

Generational Support in Treatment Foster Care for Parents with Mental Illness

Crystal Peterson, MSSW, APSW

Stacia was born in a psychiatric facility on Thanksgiving Day. Her mother, a gifted seamstress and equestrian plagued with mental illness since her 20s, was inpatient again due to her debilitating symptoms. With a life of foster care ahead of her, Stacia would need the support of incredible people in her life in order to be successful. Thankfully she got it.

Mental illness in treatment foster care is as prevalent as anywhere else in child welfare. The generational impact is as intense, and the effects are just as distressing. Most of the children referred to Anu Family Services have a parent with some level of diagnosed mental illness with the severity ranging from mild to life debilitating. The impact of the parent's mental illness is profound for the children involved but also affords unique challenges for the foster parents. One family at Anu Family Services seems to have found the answers to working with the families who struggle with major mental illness.

Stacia came to the Phill and Mary Jo Klamm home at the age of 9. Like many foster youth, Stacia had disrupted from three other foster homes prior to landing at the Klamms'. She had the support of and a relationship with her maternal grandparents, but they were unable to take placement of her due to her behaviors. At this time, Stacia was already diagnosed with Reactive Attachment Disorder and Oppositional Defiant Disorder. Her behaviors were extreme due to the unstable and unpredictable situation in her mother's home where she lived from the age of 2-7. Stacia reflects on this time as incredibly painful and frightening, not knowing what kind of mood her mother would be in. One day she would gush over Stacia and express her thanks over such a gift on Thanksgiving. At other times she would yell and scream at Stacia for things she didn't understand. This resulted in extremely challenging, pain-based behaviors so common in children with a history of trauma, grief and loss. These behaviors came out in the safety of the foster home.

The Klamms' relationship with Diana (Stacia's mother) started early in her placement through contact during supervised visits. Mary Jo would encourage Stacia to interact with her mom and provide the safety net that Stacia needed in Diana's presence early on. This allowed Stacia to feel supported and safe without threatening Diana's bond with her daughter. The Klamms also continued to support and



build on the relationship between Stacia and her grandparents. When Stacia's behaviors became challenging or overwhelming, the Klamms would call the grandparents who could sometimes calm Stacia or just provide a sounding board for Mary Jo. Mary Jo would do the same for them when Stacia was in their home on visits.

returned from two weeks at summer camp with a full out hug for Mary Jo, and Mary Jo thought to herself, "it's working."

The Klamms supported Stacia's relationship with her maternal grandparents who flew her to Florida every year for Christmas and paid for her summer camp every summer. Mary Jo remembers that she

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The Klamms researched mental illness and explained it to Stacia in ways that she could understand. They helped Stacia know that her mother's illness was not her fault, was not intentional and was very real. They helped Stacia see the difference between her mother and her mother's illness. When Stacia and her mom would go shopping, Mary Jo supported mom's involvement and acknowledged mom's generosity.

Stacia remained in the Klamm home and continued to build on her relationship with her mother, the Klamms, and her grandparents which led to her eventual healing. This was a long road and not without its challenges. When she first came to the home, she would give a hug to the foster parents with a simple finger touch. When she was 11, she told her therapist that if the Klamms kept her for two years she would give up her trying behaviors because then she knew they were strong enough to protect her. When she turned about 12, Stacia's behaviors began to change after another child with Reactive Attachment Disorder was placed, providing a mirror to her own behaviors. She

was pressured by county workers to adopt Stacia, to which she replied, "Why would we punish Diana **more** by taking her kid away?" The Klamms committed to providing a home to Stacia for as long as she needed, and they stand by that commitment today.

Stacia graduated high school in 2010 with her mom, grandparents and the Klamms in the audience. She applied to and was accepted at a four-year University and has successfully completed her sophomore year. Stacia just returned "home" to the Klamms for the summer before traveling to her maternal grandparents' home for a short visit. She maintains contact with her mother whenever her mom is able. Stacia is a self-proclaimed "bug-hugger" and plans to be an environmental scientist when she graduates.

Phill and Mary Jo Klamm are treatment foster parents with Anu Family Services.

Crystal Peterson, MSSW, APSW is Southern Regional Director at Anu Family Services. She can be reached at cpeterson@anufs.org.