

Testimony Jonathan Stahl

Good Afternoon,

My name is Jonathan Stahl. My wife Katie and I have been fostering kids for almost a decade and specialize in difficult teens. Today I am here to tell you the story of our family.

Like every good story, ours has a hero. His name is Alex. Today I am here for him.

When my wife and I started fostering we intended to foster boys ages 0 to 6. We had determined that teens, especially teen boys, were scary. After a year of fostering two precious boys, our two went home to be with their dad. A month later we had accepted two more young boys. A month after that I was sitting in my living room relaxing after having put them both to bed when we got a call about a 13 year old boy named Alex. My friend told me that Alex was a tough kid but that she felt that he was perfect for us. Without hesitation (something that surprised even me) I said yes.

The next day as I watched Alex arrive from the window I noticed that on his ankle there was a monitoring device. I was immediately nervous as to what I had gotten myself into. What if this kid broke things in my house? What if he brought in drugs? What if he was involved in a gang? What if he endangered our family? When I opened the door Alex looked at me with a shy/goofy grin and all of those fears went away. This was a kid. A kid that needed a home, and we were all in.

Over the next few months, Alex grew into our family. We watched him “nest” into his room and make it his own. We celebrated me finishing my masters, and Katie becoming pregnant(after 3 miscarriages and a doctor telling us it wouldn’t happen).

3 months later we got a call from the same friend that called us about Alex. She said that there was another kid, Zay, who needed a home. Zay was 15 and from the same group home that Alex was in. He had been in 50 different placements and had 2 failed adoptions. I told her that Alex was very attached to his own room but that I would talk to him. As I sat down Alex to talk to him I mentioned Zay and before I could get any more words out Alex said “Zay needs to come live here. I can share my room. He’s a good kid and deserves a home”. 2 days later Zay was a member of our family.

Trauma is hard. Trauma behaviors are hard. In addressing his own trauma, Alex would self-medicate. He experimented with drugs, snuck out of the house, and challenged us in ways we’d never been challenged before. Zay would have PTSD triggered meltdowns where he would just out of our cars when parked at stop lights, tear up the house, put holes in walls, and run away from school. We watched our two boys struggle, succeed, and then struggle more. Throughout all of this, Alex and Zay had become brothers. They picked each other up when they were down, prayed for each other, and defended each other at all costs.

When our son, Jude, was born Alex and Zay were so proud. They were the best big brothers. I remember Alex would hold Jude non-stop. They both bragged about their little brother wherever they went.

Our year continued with struggles and successes. By the even of the year Zay's behavioral teacher(a teacher of 20 plus years) had said that Zay showed the most growth of any student. We were so proud. At this point Alex had not had any visits with his family in 6 months and had been with us for a little over a year.

Alex had a routine court hearing at the end of the year. I did not go to it because it was 2 hours away and nothing had happened at any of his other hearings. I also did not like the way Alex's judge spoke about or to him and felt it was best for me to not attend. While at work I got a call from his worker. Her voice was shaking and I knew something was wrong. She told me that the judge had told Alex that he wasn't worth the time we were all putting into him, that he belonged in jail, and that he was sending him home to his parents so that that would happen. I was crushed. Alex argued for the judge to allow him to come back to us for one day to say goodbye and the judge finally agreed.

We spent one last day together. It was the hardest day of my life. Zay was devastated, our younger two were devastated, Alex was numb. He hugged us goodbye and went out the door to his new/old home.

The next 3 weeks were hard. I missed Alex deeply. You see, somewhere in our long year he had become my son in my heart.

While training to teach the foster licensure classes 3 weeks after he left, I got a call from his mom. Alex had gotten in a fight and his front two teeth were knocked out. She did not have him on her insurance yet and asked if we knew a dentist. I got him into the one he was in at our house and offered to pay for his teeth. She suggested that he come spend the night and mentioned that she was worried about how he was doing where he was and who he was hanging out with.

Alex came up for the weekend to visit. 2 minutes after his parents pulled out of the driveway I got a phone call. It was his mom. She told me that she felt he was better off with us, that they could not raise him, and that they wanted to sign over guardianship to us. She asked me to tell him for her.

Guardianship meant several things to us as compared to being his foster parents. We would get no money from the state, he would be on our insurance, and we would lose most supports for him that were free. We would not be responsible for him in every way. Without hesitation we said yes. This wasn't about the money, they was about our kid who needed us. I would not like him go somewhere where people were not willing to raise him. Alex takes a lot of work as a parent. He takes high investment, late nights, lots of emotional energy...and he's worth it.

