

Growing Patience: An Adoption Story

Foster care and adoption through foster care is not easy, even in the best of situations. But occasionally the process takes a lot longer than it should. Percentages of successful outcomes shrink over time as cases drag on. So, we are especially grateful and celebrate when all the pieces align for a successful outcome. We share with you Zachary Boufford's story of perseverance, patience and growth during six and a half years in foster care, which included three families and two facilities.

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Reflections from Adoptive Parents Daila and Joe Boufford

What led you to decide to become foster/adoptive parents?

We had talked about fostering several times, even before we had our biological child, Mason. But one weekend, it just hit us that the time was right. Joe met a COBYS family at a friend's birthday party and struck up a conversation with the dad. The more he learned, the more he knew he was ready to begin the journey. For me personally, I've always gravitated toward helping those in need. We knew we were in a place in our life where we could open our home to help others and it just seemed like the natural next step to become foster parents.

How did you come to be foster parents through COBYS? How long have you been involved in foster care?

We went through certification in 2015 and became foster parents in April 2016. We had envisioned our journey to be very different. Our original intent was to focus on younger children. Mason was five at the time and we felt it was important that he be the oldest. We didn't foresee adopting, but rather thought that we'd have numerous children coming through our home for shorter periods of time as foster children. God had a different plan, however. Our first foster child was 13 years old and was with us for six weeks.

Zakiesha came next – a spunky nine-year old who never stopped doing cartwheels. We had her enrolled in

gymnastics about a week after she moved in! Time went on and eventually it became clear that we were headed toward adoption. At that time, Joe and I had several conversations about what the future might hold. Neither one of us was ready to let our foster parent journey come to an end. At the same time, we were out of bedrooms and were pretty sure that we would limit ourselves to just fostering. Well, once again, God had a different plan. In 2020 we began a home renovation, adding a bedroom to our house as well as some other improvements. The renovation was complete the weekend before Thanksgiving, and Zach moved in seven days later. We thought he was going to be here for just a couple of



Clockwise from the upper left: Joe and Daila Boufford with their children Zachary, Zakiesha and Mason on the day of Zach's adoption.

weeks, but that turned into a couple of months, and before any of us knew it we all just got used to the idea of him staying permanently. Zach's adoption was finalized in January of this year. People often tell us how wonderful we were to make the decision to adopt Zach. But the truth is, there was no decision involved – it was like he was the missing piece we didn't even realize we had been waiting for.

How did you as a couple, and as a family, cope with the exceedingly long process that at least Zach's journey in foster care and to adoption was for you?

To be honest, the process has never seemed onerous or too long. We've always enjoyed working with the COBYS team and appreciate their due diligence to ensure that each child

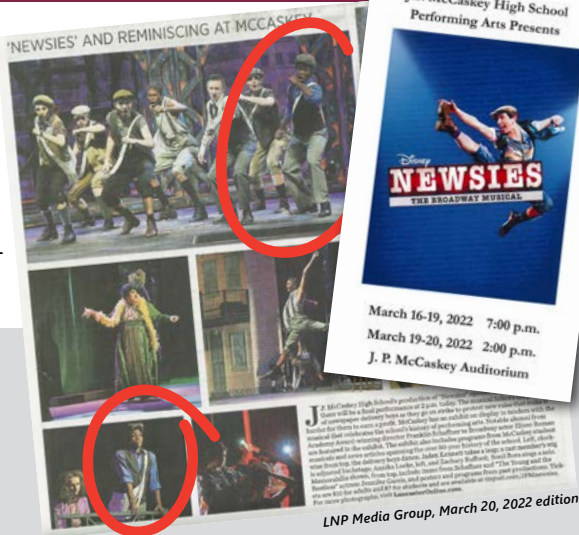


Reflections from Zach and his long-time COBYS caseworker, Jamila Witmer (on the next page)

Walking with Zach: A Caseworker's Reflections

By Jamila Witmer

At 10pm on Friday, March 18, 2022, I walked away from McCaskey High School after watching an amazing school musical, Newsies, with my heart so full I felt like it would burst – because of who the lead was.



