

Elizabeth Borges: A Birth Mother's Story of Loss and Gain

By

Janice G. Schuster¹

This essay is about my life experiences as a birth mother whose son, Kirk, was put into Massachusetts state care at age one and who was adopted by Janice Schuster and Tim Southern when Kirk was 3 1/2 years old. I pray that my story will be useful to other birth parents who were not able to raise their biological children, despite loving them very much and wanting only the best for them.

I was born in New Bedford, Massachusetts, in 1975, the oldest of three children of very young parents. My mother had just turned 17 when I was born. During my childhood, I was responsible for my two younger siblings because our parents had drug problems. Because our parents were both drug addicts, my siblings and I did *not* have a normal family life. While my parents spent their days getting high, I took care of my younger sister and brother. I did the best I could in this role. Unfortunately, I had no model as to what a family should do or how family members should act toward each other. I now know that normal family life involves doing things together like parents reading to their children. In addition, throughout my childhood, I suffered physical, mental, and sexual abuse.

When I was in elementary school, I told a teacher that I was being sexually abused. A social worker interviewed my parents and me. My parents would not

let me press charges against the family member who had raped me; so no justice was ever done about my being raped. I'm not sure why the state did not press charges on its own.

Due to the abuse I was experiencing at home, I was placed in foster care at age 10. From then, until I was about 15, at times I lived at home with my family and at times I lived with foster families. When I was 15, I ended up in a group home, where I lived until I was 17.

At age 17, soon after I left the group home, I became pregnant with Kirk. His birth father and I broke up soon after. I then began a relationship with a man who would later become the birth father of my two daughters. When Kirk was born in August of 1993, I was 18 years old. My boyfriend willingly put his name on Kirk's birth certificate as his birth father, even though he knew that Kirk was not biologically his child. In June of 1995, I had a daughter with this same man and, in early 1997, I gave birth to a second daughter with him.

¹Elizabeth (Liz) Borges' story was written by Janice Schuster based on meetings with Liz on 7/2/15 and 7/7/15. Janice and her husband, Tim Southern, feel blessed to have a very good, close relationship with Liz, their son Kirk's birth mother. When Janice wrote her Point of View essay for Volume One of SBG about her experiences as an adoptive mother, she asked Liz if she was interested in writing about her experiences as a birth mother whose son was placed in foster care and subsequently adopted. Liz replied with an enthusiastic yes. Upon further discussion, Janice and Liz agreed that Liz would tell her story to Janice and that Janice would write Liz's story. Janice drafted this essay and discussed it with Liz who stated that this essay accurately conveys her story. Janice can be reached at jschuster@providence.edu

My boyfriend abused me physically. Someone reported the abuse to the Massachusetts Department of Social Services (DSS, now the Department of Children and Families). Due to our unstable living conditions, DSS removed Kirk, who was one year old at the time, from my care and placed him in foster care. One of the staff members in the group home where I lived while I was in foster care became my social worker when Kirk was taken from me and placed into foster care.

After Kirk went into foster care, my life really began to unravel. I was angry, both at the world and at myself. I felt that I needed guidance on how to be a mother to Kirk and my daughters, but no one was willing or able to give me that guidance or help. Since my childhood was not normal, and I had no role models about how to be a good parent, I did not know how to provide a normal childhood for my children. I still feel that if someone had been willing to teach me and give me the guidance I needed, I would have been able to raise Kirk, and he would not have been placed in foster care.

When DSS took Kirk from me, I felt that they would take my daughters as well. I had no one to turn to for help. As it turned out, DSS placed my daughters in foster care with a family friend. My friend wanted to take Kirk also, but DSS decided that she already had the maximum number of foster children, so they placed Kirk in an outside foster home instead.

Finally I was able to end my relationship with the birth father of my daughters. Soon after, I met a man who gave me the stability and love that I had been lacking. He cared about the girls and me and treated us well. He became the birth father of my two younger sons, who were born in 2000 and 2001. We had a good, stable family life for a while. I was devastated when, in November of 2002, I returned home to find my boyfriend dead of an overdose in our apartment.

