

Leap of Faith: Adopting our Sons through the State of Massachusetts

By

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This essay is about my family's experiences adopting our two sons through the state of Massachusetts. The application process, the MAPP parenting training, the home study, the placement of our sons with us and the finalization of their adoptions all contributed to a very positive experience for us. I encourage anyone who is thinking about adoption to seriously consider exploring adopting a child or children through the state foster care system.

In 1996, after twelve years of marriage spent concentrating on finishing our educations and establishing ourselves in our careers, my husband, Tim Southern, and I felt that God was leading us to start a family. At that time, we had no idea what God had in mind for us. After a year or so, we realized that God's plan did not include biological children. We agreed that adoption was a good option for us. We both felt that we would have no problem loving and welcoming into our family a child who was not biologically related to us.

We researched applying for a placement through a private agency and also thought about adopting

internationally. Neither of those options seemed right to us, though. We came to the conclusion that, since there were children in the Massachusetts foster care system needing families, we should adopt through the state. We began the process by filling out an application to adopt a child who was waiting for a forever family. We also were required to provide physical, mental health, and character references. Our doctor signed a statement that we were physically healthy, and the minister at our church as well as our four closest friends wrote character references for us.

The state assigned a social worker to us for our home study. Tim and I spoke with her separately by phone, and she made several visits to our house to complete the home study. She met with us both separately and together and asked us detailed questions about our reasons for adopting; gender and age preferences; our relationship; how we resolved differences in our marriage; how we communicated; had either of us experienced any violence in the home; etc.

In the summer of 1996, we completed the required Massachusetts Approach to Partnerships in Parenting (MAPP) training. From the Massachusetts Adoption Resource Exchange site: <http://www.mareinc.org/Steps-in-the-Adoption-Process.html>

“...MAPP training is typically held one night per week for ten weeks...The course is designed to help families determine what child they can best parent and also serves as a self-screening function...This training will include discussions about the children who are waiting to be adopted and what behaviors they might exhibit as well as information about resources and support available to you as an adoptive family.”

Tim and I found the MAPP training to be extremely useful. We learned both big-picture and small-picture aspects of parenting an adopted child. For example, we learned the importance of not communicating negative things about or badmouthing a child's birth parents, partially because the child has the right to a positive view of his or her birth parent, and partially because the child will think that, if the adoptive parent is rejecting the birth parent, the adoptive parent is also rejecting the child. Another example, that I will mention in more depth later in this essay, is the importance of keeping the child's birth name whenever possible. This became an issue for us when we adopted our older son, Kirk; more details on that later in this essay. When we told friends with biological children about the MAPP training, they commented that they wished that they had had some of that parenting training. The training prepared us not only for what to expect from adopting a child but also what it means to be a parent.

We completed the MAPP training in the fall of 1996, and began waiting for the state to match a child with our profile and application. A few months later, our social worker called us about a potential match. I think our short waiting time was due to the fact that we had not indicated a preference for a baby or infant, since such a

preference often means a longer wait for a match.

Finding Kirk: Our social worker gave us information about Kirk, a 3 1/2 year old who had been in foster care with the same foster family since age one. His birth father was in prison, and his birth mother lived in the nearby city where Kirk was born in 1993. He was in foster care because his birth mother was young, had serious addiction problems, and could not take care of him. Fortunately, Kirk was healthy and did not seem to have suffered abuse. Kirk's foster mother described him as a well-adjusted child who had made firm attachments with her and other members of her family. We prayed about it and agreed to take the next step and meet Kirk.

In early 1997, we went with our social worker to meet Kirk at his foster home. We brought a Barney doll to that first visit, since his foster mother had told us that Kirk liked Barney. He still has that Barney doll. Kirk was open to meeting us, seemed excited about getting to know us, and was very verbal. Over the next month or so, we picked Kirk up at his foster family's house and took him on various outings like eating at Friendly's and to the park.

