

I'll Be "Home" For Christmas You Can Count On Me!

by Judy Howell, President MFCA

*"I'll be home for
Christmas,
You can
count on me.
They'll be snow
and mistle toe
And pres-
ents under the tree"*

*Walter Kent, Kim Gannon, Buck Ram
(1946)*

She stood at the window looking at the falling flakes. Thinking. Alone. Our house was a bustle, the tree was decorated, holiday music filled the air. We had already baked a batch of ginger cookies. The sounds, sights and smells expressed Holiday spirit and festivity. The children expressed varying degrees of anxiety over the coming holiday.

Some were emotionally dead from past life experiences and looked toward the holidays with mistrust and suspicion. Others ran from surprise to new experience exclaiming shrieks of joy, mixed with apprehension. Were the presents under the tree 'really' theirs to keep? Were the BIG presents only for MY children? Were they ONLY going to get clothes? My heart ached for each of them to feel that the shining star at the top of the tree was reachable in each of their lives. Each child was special and each had a reason for being. This was the season of the year that I felt joy and completeness.

The girl at the window turned. Her eyes silently said "I don't care how much you know about me and my family. I need to know how much you care about and for me. I can't tell you my past holidays. It is

hell to tell. I want to be a part of your celebration and joy, but I am scared. I don't know how to be and I miss my family.

My heart cried for this young woman. Change and transition were excruciating to her. Her old holiday experiences were familiar. In the chaos of her life she had knit a holiday family story that let her mind wander – the color of the wrapping paper, the ham her mom had baked, the bits and pieces of beauty and warmth and love – the hug from her cousin. And I realized she had sealed away the pain and hurt and disappointment she had felt each year. I wanted to scoop her in my arms and tell her things don't always turn out like we planned, but that doesn't mean it turns out wrong. At that moment I knew that a hug or touch from me would feel invasive of her private thoughts – a collision of her memories, dreams and wishes with the reality of holidays in my home. I headed for the kitchen and returned with hot chocolate garnished with red and green mini marshmallows. "I brought you some hot chocolate" was all I said and together we silently sipped and watched the flakes fall. The gift of the moment – togetherness wrapped in the peace and respect of silence. And the young woman wished upon the falling flakes "Oh let me be home for Christmas."

For over twenty Christmases and three hundred children I had finally learned to shut up at least for a while. My resilient new foster daughter sipped her cocoa. I thought of the child I had just brought home for the holidays whose eyes pleaded with me to stay.

In another home her birth mother looked out the window at the falling flakes. She wondered where her daughter was. Was she happy? Was she lonely? Her heart ached.

The pain of having her children not there during the holidays never departed. Every Sunday at church she looked at the empty seats and asked God why. Why did life go this way? And she hoped in the deepest part of her heart that someone with compassion held her daughter and cared for her. And she prayed that her daughter wouldn't forget her no matter what had happened and that she knew how much she was loved. Yes she could keep her daughter in her heart, but that wasn't the same as a hug. And she also knit together a holiday family story that danced in her mind. The good memories of Christmas past. "Oh, if only her daughter could be home for Christmas."

Child zoomed past like a freight train, chasing another youngster. His behavior had gone into wrap speed at the sound of the first Christmas Carol. Every word I spoke returned to me twisted and tormented. There was nothing I could do right. There was nothing in my home that would feel like the holidays. He had assured me "I will be home by Christmas!"

At another window, mother stood despondent, holding her beer and joint – "those damn flakes only make life worse." What kind of Christmas is this. My kids are gone. The system stole them from me. Her chemical dependency had come at such a cost. The system let me down, they weren't there when I needed them. Her heart ached and her anger raged – at the system and my home. It was too painful to see the reflection of her own actions and life and its gift to the present circumstances she faced. She wanted her kids back and she wanted them back now. Anything. Anything to get them back and have a Merry Christmas. The holidays weren't nothin' without her kids. And she fantasized about the food and tree

and presents, when in reality they did not exist beyond her mind. She hurt. Her mind scattered through thoughts of holiday cheer and holiday horror. She would find a way to be with her children. "They will be home for Christmas" as she formulated a plan of return.

Holidays are a time of pain and confusion for and children families in out-of-home care. As caregivers we must proceed through the holidays with caution and love. We must respect and remember the families of origin of children in our care. We must remember there is another "HOME

FOR CHRISTMAS". Some families share a special meal together. Some bake cookies. Some get approved special visitations for children to see their families. Don't forget to share the holiday gifts they may make in school. Take some time to write cards or make ornaments. Take time to shop for presents or make gift for siblings and family of origin gifts. Consider making a dish to give when the children visit (and include the plate in the gift). Make a small package of holiday cheer - bath soaps, shampoos, candles, hot pad holders. Wrap everyday items that can be used and enjoyed. Reach

out. Don't leave that birth family isolated. Let them know you care. Keep yourself safe and take care of the children. Let there be TWO HOMES for CHRISTMAS!

Bless You

Judy Howell, President MFCA



Judy Howell is the Presentif of Minnesota Foster Care Association, she is an adoptive, foster and birth mother.

We need more foster and adoptive parents as members. Get your friends to join MFCA and keep up the great job Minnesota!

Judy Howell
2119 Lake Elmo Ave N.
Lake Elmo, MN 55042
Telephone: 651-770-1247
Fax: 651-770-7571