

An Exception to the Rule

As foster parents work closely with a biological mom, they gain a new understanding and respect for the mother of their foster children

Many of us approach foster care with a certain set of assumptions about the system, kids, birth families, social workers and on and on. From those assumptions we often form rather rigid perspectives and understandings of how things work and how situations and people will end up. In an effort for it all to make sense we arrive at what we believe is, and will most likely be, the norm — the rule if you will. And we often hold out little hope that things can and will turn out differently.

Every once in a while, however, we come across a grace-filled story that serves an exception to the rule — and it shatters what we thought we knew about foster care. These exceptions stretch and challenge us even as they cause us to consider new possibilities and ask the all-important question: “What if?”

Kim and Shelley, whose names have been changed to protect their privacy, have a unique story that is just such an exception. Their story should cause us to re-examine our rule, consider new possibilities and ask ourselves what the foster care system might be like if we, together with thousands of others, acted as, and expected, an exception to the rule.

AN UNUSUAL INTRODUCTION

“Hi, my name is Kim and I’m here to help you get your kids back.” Even as the words

fell from Kim’s lips she couldn’t believe what she was saying. Yet her statement, as compassionate as it was prophetic, marked the beginning of an amazing and inspiring foster care odyssey for all involved.

Kim, a young and inexperienced foster mom, had struggled for days leading up to her first meeting with Shelley. Shelley’s young girls had been removed by Child Protective Services and were now living in foster care with Kim and her husband, Steve.

“What do I say when we meet? How do I introduce myself? How will she react? Do I even want to meet her?” These questions and many more flooded Kim’s mind as she repeatedly wondered to herself, “What have we gotten ourselves into?”

Like many others, Kim and Steve got involved with foster care for a variety of reasons. On one level they knew of the need — so many children in need of protection, care and unconditional love. Motivated by their faith and a deep compassion for these children, Kim and Steve wanted to help and becoming foster parents seemed like the best way for their young family to do that.

At the same time, they were also open, maybe even desiring, to add to their family through adoption. In fact, the thought had already crossed Kim’s mind that maybe, just maybe, these two girls they were now fostering might



one day be theirs. Nevertheless, they became foster parents primarily to help the kids, but were now becoming aware that behind each scared and hurting child in foster care there is often one or more hurting and broken birth parent. They felt somewhat prepared to care for their kids, but they were now coming face-to-face with a less obvious, but equally challenging reality: to truly care for these children they would have to also care about and for their families.



So there was Kim in the child protective services office standing within arm's length of Shelley. In this uncomfortable and somewhat surreal moment their two different worlds met, and Kim knew the foster care journey that God had placed them on was going to be different than anything she could have ever imagined. As she looked Shelley over, dressed in baggy hip-hop garb with her hair slicked down, all Kim could think was "She's just a kid herself." Kim could

sense that Shelley was angry and defensive, but Kim also sensed that more than anything she was just scared. She was right. Kim couldn't have known at the time, but she eventually came to learn that Shelley herself had been abused as a child. Her childhood was nothing short of a living hell.

THE NECESSITY OF HOPE

Lacking any sense of stability and possessing no healthy relationships to speak of, Shelley

wandered aimlessly into and through her teen years and, not surprisingly, fell in with the wrong crowd. No matter what she tried, she always seemed to follow one bad decision with another, until the weight of so many bad choices finally came crashing in on her — and her children. Shelley's two little girls were removed from her home and placed into foster care because the state determined that they were not safe. But like so many other parents in similar situations, Shelley

loved her children and wanted the best for them — everything she never had. The issue was not a lack of love for her kids, but a lack knowing how best to raise and protect them. Shelley had no idea about where to turn or how to escape from the prison of bad relationships and wrong choices she was trapped in. She wasn't the perfect parent and she was keenly aware of that. Maybe the foster care system could provide a way out — not only for her children, but for Shelley as well. In order for that to happen, however,

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Shelley would need to encounter people in the system who wanted to help her children as well as her. What Shelley needed was hope and people who were willing and able to offer it to her.

For Shelley, real hope seemed only a distant reality. In order to allow her kids to return home, Shelley was told that she first needed to create an effective support system around her. That sounded fine and well, but Shelley, like many other young women in her position, hardly knew what an effective support system looked like, much less how to assemble one. Shelley needed more than someone simply telling her where she was going wrong and what she needed to do right. She desperately needed someone to believe in her, embrace her — imperfections and all — and be willing to walk alongside her on the path toward hope and healing.