After a few weeks of visiting Kirk in the town where he lived, we brought him to our house for the weekend. The weekend was a big success and Kirk seemed to adjust well to being with us. However, when we were getting ready to take him back to his foster home, he fell down our stairs and sustained a noticeable black eye. Tim and I were both afraid that Kirk's foster mother would not believe that he had fallen down the stairs, that she would instead think that we had done something to him and that we would not be allowed to continue with his adoption. That would have been devastating for us, since we already loved Kirk and felt very attached to him. We felt that he was developing an attachment to us as well. Fortunately, his foster mother believed us when we said he had fallen down the stairs. This incident illustrates the tightrope that pre-adoptive and adoptive

parents walk. Falling down the stairs, which can happen to birth children with no serious consequences, is very different when it happens to a foster child going through the adoption process, or to an adopted child; it could mean a state investigation. We are thankful that Kirk's foster mother believed us.

Kirk's Birth Name: MAPP training stated that it is better to keep a child's birth name, if possible. That made sense but it also presented a problem for us. Kirk was named Kurky, his birth father's nickname. We felt that he would be teased by other children if he kept a name that rhymes with "turkey." We discussed with our social worker the idea of modifying his name to "Kirk." She thought it would be fine. His foster mother willingly started calling him "Kirk" instead of "Kurky." He did not seem to mind one way or the other, so Kirk became his new name. We were happy that we were able to keep his name close enough to honor his birth heritage while also protecting him from unnecessary teasing and other possible problems later. We love the name Kirk; it is unusual enough that there aren't too many others with that name but it is not so unusual that it causes problems for him.

Kirk moved in with us and became our son on February 14, 1997. What a happy day! We drove down to his foster home to pick him up. As we were getting ready to leave with Kirk, his foster mother proved once again how much she loved him. She had tears in her eyes, and Kirk mentioned that she was crying. She told him that she was crying because she was happy for him. I am still moved by her putting a positive spin on the situation for his sake when, in reality, I know she was heartbroken to see him leave.

Since then, I have thought a lot about the frequently unrewarded and unrecognized but vital role that devoted foster families play. Kirk's foster mother gave him such wonderful stability during his 2.5 years with her. I am convinced that he is a well-adjusted young

man today in part because of the foundation that she provided for him during those early years. I remain grateful for everything she did for him.

I was granted adoption leave from my position as a library faculty member at Providence College. So, I was home with Kirk until mid-May of 1997. Tim and I loved having Kirk, but having a 3-year-old in the house was also a big adjustment. We also realized early that it was our responsibility to be Kirk's advocate, which sometimes meant pushing for the services he deserved and was entitled to get. For example, Kirk had an IEP and attended a pre-school in the community where he was in foster care. When he became our son, I looked into getting him into a similar pre-school program run by the public school system in our hometown. I took him to an evaluation session. The director of the program agreed that he needed services but said that she didn't have any openings in her program. Her answer did not sit well with me. I thought she was not taking Kirk's needs seriously. I contacted her the next day and told her that I wanted Kirk in the program and that it was up to her to find space for him. She immediately found a slot and he started the program the next week. I found out later that she was obligated by law to find a space for him. I have wondered if she told me initially that there wasn't space for him in hopes that I would just go away after her first refusal. This is one example of how Tim and I came to know that it was our responsibility, as Kirk's parents, to be his advocates and to insist that he receive the services to which he was entitled. If we did not advocate for him, who would? That experience was one of the many times I realized what a huge responsibility God had entrusted to us when we adopted Kirk. We were responsible for the health and well being of this small person. I know the majority of birth parents feel this same way. However, I was surprised at how strong the same feeling was in us as newly-adoptive parents.

Kirk had no *attachment* issues, probably because he had had great stability with the foster family for 2 1/2

years. We were grateful for that. We had learned during the MAPP training that it is common for adopted children to have attachment issues, because often they have been moved to and from multiple foster placements. He did, however, have some *emotional issues*. For example, for the first few months after he became our son, he insisted on keeping ALL of his possessions on his bed (toys, books, most of his clothes, etc.) Because we felt some insecurity was understandable in a new situation, we went along. After three months or so, he no longer needed to keep his possessions on his bed. Kirk also had some food insecurities during the first few months he was with us. We frequently found jars of peanut butter in his room. There certainly was no problem with having enough food in his foster family, and he knew that there was plenty of food at our house. I wonder if there had been some problems with food in his birth family? Most likely, having control over some food when he wanted it was his safety blanket. I say that because his need to keep food in his room diminished after he had been with us for several months.

