

Dreams Do Come True: An Unexpected Journey into Social Work

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Imagine being 11 years old and having little, if any, rules to abide by at home. You are able to set and enforce your own rules. You have a younger brother, who is eight years old, who's your good friend, but still, he is your younger brother and you do not always get along with one another. You are put in charge of babysitting him a lot, and you have no idea how to babysit your brother who is very active and doesn't typically listen to you.

Your mother is working two jobs and trying to make ends meet. She is overwhelmed at the responsibilities of raising two children. And by the way, the three of you reside with your mother's parents. You can do no wrong in the eyes of your grandparents and this creates a great deal of tension in the household between your mother and them.

Your relationship with your mother is more similar to a sibling relationship rather than a mother-daughter relationship because only a fifteen year age difference exists between the two of you. You love your mother and you

know your mother loves you and your brother. Your mother loves you so much that one day she reaches out and asks for help and she ultimately makes the difficult decision of voluntarily placing you into foster care; where you remain until you become emancipated.



Elonna, her husband and their dog

Elonna's Journey Begins

This is the true life story of Elonna Tompkins, who at the age of 11 years old, was voluntarily placed into foster care. Her mother was working two jobs and she was still not able to make enough money to support her and her two children, Elonna and younger brother, Billy. However, she was making too much money to qualify for any type of financial assistance.

They were all living with Elonna's paternal parents but there were conflicts between her grandparents and her mother, as well as Elonna starting to get into trouble.

Elonna was friends with older teens and she often would leave her house and get into cars with her friends. After all, she was used to doing what she wanted, when she wanted to and how she wanted to do it. This led up to her mother's voluntary request to seek out

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help.

Extended family members were initially considered as placement options. Elonna was very close to her grandparents, but she was afraid if she lived with them that their positive relationship could be negatively impacted, and she didn't want that to happen.

She describes her grandmother as her "best friend." Her grandparents wanted Elonna to live with them, but her grandfather became ill with colon cancer and this had a dramatic impact on their lives.

Another option was Elonna's adoptive father, Mark (Billy's biological father). Elonna was adopted by Mark when she was three years old, but her mother and Mark divorced when she was five. Her father didn't know how to parent her since he was not actively involved in her life.

A Loving Foster Family

Elonna attempted to live with a friend and then she moved back in with her mother and her mother's boyfriend. But all of these options were ultimately unsuccessful. "I had to grow up really fast," she says.

Elonna eventually ended up in juvenile detention. There she met foster parents Rich and Robin Zulfer. She was given a choice to remain in the juvenile detention facility or

chose to live with the Zulfers. Elonna decided to take a chance and move into the Zulfers' foster home.

The Zulfers had two birth children, who were five and eight years old when Elonna moved in. Elonna was the first teenager that Rich and Robin had welcomed into their home.

While she was living at the Zulfers' home, Robin told Elonna that she was pregnant.

That was difficult for Elonna to handle, but she eventually accepted the new member of her foster family.

Elonna's mother was very involved with Elonna and the Zulfers. She spent quality time with Elonna on the weekends and she attended school events, sporting events, and meetings at school.

In addition, Elonna was able to spend time with her grandmother as often as possible. She also spent time

with Rich and Robin and their extended families in Chicago and Michigan.

Separated in Care

Elonna had only been living with the Zulfers for about a year, when she learned that her brother Billy had been placed into a foster home on a voluntary basis.

She didn't know the reasons behind his placement and also never understood why she

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and her brother couldn't be together. No one would answer her questions about this.

As a result of their separation, Elonna and her brother lost much of their relationship with one another. Their relationship is better now, but they are both unsure how to go about recapturing their relationship that they once had when they were children.

Elonna had a positive experience in foster care but unfortunately, Billy's experience in care was not as positive.

Billy is now happily married and he and his wife have three children. She is extremely proud of Billy and her sister-in-law

because both of them had gone back to school to earn their General Equivalency Diplomas (GED's) as adults.

"I am proud of my brother because he has found happiness and he loves his family," says Elonna. "That is all that matters to me."

Stigma of Foster Care

Elonna didn't tell anyone that she was in foster care until she was a senior in high school. Even then, she only told her close friends on the pom-pom squad who were a year older than she was. No one else in her class knew that she was in care. She wanted to avoid all of the negative stereotypes about foster care, and she didn't want her peers to

think either she or her mother was at fault.

Family Values

She liked how her foster parents' marriage and family worked and how their family life was structured. Elonna said that she received her ethics and personal values from her foster parents and from her grandmother.

He was always one of her biggest supporters and he continually encouraged her to "beat the system." When she needed an internship, she called him and requested his unit, which he kindly agreed to.

She also appreciates the courage that it took for her mother to reach out and ask for help.

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Giving Thanks

Elonna's best experience from being in care occurred after she left the system—her foster parents never gave up on her. Elonna admitted that she at times could be a handful but her foster parents were always there for her and to this day, she keeps in close contact with them.

Elonna also gives thanks to some other influential people in her life who helped to guide her along her personal journey. In high school, there were two special people who made a positive impact on her life, Mr. and Mrs. Hayes. Mr. Hays was her guidance counselor and his wife was her pom-pom

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coach. They offered to pay for an unlimited number of application fees for college for her. To this day, Elonna sends the Hays family a Christmas card because she was so moved by their generous offer to be a support for her in her college decision making process.

Elonna would also like to say thank you to Mr. Tom Callahan, who was in charge of the Rock County Foster Care Program when she was in care. He was always one of her biggest supporters and he continually encouraged her to “beat the system” and not to let anyone define her as a negative stereotype of foster care.

Elonna would tell Mr. Callahan that she would be coming for his job one day. When she needed a social work internship, she called him and requested an internship in his unit, which he kindly agreed to.

Career

Elonna is employed as a Licensing Specialist with Lutheran Social Services of Wisconsin and Upper Michigan, Inc. (LSS). Her job include interviewing prospective foster parents, conducting background checks, completing home studies, and monitoring annual paperwork for licensed foster homes.

Advice for Children in Care

Elonna wants children in care to know that it doesn't matter what your situation is—there is always a bright light at the end of the tunnel. The light may seem incredibly far away but it is there and you can achieve your dreams. Make sure to stay connected with people who you trust: teachers, guidance

counselors, social workers, mentors.

Whoever are your go-to people for you, trust them and let them help you. You can't do it alone.

Advice for Workers

Be on the lookout for signs from children when they are talking to you. Every word might be a hidden message. Give them your full attention and listen to what is said and how it is said.

You do make a difference in the lives of children each and every day. Elonna holds a great deal of guilt about her brother's foster care experience. She attributes her career in social work and foster care as a calling to make sure his situation does not happen to other children in care.

Elonna's dream of becoming a social worker did come true when she was offered her position at LSS, and she attributes this accomplishment to all the caring people who supported her along the way.

She is now making a positive difference in the lives of foster families and children in care thanks to everyone involved in her support network. Never give up on your dreams because Elonna Tompkins has proven that dreams do, in fact, come true.

