

# When My Son Came Home

I've been a foster parent for almost seven years now, and during that time I've had 16 children in my home. Two were teenagers, and the rest were 0-5 years of age. Being a foster parent is a great feeling, especially if you love kids. There are so many children who deserve a family and stability in their young lives. A foster parent might accomplish what a whole team of social workers, therapists and courts can't. Having a nurturing relationship with a child is essential to the child's healing and growth. The foster parent's role is important, even if others believe it's not. Even my job revolves around what I love to do. I'm the foster parent community advocate at Family Paths, and the position enables me to support foster/adoptive families and relative caregivers who are caring for children, who have been removed from their biological parents. Family Paths' mission is to strengthen families and relationships by helping the community.

One child in particular who captured my heart the first day he was placed in my home was Ernest Lee Turner. He was 2 weeks old. I still remembered that special day when, Khyla from the placement unit called and asked me if I would like to have a 2-week-old baby boy placed in my home. She knew I would say yes. Everyone in the placement unit knew to place the little ones in my home whenever I had openings because I love to take care of babies. Two other foster parents; Dale and his wife only did emergency placements, and they had picked him up from the hospital. He was only with them for a few days before Dale dropped him off to me.

Ernest was placed in my home on February 17, 2010. The moment I laid eyes on him, I knew he would be a part of my life regard-

less of the outcome. Ernest's biological mother's case was unusual. She is schizophrenic and has an intellectual disability. She also had a drug addiction. In the county I live in, the Child Protective Services office believes in family reunification. There have been cases where children have been placed back with their biological parents more than a dozen times before the parental rights are terminated; and in this case that is exactly what happened before her parental rights were terminated. During the time Ernest had been in my home I went through a lot when dealing with his mother. His mom and I got along pretty well considering the circumstances surrounding her case. She even asked me to stick around; even if Ernest left my home, and I told her I would because we both loved him.

Then six months down the road his mother was approved to go into a transitional home for women. Ernest's mom had two case managers who were known to the foster parents as bullies. I didn't realize it until I had to take Ernest to his first visit with his mother. Boy was it difficult, those case managers were so mean to me, and I had to ask the social worker for supervised visitation. Over time the issues with Ernest's mom and the case managers had gotten worse and I was just tired of dealing with it. The social worker in the beginning told me Ernest would most likely become available for adoption, but that didn't happen.

On April 20, 2011 I received a call saying I would have to drop off Ernest to his mother. There was no sorry, no explanation on what happen, there was nothing. I was crushed for days, I cried. After everything I went through to prove I was worthy to be his mother, I felt it was done in vain. I dropped him off the next day. Before I handed her Ernest, he looked at me and smiled; and

I smiled back with tears rolling down my face. Crying and calling momma, I had to watch my baby be carried off to a whole new world. I had gone through so many transitions. I wanted to give up my license, and not care anymore. But, once the initial pain went away, I decided to continue to be a foster parent and I had to accept my role. I realize in this field of parenting, a person will have issues and challenges when dealing with the system; and it's not the fault of the children who are in the system.

One day I got an unexpected call from Ernest's mom, and let's just say at the end of the call, she asked me to be his godmother. Of course I said yes. A year had passed, and I got another call from Child Protective Services placement worker, asking me if they could place my son with me again; and the cycle started again. This time he stayed for more than three months, and then was gone again. I wasn't as upset as I was the first time, because I saw him every weekend. Then a month later, he was back in my home, and I had to ask the worker, is this it?

I just finished my homestudy and hopefully by this coming November, I will officially be Ernest Lee Turner's mother. The love I have for him is second to the love I have for God. My son is my life, joy and inspiration. He is an angel brought down for me to take care of. Everything I've been through and still going through has been worth every bit of my patience. When I see him smile, or hear his laughter I know everything will be OK.

I read a quote by Jeffrey Holland, and it said, "You are doing God's work. You are doing it wonderfully well. He is blessing you, and He will bless you — even — no, especially — when your days and your nights may be most challenging. Like the woman who anonymously, meekly, perhaps

even with hesitation and some embarrassment, fought her way through the crowd just to touch the hem of the Master's garment, so Christ will say to the women who worry, wonder and weep over their responsibility as mothers, "Daughter, be of good comfort; thy faith hath made thee whole. And it will make your children whole as well."

Every night before we go to bed, I would read to my son one of his favorite books. So, one night my son said to me, he would like to tell me a story. He said, "once upon a time I was in the dark forest, I was scared and when my mommy found me she had wings. My mommy took me out of the dark forest and hugged me and said, 'I love you.'" Ernest turned to me and said, "Mommy, that's you. The end."

I was surprised, smiling and crying all at once. He is only 3, and the story he told me was deep. What I've learned about children that young is that they're smart. My son knows all the transitions he had been through, and he also knows he is safe now. My life, my love, my son Ernest. ❁

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Shanna Johnson is the foster parent community advocate at Family Paths. She has been a foster parent for more than seven years. Johnson has had more than 13 kids in her home and has three biological children ages 25, 21, 17, who are happy to have a little brother. Johnson is a concurrent family licensed home/adoptive home. Johnson is the liaison between the foster families and Alameda County Social Services and is part of the Alameda County Foster Parent Association. The association provides support and networking services for foster parents. Ernest's adoption was finalized Jan. 15.

## The Wisdom of the Well

We are reading a bedtime story, my foster son and I, and the little girl from fairytale land is sent out the door and to the well to draw water for her family. My son looks up at me, and I catch his pause, "Can you tell me what a well is?" I ask.

He tentatively shakes his head, so I start with the beach, digging for periwinkles deeper and deeper until the water is oozing sand through our fingers faster than we can scoop it out. From there I launch into water tables, and times when our faucets were buckets and...

"Oh, I know, I know! There was a wishing well by where I used to live!"

"Yes!" I reply, and before I can continue with too much information, he takes over excitedly, "My mom used to take us kids to it after it got really dark. And she would lower me and this other littlest kid down to the bottom so we could get all the money!"

He, again, has silenced me. I nod, confirm that we love wishing wells, and together we continue our story.

I tuck him in and kiss him goodnight, this gentle child whose innocence is so complex. And then I let myself feel — how dare she! That is so dangerous, so reckless! So... so selfish! And it's illegal! It's trespassing! It's theft!

But my litany ebbs unspoken. For I know it is not for me to judge. Laws are made by those of us comfortable in warm buildings, sleeping on soft beds. Wishing well coins are discards from our linted pockets and purses. And the endangerment of children? I allow my older kids to horseback ride, to ski — honestly, who is more at risk?

My darling foster child again is teaching me, in his unassuming, childlike way. He is a frightened, yet daring Tom Sawyer in Huckleberry Finn, scaling the grown up walls of rules, power and perception.

He brings home to our family the wisdom of an open heart, and of acceptance of each other however clothed and burdened. We are reminded to welcome, without judgment but with challenge and hope. ❁

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Michelle Bradley and her husband are the parents of five children. Bradley, a retired attorney, continues to be actively involved in community, parish, and youth work. She serves as a director and officer for her public school district's Board of Education.

