintaining these ties. Adopted children, including teens, are issued new birth certificates bearing only the new parents’ names. Adoptive parents have the right to end contact with birth family, including siblings. Few states have court-enforceable post-adoption contact agreements, which would guarantee ongoing contact with birth parents or siblings. These laws must be changed. Teens need their relationships with biological family, especially siblings, to be protected while they attach to another family that can provide long-term stability.

Custody arrangements and subsidized guardianship must also be expanded so that more teens can leave care for families that will help them succeed. These changes will make it more likely that teens in care will find permanent homes and that child welfare agencies can uphold ASFA while respecting the wishes of youth in care.

In the following stories, teens describe the steps that helped them find permanent connections, and

the barriers they faced. Manny and Natasha found adoptive families and went through the difficult process of learning to trust again. Tamara chose to live with her sister, who became her legal guardian when her mother relapsed, rather than enter foster care. Akeema and Natalie chose not to be adopted. Jessica and Wunika struggled with their siblings' adoptions. Eric and Erica maintained connections to their birth parents despite years of separation.

Above all, these stories show that no federal policy can anticipate the needs and dreams of every child in care. Caseworkers and child welfare policymakers must remember that the intent of ASFA is to protect children and keep them connected to caring families. Child welfare workers must listen to teens in care and help them find family situations that feel right to them.

Brick by Brick

My foster mother and I building a relationship before she adopted me. By Manny Sanchez. © *Represent*, Nov./Dec. 2006. Reprinted with permission from Youth Communication.

By the time I got sent to my third foster home when I was 8 years old, I'd started to believe that all my experiences in foster care would be negative. I was trapped in a circle of revolving doors, and I didn't think I'd ever be able to stay in one place.

On my way to my next foster home I thought I'd better be ready to leave in three or four months, and I was already worried about where I'd get sent next. I was also scared of my new foster mom. I pictured her as a witch with razor-sharp teeth and claws.

But when I met Melba, she had a happy face, anxious but full of excitement. She showed my brother and me our room and told us to make ourselves at home, but I didn't unpack my things. I felt like there was no point since we would be leaving soon anyway. I started to imagine the horrible things she would do or make us do when my social worker left.

My heart started to pound after my social worker left and I heard footsteps closing in toward the room. Melba's mouth opened and just when I thought she was going to breathe fire, she asked, "Are you guys hungry?" Daniel said yes, but I said no. I was, but I wasn't comfortable asking her for anything. When she went to use the bathroom, I ran to the kitchen and grabbed something to eat.

The first few months were all the same. I would get home from school, go to my room, close the door and

do my homework. When Melba would come by and ask if I was hungry I'd usually say no. She didn't annoy me or force me to eat. She gave me my space, which was what I wanted. At dinnertime, I would just stay in my room. Most of the time, Melba would come in and ask if I'd finished doing my homework. I have to admit, it felt good to know she cared. We'd sometimes have little awkward encounters. Maybe a "Hey" or "Hi" but nothing more than that.

After the five or six months, I started thinking I might stay. I noticed Melba's consistency when it came to feeding me and checking my homework. Sometimes I'd take some change off her dresser to see how she'd react, but she never seemed frustrated. I started to feel a little warmer inside. I began to answer, "Yes," when she asked if I was hungry, and I started leaving the door to my bedroom open. We even started to have conversations.

I found out that Melba had had other foster children living with her, but they were given back to their families. I thought that maybe the same thing would happen to me. I thought that Melba could stick with me until I was reunited with my family. This let me feel comfortable trusting Melba. Pretty soon I started to hug her when I came home from school, and I started showing her more affection than any of my previous foster moms.

On my 9th birthday, Melba took Daniel and me to the World Trade Center. I thought that we were going to do something boring, but I was shocked when we got to a huge building that towered over me. I'd never seen anything like it in my entire life. I was so happy that she remembered my birthday, took me somewhere and had gotten me a present.

After that, I opened up a lot more. I believed that Melba had paid her dues and earned her stripes. I started talking to Melba a lot, and I often found myself the one starting the conversations. We'd talk about the news, school, TV.