The next 2 years of being his guardians were the hardest, most rewarding years of our life. You see trauma doesn't disappear when kids are given permanency. Alex went to rehab in Florida twice(both times paid for by us), picked up some charges, struggled, fell, picked himself up, and kept growing. One of the times that Alex was using he attempted to drive and I attempted to take the keys from him. I ended up getting a concussion in the struggle and Alex got charged with a felony.

Alex and Zay had caused us to fall in love with taking the hard teenagers and we had many placements in between this so we were not phased by any of this. We knew kids struggle, and we knew we wanted to be there for them. During this time we had taken in another teenager full time named Dae. He was

from a rough background and I was worried that Alex and Zay might not accept him. The first night we had him, I overheard them whispering with him in their room. I immediately feared they were planning to do something like sneak out or attempt to get drugs. As I leaned in to listen through the door I heard Alex praying with them saying "Dear God, thank you for our new brother. I know it's scary now, but help him know that this is his family now and that he is safe". My heart immediately melted. Dae was not part of our family.

Throughout the years we have become the house that KVC goes to to place the difficult teen boys. We had had kids with gun charges, armed robbery charges, gang involvement. We had a kid who was a drug dealer and who had multiple guns hidden on him. We have fearlessly taken in these kids that no one else will because we believe that every child deserves a chance. It breaks our hearts to know where our sons might be if we had not taken them in.

DCF has thanked us profusely for taking in these children as well as for giving Alex permanency in a safe home. After a long time of negotiating and court Alex finally got his charges and started working towards his future. It was then, a few weeks ago, right after turning in our renewal along with Alex's background that we got a letter in the mail from DCF saying he had to be out of the house in 5 days or we could not foster because of his charge.

Since then, we have been asked to take multiple different kids with worse charges than Alex, which is perfectly legal because they are still in foster care. The only difference between Alex and the kids we take every day is that we are his guardians. Had his judge done the right thing and kept him in care we would be labeled heroes for keeping him in our house. Now we have been given the choice of sending away our 17 year old son or sending away our other sons who are in foster care. We have been asked to choose whether to send Zay out to strangers and to abandon him after 4 years or to abandon Alex (who has no one).

I fully believe that neither of these boys can handle the trauma of being taken from our home. They both call us their parents, they call each other brother, and we are the only stability that they've had in their life. We have been forced to temporarily find arrangements for Alex to be with a family friend until we can get this issue fixed. We have been told that there is no exception, no other option, and no way to fight this.

Alex has been sober, working hard to get his diploma, and has a plan for his life. I do not believe that without this family he will succeed. I fear that he will become depressed and fall back into drugs after all of his hard work. I'm heartbroken for my son but I'm also angry.

Angry that we, as foster parents, are consistently impressed upon to give children permanency through adoption. That is, after all, the best outcome for them. When I teach licensing classes I speak often about how important it is to adopt teens and give them permanent homes.

Adoption doesn't absolve trauma. Kids who came from foster care will still struggle, still get charges, still exhibit trauma. It is my fear that parents will not adopt hard teens if they know that the second they do that they will be punished if those teens struggle. Alex instantly went from a kid who everyone was begging us to keep through incentive, raising rates, and praise, to a kid who is apparently too dangerous to be in our house. Never mind that we are still being asked to take kids in care that have far worse charges than him.

I am here today to ask you to change this law so that my family can be back together, so that foster parents are encouraged to adopt hard kids, not punished when they do. I am here to ask you to change this law so that when I tell my teens that we are in it forever that I am not lying. I'm asking you to change this law for the teens who need to be adopted without parents fearing that they will mess up and cause them to choose between their children.

No parent should have to choose between an Alex or a Zay. These boys have become our whole world, they are the reason we continue to take hard kids, the reason we believe every child deserves a family that loves them, and the reason we and other parents help there not be offices filled with difficult teenagers.

Alex has changed our lives. I wouldn't be the parent, friend, son, brother, teacher, or husband I am now without him. He has brought to our family more than we've ever given him and we can't imagine our lives without being his parent. He is my greatest encourager, the biggest supports to his brothers. He is the one who chews his brothers out if they use drugs, sneak out, or our disrespectful. Alex is our hero. Today we need you to be his.