

Leaving Home

(First in a series of articles about the lives of children in foster care)

In the fiscal year from July 1, 2008, until June 30, 2009, the New Mexico Child Abuse and Neglect Citizen Review Board completed 3,040 reviews involving 2,135 children. The largest percentages of these children were taken into custody due to physical neglect.

(2010 Annual Report and Recommendations, New Mexico Child Abuse and Neglect Citizen Review Board, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 2010)

The young boy described in this article is one of these children who enter the foster care system due to the inability of their parents to take care of them.

Day One: The journey begins . . .

The small boy, in stained pajamas and with a dirty face, sat cross-legged on the floor, stuffing marijuana cigarettes and used needles into his pajama pockets. He could hear the rain hammering on the roof and see flashes of lightning through the window, but his fright did not come from the storm. He was afraid to move for fear the policeman would look at him or ask him questions or even search him. The fear came because the policeman, who was once again trying to talk with his mother, had been there before and had threatened to take the boy away if his mother did not shape up and take care of him. She was screaming, telling the officer that she had no drugs and that he had no business being in her home. She was cursing and crying and swinging her arms in order that the cop not get too close to her. The scene wasn't a new one. It had happened before. He knew that once the policeman left, after warning his mother not to do it again, she would have another drink or two, stick another needle in her arm and fall asleep. That's what she always did.

The boy, who was eight years old, was well acquainted with domestic violence, dirty surroundings, alcohol and drugs, hunger and his responsibility for the care of his younger siblings. The pattern repeated itself quite often. The problem was that it was getting harder to explain at school why he was absent so often and why his mother never came for parent-teacher conferences. School was a sanctuary for the young children although they hated going. Never feeling full was how he and his sisters felt most of the time, but once they got to school they would be given something to eat for breakfast and then lunch. The problem was on weekends when he and his sisters found it hard to find something to eat, but they had solved that problem by stuffing food from school into their pockets for the days when they did not attend. They were used to living in this manner, and the boy knew that his job was to take care of his sisters and his mother above anything else. He knew that he had to do this to keep his family together.

This time, however, there was a lady with the policeman. She was tall and had nice-smelling hair. She was wearing a plastic name tag that had her name and the initials *CYFD*. She smiled at the child and took his hand. She asked if he was hungry and if he was warm and if he was afraid. She waited with him while the policeman wrote a report and told his mother that she was not caring for her children like she should. The boy waited . . . as he always did. However, this time it was different. The lady had hold of his hand; he was leaving his house and his mother. His sisters were also leaving while his mother stood in the door cursing and yelling. He was put into a car by the nice lady and she was driving away from his home and his mom. Fear seized him for this was a new experience. Why couldn't things be like they always were? Why couldn't he and his sisters just stay with his mom? Would she be okay? Did the cop do something to her? What was going to happen to them?

Hours later, after telling the nice lady about his daily life, they arrived at a house where the small boy had never been. An older man and woman welcomed him, told him their names and gave him a glass of milk and some cookies. They told the young boy that he would be staying with them on an emergency basis for a day or two and that he would be safe. They showed him where he would be sleeping – in a bed that was clean and had

nice-smelling sheets. What he did not understand was why he was here, where were his sisters and where was his mother? Why was this time different?

As he lay on the bed in the darkened room, the small boy felt tears stinging his eyes. He was alone, frightened and apart from the only mother he had known, albeit one who was drunk most of the time and who did not care for her children's basic needs. It was the only home he knew and it was where he wanted to be.