

Through the eyes of a former foster child

Lancaster Sunday News

Published: Jun 07, 2009

I was born in Haiti, though my parents moved us to the United States when I was just a child. But shortly after we arrived in Virginia, my dad left, and my mom and sister and I had to find temporary housing in a women's shelter. After about a year my mom moved us to New Holland to be closer to her family.

At first, life was good.

My mom met and married a man and they had a child together. I loved my new little brother and I thought everything was going to be OK. But after awhile my mom's behavior became very unpredictable. She was angry that my dad had started contacting her again. While she wanted my sister and me to have a relationship with him, she was torn because he had hurt the family so much. I think this was why she became very unstable at times. I remember police showing up at our house often, after neighbors had complained that my mom was noisy, or that my siblings and I were not being cared for properly.

So it was awful when one day Children & Youth officials, along with the police, took us away from our mom and then sent us to different foster homes. It was heartbreaking. I was very connected to my brother and sister. I wanted to keep us together and make sure my family would be OK. As a 7-year-old girl, I always felt like a mother figure to my younger brother and sister.

I was told my mom was sick and that we could go back home when she got better, but as a child I had no way of knowing if anyone was truly helping her. Certainly reunification with my mom and siblings was a goal of mine.

I was with my first foster family for a few weeks until I was placed with another foster family for a few years. Everything was fine and I felt better about things. My sister was placed with a foster family in the same neighborhood, so fortunately I got to see her a lot. Then suddenly my dad came back into the picture again and he and his new wife were trying to get custody. I was excited to get to know my dad. Soon we all moved to Virginia and I was happy to be back with my sister.

But, my joy was short-lived. My dad left my stepmother and again, I didn't know what would happen to me. My sister and I were sent back to Pennsylvania to rejoin my mother, whom I was told, was doing much better. I was feeling bittersweet about the move because I had moved so much. While I was looking forward to seeing my mom again, I was nervous that maybe she wasn't well and, at the same time, I had adapted to my new life in Virginia. But I was also so angry with my father for leaving us again.

After about a year together, the emotional and financial pressures of taking care of us were too much for my mom and stepfather to handle and once again, we were all removed from the home. This time there were four of us, as my mom had had another son. My siblings were separated again, and my brothers were sent to live with foster families hours away, so I only got to see them on holidays. Fortunately, the foster families that first took my sister and me in in 1997 opened their doors again, and that was the first sense of real permanency for me. I was 12 years old at the time. Then when I was 17, my foster mother adopted me. At first I was reluctant because I didn't want to lose my name or my Haitian heritage, but I prayed a lot about it, and I decided there were more positive reasons than negative ones to being adopted.

Most importantly, I craved home and family all the time. I just really wanted to be a part of a strong family, to have a real bond with a parent. So in the end I knew adoption was the right thing for me to do.

Today I am a freshman at Millersville University. I hope to become a psychologist and deal in family and child counseling. It bothers me when my friends complain about their parents, because if only they knew what I went through as a child to find a parent who would care for me, love me, never leave me.

Saintalia Oracius-McKinney, 19, of Lancaster, 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."