For years, my birth mother had filled my head with the dream that I'd be going home. But every time she made a promise that I could go home and then didn't keep it, I felt knocked down to the ground. That's when my mother would come again and lift me up, only to knock me down again. But eventually, I got used to her routine.

Around the time I turned 14, I realized that I might never be going home, and that it was possible Melba might adopt me. One day Melba sat me on the couch and said, "If you want to be adopted, I am here for you." I had grown to love Melba, but the idea that

I couldn't live with my parents again seemed weird to me, and made me sad. I had to think about my situation before I could make a decision.

Finally I recognized that I wasn't going back home, and I knew that adoption was what I wanted. Now we're in the process of making that happen. Melba has already been my parent for so long; the only thing that the adoption will change is that my brother and I will legally belong to her. Melba has given me advice and taught me those life lessons that you need to succeed, like saving money, helping people and taking school seriously.

Melba and I have developed a bond over the past several years and I am happy that soon it will be permanent. Melba has been my salvation from a dramatic and awful life. We started from one brick and built a skyscraper of trust, understanding and love.

Clean Slate

Even a perfect adoption couldn't erase my past. By Natasha Santos. © *Represent*, May/June 2004. Reprinted with permission from Youth Communication.

On April 16, 2003 my foster mother and I went to court so she could adopt me. I felt weird and uncomfortable, almost like I was to be heading for the courtroom to trade in my identity. My mother sensed my doubt and became frustrated. She said, "Come on or I'll call the entire thing off." So we went.

I wanted to be adopted. My adoptive family felt like a real family. They stuck together and seemed bonded by their deep affection for one another. It seemed like they wanted me and wanted to help me. I thought I could fit in, that I had found a pretty good home.

At times like Christmas and other holidays, or the rare occasions that we were all in the same room at the same time, talking and laughing together, I felt safe and wanted, like this is what families are about. Warm feelings, a Christmas tree and happy smiling faces. Normal family. I always wanted that.

I thought that once I got adopted, everything would feel right inside me, like Christmas every day. I believed all my past troubles and trauma would be erased and that I would start new. I thought I'd feel secure in my family. I'm still waiting for that to happen.

For a long time after I got adopted, I felt angry and hurt. I had hoped that I could tell my family everything about my feelings and my past, and that they would want to listen to me. But it didn't always go well. I always felt like they were rejecting me. When I

talked with my mother about a foster mother I had before, my mother always seemed to defend the foster mother. That hurt me. I thought she secretly agreed with how the foster mother had treated me. That made it harder for me to confide in this new family. I tried to trust them anyway, but years of rejection and ridicule had left me emotionally withdrawn. My insecurities began to appear.

The worst was that, when I did something wrong or hurtful to my new family, and they would bring up painful things I had told them about my past. I felt like they were trying to prove to me that I had always been a bad child, and what I endured wasn't abuse.

I gradually began to realize over the weeks, months, years, that my family can't handle certain things, like talking about the abuse I went through. What they did to deal with the sometimes overwhelming information I gave them was to downplay what happened.

So I learned what to divulge and what to keep to myself. I stopped telling them major things about myself. My feelings were spared and their minds were at rest. But trying to keep those feelings in has been painful. I was upset a lot and couldn't concentrate. I still haven't dealt with the sexual and emotional abuse I endured for many years.

Recently, though, during a post-Christmas morning, my mother and I discussed my mental stability. We were incapable of doing that before, either because I feared rejection, or because she feared upsetting me.

I felt anxious, but I began to tell her how I felt. I told her about my panic attacks and my paranoid thoughts about what classmates and teachers might think of me. And she listened. I told her about my struggle to forget my former life. When she listened and spoke to me understandingly and encouragingly, I was surprised.

We even talked about my past foster homes, and I came to understand that she wasn't defending my old foster mother. She was trying to make me see that the foster mom had her own problems and was taking them out on my siblings and me. That was a weight-lifter, because for a long time I felt that the way the foster mother treated me was all my fault. I needed her to tell me it wasn't.

I've realized that there is no such thing as a normal family, and that I will drive myself crazy looking for families like the ones on television. From hearing my friends' description of their families' embarrassing acts and arguments, it seems to me that no one can always get along. That helps me to understand that my family isn't far off from normalcy, if there is such a thing.

