

2002-01-01

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Recommended Citation

Deady, Christine (2002) "My Story," *Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 20.
Available at: <http://arrow.dit.ie/ijass/vol3/iss1/20>

My Story

Christine Deady

Christine has recently been elected to the board of the Irish Foster Care Association. Christine is the national representative for children who have grown up in foster care.

Introduction

I had my first experience of foster care when I was about eight or nine. I realise by putting it in writing, that I have been in care for over half my life. I had never heard the words *foster care* before and so had no understanding of it. A social worker at the time told me it was '*experiencing other people's parents*'. I found this foolish: why would we want to experience other people's parents? Why couldn't we just go home and live with our own? But I soon stopped asking questions because I never understood the answers.

My first foster placement was on a short-term basis while my mother was in hospital for an operation, and five of us were kept together. I was the eldest girl and wanted to be strong for my mother so I would never be seen crying. Anyway I always thought that things would all work out alright in the end and that we would be going home soon. My younger sister suffered the most in this placement. Her longing for my mother, and her constant crying was interpreted as 'trouble-making.' I think that many of the insecurities she now suffers can be traced back to this time. She was told that if she didn't stop being bold she would be sent to a place for bold children. She was six at the time. One day she gave me her favourite doll to mind in case she would never see me again. I think it was cruel to tell her such things, when all that was wrong with her was that she was missing her mother. I feel guilty now, that I didn't stand up more for her, as although I was unsure of what would happen, I knew she wouldn't be sent away, but I was afraid to make trouble in somebody else's home. I saw myself as an inconvenience and felt that it was wrong to step out of line. I think those foster parents were wrong in the way they handled my sister, but I have no doubts that they did not realise the effect it had on her. They probably thought that they were right in disciplining her in this way. I think that they may have been inexperienced or else maybe they didn't have enough training.

In a way I blame the system for this. We would probably have been better off looking after ourselves with a little help, as my eldest brother was sixteen at the time. These foster carers had five of us and probably no support or training. Training should be obligatory for foster parents. Maybe there was a shortage of places but there should have been some way of stopping this from happening. It still baffles me how our social workers don't understand why my sister is so angry. What six-year old could have emerged from that unscathed? None that I know anyway.

My second foster placement was in a different community care area. A couple of days after my tenth birthday, which was about two weeks before Christmas, we were again placed in care by my mother as she was finding it difficult to cope. We were broken up into two's this time. I was placed with my youngest sister, who was about a year and a half at the time. She had become almost completely dependent on me, as I had been looking after her at home. She would cry when I left the room, and tried to follow me when I went to school every morning. I would leave home and she would be crying on the doorstep. I resented my foster parents for trying to break our bond. I thought that they were trying to get my sister to trust them and to forget about me, I knew she didn't want to be left alone with strangers at her age and I felt that they were trying to deprive her of the only bit of familiarity she had left - me. I was told not to lift her up every time she wanted me to and not to give her so much attention. All I knew was that she needed me and that she didn't understand what was going on, so I ignored their directions. Looking back I think that it was the right thing to do, because she soon settled in and began to trust our foster parents. We stayed in this house for a few months. One day I came home from school and there was a social worker in the house who told me that we were going home. I remember feeling my face light up at the thought of a new life, getting back to normal again and possibly forgetting the last couple of years had ever happened. My foster mother was upset to let us go and I know that she cared for us both but at the time my mother's love and care was all I wanted and all that really mattered to me. Thinking back now I really should have thanked those foster parents for being the best they could be for us, but I was just clocking up time there until I could go home.

Going home was not as I had expected it would be, for one thing my father was no longer there and I didn't know how to answer the neighbour's questions on where I had been. Nevertheless home is where I wanted to be and I didn't have to go through the complicated access procedures to see my family: once again I was surrounded by them. However, it wasn't long before things started to break down again and the morning arrived when my mother called us all into her room and told us that she wasn't strong enough to look after us, and that we deserved better. I burst into tears and told her I

wasn't going to leave again. The day the social worker came to take us away I begged my mother to let me stay home, telling her that I would help out more and take care of her. My mother gave in to me and when the social worker came to return us to our old placements we told her that myself and my baby sister were staying with my mother. We drove to the house and I had to pretend that I was going to stay with my little sister just like before, because she had once again become dependent on me. When she saw me getting into the car to leave she became hysterical and ran after the car, calling my name. She was only two at the time and the memory of this still haunts me, because once again I know she needed me but this time it was my own choice not to be with her. I don't think there was ever anybody in my life who put their whole trust in me the way she did, and even though I knew I had to look after my own needs I feel as though I betrayed her. This whole episode has had a permanent effect on me as I feel I cannot make promises to her unless I can keep them. I fear she will remember this in years to come and hate what I did, and I wonder will I be able to justify my reasons.

When I was back at home my mother realized that I was unhappy: home wasn't home without my brothers and sisters. She told me that *care* would be a better place for me, and that I'd still get to see her as much as I wanted to. At this stage I agreed, as I felt incomplete without my brothers and sisters.

In the summer of 1994 I had what I would call my first chosen foster home. I had been to this house to drop off my sister and to try to make her feel comfortable and help her settle in, and it seemed like an easygoing, lively home. I asked to be placed here and the social workers and foster parents agreed so the decision was made and I again returned to foster care. I spent the entire journey asking questions. It seemed that there was an army of children there and I would never be bored. I was very unsure of myself for the first few weeks. I loved living with my sister once again and teaching all of the other children how to play the different games we knew. It all seemed like an adventure to me though I wasn't expecting it to last because I was told I would only be there for two weeks.

Two weeks turned into seven years before I knew it and in the meantime my sister left to be with my younger brother. My life gradually became 'normal' again, and I realised that the natural home isn't always the best place for everyone, that it's ok to miss my family and that I don't always have to be the strongest one.

This placement can only be what is described as a success story. My so-called two weeks have become the most secure eight years of my life. My understanding of myself and people around me has greatly increased, and I have come to learn how three-

dimensional foster care is and the fundamental conditions necessary in making a success of it all. The most important thing to me was consistency, knowing that I could see my family at a definite date and the reassurance that it would happen. There were many times when I refused to give the social workers proper answers when they questioned me on what I would like to happen with my placement as, I felt that what I asked for was completely ignored. For instance I was tired of asking for more access on my review forms year after year without any changes being made. I stated the fact that I didn't want to repeat myself anymore and that it was pointless filling out forms that asked the same questions year after year that were never acted upon. However I later found that putting my feelings on paper was the most effective ways of being heard as my requests were on record for future reference.

I have spent ten years of my life in care, some of these have been the happiest days that I can remember and now I feel that I have two families. Being able to keep in regular contact with my brothers, sisters and my mother has made a huge difference in my life. Access arrangements, I know are hard to organise, but this is one of the most important issues in creating a successful foster placement, and social workers and foster carers should realise the misery and grief that separated children feel. I wish that we could all have been kept together but I know that this was not possible. The next best thing is to know that my family was being looked after properly and that I could see them regularly as well as phoning and writing to them.

In writing my story of living in foster care I hope that other people, social workers, foster parents, birth parents and brothers and sisters will read a part of the story which might help explain an experience that you might have had too.

I have been lucky and I believe that the last eight years were not taken from me but given to me.