At that point, I wanted to give up. I didn't see the point in living. Due to my unstable mental state, my

younger sons went to live with their birth father's sister in New York. After ten years, their aunt said she was having problems with them and brought them back to me. With no warning whatsoever, they appeared on my doorstep. DSS found out that they were with me and decided that I could not provide them with a stable living environment, so they placed them in the care of my younger brother, Jose G. Borges, Jr., his wife, Erlinda Borges, and their family in late 2012.

Kirk, my oldest child, was in foster care for 2 ½ years. During that time, before Janice and Tim adopted him, the foster mother with whom he lived for the entire 2 ½ years, was very good to me. DSS had given me a schedule for visiting Kirk. Sometimes, however, his foster mother let me visit him outside of the schedule. I felt that she was trying to help me and that she understood how much I loved Kirk. When DSS terminated my parental rights and placed Kirk with Janice and Tim as their foster son, his foster mother assured me that Kirk had been placed with a good couple. Since I trusted her and knew she was on my side, I believed her. This belief alleviated some of my worry I had about him.

After Kirk was placed with Janice and Tim in early 1997, I frequently asked my social worker if I could have contact with him. She encouraged me to write him a letter. I did not know what I would say in a letter. I did not think that I could communicate to him what I needed to say in a letter. So, although I never wrote to him, I thought about him all the time. I also prayed that someday he would search for me and find me. I was miserable not knowing where Kirk was or how he was doing. Despite his foster mother's assurance that good people, i.e. Janice and Tim, had adopted him, I worried about whether he was being abused (probably due to my own history of abuse), whether he was getting enough to eat and whether he was happy.

I spent 15 long years not knowing where Kirk was, how he was doing, or anything about him. I prayed every

day that he was healthy and happy and that he was doing well. In early 2012, God answered my prayers. Kirk used Facebook to find the man who was listed on his birth certificate as his birth father and contacted him. He, of course, was not Kirk's birth father and wanted to have nothing to do with him. He did, however, give Kirk the names of my daughters, Kirk's sisters, who were this man's biological daughters. Kirk contacted one of them via Facebook and that led to Kirk's finding me.

I was very nervous before my first meeting with Kirk, in March of 2012. We had arranged to meet at my sister's house in New Bedford, and, due to how nervous I was about meeting him again after so many years, I hid behind the front door that I knew Kirk would come through. I worried about how he would react to seeing me again. Would he be angry that I could not raise him? Would he yell at me? I worried and was very nervous about all of these things.

Finally, Kirk walked through the door. He immediately recognized me and gave me a big hug. He introduced himself very politely and respectfully, which helped me tremendously because I knew at that moment that he had been brought up very well. We talked about his playing football and that he had great parents. I was so relieved that he was not angry with me and that he wanted to get to know me.

Soon after I was reunited with Kirk, I met Janice and Tim for the first time. My heart was changed dramatically at this point, because I knew that great people had adopted him. Not having to worry about what kind of people adopted him changed my heart tremendously. A huge burden had been lifted from me.

I am thrilled to have a good relationship with Kirk now. He is busy with college and working for Vector Corporation selling Cutco knives (during the academic year) and managing a branch office for Vector (during the summer). I don't see him as often as I would like, but we keep in touch through texting and Facebook.

I feel that Kirk does not like to visit New Bedford, though, since I think he realizes that my family life is not normal. I believe he sees how my family members treat me and does not like it. I am currently living in Fall River, so I'm hoping that he will be more willing to visit me than he was when I lived in New Bedford, where my parents still live. I am relieved beyond words to know that he was raised in a loving family that cared for him and gave him all the things I could not. I am also grateful to have a good relationship with Janice, Tim, and Kirk's brother, Jordan. God has truly answered my prayers.

About the Author: Janice G. Schuster, Associate Professor, is Commons Librarian for Research, Education, and Collections, at Providence College's Phillips Memorial Library. She received a B.A. degree in German and an M.L.S. degree, both from Indiana University in Bloomington, IN. She can be reached at: jschuster@providence.edu