I came to this new home with broken spirits and a heavy heart. Now I'm getting better, I'm almost revived. I have people who want to make me well. We're learning to trust each other and to be a lot more considerate of one another. I've almost found my dream family. I want to hold on to them.

Sensitivity Chip

Teens feelings must be safeguarded during the adoption process. By Natasha Santos and Pauline Gordon. © *Represent*, May/June 2004. Reprinted with permission from Youth Communication.

Recently we went to the set of a TV program that features teens in New York City who want to be adopted. On screen was a number that parents could call if they wanted to adopt the teens on the show. It's a similar program to Wednesday's Child on CBS.

In fact, Deana, one of the teens who was featured the night we went, had already gone on Wednesday's Child, but she hadn't found a family yet. Deana wanted to be a model or an actor, and she was charismatic. She spoke clearly and vividly, and seemed to have everyone hanging on her every word. Deana had been in a lot of foster homes and wanted a family to love her. She said she didn't care who she lived with as long as they respected her, and that if they didn't, she'd talk back to them.

The audience was really interested in Deana. People were asking her: "Would you be comfortable living with a single father who'd help you pursue all your dreams?" "Would you be comfortable with a white family?" "Would you be comfortable having a sister?"

Marisol, 12, also went in front of the group. Marisol wanted badly to be adopted. She felt abandoned in foster care. Marisol thought adoption would be her cure-all, and that by telling her story on television she'd find a family that would take her home.

But when she got in front of the cameras she was shy and didn't talk much. Marisol said only that she wanted a family that would appreciate and love her. No one in the audience asked Marisol questions. We were relieved that Marisol hadn't seen how the audience reacted toward Deana, because if she had, she'd have felt pretty bad.

We worried about how it might affect these kids to expose themselves in the search for a family to love them. We feared they might think, "If no one accepts me for who I am, then who I am is not good enough."

We were also disturbed by the attitudes of some prospective adoptive parents. One woman asked a

teen, "How tall are you?" Why would you ask that question? It was like she was picking out an animal. Later we asked that woman why she wanted to know the girl's height. "I don't want anyone taller than me," she said, jokingly. But she seemed to mean it.

The kids on the program seemed like they were counting on adoption to fix their lives. One told me, "My caseworker told me I was going to get adopted today." Marisol shook her head when we asked, "What if it doesn't happen?" She refused to believe the possibility of not getting adopted. She said, "I'll get adopted if I behave."

So we got angry when we talked to the program's organizer, Pat O'Brien. He said that the goal of the show wasn't to get the kids adopted, but that it was a "consultation" for people thinking about adopting. We were shocked. Like Deana and Marisol, we really thought the parents in the audience were interested in making a home for them. Why else would the parents ask such invasive questions?

We hope the system will try harder to be sensitive to teens, despite the pressure to get kids adopted. Adoption is not a cure-all, and many teens in care will never be matched with an adoptive family. Teenagers are people, not objects. We don't need the false promise of adoption to mess with our minds.

In Control

I was able to choose a home that's right for me.

By Tamara (Names have been changed). © *Represent*, March/April 2008. Reprinted with permission from Youth Communication.

Recently I moved in with my 22-year-old sister, Tasha, because my mother started using drugs again.

When I was 2, my brothers and sisters and I were placed in foster care because of her drug use. She got clean and regained custody of us four years later. I remember being so excited about going home. All I wanted was to be with my mother.

My mom stayed clean for ten years. But things weren't good at home. My mother was always yelling, making mountains out of molehills. She cursed at me every day, saying things so cruel that sometimes I hated having been born. Still, she was my mother, and we had our good days. If I was feeling sad, she would say things to make me feel better.

Then, last summer, things escalated. She was going from job to job, she was losing a lot of weight, there was never any food, and the arguments we had became way more intense, and more violent. Once

she slammed my head against a mirror, angry that I'd told Tasha how she'd blown the money meant to pay for our brother's graduation.

All these things were major clues to my mother's drug addiction, but I didn't want to believe she was at it again. Then came a signal I couldn't ignore: my mother stole \$100 from me that I had gotten as a birthday gift, and then lied about. I wasn't even angry, just disgusted that she could lower herself to such a level. I realized I'd been blind.

