

## Building Trust, Brick By Brick

**By Manny S.**

By the time I got sent to my third foster home when I was 8 years old, I'd started to believe that all my experiences in foster care would be negative. I was trapped in a circle of revolving doors, and I didn't think I'd ever be able to stay in one place.

At my first foster home, there was a kid named Robert who thought he could bully my younger brother Daniel. One day I got so fed up with him that I punched him in the face, and my brother and I got kicked out. Then we were sent to live with my uncle, which was great, until he kicked us out. He said it was because Daniel and I were always fighting.

After getting the boot from my own family, I started to think I couldn't rely on them as much. I figured I could only be independent. I also believed that since I wasn't in those two homes for very long, my next home would be the same.

On my way to my next foster home I thought I'd better be ready to leave in three or four months, and I was already worried about where I'd get sent next. I was also scared of what my new foster mom would be like. I pictured her as a witch with razor-sharp teeth and claws.

### No Point in Unpacking

I walked to the door with Daniel and my social worker and rang the bell. I heard barking and I was terrified at what she might have in that house—perhaps a pit bull trained to scare little kids, or torture them as they slept.

The door opened and I saw a woman with a happy face, anxious but full of excitement. She welcomed us in, but I was cautious due to what I'd heard at the door. Then I looked down, and saw a little dog whose bark was way bigger than his bite.

I looked around the apartment and I liked what I saw, but I was still on my toes.

The woman said her name was Melba. She showed us our room and told us to make ourselves at home, but I didn't unpack my things just yet. I felt like there was no point since we would be leaving soon anyway. My brother and I stood in the hall as Melba and my social worker talked in the living room. I started to imagine the horrible things she would do or make us do when my social worker left.

When my social worker came in to say goodbye I thought, "Yup, this is it." I heard the door slam shut and my heart started to pound as I heard footsteps closing in toward the room, but I played it cool and sat on the bed. Her mouth opened and just when I thought she was going to breathe fire, she asked, "Are you guys hungry?"

## **Giving Me Space**

Daniel said yes, but I said no. I was, but I wasn't comfortable asking her for anything. When she went to use the bathroom, I ran to the kitchen and grabbed a little something to eat.

The first few months were all the same. I would get home from school, go to my room, close the door and do my homework. When Melba would come by and ask if I was hungry I'd usually say no. She didn't annoy me or force me to eat. She gave me my space, which was what I wanted. At dinnertime, I would just stay in my room.

Most of the time when I was in my bedroom, Melba would come in and ask if I'd finished doing my homework. I have to admit, it felt good to know she cared. We'd sometimes have little awkward encounters. Maybe a "Hey" or "Hi," but nothing more than that.

After five or six months, I started thinking I might be here longer than I'd thought. I also noticed Melba's consistency when it came to feeding me and checking my homework. Sometimes I'd take some change off her dresser to see how she'd react, but she never seemed frustrated.

## **Feeling Warmer Inside**

I started to feel a little warmer inside. I began to answer, "Yes," when she asked if I was hungry, and I started leaving the door to my bedroom open. We even started to have conversations about things we liked or had in common. I found out that she'd had other foster children living there, but they were given back to their families. I thought that maybe the same thing would happen to me.

I felt happy that under Melba's care those kids had "survived" long enough to be returned to their families. I felt she could do the same for me until I was reunited with my family. This let me feel comfortable trusting Melba. Pretty soon I started to hug her when I came home from school, and I started showing her more affection than any of my previous foster moms.

On my 9th birthday, Melba took Daniel and me to the World Trade Center, which I'd never visited (this was before 9/11 happened). When we got to a huge building that towered over me, she said, "We're here." I thought that we were going to do something boring, but I was shocked when we got inside. There was actually a huge variety of stores and restaurants. I'd never seen anything like it in my entire life.

## **Part of the Family**

We looked everywhere and we got to eat pizza at a cool restaurant, which I wasn't used to. When we sat down I tried to think of the last time I'd eaten at a table like that. I was so happy that she remembered my birthday, took me somewhere and had gotten me a present.

After that, I opened up a lot more. I believed that Melba had paid her dues and earned her stripes as my foster mom. I started talking to Melba a lot, and I often found myself the one starting the conversations. We'd talk about the news, school, TV and anything else worth talking about. The conversations weren't three hours long, but they were progress nonetheless. I also began to get closer to her family, which was cool. They didn't live with us, but they all treated me as if I was really part of their family.

Around the time I turned 14, I realized adoption was a possibility. We didn't really talk about it, but as time went on I knew that eventually it had to happen.

### **'I'm Here for You'**

One day Melba sat me on the couch and said, "If you want to be adopted, I am here for you." I had grown to love Melba, but the idea that I couldn't live with my parents again seemed weird to me, and made me sad. I had to think about my situation before I could make a decision.

For years, my birth mother had filled my head with the dream that I'd be going home. But it never happened. Every time she made a promise that I could go home and then didn't keep it, I felt knocked down to the ground. That's when my mother would come again and lift me up, only to knock me down again. But eventually, I got used to her routine.

### **Making it Permanent**

When I finally realized that going back home wasn't going to happen, I knew that adoption was what I wanted. Now we're in the process of making that happen.

Melba has already been my parent for so long; the only thing that the adoption will change is that my brother and I will legally belong to her. Melba has given me advice and taught me those life lessons that you need to succeed, like saving money, helping people and taking school seriously.

Melba and I have developed a bond over the past several years. I am happy that I finally got a break from the negativity, and soon it will be permanent. Melba has been my salvation from a dramatic and awful life. We started from one brick and built a skyscraper of trust, understanding and love.

