

Lost And Found

July 8, 2007

(CBS) *This segment was originally broadcast on Dec. 17, 2006. It was updated on July 8, 2007.*

They've been called some of the loneliest people on earth: children who were taken away from their parents due to neglect or abuse, but were never adopted by new families. Stranded in the child welfare system, they move from foster homes to group homes. There are tens of thousands of these children. They have no one – not a single relative to visit on Christmas or their birthday.

As **correspondent Lesley Stahl reports** first reported last December, there are now several cities across the country that are trying something new. It's called "family finding." The goal is to track down the families these children were taken away from in the first place to see if they can go home again.

Fourteen-year-old Samara has been in foster care her whole life and now lives at "Five Acres," a treatment center for troubled kids. Officials tell **60 Minutes** she does well in school, but that she struggles with severe depression, despite years of therapy and medication.

Last Christmas, Samara admits she was in pretty bad shape and even tried to hurt herself. Asked what was going on inside of her, she tells Stahl, "Cause the other kids. They used to go on visits with their family and all, and I was stuck at the house. Like for Christmas, everybody else was out."

Everyone was out with some relative but her.

"She was very suicidal, very self-harming," Marylou McGuirk, Samara's therapist, remembers.

"Is your analysis of her case that it was all stemming from the loss of her mother?" Stahl asks.

"I believe it was the loss of her family," McGuirk explains. "Not having a support system around her. And that trauma — was there was no healing process for that."

Kevin Campbell, who created and runs "Family Finding," went to Five Acres a year and a half ago to teach the staff how to find Samara's family.

"If the situation was so bad that the state had to take a child away from that home, why under any circumstances would the state put them back into that home?" Stahl asks Campbell.

"We may not be ever considering placing the child back in that home. What I'm looking for is 'Does he have an aunt or an uncle or a great-aunt or uncle who's safe with their kids and has done a good job and would be there for them,'" he says.

"What do you do when you find family members who say, 'No, I don't want anything to do with him or her?'" Stahl asks.

"What we do is keep moving. You're not done until you've found at least 40 relatives. Don't stop," Campbell explains. "The minimum first step is 40."

That seemed like a long shot, since Samara was considered a "cold case." Not a single relative was known.

The search began with just a few details about her mother. "I have her first name, we think an accurate spelling, a middle initial and a last name. We think she was in Culver City, Calif. We think that she's 27 years old," he explains.

That's all they had. And yet, with the help of a company called "U.S. Search," they were able to find not only Samara's mother, but a virtual family tree.

Within two hours, the search yielded 44 family members.

This is the family Samara knew nothing about, until Family Finding came into her life. There was a family reunion, with barbecue and music.

But unused to affection and belonging, Samara felt uncomfortable. She was taken away from her mother when she was only 10 months old on charges of neglect and now she was meeting the relatives she had yearned for, as if in a dream.

She met them all, including her great grandmother, grandparents, cousins, and aunts; for Samara, the hugging was overwhelming.

There were over 40 relatives in all.

"I was really, really scared, 'cuz I get really scared around a lot of people. And like when I was walking up the stairs, I almost like threw up," Samara explains.

Through Family Finding, Samara also met her mother Lakesha. Three months before the barbecue party, she got a call from Family Finding asking if she wanted to see Samara.

"And I said, 'Of course. I'm like I've been wanting it for years you know,'" she remembers.

Lakesha says there was no hesitation at all to meet her daughter. She had Samara when she was just 14 and in foster care herself; she says she was a rebellious, irresponsible teenager.

"I refused to go to school. I refused to go to counseling. Parenting classes. I refused to go," she recalls.

One day, she ran away and left Samara behind. She tried to get her back, but failed to show up for the big court date, was accused of neglect, and lost her parental rights.

Lakesha says she never physically abused her daughter and admits that some people think she neglected her child. Asked if in her own eyes she neglected her daughter, she says, "There's a lot of things that I could have done better, as a parent, I think, but I don't think, I don't think I did so much to have lost Samara."

Lakesha says she's a different person today. She has a full-time job as a teacher's aid, and is raising three young, healthy children.

After Family Finding called, Lakesha met with Samara's therapist and underwent a criminal background check. Only then was she allowed to meet with Samara.

"At first I was nervous. I couldn't say anything. Like my mouth was so dry. So she was just talkin'," Samara recalls.

That was in April 2006 at "Five Acres." The last time they had seen each other, Samara was six years old.

Samara didn't have a photo of her mother and didn't remember her face but when they met she knew it was her. Samara says she didn't cry during that encounter. "I was trying to hold it back 'cause I don't like people seeing me cry."

Samara has trouble expressing any emotion, and connecting. When her mother talked to her, Samara looked away. And yet, when Lakesha told her she had actually kept her picture all these years, Samara was surprised.

"So it's evidence that she was thinking about you all this time," Stahl remarks.

