

Gary Mallon's Adoption Story

I met her for the first time on a very sunny day on September 10, 1977. Leslie reminds me even now when we talk about this day that it was a Monday.

With hair so short I was not sure if she was a boy or a girl, this quirky child dressed in a striped shirt, jeans and brown horn-rimmed glasses was sitting outside on the grass in front of the cottage that she lived in at St. Agatha's Home in Nanuet, New York - it was called Seton Hall. After being introduced to her by one of the other staff I said, "Hi, I'm Gary, I am the new counselor."

There was no response or even acknowledgement that I had said anything. I stood there feeling dumb wondering what to do next. Then, as if I had just said what I said about five minutes ago, Leslie came to life and said, "Hi, what day is your birthday?"

I thought this was an odd response, but I was told that the kids in this cottage where I had been assigned to work as a child care worker were "special needs" so I chalked it up to that.

"May 25th is my birthday," I told her, and then she asked, "What year?"

"1957," I said.

She stopped and seemed to be calculating in her head. She responded, "You were born on a Saturday." I was impressed, she was right, I was born on a Saturday, but how did she know that? When I asked her she didn't know how she knew, she said, "I just know."

This was one of Leslie's many special gifts, as I was soon to realize – she was a quirky child and gifted in many ways.

When I met her on that grassy hill 28 years ago, I never thought I would adopt Leslie. She was, as they told me, "unadoptable." I know that this is a term that adoption folks hate, but that was a term we used in those days. Leslie was a very ingratiating child; she was full of surprises, unpredictable, she said whatever popped into her head uncensored, she talked to herself, she spoke in a very measured and almost robotic manner, she loved long hair and love to comb mine (in those days it was long) and everyone else's for hours. She would even "check me for bugs." You will be happy to know that I always passed inspection. "No bugs!" she would proclaim at the end of her diligent search through my hair. Leslie was

very interesting, not like any other child. She did not walk, she ran everywhere. Actually, a more precise description would be – she galloped up and down the halls like a horse at full race speed. She LOVED to eat. She loved white rice, noodles with lots of butter, and cream of wheat cereal for breakfast - those were her favorites. I was not such a good cook, then or now, and I would frequently burn the cereal or over-salt it. At which point Leslie would remind me in a very serious tone, "Be careful not to put too much salt in that cream of wheat, like last time, you'll give me salt diabetes."

Leslie was then, and still is now, quite a character. I was not Leslie's favorite counselor. She reserved that privilege for some of the female staff, especially Cathy Healy. Leslie loved Cathy. Cathy got Leslie's ears pierced, helped her to shop for fashionable clothes, and pretty much took her everywhere. I was of course jealous that Cathy was Leslie's favorite and I would frequently joke with Leslie about it. She would, of course, deny that Cathy was her favorite counselor, and look at me out of the side of her eye like she still does when she is not being truthful, smirk this odd smile and say, as she played with my hair, "Lido!" Lido was a unique name that Leslie made up for me - it meant nothing, but in her mind, it was somehow symbolic of me.

Holidays were always hard for Leslie; she was one of the few kids at the cottage without family. The counselors always took her home with them, and she loved that, but she was always sad during these times. Mother's Day was particularly sad for her and my heart would break for her when she cried with big tears streaming down her face, "It is Mother's Day and I have no Mother to wish a Happy Mother's Day to!"

I would always try to get her out of her sad mood and say, "Oh, just make believe I am your mother and wish me a Happy Mother's Day." To which she would always respond, "Gary, you are a man and you are white, you could not have given birth to me!" We would joke for a while and I would always try to do something special with her that day. Sometimes I would bring her to my mother's house and she would make a big deal over Leslie and try to ease her pain. We knew that none of these really things helped much, but it was all an attempt to lift the spirit of a sad girl on a sad day.

Leslie and I had a special relationship. Lots of the other staff let Leslie slide with rules and her behavior (and she loved it when new staff found her to be endearing) and I was in those days a stem task master - I have mellowed significantly over time - Leslie did not like it when I disciplined her or made her do her chore over again. She would sometimes mutter under her breath, "I hate Gary." As if I couldn't hear her. She would remind me, "Gary, you are hard on me." I would try to explain that I

wasn't trying to be hard on her, but I thought she had to learn. In retrospect, at 20 years old, I probably was sometimes hard on her.

A hallmark of Leslie's life is her persistence. When she sets her mind to doing something, or if you promise that you will do something for her, she does not let you forget. This has been a great strength for her. When I first met Leslie, she didn't read very well and we tried to be sensitive about it by helping her and spending a lot of time with her. Sister Thomas, one of the nuns at St. Agatha's took time to teach Leslie how to read and write, and with great focus and concentration, she began to excel at reading. No one ever believed that she would learn to read, but she did and that had changed her life.

