

## Finding Refuge in Oneself

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

*Children in foster care are like rolling stones - if one placement doesn't work out, another is found. Moving from home to home, and living in strange surroundings without much to call one's own becomes habit for children who are older, who don't exactly follow the rules or who are identified as emotionally or behaviorally needy. Children respond to this vagabond existence the only way they know how - with insolence, disdain and/or silence. They cannot imagine there is anything to look forward to and looking backward is too painful. In these instances, the Children's Court can do much to support the child. Appointing a CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocate) adds yet another person to ensure better outcomes for children in foster care. Working on a volunteer basis, a CASA worker can serve as a bridge between the child and his biological family or as a transition to a new family. The more support a foster child receives, the better the outcome for that child.*

### **Eight Months after coming into custody: Living in Treatment Foster Care**

Kevin showed Micah where he would be sleeping in his new home. This time he had a room to himself with a chest-of-drawers and a closet. He didn't have much to fill it, but Angela said that she would get him some new clothes to wear to school. Micah flopped down on his bed only to be interrupted by Kevin who had a young boy with him. "This is my son, Shawn. I hope that you two become friends and have fun together."

At dinner that evening, Kevin talked to Micah about the rules he would have to follow. "Everyone in this family works. I go to work everyday and Angela stays home to take care of you and Shawn. Your job will be to go to school and learn. Shawn, since he is only four years old, goes to pre-school two days a week. His job is to play and have fun and do what his mother tells him to do. There are rules that we all follow and if rules are broken there are consequences that will be administered. Let's talk about them."

Kevin explained that Micah would be expected to make his bed, help Angela where he could and to do what she asked him to do. Micah should expect to have lots of people visiting with him and would have lots of doctor appointments to help him feel well again. He would be expected to join into family events and take part in daily activities. Kevin explained that he and Angela would be there for Micah and if he had problems, he should talk to either one of them. Micah should not feel as if he was alone.

Janice, his CYFD caseworker, and Nick, his *guardian ad litem*, came the next morning to see if he had settled in and to share information with him about what would be happening. Micah had now been in foster care for eight months and new people and meetings would be added to his schedule. Janice shared that Micah would be meeting with Dr. Sung, a psychologist. He would still have Dr. Rubino as his pediatrician and Dr. Fernandez as his dentist. A new member of his treatment team would be Greg, a CASA worker, who would visit him and help Janice keep in touch with happenings in Micah's daily life. They explained to Micah that he had a wonderful treatment team whose only interest was helping him to be happy and feel safe. "You're only nine, Micah. You should be having fun, making lots of friends and looking forward to the future. We're going to help you do that. Meanwhile, get dressed and we'll go register you in your new school."

"I hate school," Micah screamed and ran to his bedroom. "I'm not going and you can't make me." The bedroom door slammed shut. Janice, Nick and Angela looked at the door, a barrier that Micah was using to shut out everything he regarded as a challenge and anything that had been hurtful to him. Nick tried to talk him out of his room, to get him to open the door, but it was firmly shut and the three adults were met with only silence.

"Let him be for now," said Janice. "Patience is what he needs right now."

When Kevin got home from work, Angela shared with him what had happened that morning. Kevin knocked

on the door and entered Micah's room. Micah was in a heap in the middle of his bed. Kevin could see that he had been crying and was deeply distraught. "I don't want to go to school," Micah cried. "I can't read and the other kids laugh at me. They all know how to read and add and they know about all kinds of stuff. I don't know anything. I can't do it."

Kevin sat on the bed beside him. "Micah, it's perfectly understandable that you wouldn't know what the others know because they have gone to school for three years and you have not. When other kids were thinking about adding and subtracting and learning about animals in the zoo, you were taking care of your sisters and making sure that they got enough to eat and had a place to sleep. Micah, you are a hero in so many ways, and you can do so many things. We can teach you to read and write and think about things other kids your age think about." Micah began to settle down. He wasn't crying any more. "Are you hungry?" asked Kevin. Micah nodded. "Then let's go eat. Angela has made a great dinner." Micah slid off the bed and followed Kevin to the dinner table.

Micah's first appointment with Dr. Sung came three days later. Kevin had repeated to Janice Micah's comments about going to school and had asked if perhaps Angela could home-school Micah until he felt more in control and could face a huge new challenge. Janice promised to pass this suggestion along to Dr. Sung to discuss with Micah during their session together.

During the weeks that followed, Micah's entire treatment team began to see differences in him. He became more talkative and seemed to be happier. Janice had arranged for him to talk to his sisters once a week and visit with them once a month. Angela had scheduled two hours daily where she and Micah sat down to read books about subjects Micah had never dreamed even existed. He had learned how to add and subtract and was starting to learn how to multiply. He went to sleep each night practicing his times tables. A new man had also entered his life. Greg, his CASA worker, was teaching him how to play baseball and had even met Kevin and Micah at an *Albuquerque Isotopes* baseball game. Micah looked forward to Greg's visits; he even looked forward to reading with Angela.

Micah liked the treatment team that consistently helped him. He was even beginning to build a relationship with Dr. Sung. Micah hadn't liked him, at first, because he made Micah remember things that had happened with his mother and Johnny. Dr. Sung asked Micah to talk about why he didn't ask for help when horrible things were happening and because of their conversations, Micah wasn't so afraid any more. Dr. Sung also helped Micah to believe that he was in a better place now even though his mother was not there with him. Micah was beginning to understand that he would always love his mother, but she wouldn't be part of his new world and that was probably okay.