Samara never stopped thinking about Lakesha. Eight months after their first meeting, they talked about Samara moving in with Lakesha and her three young children. But it will be a huge undertaking, given Samara's behavioral problems.

"She's not used to the close physical proximity. Nor the emotional proximity, says therapist Marylou McGuirk.

McGuirk says after Samara first met her mom, she regressed a little.

"You know, breaking some property. Don't really like this: going to break something. You know, she was really confused at some point of: 'How do I do this? How do I have a parent now? I don't know how to do this,'" she explains.

Lakesha seems more worried about providing for her daughter. If Samara moves in, she'll likely lose things like free therapy and tutors, a clothing allowance, and help paying for college.

Samara acknowledges she will have to give up certain things and could stay at the facility while seeing her mother but it's not something she wants to think about.

Over the past six years, Campbell has trained social workers from 40 different states and so far, they have found relatives for 3,000 children. Of those, only about 25 percent have moved out of foster care and back home with family. But another 50 percent develop relationships with a relative.

Family Finding tends to deal with the most troubled kids in the foster care system. Often it's the ones prone to violence like Beverly, age 15, who's had no one for the last eight years, except for her brother Melvin, who lives at a group home nearby.

Beverly admits she has been very angry and acting out. "One of the foster homes that I was in I trashed the place. I threw

stuff at them, I threw glass at them, I threw whatever I could find at them," she recalls.

What was the rage about?

"Well, I felt, like, nobody wanted me, or whatever," she says.

What about her brother Melvin?

"I always had problems in school. And they wasn't like academically or nothing. It was just like always fighting. I'd fight anybody. I didn't care who it was," he says.

Beverly never stopped yearning for her family. When Family Finding came into her life, she thought they were taking too long. So she decided on an end run. In Feb. 2006, she just got up and ran away and on her own came to Watts and found her father, Melvin Sr.

It took him four months to pay his daughter a visit at "Five Acres." Beverly was ecstatic.

It was also the first time Melvin Sr. had seen his son in eight years; that reunion was far more restrained.

Through Family Finding, Melvin Jr. and Beverly learned that their mother died of drug abuse, and that since he lost his parental rights after being charged with neglect, Melvin Sr. has struggled with alcohol, has been in and out of work, and has 10 other children.

"Melvin Sr., your children have been raised in foster care. They've been shuttled around from house to house. Eight for Beverly, four for Melvin Jr. Is there anything you want to say to them?" Stahl asks.

"I'm sorry I wasn't there for y'all like I should have been. But now that I'm getting back on my feet, I will be here for y'all always. And I love y'all dearly," he says.

Asked if he has ever said that to them before, Melvin Sr. says, "I always tell my kids I love them."

But he acknowledges he has never apologized to his children in this way.

He has said he would like his children to come and live with him. He thinks that is a real possibility and that it is realistic.

Both Beverly and Melvin say they realize, given their father's problems, that they can't move home with him.

Melvin tells Stahl meeting his father still doesn't feel like a real relationship. Beverly meanwhile says she is developing a relationship with her dad.

Melvin acknowledges Melvin Sr. is trying but that he is being defiant as his father is making advances. "I'm not mad at him. It's just, I don't want ... I don't know. We'll see over time," he tells Stahl.

But that's not the end of the story. As part of Family Finding, uncle Frank, their mom's brother, comes to visit them every week. Raised in foster care himself, uncle Frank knows pretty much what they're going through.

"Being in the system, and you don't have nobody visiting you or, or showing that they care about you. It's hard. I'm just trying to keep everybody together because this is all that I have right now," he explains.

Beverly's therapist tells Stahl that she is happier: there are no more bouts of rage, she is more involved in school activities and dreams about going to Harvard.

Melvin, a senior in high school, also wants to go to college, hopefully on a basketball scholarship.

And in the meantime, uncle Frank says even though he can't take the kids now, when they leave the system at 18, his door will be open.

"So, when Melvin goes to college, when he gets his basketball scholarship, and he comes home for Christmas," Stahl asks Frank.

"He's always welcome. He's welcome," the uncle replies.

"It's just this basic need that human beings have to know the truth about what's happened to their families," says Kevin Campbell. "That's important, that's essential. How do you grow up without those things? Well, we know how they do it. We can look at young people in the foster care system and their struggle and see what happens when you don't have those things."

"It breaks them. And they struggle with it. And we can do something about it," he adds.

As for Samara, there are still lots of problems, including a lot of adjusting. She isn't close to being healed.

But in August, she went to court and asked a judge to put her back where she says she belongs. She asked the judge to reinstatement of parental rights, paving the return to her mother Lakesha.

It has been nearly a year since Samara asked the judge to send her home, but that still hasn't happened. Samara's had trouble in her group home and is now in a foster home. Her mother Lakesha, now unemployed, is still looking for a larger apartment so Samara can move in.

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