When I left St Agatha's in July of 1979 and went to Grace House (a CYO Center for Youth in New York City), I felt very guilty about leaving Leslie. That was always one of the real hardships about being a staff member in a child welfare agency. But I made a promise to keep in touch with Leslie and went to visit whenever I could. I ran a program for teens in New York City, a leadership development program for young people in Harlem, and one day I thought, this would be great for Leslie. In February 1980, I invited Leslie to Grace House; she had a good time socializing with other teenagers, they treated her really nice and she enjoyed being there.

In 1981, Leslie left Seton Hall and went to live in the group home and we still kept in touch. Two years later, I got married. My wife Suzanne was really great with Leslie and they enjoyed one another's company. Leslie spent many weekends with us. Truth be told, she was a bit jealous of Suzanne at first, but they worked out their issues and developed a strong relationship. In March of 1985, Suzanne and I asked if Leslie would like to be our foster daughter. It never even occurred to us to try to adopt her. In those days, most agencies did not ask foster parents to adopt, nor did they try to get older teens adopted. Even though I had know Leslie now for 8 years, and had worked for the agency where she was placed, I had to go through foster parent training, do tons of paperwork (all of which the agency lost, and then I had to re-do) and finally on August 26th of 1985, Leslie came to live with us. It was, sadly, the first time in her life that she had ever lived in a family setting. All of her 17 years had been spent in institutions and group homes.

It wasn't always easy to be a foster parent; having someone live with you as you try to create a family is challenging, even on good days. Leslie had been so institutionalized that she needed to learn what it was like to live in a family, in an apartment in New York City, and on top of all that, to be a teenager! Our focus was to provide a safe and nurturing home for Leslie where she could thrive. She never called us Mom or Dad, she always called us by our first names, but she was clearly our child. We went to parent-teacher conferences, met with guidance counselors to

help her negotiate a new school environment, met with social workers when they did their monthly visit - we had four different social workers in one year, and cared for her as any parent would be expected to do. Our job we thought was to help Leslie to become independent. We didn't really consciously think of having a lifetime connection, but we knew that Leslie would be part of our lives for the rest of our lives, no matter what.

As I think back on my relationship with Leslie, I know I made some mistakes as a parent, although I probably would have bit anyone's head off if they had suggested it at the time. I was very young to be a parent of a teen – I was 26 and Leslie was 17. I tried very hard to be a good parent. I am not always so sure I succeeded, but I did the best I could with the tools that I had at that time. Although sometimes she presented me with challenges I never thought I would have to deal with (like the time she invited a man she had just met in the New York City subway to our apartment) I have always enjoyed Leslie. I enjoyed having her in my life. She was unpredictable, and while that sometimes played out as poor judgment on her part, it also made her a very interesting person.

My relationship with Leslie has endured longer than almost any other relationship that I have had. When Suzanne and I divorced, Leslie continued to visit us both and told me frequently, "Gary, I had a dream last night that Suzanne and you got back together." The dream of every child of divorce. I used to joke, "You wanted to be a part of a family, and now you've even experienced divorce in a family." Overall, Leslie was very resilient and handled things well. When I came out as gay, after my divorce, Leslie was nonplussed by it. "Can I still visit?" she wanted to know. "Of course," I said, "nothing will change." And so she was fine with it.

Leslie went to Job Corp in 1987. She always wanted to be a nurse's aide - it was her dream. She took all of the Nurse's Aide classes, excelled in every area, and then tragedy struck. On her first day of field practicum, at the end of a very long first day, the Nurse Instructor asked, "Before we finish, are there any questions?" Leslie's had shot up and in a loud and inquisitive voice she asked, "What would happen if one of the Nurse's Aide practitioners, like me, were to slap one of the patients?" Everyone looked at her in horror, and the instructor just said, "Can I meet with you after class?" Leslie was told that she would not be able to continue in the program and she was devastated. She called me hysterically crying on the phone as she recounted the story to me. "Why on earth would you ask something like that?" I asked. "Gary, you know how you always say that what pops into my mind should sometimes stay in there and not come out?" "Yes," I responded. "Well, I would never hit a patient; I just thought about it and decided to ask the question, it was a big mistake." It was, but it also directed her to her new career path, food services - something she also knew a great deal about!

When Leslie graduated from Job Corp, I helped her to get a job at the Mt. Sinai Hospital Dietary Department in New York City. She made a salary of \$12 an hour and now could afford to live on her own. Leslie began to live independently and I thought this was what she should developmentally be doing. But in 1992, while living on her own she was hit by a car while crossing the street. She completely shattered her leg, spent months at a time in the hospital and had more than 17 operations on her legs. During this time, as she recuperated, Leslie came to live with me again. Off and on for a period of three years she lived with me, and for a solid 18 month stretch she lived with me, my partner Mike and our two children, Ian and Travis, who were then six and three years old.