That same day my sister Tanya and I decided to go stay with our oldest sister Tasha, who'd moved out of mom's house about six months earlier. That night, while I lay on my "bed," (a bunch of quilts on top of quilts) I imagined going home, waiting for my mother to get herself together. What if she couldn't? What if staying with her began interfering with my own life plans? In three years I was going to be 18, and probably already in college. If I went into foster care again, my world would go topsy-turvy again. That would certainly affect my schoolwork, and maybe even my mental health.

I didn't want to hurt my mother, but I felt like staying with Tasha long-term was the only way for me to be in control of my life. Finally Tanya and I told Tasha how we felt. Her only response was, "If you don't want to go home, then I'm not going to make you."

A couple of days later, we all went to the social services office so that we would legally be able to stay with Tasha while she tried to get temporary custody. From there we had a month of court dates, only two of which my mother showed up for. Both times, my mother was enraged, and it was almost impossible to talk to her.

After a couple of weeks, we started having supervised visits with her at the agency. My mother was like another person during these visits. She'd talk about how she couldn't wait for us to come home, and how everything was going to be different. I didn't believe her, and I didn't want to let her continue this wishful thinking.

Finally I called my mother to tell her we weren't coming home. "Ummm, Mommy? I have something to tell you." My voice had already begun to wither away.

"What's the matter, what is it?" she asked with concern in her voice.

"I don't want to come back home, and neither does Tanya. It's not that we don't love you, it's just that we'd feel better if we stayed with Tasha. Please don't be mad."

There was a brief silence. Then my mother said, "No, it's OK, I understand. I know that I can't provide

you guys with everything you need right now, and Tasha is just doing a better job than I can. Trust me, I'm not upset. It's fine."

"OK," I said, feeling somewhat relieved. We exchanged I love you's and hung up, but I just lay down feeling overwhelmed with worry. I knew that in some way I was breaking my mother's heart. But I also knew that staying with Tasha was the best thing for me.

I'm glad I was able to make a good decision about where I wanted to live, and that the courts gave Tasha custody instead of placing my sister and me in foster care. I feel in control of my life again, and more sure of my future. Tasha takes the time to listen to me, treats me with respect and values my opinion. She makes me feel safe and wanted.

Saying No to Adoption

I want to reconnect with my own family. By Akeema. © *Represent*, March/April 2008. Reprinted with permission from Youth Communication.

At 14, I moved in with my first foster family. My social worker kept telling me that this would be a nice family to adopt me because they'd adopted my younger sister at birth. But I didn't know this family, and they didn't know me.

Even though I've grown to know and love my current foster family, I still don't want to be adopted by them. In my experience, people have walked out of my life whenever I've started to count on them. For that reason I don't allow myself to really get close to anyone. I'm so used to being let down that I'm not willing to risk it.

I also don't want to commit to a family that's not my own. When I think about becoming part of a different family, I feel deprived from my own life, as though I'd be losing a part of who I am. My family is a part of me. If they were taken away from me I'd feel as if I didn't have a say in my own life, like social workers were deciding who I am.

I don't want to live my life through other people's families. My sisters who have been adopted since birth carry their adopted names, and they don't really know anything about "our" family. I especially don't want to change my last name. Your last name has a history behind it, and that's something very sacred to me.

I'd rather help strengthen my own family relationships than build the connections I have with my foster family. So instead of adoption, I've decided to stay

in the system until I age out at 21. That way, ACS (child welfare) can help me pay my way through college and then, hopefully, I can accomplish my goals.

No, Thanks.

I couldn't be another mother's daughter. By Natalie Kozakiewicz. © *Represent*, May/June 2004. Reprinted with permission from Youth Communication.

About a year and a half after my picture was put in the adoption album, a few different families wanted me to be adopted. I wondered, "Do I have to be adopted? Who should I choose as my family? Can I wait before deciding?"

I thought it would be good to be part of a family again, with parents who would choose to adopt me and really care about me. I thought that I could become close to that family, although not as close as I was to my real parents who had died. My biological parents raised me and made me who I am.

