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'She's Still Your Mother

I am angry at my sister but my nieces need her love.

BY QUEENIE BUTLER

Eight years ago I became a foster mother to my two nieces, ages 10 and 5. My sister was on drugs and lost her daughters to foster care.

First the girls went to my mother, but my mother's house was too crowded. Eventually, my mother called me and told me that the girls might end up with a foster family.

I was scared for my nieces. I asked my mother, "Do you think they will let me get the girls?"

"Call and ask," she said. So I did, and the supervisor said yes. I was more than happy. I called my mother and she said, "Thank God. At least the girls will be with family."

A Hard Adjustment

My mother told the girls and the girls were happy, too. Still, when my nieces came to live with me, it was hard. They were behind in school because they had missed a lot of days. The little one didn't adjust easily. All she did was cry and act out. She missed her mother and she didn't understand what had happened in her family. My older niece understood a little more, but she had begun to go into her own world.

Once I realized how much caretaking they needed, I started giving the girls all my time and got them into all kinds of programs in their school. Soon I saw them catching up and thriving.

High Hopes

At the time, my expectation was that the girls would only stay with me for a few months until my sister completed the service plan. I also hoped that my sister would come over for dinner, go out with us and go to the girls' schools with me.

I helped raise my sister and always considered her a doll my mother had given to me. I dressed her up, played with her and took her everywhere. We had fun together, always acting up at the dinner table and frustrating our mother. My sister was very cute and sharp, always saying funny things. I enjoyed my sister a lot and we got along well together.

When my sister started using drugs, I didn't understand it, and I still don't. When I first found out and looked into her face, I said, "Oh, no. Not my sister. That's my baby." Her addiction felt like a terrible dream.

Trying to Help

At first, I truly believed that I would not have my nieces with me for long. But it wasn't like that at all.

My sister didn't do what the courts said. She would do what she wanted to do, go to her program when she wanted to go. The judge and their lawyer gave her so many chances but she just did things her way.

One day she came to court late so she didn't see the judge. She took it out on me, saying, "If you didn't take my girls, I wouldn't be here in court."

It was so hard to make my sister understand that I was only trying to help her and the girls. She would barely talk to me, but I tried to help my sister anyway. If she didn't come to court or a meeting, I would tell my mother what was said.

Feeling Blamed

As time passed, my sister started to lie and say bad things about me to other people and to my face. One day I came on a visit with my nieces and my sister came out on me. She said, "You're only in it for the money."

"What money?" I said. "They don't give you any money you can do anything with. Everything my nieces get is from me."

I was furious. I spend hundreds of dollars on my nieces every Christmas, and they don't want for anything. I was upset that my sister didn't want to believe that their uncle and I gave to my nieces with an open heart.

Talking Mess

Sometimes my sister would call me just to talk mess. She would say that I am a liar, that I take people's children, that I should have my own daughter. She'd say, "The girls don't belong to you. My girls belong home with me. You will never be their mother. You can't take my place."

Then she'd ask if the girls could come to her house, knowing that the girls couldn't go without permission from the worker. "Ask the worker at the agency," I'd say. "I don't make the calls, ACS does, and what they say I have to do, even if I don't want to. If I don't follow ACS' rules, I can lose the children. I don't want your girls to live without family."

Then she would really talk junk.

"Tell their worker," I'd just repeat. Finally she wouldn't say anything. I'd really feel bad that I had hurt her feelings and that I had to follow ACS' rules instead of doing what I wished to do as her sister, but I was also relieved to say goodbye and hang up.

'How Would You Feel?'

After my sister's phone calls I'd lie in my bed and say, "Why should I take this?" I felt angry at my sister and at the system, because following the rules was ruining my relationship with my sister. I felt like the system didn't understand the

pressures of being a kinship foster parent. They placed the children with me but didn't help to keep our family together.

I had to remind myself: I am doing this for my nieces, and I have to put my hurt feelings to the side. I'd also remind myself that my sister was hurting inside and missing her girls.

After a while, I began to think about my sister's point of view. I'd ask myself, "How would you feel if someone took your kids? No matter what the reason it happened, they are your kids."

Trying to Keep a Cool Head

Still, I wished my sister would stop and think about how I felt, and especially how the girls felt, caught between two people who cared about them.

Trying to balance what my nieces needed from me, what the agency required, and what my sister wanted was very stressful. I didn't know if I was going or coming. I tried to keep a cool head, but it was too much. I started getting very bad headaches.

