

Duct Tape and Baling Wire

It all began innocently enough, my decision to become a foster parent. I have no wonderful, earth-shattering reason why I decided this was what I was going to do. No powerful sermon was preached about it the previous Sunday. There was no profound moment. I just woke up and knew it.

I called Terri Yu, of Lincoln County DHS, and thus the roller coaster, known as "being a foster parent" began. I began my classes, and with each class, I was convinced this was something I was meant to do. Through rose coloured glasses, I saw myself as Wonder Woman saving the world from imminent evils. Keep in mind that at this time, my heart was securely intact and as good as new.

My very first placement was a dream come true. I picked up a beautiful newborn baby boy from the hospital and brought him home with me. That dream turned into a nightmare the very next night when I picked up his four-year-old brother. I am pretty sure he was my own personal war on terrorism. This was a child who wanted to grow up to shoot windows out of cop cars. He did not want to become a fire fighter, a pilot, a cowboy.. he wanted to shoot windows out of cop cars. My heart sank, and reality started seeping in.

I was not dealing with innocent children who were thankful you rode in and rescued them. I was dealing with broken children... even the newborn, who did not ask to have drug withdrawals, but that was the life his mother chose for him. I was dealing with four year olds, who should be playing with cars and building forts, but instead they could out cuss a sailor, acted out violently, and knew what "weed" was. I thought that the 4 year old was beyond help. With consistent structure, firm guidance, and love, however, I was beginning to see his potential when he left. I'll never forget his last words, "Shawn, I'll very miss you so much." It was then I noticed my heart had little cracks in it.

I, in my innocence, thought I would be teaching them, but rather they taught me. They taught me that not everyone lives a sheltered life where they are loved and provided for. They taught me food was not something expected to be on the table when you were hungry, but food was a blessing to receive. They taught me that not everyone thinks the world revolves around babies, but rather that babies can be left strapped in car seats for hours upon hours until that beautiful little girl has a permanent head tilt and crooked jaw...all because she was in the way of mommy's partying. My heart broke. I somehow managed to patch it up with a little bit of duct tape and gathered myself together and answered the phone once more for one more baby.

I learned that parents do not show up for visits and/or court dates to get their children back, much less PTA events, recitals, and music programs. I have learned that babies at eleven months old have already learned that life is not fair and they can and will give up on life. I had thought that at eleven months old your only thought was "what can I get into today?" Unfortunately, for some eleven-month-old babies, their thoughts are more along the lines of "I saw daddy hit mommy. Cops took me away, and I am now in a shelter where there are 23 other babies my age. There is nobody to hold me or love me. I cannot deal with this any longer".

I've learned that politics are more important than a four-month-olds wellbeing. I have learned that someone in the DA's office can work deals under the table unbeknownst to DHS. I learned that politics in the system did not care that Mom and Dad could not stay clean. They did not care that Mom had previously lost two children to adoption because she could not change her life. They did not care that Mom could not trouble herself to come to court or come to visits except sporadically. Because a child is ONLY property and has no rights, they sent him home. They never gave Mom a chance to clean up and to be the appropriate Mom a baby with health issues needed. Knowing that he was leaving to go home to unsafe conditions, this time, my heart shattered. Duct tape was not enough to mend it. With a bit of baling wire and lots of duct tape and patches, I put it together the best I could and questioned my decision to become a foster parent.

In the midst of my grief and reconsidering my decision, the phone rang. Terri said "Shadawn, there is an 11 month old in the shelter. He has given up. He is no longer interacting with staff nor responding, and he has shut down. Can you take him?" When I picked up that beautiful brown eyed baby boy and looked into his eyes, what I saw broke my heart. Instead of the innocent happiness of a child, I saw a long black tunnel of despair and hopelessness. Again, my heart broke. I would rock him to sleep each night, kiss him on the forehead, and put him in his bed while my heart broke knowing his story. I brought out the duct tape and baling wire once more.

No longer is my heart in the perfect condition it once was. It has now been broken and repaired more times than I can count. Whereas it used to gleam, it is held together by duct tape and baling wire. More tears than I can count have been shed. I have been asked by many "How do you do this? Don't you get attached and get your heart broken? How do you keep doing this?" I look at the picture of the 11 month old (now 18 months). I look at his eyes in the pictures I picked up yesterday, and where there once was despair and hopelessness, there is now mischief and happiness. Instead of lying there listlessly and not responding, there is a little boy who loves to say "hut-hut" and then tackle mommy.

I do not do this for myself. I do not get my heart broken repeatedly because I enjoy it. I do it because of all my past, present, and future babies. I do it because they need to go to bed at night hearing "I love you". Is it easy? Not only no, but heck no. But every child, 0-18 years old, needs to know what it is like to not have to worry about if they will be fed or not. Even if it is just a few months, they know what it is like to be safe and sound. My heart is not near as important as they are. It will recover; that child may not.