

Leap of Faith: My Sons' Adoption Stories, the Journey Continues

By

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“...belonging comes in all shapes and sizes, visible and invisible, hidden and made, chosen and found.” (Sentilles 2018: 32)

BACKGROUND

There is an ongoing need for families to provide foster and adoptive homes for children who are currently in state custody. In federal fiscal year 2015, for example, there were 10,283 children in the Massachusetts foster care system, with 6,245 of them entering in that fiscal year alone. In the United States, there were 427,901 children in foster care during fiscal year 2015, with 269,499 of them entering in that year alone.

When I compared Massachusetts' foster care statistics with those for the U. S. in general, I noted four similarities. First, the average length of time children spent in foster care was 20 months both in Massachusetts and in the United States overall. Second, the percentage of children who were in foster care for five or more years was nearly the same in Massachusetts (5%) as it was in the United States (6%). Third, males (52%) slightly outnumbered females (48%) in foster care both in Massachusetts and in the United States overall. Fourth, the racial breakdown of children in care in Massachusetts was similar to that of children in care in the United States: 47% of the children in Massachusetts foster care were white, whereas, in the United States overall, 43% of the children in care were white. In Massachusetts 53% were African American, Hispanic or Latino, Asian, of multiple races, American Indian/Alaskan Native, and Pacific Islander, and in the United States in general, 54% were of those races. (AFCARS Report for FY 2015 and Children in Foster Care Waiting for Adoption by Race and Hispanic Origin).

In 2018, the Foster Parent Ambassador from the

Department of Children and Families (DCF), Brockton office, sent a letter to Pearl Street United Methodist Church, among other faith-based groups, to “...let people know of the ongoing need to identify families to care for children in need of foster and adoptive placements... We are always in need of foster families to help care for these children who cannot remain at home because of parental abuse or neglect.” (Allen 2018). The need is also emphasized on the DCF website: “Children are sometimes temporarily placed in foster care because their parents aren't able to give them the care they need... There's a need for foster parents across Massachusetts, from all diverse backgrounds.” (Department of Children and Families website, <https://www.mass.gov/foster-care>).

In addition to parental abuse and/or neglect, dire economic constraints, and other factors, the drug abuse crisis in Massachusetts also contributes to the need for foster and adoptive families. “Some of the youngest victims of the opioid drug abuse epidemic are children who need safe and nurturing homes. Social workers describe the need for more foster families as urgent and critical... The number of children in foster care with the state Department of Children and Families has gone up 38 percent from 2012 to 2017 statewide...” (Myers 2017).

UPDATE

In my previous [Point of View essay](#) (Schuster 2015), I wrote about my family's experiences adopting our two sons, Kirk and Jordan. I had two goals in writing

that first essay: to encourage anyone interested in adoption to explore doing so through the state foster care system and to share my family's positive adoption experiences. My husband, Tim Southern, and I went through the adoption process in Massachusetts to bring Jordan and Kirk into our family. Based on my family's experiences, I believe that adoption through the state foster care system can be an overall positive experience. However, prospective adoptive parents of a child or children who has/have been adopted from the foster care system should expect realistically to encounter at least some challenges along the way. These parents should have appropriate post-placement services lined up in anticipation of possible issues.

In this follow-up to our family's story I provide an update on how our sons have been doing in the three years since I wrote my original essay. Kirk is now 24 years old and Jordan is 21. My husband and I are very proud of how productive our sons have become since we adopted them at ages 3 and 2 respectively. Regarding milestones, both Kirk and Jordan have continued their education after high school and both are working in professional positions. Both young men are trying to be independent, which we encourage; but we also want them to know that we will always be available if and when they need us. Kirk and Jordan exhibit good judgment for the most part. When they are considering something that we feel is not in their best interest, we try to give them objective advice; then we let them make their own decisions.