After the girls came home from school and did their homework, I would lie down and rest. I needed that. The headaches scared me. I would say, "Now my health is at risk."

I even worried about losing the girls. I would tell myself, "Get it together. They need you too much."

'I Didn't Take Your Girls'

One day, I went to the agency and I was told that my nieces were unlikely to go home. My sister was not doing what she was supposed to do, and their goal was being changed from "reunification" to "adoption."

I was upset because I didn't think it was going to come to that. I knew my nieces would be very disappointed. But I felt I should adopt them so they didn't end up being removed from me. I took a deep breath and told the worker, "These are my nieces and I don't want anything to happen to them."

Soon after, my sister heard that the girls weren't going home. She came to the agency and she went off on me. My nieces were there and saw how their mother turned to me and said, "You took my girls, and because of you, they are not coming home."

"What the hell do you mean?" I said. "I didn't take your girls, ACS took them."

Ready to Give Up

I was overwhelmed. I said to the agency worker, "I am going to give up. I can't take it anymore. If she doesn't want me to have the girls, that's all right."

The workers didn't agree. They talked to me and said they felt it was best for the nieces to be in my home.

I was so glad that the caseworkers at my agency were there to hear me and help me in any way they could. They were able to help me see that my nieces needed a stable home, and that home was with me.

A Sad Conversation

It was difficult to explain to my nieces what was going on with their mother. They were worried about her and about their futures.

I told them, "Your mother made mistakes in her life, and because of those mistakes your mother lost you to foster care. Now your mother is not doing what the court ordered her to do. I don't know why.

"But my sister is your mother, and no matter what happens, your mother loves you with all her heart. Her mistakes don't mean that she doesn't love you, and they don't mean she doesn't miss you. She loves you and misses you so much. That is something you can be proud of and no one can take that from you.

"It's not right that your mother isn't following the rules of the court, but one day I hope she will make it up to you. In time, things will work themselves out. You will still be able to spend weekends with your mother and do things together."

Keeping the Connection

Despite adopting my nieces, I still try my hardest to let my nieces and my sister have a relationship. I let my nieces talk to their mother on the phone about three to four times a week. Maybe once a week, on a weekend, she comes over. I go to my room and leave them alone.

On holidays, when the family gets together, I let the girls see their mother and stay as long as they want to stay.

I don't allow my sister to take them anywhere, though. I feel bad about that, but I'm afraid that if something happened, I could get in trouble.

Lying to the Girls

For years, my sister refused to believe the adoption. Finally I had to send her a photocopy of the new birth certificate to make her understand that she'd lost her rights.

Through all of those years, my sister kept telling the girls they were going home. She told them that every week and it was a lie.

Just a year or two ago, my eldest niece told me, "My mom is always saying things and has never kept her word. I am tired of my mother's lies. I don't believe anything my mother tells me. What is the use of believing in my mother if it is always a lie?"

I understood her anger, but I said to her sadly, "Don't be so hard on your mother. She is going through a lot right now. Every night, your mother has to go home without you and your sister. She can't walk into her apartment and see you two. She can't go to your room and see you in your room."

Reaching Out

One positive moment was when my nieces were in an afterschool program at JHS 263 and were in the Christmas show. I told my nieces, "Call your mother and ask if she wants to come see you perform." My sister said yes, and she was happy that they wanted her to come to the show. She was even happier when the girls told her, "Aunt Queenie told us to invite you."

The day of the show, my sister came and said to me, "Thank you for letting the girls call me, and for letting me see the show." The show was very good, with singing and dancing. We took a lot of pictures and had fun. That night of the show was the best night I've had with my sister.

Another nice moment was when my sister held a little get together for my youngest niece's birthday. She was turning 9 years old. They had balloons, candy, ice cream, chips and sodas, and they played games with their mother. But above all, my nieces said they had a nice time because their mother didn't lie to them or let them down. Everything was about the get together, and she didn't tell them they'd be coming home.

Still Hopeful

I still have hope that my sister and I will become close again. I've noticed that in the last six months, our relationship has been smoother. My sister has been taking an anger management class that is definitely having an impact. Writing this story has also helped me reflect on our situation and think about it from my sister's point of view. I can put up with her a little better than before.

It's been a while since my sister came at me over the phone or made false promises to the girls. I truly believe that my nieces will one day see us getting along, sisters once again.

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