Lack of Post-Adoption Services: We were disappointed in the post-adoption services available to us. There were few services to begin with, and the ones that were available were not helpful. For example, we attended several meetings of an adoption support group but didn't find it terribly helpful. Most of the other families in the group were experiencing serious behavioral and/or emotional problems in their adopted children. The issues we were experiencing with Kirk were subtler, such as his problems with focusing and his hyperactivity. We needed coping mechanisms for ourselves and, more importantly, we needed advice on how to help Kirk settle down and focus, but the support group never provided that. We also did not have any luck with the counselors that the state referred us to (more on that later.)

We took Kirk to the events sponsored by the state so that he could be with other adopted/foster care children

and we could talk to the other adoptive parents. Unfortunately, he did not form a connection with any of those children, most likely because the events took place infrequently, and it was often different children at the various events. The events didn't benefit us, either, since the parents dropped the kids off and didn't interact with the other parents. I think the state could have done a better job of connecting the adopted/foster kids as well as the adoptive/foster parents.

Kirk saw a counselor for a few years because we felt it was important for him to have someone other than us to talk to about potential issues with the adoption, etc. He formed a therapeutic relationship with one counselor, but that counselor experienced personal difficulties and often cancelled or rescheduled Kirk's appointments. After about a year of being disappointed every time the counselor had canceled or rescheduled, we decided that continual disappointment was not helping Kirk, so we stopped taking him to that counselor. This experience was another example that the state post-adoption services were inadequate.

In August of 1997, when Kirk had been our foster son for the required six months, we began the process of finalizing his adoption. Part of the process was for us to indicate what Kirk's new name would be. On March 31, 1997, about one year after Kirk had become our foster son, the judge finalized the adoption, and Kirk officially became Kirk Schuster-Southern. We received a new, revised birth certificate as a result of the finalization, which indicated that Tim and I are Kirk's parents. We kept the copy of his original birth certificate, since we knew that he would want to see it in the future.

In early 2012, Kirk told us that he had contacted his birth family and was planning to meet them. We thought this was wonderful, but we also wanted to make sure that they would be a good influence on him and that he would be safe with them. Before we would agree to let him spend the night with them, we wanted to meet his

birth mother, Liz, and her family. We explained to Kirk that we understood their importance as his birth family, but that to us, they were strangers, and that we needed assurance that he would be in a good environment with them. Kirk seemed to understand this and, in March of 2012, he arranged for us to meet them at a nearby city. Somehow it seemed right that he had gotten in touch with his birth mother and that we would be meeting her and her family. She was, after all, the woman who had given him life, and we would always be grateful to her that she had done so. I did not, and still do not, feel threatened by her at all. I was excited about meeting her and the rest of her family.

The meeting with Liz went very well. We took her and her family out for pizza and spent some time getting to know them and their stories. Kirk's birth mother told us that she had tried to keep him but that she didn't have any support, either from her family or from the state; that she was only 18 when he was born, and she didn't know how to raise a child. It was very interesting to talk to her and to realize what a wonderful woman she is. She obviously loves Kirk very much but could not raise him or his birth siblings. We have seen her several times since the initial meeting in 2012 and have a good relationship with her. She and Kirk also have a good relationship, which we encourage. It has been very positive for Kirk and for us to be in touch with his birth family. I firmly believe that the more people who love Kirk, the better. In the fall, Kirk will begin his senior year at Plymouth State University, majoring in Marketing. His essay also appears in this issue of SBG. Tim and I are very proud of the young man he has become.

When we originally applied to adopt, we indicated on the application that we were interested in adopting two children. Both Tim and I had grown up with siblings, so we knew that we wanted to adopt at least two children. The process for adopting Jordan was easier and less time consuming than it had been for Kirk, since our application was still considered complete and current.

Kirk had been our son for approximately eighteen months and was five years old in August of 1998 when we received a call that there was another child who was potential match for us.

