



Maryville Daily Times FROM THE HEART Column

Shining Light on Children's Priceless Potential

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As the door opened to my fourth grade classroom, the principal of the small rural school appeared with a new student whom he introduced as Kara (not her real name). Looking pale and malnourished, she was dressed in a tattered, dirty dress covered with mud. The room was deadly quiet as I ushered her to a seat and gathered textbooks and other materials for her use.

During the next several weeks, Kara's grades were marginal and she was shunned by the other students due to her unclean, unkempt appearance. She arrived each morning on the school bus without school supplies or lunch money. The school ultimately provided lunch for her and I made sure she had the pencils, paper and workbooks she needed each day. I purchased clothes for her to take home and helped her clean up each morning in the staff bathroom before going to class. After a while, she again began coming to school in her old dirty clothes and I discovered that her father was selling the clean clothes in order to purchase beer. I bought more clothes and kept them at school. Each morning upon her arrival, Kara bathed and put on clean clothes for the school day. At 3:00 she changed into her "home" clothes before boarding the bus after school. A little black purse I found at a consignment shop became her most treasured possession. Her grades began to improve and she began making friends.

A chronic cough that was present when Kara entered school was now making it difficult for her to breathe. Even though her parents had access to a free clinic, they refused to take her for medical treatment. With the support of the principal, I asked the parents if she could stay with me for a while. Thinking it would mean one less mouth to feed, they easily consented and gave permission for medical treatment. It took a month of antibiotics to clear the long standing infection. Suddenly Kara began eating like she would never have another meal. She gained weight and her face began to glow with color. My young four-year-old daughter and Kara became fast friends and were inseparable.

Amazing things began to happen. Kara developed a perpetual smile. I discovered that she had an amazing sense of humor. She began making A's in school and with her newfound self-confidence, her popularity with other students soared. At our house, she had her first birthday party. At her request, I made Kara and my daughter matching Easter dresses to wear to church services. She became very attached to my family and the feeling was mutual.

In late spring, a month before school ended, the inevitable call came that I feared most. Kara's father phoned and said that he had been informed that his monthly government check would be reduced because Kara was not living in the household. He demanded that Kara be returned immediately. Reluctantly, we traveled to her house located on a secluded parcel of farmland. The house was in shambles, the exterior charred from a fire set by her father one night while in a drunken rage. Inside,

floor boards were missing, exposing the dirt and elements below. There was evidence of rats and other pests among the filth of open food containers and piles of unwashed dishes.

I was met by Kara's mother at the door. With six children in tow, she looked much older than her age. The father was drunk, yelling obscenities while watching a static ridden television with tin foil on the antenna. A rifle was parked in the corner which the father reportedly fired at will when in one of his notorious intoxicated rampages. Kara was sobbing, clinging to me and begging me not to leave her there. Appearing nervous, her mother pulled her away, thanked me for all I had done and closed the door. I left in tears wondering if it had been a terrible mistake taking in this child--giving her a taste of hope and security knowing that she might ultimately be returned to squalor and neglect. Was the emotional cost for Kara greater having been exposed to a better lifestyle only to lose it or to have never experienced it at all? I would struggle with this question for years to come.

Kara returned to school the next Monday in tattered clothing looking heartbroken and hopeless. Throughout the remainder of the school year, I continued to encourage her and each day provided her with a change of clothes. The local Department of Human Services (at that time the child protective service agency) investigated and made the determination that there were insufficient grounds to remove the child.

The next year I moved to a city 40 miles away, enrolled in graduate school and became a counselor. Fifteen years later, to my surprise and delight, I received a phone call from Kara. After considerable effort, she was able to track me down. Kara called to tell me about the turns her life had taken after that eventful fourth grade year. She was the first and only person in her family in generations to finish high school. Now married, she was the mother of two young children and worked as a receptionist in a small business. She called to let me know that the year she spent with my family mattered and it gave her the courage to seek something different. Kara thanked me over and over for helping her believe in herself and have the confidence to stay in school, breaking the family legacy of poverty.

I hung up the phone realizing that one can never underestimate the value of mentoring and encouraging children no matter how brief the opportunity. Those moments will never be forgotten even for those who struggle to overcome adverse influences. Children will typically strive to live up to what others believe of them. Many have gone further than they ever thought possible because someone gave them hope. Take the time to shine a light on the gifts of children who believe they have none and guide them through the darkness. Help them find purpose and discover their dreams for the future. Time spent helping a child feel valued with a firm grasp of their potential is a priceless gift that lasts a lifetime.