

Foster Care Children

Bonnie Geer, CRB Board # 29

Although the term *foster care* is known to most Americans, I wonder if most people really know what it means. The term is used in newspaper articles, television news stories and among state legislators when they talk about the annual budget. School administrators talk about children who are in foster care and public health personnel always highlight the care given to children in custody. When someone gets into trouble or does something against the law, reports never fail to include, "He grew up in foster care." In reality, the term mostly carries with it a negative response when used and those who have been in foster care briefly or who were raised "in the system" carry with them a perceived stigma.

The foster care system is just that - a system that is to be navigated, a pathway to safety that is dictated by state law. There are specified events and timelines that must be followed by the child and everyone who comes into contact with him. A multitude of foster care adults monitor both regulations and the myriad of hurdles that must be jumped if the finish line, a safe and loving home, is to be crossed. Apart from being separated from biological parents, the foster child interacts with unknown adults and children's court judges for a year or more and at the end of that time is placed permanently with a relative or guardian, is adopted or is returned to his biological parents. The foster care path is long, hard and scary and sometimes contains a not-so-happy ending.

In my role as a volunteer for the *New Mexico Child Abuse and Neglect Citizen Review Board*, meeting foster children and learning what they go through has caused me to reflect upon my childhood. I had two parents who loved me and made sure that I had a nice place to live and food to eat. I grew up like most everyone does: I went to school, had friends, had a home with a dog and celebrated every holiday, especially Christmas and my birthday. I did not feel especially grateful for my circumstances for I was living life "the way it was supposed to be." However, children who have been placed into foster care often do not have a clue about how daily living during childhood should be. Therefore, because of my reflections, I felt the need to share with others the experiences of one child who actually lives within the foster care system and realizes its impact upon his life, now and in the days and years to come.

To share the journey that foster children take, I have written a series of eleven articles to highlight each step, each hurdle and each event that guides the life of a foster child. I created Micah, a composite of many foster children. My hope is that you, the reader, will understand that beyond the term *foster care* exist children who only want to grow up "the way it is supposed to be." I hope that you will gain greater understanding of the system and that you will come to believe, like me, that foster children are among the forgotten heroes in our society.

Summary of Articles

There is a process for identification of neglected and abused children and New Mexico law, i.e., Children's Code, dictates how children shall be protected and cared for. This series of articles will allow you, the reader, to take this circuitous journey with a neglected and abused child.

Article One: Leaving Home

Children are removed from their biological parents for a myriad of reasons. These might include the parents' inability to care for the child, physical or emotional neglect of the child, parental drug or alcohol abuse, inadequate supervision of the child, etc. However, once the child is removed from the biological parents, an emergency placement is identified. This article begins at **Day One**, when Micah, an eight-year-old boy, is physically removed from his mother.

Article Two: Looking For Family

Once a child is removed, he is placed temporarily in an emergency foster home while a worker from the *Children, Youth and Families Department* (CYFD) gathers information and investigates if there is a relative with whom the child can be placed. While the investigation is initiated, the child stays in the temporary placement, **Days Two and Three**. Micah learns that he will not be going home soon.

Article Three: Finding Safe Haven

When children are removed from their biological parents, they are temporarily placed in an emergency foster home. In some cases, this home becomes their permanent placement. In other cases, children are moved from their emergency placement and placed in another home with permanent foster parents, **Days Four through Nine**. Micah meets his new foster parents, Roy and Ruby.

Article Four: Taking Care of Society's Children

After a child is taken into custody, a custody hearing is held on **Day Ten** so that a judge can decide whether there is justification for the child to remain in CYFD custody or be returned to the biological parent. Micah learns that he will be staying with Roy and Ruby, his CYFD-assigned foster parents, longer than he had anticipated. He also meets more people involved in his case and learns what his immediate future will include.

Article Five: Learning New Lessons

While most children understand that their education and schooling are important, Micah never had the role models to make him think of school as anything other than a place to get food. Not being able to read or write was not a matter of concern either to him or to his mother. When Ruby registers Micah at the neighborhood school, he finds that he is very far behind his classmates, **Two Weeks** after being removed from his mother.

Article Six: Looking For my Mom

Micah is getting used to his life with Ruby and Roy. After **Two Months** in foster care, he pretty much knows the routine and what is expected of him but going to court looms ahead of him. This time the judge will order what Micah's mom needs to do to get Micah back. Micah feels confident that his mother will be better and the adjudication hearing will go well. Micah is becoming quite well acquainted with how the foster care process works even though he is only eight years old.

Article Seven: Living a Life in Foster Care

Children in foster care have feelings just like everyone else. When Micah is rejected by his mother, he spirals into a condition of not caring and not feeling. His CYFD worker reports at the Judicial Review hearing, **Month Four**, that Micah needs special help. Micah has become disruptive, uncooperative and disrespectful. Ruby and Roy report that Micah cannot stay with them any more due to his disruption of their home and the other foster children living with them. Micah will have to be moved to a treatment foster care home.

Article Eight: Needing a Family to Love Me

Micah is now nine years old after having a birthday and feels unloved and unwanted. He is full of anger and self-loathing, blaming himself for what has happened, yet not knowing how to fix it. He is moving to another foster home, **Month Five**, where he has to start all over again. Meanwhile, the CYFD worker is still looking for and investigating the hope that a relative can be identified for Micah's possible placement.

Article Nine: **Finding Refuge in Oneself**

In his new foster home, Micah learns that he has rules to follow. He settles in and begins to learn that he can function with the help of his treatment team and his foster family, **Months Five to Nine**. Micah learns to trust others. He learns about self-worth and how to meet everyday challenges that he encounters.

Article Ten: **Understanding the World of Foster Care**

It has been **Nine Months** since Micah entered foster care. He has met many people who have helped him understand why he is no longer with his mother. He now understands that his mother's problems are her own and that he is not responsible for them. It has been a long journey for a nine-year-old, but it is not over. The *New Mexico Child Abuse and Neglect Citizen Review Board* wants to meet Micah. This Board, which was legislatively created to monitor independently children placed in CYFD custody, will make recommendations to the judge about how Micah is doing in his foster care placement, in school and in his emotional and physical well-being. It is important that he attend the meeting.

Article Eleven: **Finding My Place in the World**

Micah, although only nine years old, is aware of his needs and is very grateful for the help he has received. He understands that he will not return to his mother. However, a surprise is ahead for him and, perhaps, a permanent home where he will be loved. He must, however, follow the legal timeline and traverse the legal milestones until he finds his place in the world, **Ten Months** in foster care and probably **Another Year** until Micah's permanent placement is identified. Until then, he will be cared for and watched over by the caring adults who care what happens to Micah.

For more information on the foster care system, refer to the *New Mexico Child Abuse and Neglect Citizen Review Board* website at www.nmcrb.org