Finding Jordan: Jordan's social worker had received our home study from our social worker, and she felt that Jordan, who was 23 months old, would be a good fit for our family. During our subsequent conversations with her, we learned that Jordan was the youngest of four birth siblings: two birth brothers and one birth sister. His birth father had not been involved in his life and his birth mother was unable to care for him due to her having some serious issues. He had been placed with five foster families in his young life. I think that, given that the state had too few foster families and that Jordan had been moved around so much, his social worker decided that the best thing for Jordan was to place him with a pre-adoptive family. At this point, his birth mother's parental rights had not yet been terminated.

We contacted Jordan's foster mother, who told us that he liked books and mechanical toys, that he was slow in speech, and that he had tantrums easily. This slightly negative information did not deter us, and we decided to meet Jordan.

But before we could meet him, we needed to prepare Kirk for the addition of another child to our family. We explained to him that we had the opportunity to adopt another child who, if all went well, would become Kirk's little brother. I remember thinking how wonderful Kirk's response was. He was very excited about the possibility of having a little brother. He did not seem to care that another child would take some of our attention away from him. His reaction showed us that he felt secure in our family and was not threatened by the addition of another child. His reaction also supported our view that Kirk's self esteem was very high. Kirk even used some of his own birthday money to buy a small red ball to give to Jordan at our first visit.

In mid-September of 1998, Tim, Kirk, and I went to meet Jordan at his foster family's home. Kirk gave Jordan the red ball that he had bought for him. Jordan held onto that ball during our entire visit and seemed to understand, even though he was not quite two years old at the time, that it was from his big brother. From that moment on, Jordan has looked up to and respected Kirk, and Kirk obviously loves Jordan very much. During that first visit, Jordan and Kirk played with the ball. They formed a strong bond with each other that has strengthened over the years.

On September 25, 1998, his Family Day, Jordan moved in with us and became our son. Tim and I were excited to add another son to our family, and the boys seemed to get along very well together. Kirk had just started kindergarten, so it was an exciting and busy time. I was fortunate to be able to take a second adoption leave from my library faculty position at Providence College, which was especially important because Jordan had many medical appointments, including visits with speech therapists due to his delayed speech.

Jordan bonded quickly with Kirk, Tim, and me. We were concerned that Jordan would have bonding/attachment issues since he had lived with so many families since birth. We were pleasantly surprised to find that he had few such issues. Jordan also showed us very early that he is extremely intelligent. He understood things very easily and quickly caught up to age-appropriate speech. I think that the stability of living with Kirk, Tim, and me created an environment that allowed him to catch up. However, there were negative effects of the instability he experienced early in life. He had serious issues making transitions and had major tantrums when it was time to move from one activity to the next. For the first few years, we frequently had to leave stores and restaurants due to his tantrums and meltdowns. We removed him from the situation, sat in our van and waited for him to calm down enough to buckle him into his car seat. Tim and I understood

the reasons for the tantrums and tried very hard to be patient with Jordan during these outbursts. Jordan's tantrums did not stop until he was 6 or 7 years old.

Our lack of preparation for his outbursts was another example of our not receiving the post-adoption services that we needed. We asked our social worker for a referral to a counselor who might be able to help us give Jordan the support that he needed to handle his frustration in a more productive way than the tantrums. The counselor to whom we were referred, allegedly experienced in adoption issues, was not helpful at all. We had made it clear to her that we had sought her out for help in dealing with Jordan's tantrums and other behavior issues. However, during a visit with her where Jordan was present, he had one of his meltdowns in her office. Instead of using that incident to help us to learn how to deal with his tantrums, the counselor chastised me saying that I had not reacted properly to his behavior. Obviously, we did not return to that counselor. Jordan eventually outgrew the meltdowns and tantrums. However, I still feel that appropriate counseling would have helped all of us handle his behavior better.

