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SPECIAL COMMEMORATIVE ISSUE...

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Count Your Blessings...

Words: Tracy Vanderneck

When I was five, my sister, Christina, told me that my mom and dad bought me from Kmart on Blue Light Special. Christina said she'd wanted to return me, but as anyone who shopped at Kmart in the 80's remembers, you couldn't return things you bought on Blue Light Special. She told me this with such smirking disappointment in her eight-year-old green eyes. I was, of course, devastated, not to mention worried that Kmart would change its policy and that I would be returned.

My sister would also let me tag along when she played kick-the-can with the boys from the neighborhood. She was who I would sit with in the living room when I was twelve pretending not to know our parents were fighting in whispers on the back porch. She helped me when I needed her to, and probably told me to "suck it up and deal with it" a time or two over the years as well.

I share these things not to illustrate that my elder sister is a monster (well); I share them because to me, they are examples of how siblings have such a close bond that they know all of each other's stories, pranks, happy times, sad times, and every feeling in between times. Not to mention that they often cause these feelings in one another.

My sister and I are pretty typical. Nothing bad happened to us when we were kids. After our parents divorced, our mom worked two jobs sometimes to make sure we had what we needed; and we always saw our father on Sundays.

Not all kids are this lucky. Somewhere in our community there is a five-year-old that already knows to hide under the bed when mommy is mad. There is an eight-year-old with his arm in a cast, because his dad "didn't like his tone". There is a 15 year-old checking her neighbor's trash cans to see if they threw out bread crusts or old fruit, so she could give them to her little sisters because mom hasn't come out of

her room in days and there is no food left in the house.

There are kids in our community that have experienced too much for their age; that know things no child should know. They have seen the worst life has to offer, often at the hands of their own parents-the very people meant to love and care for them and keep them safe.

In some cases like these, it is the best thing for the kids to be removed from the home until their parents or guardians can provide a more stable and safe environment. Though necessary, these situations are never easy. The children often have to leave their homes during times of crisis, leaving all of their clothing and belongings behind.

Imagine being a five-year old standing in the front yard holding your sister's hand, looking at people you don't know who came with the police to take you away. The dogs are barking. Mom is screaming. You are crying because, even though she scares you, she is your mom and you don't want to leave her. Your heart is pounding in your ears, and the only thing keeping you from flying away is your sister's hand, holding tight.

Where do the children go then? Through a network of community agency partnerships, and on the recommendation of case management professionals, the children are placed either in foster homes or group homes until they can return to their own homes, or in some cases, until they are adopted.

Now you are that five-year-old watching your only protector, your sister, getting into a car with those strangers, because she has to go live somewhere different than you. There isn't room at any of the homes for both of you. Now you are alone. You couldn't find your favorite stuffed animal to take with you. You are wearing your pajamas from yesterday. And your hand

is empty and cold where your sister's hand used to be.

Sometimes this just can't be helped. The safety of the children in our community must come first. If siblings have to be separated so that they have a safe place with compassionate caretakers, then it has to be.

Luckily, that is not the case at Everyday Blessings. The mission of Everyday Blessings, Inc. is to provide high quality care for sibling groups through a live-in caregiver model. With two locations, the original program in Hillsborough County and a second location in Sarasota, Everyday Blessings provides sibling groups the opportunity to remain together.

Children are placed with Everyday Blessings from Manatee, Sarasota, DeSoto, Hillsborough, Pasco, Pinellas and Polk counties. Live-in, 24/7 caregivers provide ongoing emotional and social support, transportation, and child advocacy. Additionally, the agency's support staff provides counseling, medical oversight, crisis intervention, case management, tutoring, and developmental daycare. Through the generosity of volunteers, educational, social, spiritual, and leisure activities are also part of the daily activities.

No child wants to be separated from his or her parents, the same way no child wants to be hurt by his or her parents. But when the child is experiencing abuse, neglect, or abandonment, that separation is necessary. Providing a way for these children to stay with their siblings can mean the difference between a difficult situation and a dire one.

The things I took for granted as a child with my sister become really important when you need your sibling and can't be with them. Just eating dinner together or doing homework together before bed can provide the comfort that siblings in foster care need. Nothing instills more of a sense



"Your heart is pounding in your ears, and the only thing keeping you from flying away is your sister's hand, holding tight..."

of normalcy than having your sibling play a prank on you, grouse at you, or hug you. Good feelings or bad both feel more normal with your sister or brother by your side.

My sister may have occasionally told me she wanted to return me to Kmart, but she was also my best friend and my champion. Thanks to the caring and loving staff and volunteers at Everyday Blessings and its partner agencies, siblings in foster care in Southwest Florida have a chance to stay together. And together is a really good place to be. 🙌

For more information on Everyday Blessings and its Springboard program for young adults transitioning out of foster care and those at risk of becoming homeless, visit www.everydayblessings.org and www.springboardsrq.com.

- Tracy Vanderneck, MSM, CFRE is the Development Director for Manatee and Sarasota counties for Everyday Blessings, Inc., a foster care organization dedicated to providing high-quality foster care while keeping siblings together.

In addition to its foster care mission, Everyday Blessings also runs the Springboard Program for young adults transitioning out of foster care and those at risk of becoming homeless. Visit www.everydayblessings.org and www.springboardsrq.com.

Tracy is also the owner of the Manatee County business, Phil-Com, which provides training and consulting to nonprofit organizations and communications services for small businesses (www.phil-com.com) as well as delivers on-demand, online fundraising training at www.thedauntlessfundraiser.com. She is also a DonorPath Expert that provides fundraising advice to nonprofits around the country.

