

Adoption: An older brother's courage, and a younger brother's legacy

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During the month of November, we celebrate National Adoption Month and the heartfelt stories of children establishing permanency. These children hold stories of remarkable courage and resilience at times, their experiences too overbearing for their innocent smiles. During this month, we also draw attention to those children waiting to be adopted. They should forever be in the forefront of our efforts.

My parents made the decision to adopt children even prior to being married. Both with their commitment to one another and deep religious faith, they felt a calling to open their doors to society's most needy and vulnerable -- children awaiting permanent homes. Licensed for specialized-needs children, our family grew to a total of 11, of which eight are adopted. State agencies quickly realized that when you called we said yes, and when you walked through our doors, you were not leaving. Whatever it took for that child to remain in our home, we all did it for one another.

Together, this family encompassed children of different ages, levels of exposure to trauma, race and emotional challenges, and heartbreaking stories. What we all had in common was a need for stability. When you were placed into our house, you were immediately loved. This became your home. Your fears of finding a family could be put to rest.

Our younger brother, Kallif, was born to a substance-abusing mother in inner-city Chicago during the 1970s, when child welfare agencies were just beginning to form an identity and a child's fundamental right to be protected was overmatched by the ills of society. Because of his drug exposure, Kallif was brain damaged since birth, resulting in significant behavioral and intellectual challenges.

In his early years, Kallif suffered countless acts of abuse and neglect while living with his older brother, Omar, in a violent, substance-abusing home. Removed at young ages by child welfare authorities, the brothers were placed in more than 26 different foster homes during a period of about two years. Kallif's behaviors were used as the primary factor in many of the disruptions leading to strong doubts as to whether either boy would find a permanent home. Omar was constantly watching over Kallif. Eventually, the brothers wound up in a city-run shelter.

The local adoption agency originally called our family only about Omar, and soon thereafter visits began, leading to a plan for placement. Adoption officials eventually told my parents about Kallif and their plan to separate the brothers, believing Kallif was "unadoptable" and would wind up in "institutionalized care." My parents asked Omar, Kallif's protector and hero throughout the brother's horrendous childhood, about his younger brother. In perhaps his greatest act of courage, Omar spoke openly of his desire to be placed with Kallif despite the fact that as history had shown, it may potentially have put into serious jeopardy his placement into our family. Confronting shelter staff about their plan for both boys, my parents made themselves extraordinarily clear; siblings stay together and this family could meet any challenges. The happy ending to the story was written. These brothers had found a home. Together.

Kallif was the little boy who society said could not make it in a family. Physically, his body was scarred from the abuse he suffered, and emotionally his ability to trust and bond was diminished.

Hyperactive and scared, he could not sleep. Mom would sit on the edge of his bed and sing to him for up to two hours a night to calm him until he could relax. On one particular night when my siblings, Christine and Joe, sensed Kallif was especially upset, they took their pillows and blankets along with some of the other siblings and moved right into his room to sleep on his floor. They knew Kallif needed their comfort. In this family, we understood what it took to care for each other.

When Mom and Dad took Kallif to a renowned neurologist for an evaluation, they were told Kallif should be placed into a facility; that his behaviors would disrupt the family and there was no hope. Little did the doctor understand what this family could achieve and how we believed in Kallif. My parents simply thanked him for his time and walked out of the office. Nobody was going to tell them what was best for their children, especially this little boy. Soon thereafter, Kallif was examined by the head of children's neurology at the University of Chicago. Together with my parents, the doctor developed a comprehensive plan to allow Kallif's true personality to come to light, and for him to reach his potential.

Over the years, our brother was loved in the community. Kallif was a neighborhood favorite. Learning to ride a bike, he became known for his long journeys around the block. No animal could walk by him without being pet or hugged. We taught him how to play baseball and his brothers coached his team. You can imagine the emotions when Kallif ran to first base successfully after his first hit, throwing his arms up in the air and smiling. Even the other team cheered. He made the high school wrestling team, and once when he pinned his opponent, no one in the gym could believe what they had seen. Kallif competed in the International Special Olympics and returned to Connecticut on a corporate jet after winning a gold medal. He owned the dance floor during parties, and when he sensed you were sad, could make you smile in his unique way.

Kallif became an advocate for himself, quickly correcting anyone in his presence who referred to him as "brain damaged" or "retarded." Entering early adulthood, the decision was made to have Kallif move into a group home managed by a state agency. This placement would allow his fullest potential to be reached while residing with other adults with the same challenges. Kallif achieved his potential. He was able to maintain a job working on cars with the assistance of a job coach, earned money and shopped for himself. His staff members became his mentors and his "second family." Kallif never left our family, he just lived somewhere else. Our younger brother became a productive adult.

For holidays and family gatherings, Kallif was the life of the party. We received frequent phone calls from him, engaging in conversations covering the White House to Michael Jordan. He probably owned every Rocky Balboa video. At our last Christmas together, Kallif gave my parents a barbecue grill. He bought it with his own money. His own idea.

Kallif passed away almost two years ago. His funeral and services were a celebration of his life and the gifts he taught all of us. Teachers and counselors, police officers and coaches, friends and acquaintances all came to say goodbye. Yes, we cried, but each of us had a funny memory and story about him. At his group home, a tree was planted in his memory next to a bench with a plaque engraved with his name. He would be so proud.

Our family knows Kallif is in Heaven.

Kallif's story is one filled with countless meanings for all us to take. My father put it best when he said that God gave Omar the courage and strength to protect and watch over Kallif until they found our family. It was Omar on countless occasions sticking up for and guiding his younger brother. The

bond of siblings is immeasurable. If not for the older brother, we can only imagine the life of the younger brother.

Perhaps Kallif's legacy is that by his example, we learned to never underestimate the human spirit, the importance of keeping siblings together, the power of a family, and to never give up on a child. Those who said we should not take Kallif into our family simply did not understand the true meaning of adoption and that every child deserves a home.

Our children need you to come into their lives. One child at a time, but they cannot wait. Adoptive families are desperately needed throughout Connecticut. You have the ability to change someone's life, love them and give them a family. Forever.

We have an empty seat at our table during Thanksgiving. In Kallif's special way, we know he is always with us. During National Adoption Month we not only celebrate the countless families who have entered into adoption, but we also draw attention to the children awaiting a permanent home. Look around your house and you may realize you have room at your table for one more seat. Our kids are waiting for you. A child's sense of time moves so rapidly. They must achieve permanency so they can heal and rest at night.

In November, our family remembers an older brother's courage and the younger brother's legacy. We also celebrate Kallif's birthday.

Please call 1-888-KIDHERO to receive more information on being a mentor, foster parent or licensed adoptive parent. Our kids are waiting for you.

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