In late 1998, when Jordan had been our son for a few months, the court terminated his birth mother's, Michele's, parental rights. The state decided that he needed to have a final visit with her. Tim and I were very concerned about this. Jordan was only two years old, and we were not at all sure what the benefit would be for him to meet with her for a final time. We talked with our social worker and told her that we didn't think that a final visit with Michele would be in Jordan's best interest. At that point we realized the tenuous situation we were in. Massachusetts has a requirement that a child live in a pre-adoptive home as a foster child for at least six months before an adoption can be finalized. Jordan was our foster child at this point, not officially our son. As such, we had very little say in what he did or did not do. The state controlled everything. As Jordan's foster parents, we had no legal right to refuse a final visit with

his birth mother, or to assert our wishes about anything else in opposition to what the state wanted. Being in this limbo-type situation was painful because we loved Jordan already and felt as responsible for him as we did for Kirk. The end result was that the state required that Jordan have the final visit with his birth mother. They did not require that Tim and I be there for the visit, but, of course, we wanted to be there if Jordan had to be there.

In early 1999, the social worker arranged for us to meet Michele in a neutral environment. To our surprise and happiness, the visit was a wonderful experience for all of us. It was truly a blessing for Tim and me to meet her and to get to know her a bit. We spent several hours with her. She gave Jordan a Blues Clues toy which he still has. We took many pictures of Jordan with her, with us, and with all of us together. We came out of the meeting with a profound appreciation for how much Michele loved Jordan and also with a much better understanding of how heartbreaking it was for her to not be able to raise him. We felt a closeness to, and respect for, her that we would not have known if we had not met her. She gave us letters that she and Jordan's oldest birth sibling, Jessica, had written, for us to give to him when he was older. The letters were full of both love for Jordan and regret for the fact that his birth mother had serious issues which prevented her from raising him. Years later, Jordan used these letters to locate and reunite with his birth mother and the rest of his birth family. Tim and I met her again at that time and found her to still be very devoted to him and to his birth siblings. We were all shocked and saddened by her untimely death in early 2015. Jordan continues to have a very good relationship with his birth sister and his two birth brothers. They are a blessing to all of us.

We finalized Jordan's adoption on June 23, 1999, only nine months after he had moved in with us, and he officially became Jordan Schuster-Southern. The judge who finalized his adoption drafted a document, separate

from the adoption certificate, declaring that Jordan was now an official part of our family, which all of us signed. At the judge's request, Kirk signed the certificate for Jordan, since Jordan was only two years old at the time. I remember thinking how wonderful it was that the judge took the time to make the adoption ceremony special for all of us by creating a wonderful certificate and to give a special job to Kirk, to sign the certificate for Jordan. We celebrate Jordan's Naming Day on June 23 every year. As with Kirk's adoption, we received a revised birth certificate for Jordan indicating that we are his parents. We kept his original birth certificate since it is an important part of Jordan's life history.

This year, Jordan will graduate from high school. In the fall, he is planning to attend Universal Technical Institute in Norwood, Massachusetts. He has a solid work ethic. I know he will be successful in a technical career. We are proud of how he has overcome many losses in his young life to become a wonderful, caring young man.

Family and Naming Days: Each year since we finalized the adoptions, we celebrate two adoption-related anniversaries: Family Day, when the boys moved in and became our sons, and Naming Day, when the judge finalized the adoptions and gave the boys our hyphenated last name. These are two very important anniversaries for us. We give the boys gifts on those days and do something special together as a family. We have always felt it was important for the boys to see their adoptions as a positive thing, as we always have. Celebrating their Family and Naming Days is a big part of that.

CONCLUSION: Our experiences adopting our sons through the state of Massachusetts were very positive. The application and MAPP training; Kirk's and Jordan's placements with us as our foster sons; and the finalization of both adoptions were all positive experiences for us. However, the post-adoption services that we received

were not ideal. I especially regret that we were not able to find a counselor who could assist us in helping Jordan to handle his frustration in a more productive way than the tantrums to which he was prone.

I firmly believe that God's plan for Tim and me was to raise Kirk and Jordan, boys who needed loving adoptive parents. Although their birth parents loved them very much, they were not able to raise them. Kirk and Jordan are not biologically our sons but are our sons in every other sense. They have been and continue to be huge blessings to us. I cannot imagine what our lives would be like now if we had not taken the leap of faith to adopt them.

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