After a year and a half, Leslie needed to be independent again, but I also realized she need a level of supervision and with the help of a fellow social worker, we helped Leslie to get into the Heart Share Supportive Apartments program in Brooklyn, NY. She tried to make me feel very guilty by saying that I was putting her back in the "home" but I tried to help her to see that the supportive apartments were very different from group home living and pointed out that she was now an adult. She always continued to come to our house to visit on holidays, whenever we went on vacation she stayed to watch the cats and dog, and she could come to visit whenever she wanted to come. Although she enjoyed being treated like "one of the kids" again, I kept pointing out that she is an adult member of our family and although she is an adult, she would always be my child.

Leslie and I talked about adoption a couple of time, but Leslie always said, "I don't want to change my name," "Gary, you are white and I am black," and other things like that. Leslie said when we talked that she already thought of us as her family and didn't think she needed to be adopted because she was too old to be adopted. But one day, about five years ago, when I took her to a Region II Federal HHS conference to help me do a workshop on youth permanency (I thought it would be good for her to talk about why we remained a foster parent and a foster child) - all that changed. When I asked Leslie in the workshop to tell the people there why we had made that choice, she said, "We never pursued adoption, Gary, because you never wanted to adopt me!" I was shocked! I thought we had that conversation, and I said that to her. She replied in her truly Leslie Fuller fashion, "Gary, I have changed my mind." At this point adoption advocates in the audience we cheering and yelling out, "Girl, you can still be adopted you're not too old, you go!" Admittedly red-faced, I said, "I think we should have a big talk after we finish this workshop."

After the conference was over, we did talk about what being adopted as an adult meant, and Leslie said she understood and now wanted to be adopted, but she didn't

want to change her name, which I said was fine and she didn't need to change her name. We contacted an attorney named Beth Schwartz, who had worked on Ian and Travis' adoption, and she agreed to represent us. She told us that it wouldn't be easy, she had never done an adult adoption before, but she promised to try. We worked with her for about two years. I told Leslie that she would have to take the lead in gathering all the paperwork we needed because at the time she was not working, she had "retired," as she says, from Mt Sinai on disability from her leg injury, and she had a lot of free time to gather documents. I also thought it would be a good task for her to gather these records, all of which we reviewed together after she obtained them. She was very diligent in gathering these documents, as she recounts in her own story.

Although my adoption story does not begin with the thought of pursuing adoption, it begins with the development of a relationship. I did not want to adopt any child; I wanted to adopt a specific child, one with whom I had a relationship for almost three decades. That makes this adoption story different. Our decision to move toward adoption was based on our long-term relationship and a desire on Leslie's part to have a legal permanent connection. It reminds us that even when we think we may have had the "do you want to be adopted talk," it is a talk that needs to be had many times throughout one's relationship. Our adoption was not based on creating a family because we had already done that.

Adopting an adult child is not an easy prospect, but it is very possible to do. Many adoption professionals encourage it, but I could not find many who could guide us through the process. Our attorney, who is terrifically competent, had to learn how to facilitate an adult adoption as we went along. Even though there is a movement toward adoption of adult children, one which I wholeheartedly support, there needs to be more guidance from the adoption community about how to facilitate this process.

Finally after gathering mountains of paperwork, signing tons of forms, on November 30th, the day after Leslie's 38th birthday, we finalized our adoption before Judge Nagwith in Queen County Surrogate Court. Mike, my partner, Nicole my friend, Leslie and I are all together waiting for the case to be called. The big day had arrived, 28 years in the making, ironically on the final day of Adoption Month.

Leslie is excited; she has a new outfit that she has bought especially for the day. As we are waiting she says to me, "Gary, when Oprah Winfrey hears about my story and then they make it into a movie, who do you think will play the role of Suzanne (my ex-wife)?" I say, "I don't know. Who do you think will play me?" She answers immediately, "Will Ferrell." "Oh, that's an interesting choice, who do you think will play you?" "I am not sure," she replies. "Maybe Halle Berry."

And so goes our life, our adoption story played out for these past 28 years, as foster father and foster daughter, now as legal father and daughter. Leslie and I have a long history together. We have our own inside jokes, our own reminiscences about days at St. Agatha's. Sometimes others who were not part of this feel left out as we go down memory lane, but that is a unique part of our lives together. I have known Leslie longer than any other person in my life, our relationship has lasted longer than either of my marriages, and we have endured through many challenges. Occasionally we do something crazy called "Let's re-enact scenes from our life together" - it's funny and we both really get into it.

The adoption in and of itself did not change anything for Leslie and me; we have, for many years now, seen ourselves as family. But for Leslie it made our relationship permanent, solid, legal, and for those reasons it is not just the day itself that was important but the 28 years that lead up to that day. One day when we are in a crazy mood we will re-enact another scene from our lives – the day that our adoption was finalized. It is one of those days that will be indelibly etched forever in both of our histories and in our hearts.

Thank you for reading my story.