

I'm going to take you back 15 years so bear with me. In spring of 1989 at the age of 17, I found out I was pregnant. Against my family's wishes I kept my child. With my daughter arriving early and me being so young the Doctors found out on the delivery table that I was not built to deliver a child. After almost losing myself and my baby that day the doctors advised me that if I was to get pregnant again it would be high risk. At my six-week check up I found out I had cervical cancer.

As a young single parent I worked as a waitress to make ends meet and honestly thought life couldn't get any better. Each phase of my daughter's life was the best - newborn, six months, one year... I was in my glory. August 12, 1990 I had just turned 20 and my child 19 months. Her lungs collapsed and we spent over a year in and out of the University Hospital. Her second Christmas was spent in a white hospital room. I started asking why my child was having to go through this? Why were we being tested? I quickly learnt from my experience that her and I were very blessed, for we got to go home while other children did not, but their parents had to, alone. During that time I must have been fired at least 10 times. I refused to leave my daughter alone in a hospital room.

I met my husband at one of the many waitressing jobs I'd held. At this stage my daughter's health was much improved. After getting married we wanted to have a second child, but after having a second bout with cervical cancer I knew my chances were slim to none in getting pregnant. We tried unsuccessfully for a year. My husband had some tests done and we found out his count was low. So now we knew we virtually had no chance of getting pregnant. Although we still believed it could happen, right? You always hear of those miraculous pregnancies. We were good parents to our daughter although honestly we lacked structure, we carried a very free attitude. We encouraged her to be the best she could be, given her weaknesses in her lungs, to still pursue everything to the best of her ability.

During this time we'd been approached by a friend who felt we would make good foster parents. We thought seriously about it and pursued the idea, resulting in becoming foster parents seven years ago. Our first placement came to us with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder at the age of two. We had no idea what that was, but we could love her and all would be well right? Wrong! We quickly learned that our parenting styles had to change to adapt to our new daughter. I soon realized that when my daughter's lungs had collapsed I couldn't love her better, I needed help. I needed oxygen, ventolin and a team of medical professionals. So now I needed to seek help for my second daughter, professionals and lots of education. We changed our parenting to a more structured style, and used different techniques that were more successful with our second daughter's needs. We wouldn't ask our oldest child to run a marathon; we would however ask her to walk and take her time to get through one. Now we couldn't ask our second child to learn the way her peers did without supports in place to help her. During this time we were still hoping to conceive but nothing was happening in that department.

We continued to foster through the years and have adapted our parenting many times and educated ourselves with each new child placed with us. We have had and continue to have challenging days. Five years into our marriage we decided to adopt a child we had met by doing relief care. She was two when we met her and three when she became available for adoption. There were many questions around adopting a child with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. Our first placement still lived with us, as she had become a long-term foster child. We had to ask ourselves - What if this isn't right for our other children? What if we can't afford this financially? What if we don't have the energy? The list went on and on, all "what ifs". I felt we had a great opportunity to adopt a beautiful girl. I also thought we had an advantage knowing the challenges we were about to take on. My husband however was still holding on to the hope that we would get pregnant. It was a difficult decision for him. He had to grieve the idea of being a birth dad to someone. The whole adoption process was very emotional. Unlike a pregnancy we had people telling us when we could see our child, how she was going to move in and when. It was frustrating at times. During that time it felt like an eternity. Looking back now it was just a hiccup in time.

Just like having a new baby, when she did move in there were adjustments that needed to be made. This was now official - we had our third daughter at three years old. One of the first challenges facing us was becoming her family. She had had a foster home for the first three years of her life. How did we help her grieve that family and support her into her role within our family? As her new Mom and Dad of course we wanted that to be immediate, but it took time for her to adjust, although not long - I would say about three months. Part of that for her was to let her talk about her other family and respect the fact that she has wonderful memories with them.

The second challenge was introducing her to acquaintances that we only knew through school or the community. We didn't always want to be introducing her as "our new adopted daughter". We knew there would be curiosity and questions around her arrival, so prior to her moving in we told people that we ran into frequently that she would be moving in. When she did arrive we simply introduced her as our daughter.

Our biggest challenge was accepting the fact that we did not hold her first three years of memories. Some may say that they are the most important. We had to accept this and realize that it couldn't be changed and just be very thankful that we have many more "firsts" to come. We have the rest of her life to look forward to her successes, failures challenges and triumphs. We will be there holding her hand supporting and encouraging her every step of the way. This can be accomplished without us holding onto the first three years. I think back to before we adopted and wonder what would have happened had we given into our fears and not pursued adoption. Our adopted daughter is now five and entering into kindergarten. She has challenges in her life and we advocate strongly for her. Through our children we have challenged ourselves as parents, as a couple and as individuals and are better, stronger people because of it.

Our oldest daughter, now almost fifteen, is entering high school. Her dream is to be a lawyer and fight for children's rights. She's kind, compassionate, strong, funny and the list could go on but she still can't run like her friends. Our other daughters are funny, kind, compassionate, energetic and the list could go on but they still can't think like their friends do. My daughter wrote a poem once and in it she said, "The most beautiful bouquets were ones picked from different gardens" That is my family - a bouquet of people from different families, and we are beautiful.

Life offers us choices and it is up to us to choose which ones are best for us. I don't know where my children's journeys will end for they have only just begun. I do believe their lives will take them in different directions. The one thing I know for sure is that I am honoured, privileged and a better person for being a part of their lives.

I want to leave you with one question, if all that is holding you back is the what ifs.....what if you don't?