Kirk and Jordan take responsibility for their mistakes and seem to be open to learning when things do not go as planned. An example of this happened last year when Kirk was training for his new position at Core Medical. Kirk admitted to his supervisor that he had made a mistake in calling a prospective client. Kirk did not try to blame anyone else for his mistake, and he told his supervisor that he wanted to learn and do better. I am proud of the maturity he exhibited.

KIRK: Kirk graduated from high school in 2012. He was in his third year at Plymouth State University (PSU) in Plymouth, New Hampshire, in 2015 when I wrote my original Point of View piece. Kirk had average high school grades. However, he was accepted at PSU for two reasons: He did well on the SATs, and the PSU football coach recruited him to play on the team. During his freshman year at PSU, Kirk wrote a paper on finding his birth family. That paper was the basis for his [Point of View essay](#) which was published in Volume 1 of

Sociology between the Gaps (Schuster-Southern 2015).

At PSU, Kirk studied Business with a concentration in Marketing/Sales. He struggled with academics but worked hard. When necessary, he asked for help or advice and took the help and advice that he received seriously. Kirk spent five years as a PSU student and successfully completed all but three courses required to earn his degree. He fell behind in earning his degree mainly because he changed his major during his sophomore year.

Kirk was allowed to participate in commencement at PSU in 2017, even though he had not finished all his degree requirements. In January 2018, he completed one of the courses online. He is currently (summer of 2018) enrolled in another online course. Kirk's goal is to finish the remaining course and to receive his degree by the end of 2018.

While in college Kirk worked as a sales person for Vector Marketing, which sells Cutco knives. He worked at an office during the summers of 2013 and 2014. He managed his own offices, in Acton, MA (2015), and Plaistow, NH (2016.) As the office manager, Kirk was responsible for finding and negotiating leases for office space; hiring and training salespeople and office staff; overseeing all office operations; and doing some selling.

Kirk matured greatly during his time with Vector. The company taught him appropriate business behavior and attire, time management skills, how to set and achieve personal and professional goals, and the importance of following through. He has applied those skills both to his college studies and to his current sales position.

Kirk is currently living in Manchester, NH, and started a new full-time sales position at PC Connection, Inc. in Merrimack, NH, in July 2018. He spent a year working as a salesperson at Core Medical, a medical headhunting firm, and left that position in June 2018. At Core Medical, he recruited nurses to work on temporary assignments. The position was stressful and demanding, but he worked hard and tried to develop skills and relationships that might help him in future sales positions. Kirk was awarded "Employee of the Month" at Core Medical during his sixth month of employment there. The award is an indication that the company recognized his hard work and achievements. Kirk has a very mature attitude, including a strong desire to be financially independent and to plan for his future.

Kirk has been in a serious relationship with his girlfriend, Cassie, for over four years. They live together in Manchester, NH. She finished her degree at Plymouth State University in 2016, and holds a very responsible

managerial position at a rental car company.

I believe they are planning to get married in the future. However, Tim and I know that they need to be ready for that step. Both of them have student loans, and we think it would be prudent for them to wait to get married until they can pay off at least some of their debt.

Tim and I are very careful not to mention our hope that they will wait to marry until they are in a more secure financial position to Kirk, since we do not want him to feel pressure from us in this matter. Also, we believe firmly that he and his girlfriend need to make their own decisions. Currently, Kirk is concentrating on finishing his degree and on learning as much as he can from his current position, both of which will enable him to move on to another position in the future.

