

The Gingerbread House

By Melissa Ryba, LMSW 9/20/21

A little girl, Emma, and I walked down the stairs to the visit room to wait until her mom arrived. Emma was in foster care and she hadn't seen her mom in a few months. Mom missed the last few scheduled visits, and we were both a little tense, as it was already a few minutes past the time her mom was due to arrive. Emma was six years old, and we played together with some of the toys that were in the visit room. Her blond hair was in a pony tail, her big eyes were alert, looking around the room. After a very long 15 minutes, we get the call that mom is there.

We go back up to gather mom and as we enter the lobby, her mom rushes to give hugs and kisses and Emma accepts them. Her mom is rushed, a little frantic, and starts talking right away, apologizing for being late and telling Emma about the gingerbread house she brought for them to put together as it was near Christmas. She continued to talk nervously and we all headed down to the visit room.

After I lead them into the visit room, I excuse myself and go into the observation room. It has a one-way mirror so I can observe them while giving them a semblance of privacy. I imagine that this mirror is anything but discrete to someone who is there for one short hour with their child. Although this is for the child's safety, I can't imagine being in this position of scrutiny. Someone there, watching my every move and knowing that it is being documented for the court. I know mom has a substance use issue that she has struggled with since her early teens. Emma's mom, also was in foster care as a child and experienced significant trauma.

During this hour, it was evident Emma's mom really wanted to do what she could to make up for the months of her absence, but wasn't really sure how. She talked continuously, and focused the majority of her attention on building the gingerbread house. Emma sat next to her, observing, looking up at her mom curiously. After some time, Emma said, "Mama, I dream about you at night."

My heart stopped and tears immediately filled my eyes behind the mirror. The sadness of this situation overwhelmed me. I know mom heard, but she didn't really react. She kept building and told Emma, "oh honey, I miss you too." But kept on. I imagine that hearing that also struck some pain in her heart. Maybe she was keeping a brave face for her while they were together.

I pictured them together, as Emma was a baby, having those intimate moments where bonds are made. Despite perhaps a lot of chaos in their lives, I imagine that there were moments. Emma is connected to her mom in a way that will never fully be replaced by anyone else. It reminds me of another little guy, Taylor, only two years old. He was in foster care since he was 9 months old. For over a year, he visited his mom 3 times a week, for two hours at a time, but sometimes with large gaps. In my adult mind, I would assume that his mom must be a stranger at this point, and his foster family replaced in his mind as his "family." At this point in his life, he had lived in his foster home longer than he had lived with his mother. I heard him arrive one day, and he was at the end of the hall. I heard his mom at the other end. When he saw his mom, he became so excited, and ran down the hall, "Mama! Mama! Mama!" Their bond became abundantly clear to me in that moment, and I was in awe of it. My heart again crumpled a little, witnessing the heartache these families go through.

As the case progressed, mom was unable to successfully treat her substance use, and Emma was adopted. This is the best-case scenario for Emma, given the situation. But, I wish there was more help available to moms (and dads) like Emma's and Taylor's. We have a patchwork system now - still full of stigma, punishment, and misunderstanding of those with substance use disorders and trauma. Every day we need to strive to do better. *I believe that healing our families is the first step to healing our communities.*