But adoption also made me nervous. Who knew if I would go into a family that really cared about me, or one that would abuse or neglect me? I couldn't really tell what a family was like by going out to dinner with them a few times. For some family to think they could just walk into my life and claim that they're my parents made me feel uncertain about them.

My sister and I met one couple who wanted to adopt us a few times. They lived upstate and gave me a gold chain with a real sapphire on it and a pair of earrings to match. They had a nice big house and were planning to take us to Maine for the summer for a vacation. The couple seemed to really like us.

But the whole thing made me feel strange. I didn't like how far I'd be from the friends who have been there for me since before my mother died. I also felt like the family was trying to buy us. I was so confused. Finally, my sister and I decided to turn them down.

After that, a family friend, Gia, wanted to adopt us. She and her boyfriend lived in my family's building. They are great people with good advice and who care, but still something was holding me back. It took me a while to figure it out, but I felt that I had to be the way they expected me to be or else they wouldn't like me or accept me. It felt like too much pressure. So I turned Gia and her boyfriend down too.

I didn't have to worry about those things with my mother. She was there since I was born. I knew she would love me no matter what.

I don't have to worry about that with my foster

mother, either, since we don't have much of a relationship. But at least I'm left alone to figure out who I am. I like that. I also want to take advantage of the supports that foster care offers, like help with college tuition and housing vouchers. So I turned down the whole idea of adoption, period.

Separated at Birth

At least my siblings and I have visits. By Jessica Wiggs. © *Represent*, May/June 2006. Reprinted with permission from Youth Communication.

At 12 o'clock on Christmas day, my grandma received a phone call from Kings County Hospital. My mother had just given birth to a baby girl she named Christmas Martha Wiggs. Christmas day is also my grandma's birthday and she wept, saying, "This is the best birthday gift ever."

Before Christmas was born, my mother already had eleven babies, and most of us had drugs in our system when we were born. For 16 years, I've lived with my grandma, two little sisters and my oldest brother. Two of my siblings live with their fathers, and the last four of my siblings (Christmas makes five) are all in different foster homes, or they've been adopted. I see my mother about twice a month, and I love her, but I can't forgive her. I often wonder what she will choose in the end: her kids or drugs.

When we arrived at the hospital they let my grandma go in to see her granddaughter. When she came out she said, "Jessica, you know that I love all of you and I will do anything to help you, but Christmas will not be able to come home with us." I understood that my grandmother already had enough children to raise.

During her first year, my family and I saw Christmas every other Friday. Christmas was placed with the same family as my brother Elijah, so I knew she was in good hands. My only fear for Elijah was that he was too spoiled! But when I held her for the first time and looked in her shining black eyes, I still cried. I felt joy being a sister again, and pain that she wasn't with me.

When Christmas was about 2 and Elijah was 3, their foster parents adopted them. They changed Christmas's name to Eliza, though I don't call her that. I do not feel that they should have the right to change her name because she is still our baby. I know that Christmas will always have some Wiggs in her.

Now that they're adopted, I no longer have a legal right to see them. It's hard to see her and Elijah and

know that their parents could decide not to bring them next time. It makes me wonder if at some point we might lose our connection.

Because I do not want to hurt too much, I try not to think about what's happened to my family, but just to let it go. I have learned to block out the thoughts. I have learned to live each day without my siblings. Instead, I keep my head up and let my siblings know they will always have a shoulder to lean on.

Goodbye, David

I lost my brother to adoption. By Wunika Hicks.
© *Represent*, July/August 1993. Reprinted with permission from Youth Communication.

When I was just 8 years old, I became a mother to my brother. I had to stay home all day to take care of David, who wasn't even a year old. My mother was never home. She'd be out trying to find a job, to make some money so we could have a decent meal.

So I had to do everything my mother couldn't do—make David's bottles, change his pampers (yuk!), wash him, and rock him to sleep. I'm surprised I didn't get left back because I hardly went to school. Do you know how it feels to look out the window in the morning and see other kids with their book bags while you're stuck in the house? So it was a relief in a way when my brother and I were placed in a foster home.

Five years later, I moved into a new foster home, and it was much better. It wasn't long before my social worker told me that my brother, now 6, would be moving into a new foster home, too. But there was a twist: the social worker said that my brother's new foster parents wanted to adopt him.

