

Keeping Brothers & Sisters Together is My Wish

There came a point in my life when my mom just couldn't take care of us anymore and provide the parenting that my brother and I needed, and so when I was 14 and my brother was 12 we were taken from our mother. Because it was considered an emergency placement, we were whisked from our home with literally just the clothes on our backs. I was placed with a foster family but my brother was placed in an emergency shelter.

It was extremely difficult being separated from my brother. I think they should have kept us together. We grew up together, so why would anyone want to separate us? All of a sudden we could no longer see or talk to each other every day or find comfort in our friends as we had to change schools. That's a lot of turmoil. I hated having to go to a new school and make new friends, but I am a pretty social person and so I did OK. But for my brother it was really scary.

My brother has some mental and physical challenges and being taken from our home was very difficult for him to overcome. Our separation made it even more difficult. I think I could have helped my brother cope with the loss of our home and school if we had been kept together through the transition. We were pulled out of our house and out of our school and sent to live in new places that were an hour and a half apart. My brother and I never got to live with each other again, though we were able to see each other a few times a month.

I was fortunate to stay with my initial foster family for four years until I graduated from high school. My brother wasn't so lucky and had several placements over the years. I did feel a sense of stability in my foster home and in time came to mentor other foster kids my foster parents took in. I was always the first one to introduce myself, tell them my story and tell them everything would be OK.

Reunification with my mom was a goal at first. Four years passed and when it didn't happen, I told my caseworker that I was okay with how things were. My foster parents and I talked about their adopting me and also about legal guardianship, but because my mom's parental rights had never been terminated, those options just never happened. My foster parents still gave me a lot of support and throughout all of this I have been able to retain some kind of relationship with my mom.

I left my foster family home at age 18 and since then have been able to find a full-time job, meet the man I will marry (we are engaged!) and move into my own home. Things have worked out for me. But I still worry about my brother and all the other teenagers who are in the foster care system feeling scared and alone or abandoned. I hope my story will help people understand how hard it is to be pulled from your home and be sent to live with strangers, hours away from the only family you have ever known.

I hope those involved with youth in the system will do their best to keep brothers and sisters together - and in the same school district - when they must enter foster care. It's a

way to show you know what we are going through, that we have hurt enough already, and letting us hold onto a little bit of who we were to help us get through.

Priscilla Bloom, 20, lives in Columbia County, though as a youth was in the foster care system in Luzerne County. She is engaged in the Porch Light Project, which seeks reform of Pennsylvania's child welfare system to assure a "forever family for every child." Visit the initiative at www.porchlightproject.org.