JORDAN: Jordan graduated from high school in the same year that I wrote my original POV essay. He struggled with several issues during his senior year. In early 2015, Tim and I began to see a family counselor because we wanted to be able to help Jordan more effectively than we felt we were doing on our own. Coincidentally, Jordan's birth mother, Michele, passed away soon after we started seeing the counselor. Our counselor gave us valuable advice about how we could help Jordan successfully cope with such a profound loss. Jordan had been in touch with Michele several times a year, and we had met her several times as well. We encouraged his relationship with her, and I think he felt he had just started to get to know her at the time of her death. The counselor suggested several questions that we should ask in order to try to minimize the surprises that Jordan might experience during the services, etc., following Michele's death. We already had a good relationship with Jordan's birth sister, Jessica, so I contacted her. She willingly and openly answered all of the questions that the counselor had recommended we ask. These questions included: Does Jordan have any birth siblings that he does not know about who might show up at his birth mother's wake/funeral? (No) Will his birth father be there? (Not likely and no, he did not show up.) Will it be an open casket (No, due to cremation) Will Jordan be mentioned in the obituary as a survivor? (Yes) Will he stand with his siblings in the "receiving" line at the services? (Yes)

We attended Michele's wake and service with Jordan, sitting in the background and trying not to interfere with his interactions with his birth siblings. He knew that we were there to support him in his loss and grief. Tim

and I were concerned about Jordan experiencing such a great loss at a time when he was already struggling. We talked with Jordan frequently about how he was doing after Michele's death, and he seemed to be doing pretty well. He also had the support of the wonderful guidance counselor at his high school, for which we were very grateful.

Jordan was not interested in attending college. He initially expressed interest in joining the military after high school. We wanted him to explore all of his options before he decided whether the military was the best option for him. We were not surprised when Jordan told us that he wanted to attend a technical school. He had always been interested in mechanics and how things work. Tim and I were enthusiastic in our support of his applying for admission to Universal Technical Institute (UTI) in Norwood, MA. Jordan was accepted and began his studies in August 2015. He lived at home and commuted back and forth to class. In December 2016 Jordan earned Associate's degrees in auto and diesel mechanics with Director's Honors.

We were proud when UTI selected him to continue his studies in Cummins diesel engines and power generators at the UTI campus in Phoenix, AZ. Jordan started at the Phoenix campus in January 2017. He graduated in July 2017 from the Cummins Technician Program.

In April 2017, when he was home from Phoenix for a visit, Jordan interviewed for and was offered a position at South Shore Generator in Wareham, MA. He started his position there in August 2017. After Jordan successfully completed his 90-day probationary period he was assigned to work with a company truck. This first position gave him a paycheck and a sense of independence.

In July 2018, Jordan started a new position as a generator service technician at Electronic Environments Infrastructure Solutions in Marlboro, MA. To find his current position, he took advantage of the lifelong career placement service offered to UTI graduates. Jordan believes that his current position will offer him opportunities to learn new skills and to advance in the company.

Jordan spends his time mainly working and socializing with his friends. We are happy that he lives with us at home, but we also encourage him to save money so that he can eventually live on his own.

PERSONAL INSIGHTS INTO OUR SONS' ADOPTION SUCCESS

Many factors have contributed to our sons' successful adoption and to their becoming productive young adults. These factors include the following:

- **Neither Kirk nor Jordan had a history of neglect or abuse.** To our knowledge, neither of our sons was abused, neglected, or abandoned in his birth home. Both boys had loving birthmothers who, despite their best efforts and good intentions, were not able to care for them. The lack of abuse or neglect gave the boys a positive foundation for the time they spent in foster care and for the years afterwards.
- **Kirk's foster home placement.** Prior to his adoption, Kirk was in a single foster home placement from the age of one year to three and one-half years. We believe that Kirk's foster mother gave him the stability that influenced his later physical and emotional development positively.
- **Kirk's birthmother.** We believe that, during his first year of life, Kirk's birthmother made many sacrifices to care for him in her home. Her prioritizing his needs over her own, combined with the stability that his foster mother gave him up to age three and one-half, contributed to both Kirk's lack of attachment issues and to the development of his healthy sense of self-worth.
- **Kirk was involved in our family's decision to adopt Jordan.** Kirk had been with us for 18 months and was completely settled into our family at the time he first met Jordan. Kirk was excited when we told him about our interest in adopting Jordan which would mean that Kirk would have a little brother. As the boys grew up, Kirk served as an important role model for Jordan. Jordan still looks up to Kirk and consults him when he has an important decision to make or when he simply wants to get Kirk's opinion about something.
- **Jordan's first few years in our family were difficult.** The instability that Jordan experienced in living in many foster home placements prior to joining our family caused him to be immature and resistant to any kind of change. We were as patient as possible and always made it clear to him that he was our son permanently; no tantrum or misbehavior was going to change that.