When she told me this, I stood up and just walked around the room. I was in complete shock. I began to cry. Was this really going on? I suddenly felt so protective of David. I asked my social worker if I could still see David after he was adopted. She told me that his new parents would make that decision. She also told me that they wanted to change my brother's name—not only his last name, but his first name too.

"How can they do this?" I asked the social worker. "What gives them that right? I took care of him. I'm more of a mother to him than anyone could ever be. I know what he likes and dislikes. I'm his mother, I'm his sister, I'm everything to him! I'm all the family he has—me, not some strangers!"

The social worker just looked at me. She could see the pain I was going through, but all she could say was, "That's the law."

I asked my social worker to find out if they'd allow me to see David. She said a good time for a visit would be around the Christmas vacation, if the adoptive parents agreed. I was happy that I'd finally get to see him. But before the visit could be arranged, my social worker transferred. A few months later I got a new social worker, but she didn't care that I missed my brother. Pretty soon, she left too.

The third social worker was better. At least she listened. I told her my problems, but she told me that when my brother was adopted his records were sealed. That meant I couldn't find out where he lived, much less visit him.

I couldn't cry. The tears wouldn't come. I felt completely alone and helpless. I had tried so hard but I hadn't gotten anywhere. I ran home. My foster mother asked me what was wrong and I told her. She got in touch with my law guardian, who is trying to help.

I can't believe my brother is in a complete stranger's home. I haven't seen him for three years. I don't know where he lives. I don't even know his new name. And I didn't have a chance to say goodbye.

I think of David every day—so much that it hurts. It hurts the most when his birthday passes. He's getting older without me. I hope he hasn't forgotten me, but remembers the times I took care of him as a mother.

Two Moms in My Heart

My new mom lets me stay close to my birth mother.

By Eric Green. © *Represent*, May/June 2004. Reprinted with permission from Youth Communication.

I came into foster care in 1988, when I was 4 years old. Things at home were not good when I was very little. Sharon and my father, Billy, sometimes left my three siblings and me in the house for days. Billy was an alcoholic, and when he died, we came into foster care because Sharon was too sick to take care of us.

It hurt me to live with parents who were not really mine. I felt that Sharon was my family and no one else. When our foster mother, Ms. Hazel, took me downtown for a family visit, Sharon would rarely show up. But when she did, I was incredibly happy that I had the chance to see her face and talk to her. I wanted the visits to go on and on. Whenever the visits were over, I didn't want her to leave. For me, being separated from my biological parents felt like I'd been kidnapped and taken away for a very long time.

Then one day when I was 9 years old, Ms. Hazel got a call from the agency. She told my brother

William and me that we were moving. Ms. Hazel then took us downtown to our agency. To our surprise, we met Lorine and Robert. They were total strangers, but they told us that they were going to adopt us. I felt a bit sad about moving, but I hoped that things would turn out well.

Soon after moving in, I drew a picture of Chun-li, a character in my videogame. I showed it to Lorine and she told me that she liked my drawing. I found out that I was an artist. I felt very welcomed and cherished. I felt happy to have a family that cared about me. Then I wanted to be adopted. But I also felt sad. I knew that once I got adopted I would never go back home to Sharon again.

Lorine and Robert let me keep visiting Sharon. At Christmas, my oldest brother David picked up William and me and drove us to visit Sharon at her new home. In Albany, we did a lot of things together, like watch TV and movies, play videogames, draw, look at our pictures from when we were little, and stay up late—almost 'til morning. We had a great time. She gave me lots of laughs, hugs and kisses, and I called her Mommy.

But four years ago, Lorine told me she had an announcement to make. She told William and me that Sharon had passed away from cancer. I felt my world was blown to smithereens. I was stunned, petrified, sad, confused, but mostly I was infuriated. I was so upset that I just wanted to do something crazy. But instead, I remained calm, relaxed and composed. I didn't want to let on how hurt I was.

Since then, until this very moment, I have felt so mad inside because she's gone. I think about her and wish that she were alive again. Moving on is not something that I have been able to do.

Lorine and Robert don't know the pain and anger I feel about losing Sharon, and they don't know about the sadness and isolation I felt when I came into foster care. Inside, I am trying to deal with those feelings. I think I need help understanding those losses, but I won't share my feelings with Lorine and Robert because I don't trust them.