I spent the first few months in foster care in denial that my mother did anything wrong to us. I fought off the thoughts that I was being abused and neglected by the very person who swore to take care of me. My mother got off with victimizing herself, but we were the real victims. Even a couple of years later, I'm learning to overcome and cope with what she did to us.

Becoming Me: Growing Up in Foster Care

By Zach Boufford

What have you learned about life during your time in foster care?

"I learned a lot. I learned that positive and negative things are going to come, regardless of who you are, and what life has offered you. And it's up to you to make those choices to do better and make your life better."

I met Zach when he was ten years old. I was introduced to him as his new foster care caseworker, and he warmed up to me immediately. Over the next two years, I had the privilege of walking his journey with him through placements in two different homes. He always had so much to talk about that my home visits with him often went longer than those for other kids. I never minded.

After two years, I transitioned to a new role at COBYS in the Adoption Unit and Zach and I said goodbye. However, as "luck" would have it, a series of events led to the Adoption Unit getting a referral to do child preparation services with Zach and his brother nearly as soon as I transitioned, so I was assigned to them.

My job as a child preparation worker was to help Zach understand what was happening in his case and give him a space to express himself. So, I sat with him while he vented frustrations about caseworkers, foster parents, staff at facilities and even friends at school. On occasion, I presented him with alternative perspectives and challenged him to think differently. We talked about how he felt about being placed in foster care, how he felt about getting a new birth certificate at adoption, and even how he felt about his birth siblings' foster/adoptive families. I rarely had to plan my sessions with Zach, because whatever was on his mind would drive our conversation.



One thing that I never let that experience do to me was stunt or block me from exceeding my best. There are times when I wanted to give up, and there are times where I was lost. But I had to realize that I wasn't losing myself. But rather letting go of the little boy who believed that abuse meant love. But once I let him go, I was soaring or at least that's what I thought soaring felt like.

In November 2020, Zach was finally placed with the family that would become his adoptive family. I can hardly say enough good about Joe and Daila Boufford; they have been amazing for him, supporting him in his dreams, giving him honest feedback and encouragement. They have given him the confidence to flourish. Since being in their home, he has performed in multiple shows, sung solos at school concerts, and been nominated for Homecoming court.

I'd love to think I can take partial credit for his success, like maybe my constant presence in his life gave him some sort of grounding to stay on the right track. Maybe it's true that I made a difference. It's definitely true that the Boufford family has given him space to grow wings. But I know the real hero in this story is God.



Adoption happened to be a hurdle for me. It was scary, the name change, birth certificates, all of it. In the end I realized I was doing this for me, not for my biological mother, and definitely not for my father, but for me. That's when my world opened up and for the first time in a long time I felt free.

What was it like to join your sister's adoptive family?

"It was rough at first because there was a part of me that felt like this is her family and not mine. I had another resource presenting for me, so it felt a little bit "off" at first. Once I came into the family and saw their dynamic, it made me a lot more open to living with them. Especially when I realized that the family was allowing me to be myself. I took things a day at a time at the beginning. It was kind of like getting in a pool by inching into the water instead of jumping into the deep end."

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ends up with a family that is best suited to support them. With Zach in particular, it was a longer journey. Initially we were all reluctant to be considered as a potential permanent home for Zach, because he had been with another family for about five years. They had been through some difficult times, but we did not want to get in the way of their work to reconcile and get past these issues. In the end, however, it became clear that the best path forward for everyone was for Zach to stay at our home, which eventually led to his adoption. Throughout the entire process we were very open with all of the kids, explaining where we were in the process and getting their input on how they felt about Zach staying with us permanently. It was very important for us that everyone be on board with the plan for Zach to stay.

What do you think is unique about fostering/adopting older children and siblings?

I think that with older children, you really have to take a step back and take into account that they are processing a lot of conflicting emotions during the foster/adoption journey. It's important to give them space and grace to process those emotions, while also establishing a good rapport and providing a safe environment.

Zakiesha came to us when she was nine-years old and we worked hard the first few years building a strong relationship with boundaries to keep her safe. However once puberty hit at age 12, we hit a rough patch. All of the work we had done to build our relationship crumbled as she dealt with past trauma memories that came bubbling to the surface. We had to reassess our expectations and start over again in building trust with each other. Thankfully, we are now on the mend and are working closely with our team of therapists to ensure that we all feel safe and heard as we go forward.