The changes did not come instantly, but Shelley worked her plan and things

eventually began to turn around. Over the course of many months it was two steps forward followed at times by one step back, but Kim meant what she said when she first met Shelley. What started as an awkward and unexpected greeting had become Kim and Steve's mission. They had come to believe in Shelley enough to take the chance that she could turn her life around. If and when she did, this would mean one less family permanently disrupted. Kim and Steve understood more and more each day that

their family had become foster parents for reasons that were so much bigger than they could have ever imagined when they started. Foster care was becoming their ministry and it was an opportunity to be a part of helping to restore and change lives, even as their own lives were being changed in the process.

As Shelley continued struggling to get things together, Kim and Steve never gave up hope and never stopped praying for Shelley and reaching out to her to show their support in tangible and practical ways. They helped make sure she could get to her parenting classes and counseling sessions. They helped her find a job and even invited her to church. They prayed for her and encouraged her as she made decisions and took steps to put her life back together. They had always been focused first and foremost on what was best for Shelley's girls and they extended that same focus to Shelley as well. As they did, they realized that Shelley and her daughters were becoming part of their family.

Kim and Steve were not the only ones helping Shelley and her girls. Shelley was also blessed to have a compassionate and caring caseworker, who in some ways was too young and inexperienced to know that few would fault her if she assumed Shelley would fail. Equally important, Shelley began attending church with Kim and Steve and she was amazed to see how the church welcomed her in. Church was probably the last place Shelley would ever have expected to find support. In a short period of time, however, the church became the backbone of her support system, helping her to not only find a job, car and place to live, but also the love, acceptance and relationships she needed to ensure her recovery would succeed.

EXPECTING THE EXCEPTION

Kim, Steve and Shelley's story is, in many ways, not the norm. As Kim and Steve soon found out with subsequent foster children, some birth parents are unable or unwilling to make the right decisions and pull things together in order to become suitable parents. But the question remains — should we assume the rule or should we expect the exception, no matter how frustrating it may be at times and no matter how often we are proven wrong?

Foster parents have tremendous power to shape our foster care system by providing an environment that creates many more exceptions, and gradually, if ever so slowly, changes the rule. This is not some idealistic vision that calls for the end of foster care in our lifetime or even an ambitious and laudable effort to clear the roles of children who are waiting. No, what we need is an army of foster parents that re-imagine what is possible because they understand foster care primarily as a ministry.

With a renewed and fresh passion to see hearts mended, bodies healed and lives transformed — both children and parents alike — these foster parents can, and are,

making the realities and outcomes of foster care different for all involved. They expect the exception and refuse to accept or even be discouraged by the commonly assumed rule.

This is precisely what Kim and Steve did with the help of many others. Easier said than done — no doubt. But then again, the exception — filled with miracles of grace and blessings of hope — is far better than the rule.

Today, Shelley is married to a loving husband and together they are raising her two girls. After Shelley's two girls were able to return home, Kim and Steve moved to a different city and Shelley soon followed. She now lives just down the street from them, and they and the kids get together often. Shelley still works for the same company she began working for while her kids were still in foster care. Most importantly, Shelley has come to know and experience the redemptive power of God, and as a result, she continues to heal from her own painful past even as she provides the love and care for her girls that most thought would never be possible.

Kim and Steve fostered again and they ended up adopting a little girl. They have since adopted again. You don't have to talk to them long to realize that they are the first to acknowledge that foster care stories do not always work out like theirs and Shelley's

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did. But having seen the redemptive power that this grace-filled ministry can have, you will never convince them that the blessings of approaching foster care in this way don't far outweigh the risks. After all, two little girls and a mother have been reunited, more healthy and whole than ever before, and no one who participated in or witnessed this

wonderful story will ever see foster care quite the same again. ✿

ABOUT THE AUTHORS: Michael Monroe and his wife lead Tapestry, an adoption and

foster care ministry at Irving Bible Church in Irving, Texas.

Daniel Donaldson and his wife are foster parents in Waco, Texas. Both Monroe and Donaldson regularly write about adoption and foster care from a father's perspective at www.adoptivedads.org.

(kids in waiting)



Laura, 14, is a sensitive, bright young woman who is seeking a permanent family. She likes sports, especially basketball. Laura has a great sense of humor and enjoys practical jokes. She enjoys being part of a group and shopping.

In the eighth grade, Laura does well in school and has expressed an interest in college. She is respectful, caring and eager to please, and benefits from patience and reassurance. Laura participates in counseling, which may need to continue following placement.

Her caseworker prefers a two-parent or single-mother family; however, all families will be considered. Laura has a brother with whom she would like to remain in contact. Financial assistance may be available for adoption-related services.

For New Mexico children, both homestudied and non-homestudied New Mexico families are encouraged to inquire; only homestudied families from other states should do so. For more information, contact The Adoption Exchange at (800) 451-5246. Child ID 8064