I know that Sharon thought it was a good idea for me to get adopted. Sharon told me that she thought Lorine and Robert could give me what she couldn't: good quality clothes to wear, a bed to sleep in, video-games to play, food to eat every day and a good life of happiness. Sharon could only give me fun and freedom.

Lorine has helped me feel less sad and less angry by pushing me to do my best. She has also told me to constantly keep in mind that Sharon still loves me. I

want Lorine to help me turn my life around and make me feel happy again.

I'd like to express my feelings to Lorine. I'm afraid that if I told her I think of Sharon as my real mother and miss her so much, Lorine might think that I don't love her. I also think it might be sad for Lorine if she understood that I'm going through so much pain.

It's affecting me not to try to trust Lorine. I'll feel bad if I'm sad and angry like this for the rest of my life. If I can find the nerve, I want to ask Lorine for help finding a way to feel happy again without forgetting my mother.

Loving Letters

Reconnecting with my mom through the mail. By Erica Harrigan. © *Represent*, Sept./Oct. 2006. Reprinted with permission from Youth Communication.

My mother and I use letters to catch up on lost time and heal from our painful pasts together. For years my mother and I had lost contact completely. I was taken from her as a young child, and then again when I was 12. (My dad split from the family when I was little.) I've been in foster care since then, and during that time she lost her rights.

But last year I wrote a story for *Represent*, a magazine by and for teens in foster care, and sent it to her in the mail. My story described the two years I spent in a mental hospital as a child, and my struggles to deal with the effects of my mother's explosive temper and drug abuse. I also wrote about nights I spent sleeping in the hallway of our building, which led to me getting sexually assaulted.

Even though the story described the pain I went through, I sent it to my mother so she could see how well I was doing, and to show her how proud I was of my writing. I wanted to let her know that I still wanted her to be a part of my life despite the mistakes she made raising me.

I was unsure if it was a good idea to be in touch. The court demanded that my mother stay away from me, and I feared that if the judge found out that my mother was back in my life, I'd be in trouble. But taking the risk was worth it. When my mother wrote back, I felt like a piece of my broken heart was repaired and a part of my pain was wiped away.

In my letters since then, I've let my mother know that I am not angry at her for what I went through in foster care, but I am angry at her for not taking care of her responsibilities. I also let her know that I appreciate that she is now trying to make up for the bad

things she did. From my mom's letters, I've found out that she went through similar experiences to me. She wrote, "All my life I was being abused and raped also."

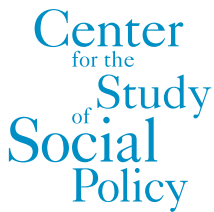
Another time she wrote: "I understand that it hurts to talk about the past. The courts have demanded that I face my fear. I've been sent to support groups for sexual abuse, and handling rejection and abandonment. All of us hate to talk about these painful problems." Reading her letters, I was glad that my mother could understand my pain growing up. I felt less alone knowing we'd been through similar things.

Writing to my mother also has given me a better insight into why she used to drink and become angry and violent when I was younger. Knowing her struggles, I felt I could forgive my mother and feel less hurt and anger, and that we could build a better bond.

My mother seems to feel sad about the way she parented me when I was a kid. She wrote: "I tried to be a good mother... When you grow up to be a mother try to be better than Joann Harrigan. Remember to set rules for your children. Hugs and kisses, Your mother."

Despite enduring a lot of violent behavior when I was living with my mom, I also experienced painful things living in foster care. Sometimes I feel I would have been better off with my mother than being placed in foster care. At least my mother has always loved me. She expresses that a lot in her letters.

I did go through a lot in the past with my mother, but I'm hopeful now that we're both growing together, getting to know one another and dealing with our problems head on.



CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF SOCIAL POLICY

1575 Eye Street, NW
Suite 500
Washington, DC 20005
202.371.1565 phone

55 Exchange Place
Suite 404
New York, NY 10005
212.979.2369 phone

www.cssp.org



URBAN INSTITUTE

2100 M Street, NW
Fifth Floor
Washington, DC 20037
202.833.7200 phone

www.urban.org