When Zach was adopted in January 2022 by the Boufford family, I looked up the meaning of his names and wrote him a letter about how I have seen those name meanings play out in his life. The meaning that still stands out to me is that his middle name, Ian, means "God is gracious." This phrase came rushing back to me as I watched him on stage that night as Jack Kelly, singing his heart out, and letting his own personality come through in his character. According to foster care statistics, so much could have gone differently, but this is where he is - flourishing in his senior year of high school, recently adopted, recently accepted into college, and playing the lead in the school musical.

The work of being a caseworker is hard, but when you see your kids flourish, you know that it must be worth it. This is my payout. This is why I do what I do.



Jamila and Zach celebrated his adoption and commemorated their journey together with a joint painting project session.



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With Zach it was completely different. He came to us at the age of 16 and had already gone through his own struggles with processing past trauma. He was much further along in his ability to reflect on his past and then step out of that to plan for his future. It is important to us that he go into the college experience with enough confidence and self-discipline to succeed in that independent environment. He will always have a home with us and we expect to see him regularly on weekends. But he needed a different kind of parenting style than Zakiesha or Mason, based on the depth of life experience he already had when he came to our home.

Where there any challenges with Mason, Zakiesha and Zach bonding as siblings?

The kids all get along pretty well. Mason was five years old when we started our foster journey. Even at that young age, we were very transparent with him about our decision to foster and what it might be like. We took his input very seriously and made sure that he was on board with the plan before we finalized our license. He and Zakiesha act like they've been siblings since the beginning. They get along, until they don't. When Zach came to be with us, I was worried about Mason. Zach and Zakiesha are biological siblings and are naturally very close to each other. I was worried that Mason would feel left out. But, it all ended up working out. Zach and Mason bonded over Roblox and Mario Kart and Zakiesha and Mason started taking Taekwondo together. Mason has a pretty strong friend group, so he's often playing with his friends when Zach and Zakiesha have their sibling time together. We were really quite fortunate that this all just worked out naturally.

Describe what adoption finalization felt like for you with both Zakiesha and Zach?

For Zakiesha, it was different. Joe and I were really excited, and I had wanted

to throw a big party, get her a special outfit, etc. But she wanted nothing to do with any of that. At the time I was hurt by that, but looking back on it now, I realize she was probably still internally conflicted about leaving her biological family (even though she'd been with us for about four years at that point). We ended up just going to lunch after the adoption hearing. She wouldn't even let me get her a new outfit for that day.



For Zach it was a whole different story. He was on cloud nine and was so excited to finally have his adoption finalized. We invited family to the hearing and that weekend had a party with friends to celebrate him becoming a permanent fixture in our home (even though we had already felt that way for quite some time). It felt wonderful that we could all be happy about his foster journey coming to a close.

What hopes do you have for the future of your family, for each of your children?

This is a tricky question – the answer has changed quite a bit over the years. I think you go into foster care with this determination to make a difference, to have an impact on a child in need and dramatically alter the trajectory of their life for the better. But the truth is, those kind of expectations can be overwhelming to a child that never thought they were on the "wrong" path to begin with. In many cases, they have come from an environment



Above L to R: Mason, Zachary & Zakiesha Boufford.

Left: the Bouffords on vacation.

with a lot more freedom, and a lot less expectation put on them. And when they come into foster care, all of a sudden there are boundaries, nothing is the same, and they are expected to perform – meaning they are expected to improve academically (based on all the support they are now getting), they are expected to behave better (based on all the therapy they are now getting), and deep down inside our wildest hopes, we expect them to be somewhat grateful for all we are doing to help them.

So, if you asked this question when we started our journey, you would hear us say, we hope for them to embrace their potential and be contributing members of society. Now . . . I think we have revised our answer to – we hope that we have given them a firm foundation upon which to build their life. We hope they feel loved. We hope that we have given them the skills to make good decisions, and when they make bad ones that they can give themselves grace.

Our kids are 13, 15, and 17 and we expect to have many fun years ahead, growing together, laughing together, and learning together. Time will tell how it all plays out. We've learned not to anticipate exactly what that will look like.