

KIMBERLY'S STORY

Kimberly– “Our Christmas Rose”

Kimberly's favorite thing to draw is this beautiful rose. Kim is a beautiful sixteen-year-old and has been in the realm of the foster care system since 3 days old, when her grandparents took her home from the hospital. After living in the Chicago area until the age of three, her grandparents moved to Rusk County, Wisconsin. Soon after the move grandma died, Grandpa had custody of five grandchildren and two foster children.

This was an important time in young Kimberly's life. She had just lost her grandmother, and she was entering school for the first time. And this is where we met. The fall of 1994 became an important time for all of us– this is where she walked into our lives and stole our hearts. We tried to assist Grandpa by becoming her kinship volunteers and provide her someone to read to her and help her with her ABC's.

During Kim's first grand year, Grandpa moved the children to a new town not far from the blue house. And also during this time we moved to central Wisconsin for my husband's new job. But, Grandpa allowed us to keep contact with Kim and let her come down to visit us in our new home. Life in Grandpa's home was getting out of hand and things were happening to her brother and cousins that should not happen between adults and children. During this same time Kim's birthparents moved to Rusk County.

When Social Services came into help the children they were bounced from inappropriate relative to relative and finally placed in a safe foster home. Just like a rose is beautiful, a child's smile is too! But, this beautiful smile started to fade with the thorny path called her life.

During visits and placements with birthmother, life became the sharpest thorns of little Kimberly's life. (At the same time Social Services decided that we were not allowed to see or talk to this beautiful child.) Both the birthmother and birth-sister (who had lived with their mother most of her life took it upon themselves to physically, verbally, and emotionally abuse this beautiful rose, which had started to fade. During this same time Kim was sexually abused by relatives and strangers her mother felt were good company to have around. After several reports, by caring people to desperately trying to alert Social Services of this tragedy, Social Services finally removed her from this thorny patch of her life and she was placed in a loving foster home. Her faded beauty started to shine just a little. During this same time my husband and I received the best Christmas card in 2002 explaining that our little Kimberly was safely placed back in foster care system and looks safe and well. This was our green light to try contacting her again. It took a little while to find a Social worker that would work in Kim's best interest, but we were blessed by finding Ruth who was pleased to hear we were interested in contacting Kim. We wanted the opportunity to tell her we loved her and we never stopped thinking and praying for her. And too much to our surprise and delight we were asked to be her forever family.

This beautiful Rose has now lifted her wilted bud and now lets people see her beautiful eyes, smile and is starting to trust adults. She has come a long way in a few short years; we celebrate the small moments in Kim's life and look forward to many more.

A note from Kim: I don't feel kids should always be placed with your first parents. We were taken for a reason and the reason is to keep us safe. So please help keep other kids safe.

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.