Tim and I brought a number of strengths into the process of raising our sons. These strengths include:

- **Being consistent in how we interact with them.** We treat the boys with respect and include them in decision-making for the family. We try to listen actively to them and to take their opinions, preferences, and feelings into consideration.
- **Being engaged proactively in all aspects of our sons' lives:** Both Tim and I attended all of our sons' sporting events. We were aware of what they were doing in school and helped them whenever possible. We were familiar with their friends and their friends' parents. We tried to be available whenever they needed to talk or needed support of any kind.
- **Making a serious effort to get to know their birth families:** Tim and I met most of the members of both boys' birth families. We also made a serious effort to get to know them and still enjoy a strong, positive relationship with members of both birth families. Equally important, we never said anything negative about their birth families and when they decided to search for their birth heritage, we encouraged them to do so.
- **Helping our sons make good decisions:** From the time our sons were little, when they needed to make a decision, we helped them identify their options and then let them make their own decisions whenever possible. We deliberately did not step in and solve their problems for them but instead encouraged them to think critically and to make the decisions themselves. I believe the result is that now, as adults, although they respect our opinions when we suggest what we think is their best option, they do not expect us to intervene.
- **Spending a lot of family time together:** From the time Tim and I adopted our sons, we spent a lot of time together as a family, including evenings and weekends after school/work was done. We attempted to make it quality time as much as possible, but we also believed that just being together was important, even if all of us were doing different things. Now that he is an adult and lives 90 miles away, we try to touch base with Kirk at least weekly. We see Jordan frequently, since he lives with us.

We try to get together as a family for lunch or dinner at least monthly. Usually this means that

Tim, Jordan, and I drive to meet Kirk at a location that is convenient for him. Kirk knows that his girlfriend, Cassie, is always welcome to join us as well. We are happy to drive the distance in order to spend some time with Kirk (and Cassie when she is able to join us), and we are also pleased that Jordan joins us when we plan a family lunch or dinner.

- **Seeking help from counselors when necessary:** Tim and I did not hesitate to seek help from professional counselors either when we felt we could improve our parenting skills or when we thought that something happening in our lives warranted outside help. In addition, the boys participated in counseling as they were growing up whenever we felt it would help them. We felt that seeking help from counselors was especially important given that we are an adoptive family with unique circumstances and stressors.
- **Loving our sons unconditionally and communicating that to them frequently:** Perhaps the most important factor in our successful adoption experience was that we made it clear to the boys that our love for them was unconditional and that nothing they did (or could do) would change that. They certainly made mistakes and got into trouble when they were growing up, but they knew that, no matter what, we will always love them.

Both boys know that we are available whenever they need us. Kirk does not normally initiate contact with us unless he has a question or needs something, but he is always open to communicating when we contact him. We try to discuss relevant topics with Jordan as they arise. We have found that it helps to have a brief initial conversation first in order to let Jordan think about the issue and then to broach the subject later instead of expecting him to discuss it on the spot. Years ago a friend who had raised four children told us that humor is very important when interacting with young people. So we try to use humor whenever it is appropriate in interacting with the boys.

CONCLUSION

We are optimistic about our sons' futures. They are on the right paths to be successful in various aspects of their lives including work and social relationships with peers. Tim and I consider our sons' willingness

to communicate openly and honestly with us and to make the time to participate in family dinners to be two important indicators of our continuing good relationship with them.

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