

Kinship Families: A Story

Since the original publication of this story in 2015, Congress has passed the Families First Prevention Services Act (2018), where there is strong recognition that children may avoid foster care placements by living in kinship families. Preventing foster care placements is an important strategy of the Act and reflects the realities described in this story.

Preventing Foster Care Placements

In 2012, Sandra was 48 and had raised two children of her own when, despite her better judgment, she allowed her stepson Paul and his eight-year-old daughter Alyssa to move in with her. They had planned to stay with her for a few weeks while Paul searched for a job and an apartment. But a few weeks turned into four months, during which time Paul would leave home for days at a time leaving Sandra in charge of Alyssa. Sandra enrolled her in school and after-school activities. She made sure she did her homework and she assumed a caretaker's role. Alyssa is diabetic. Her medication, which had been poorly monitored up to now, required constant attention as her insulin levels were completely out of control. Sandra enrolled Alyssa in Child Health Plus, got her to the doctor, and attended to her medication and diet – even making sure her school monitored her glucose levels during the day.

Alyssa's health had improved, and she was doing better in school. As time passed, Alyssa and Sandra were growing attached to one another. Then Paul decided to take Alyssa to live with her mother in the Dominican Republic – and Alyssa was gone from Sandra's life.

Sandra had no intention of interfering with Paul's decisions. In the Dominican Republic, Alyssa's mother, who had walked out on her once before, refused to take the child. A month later, Sandra got a call from an airline stewardess asking her to pick the young girl up at the airport. She called Paul and he plainly told her he was done being a parent and he wanted Alyssa to go into foster care unless Sandra would agree to care for her.

There were no other relatives willing to take Alyssa. Sandra felt manipulated and used by Paul and contemplated turning Alyssa over to the foster care system.

But she didn't. Instead she contacted NYC's Family Center and with their help she petitioned Family Court for guardianship over Alyssa.

Alyssa was just one phone call away from entering foster care. A conservative estimate of what her care in the child welfare system would cost is \$21,535 a year. Considering her significant health issues, that estimate could easily skyrocket. By contrast, the kinship staff attorney spent less than 20 hours, from intake to judgment, on Sandra's application for guardianship. Additionally, Sandra has refused to apply for temporary assistance or any other subsidies.