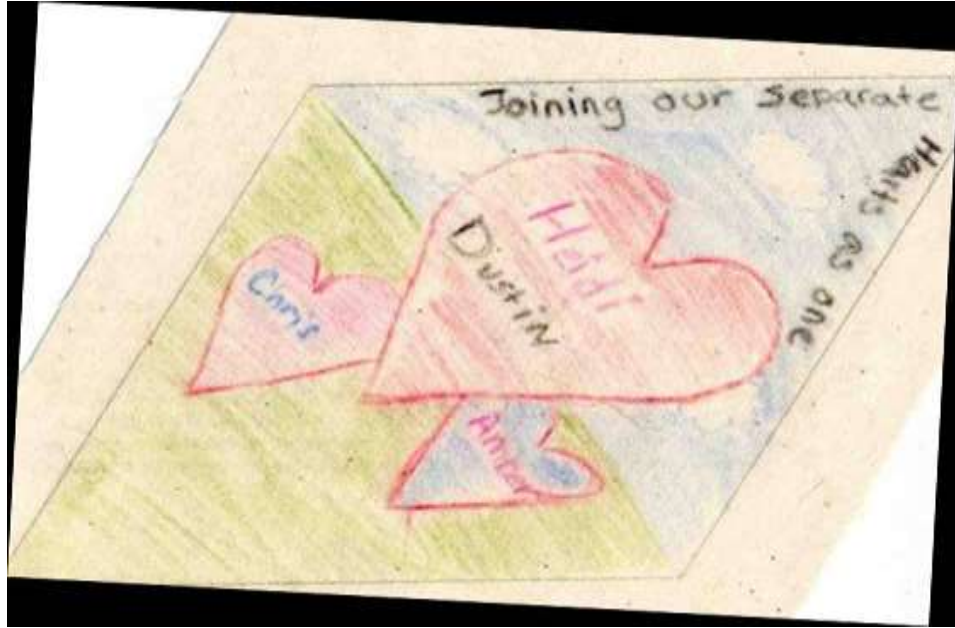


DUSTIN, HEIDI, & AMBER'S STORY



Several years ago, two sisters, Heidi and Amber, were placed with me. They were 10 and 11 at the time. They also have two older brothers, Christopher and Dustin. Chris had already been placed in kinship care with an aunt in another state and Dustin was still waiting to be placed in a foster home. They initially asked if I could take the three youngest kids (Dustin, Heidi and Amber), but I only had room in my truck for two passengers. I was a little surprised at how quickly they offered, "Well, can you take the girls, then?" (I thought they would look for a home for all three kids, but I think there was a shortage of homes.)

Dustin ended up going to live with his other brother at their aunt's home. We stayed connected through the years, especially after my kids started going to Camp to Belong, which is a camp for siblings who have been separated by the foster care system. The founders of that camp, Lynn Price and Andi Andree, were sisters who never knew each other until they were much older because of the foster care system. Eventually, Dustin ended up moving in with Heidi and Amber and me. From there, I ended up adopting him (as an adult) and his sister Heidi. They're happy and doing well, he's at the UW-EC and Heidi will be attending there next year, too. Since I am single and have no other kids of my own, I am constantly aware of the gift I've been given with my kids. I think other families inadvertently take their families for granted, but I treasure them nearly every day. (Like other parents, I do have my moments when they drive me crazy!) One particularly memorable argument with Dustin goes like this, "So do you still want to adopt me?!??" "Yes!" I shouted back. "Do you still want to be adopted?" "Yes," he said. "But you paused before answering!" I shouted again.

The foster care system is still an imperfect and sad system, even though there are a lot of good people in it on all sides. In our case, we had some outstanding judges, social workers, and bio family, but it's still sad, with no easy answers. And my family is no exception. While I love all three of my kids, Amber never wanted to be adopted and always pined for the mom who was in her heart. It didn't matter if her heart was broken often by disappointments; that's still what she wanted. After living with me for nearly seven years, and after seeing her brother and sister be adopted by me (in some respects making her loyalty to her mom stronger), she ended up going to live with her mom who now lives on the west coast. We miss her a lot. Their oldest brother, Chris, ended up in Florida, where he routinely gets help from his ex-step-dad's mother and step-dad, showing that "blood"/ "legal" relatives are not the only ones who count.

On an end note, my kids misunderstood the quilt piece directions and put their names on the quilt. They've had a fair amount of media attention because of Camp to Belong, but one thing my son would say is, " yes, they can quote me, but only if they use my real name." While the confidentiality laws are designed to protect kids, he's never been ashamed of being a foster child and indeed, is proud of who he has become in spite of his background. Heidi, too, has always wanted to challenge the stereotypes that many communities have about foster kids. She earned a scholarship to spend her junior year abroad in Germany, and is very involved in church, choir, drama and other activities. They both have good hearts and give a lot more back than they take in. Along the way, our family has been – and continues to be – very grateful for the help we've received from the government for foster/adoption subsidies and college scholarships, as well as the private sector for various scholarships.