

Leslie Fuller's Adoption Story

I was born in New York City in 1967; my mother had four other children, but couldn't take care of me, because I was born with a lot of special needs. I was only three pounds when I was born, and was two month premature - I found this out as we were preparing for this adoption process. I was brought to the New York Foundling Hospital, which was a large home for children on Third Avenue and 68th Street in Manhattan, when I was nine days old. I grew up there, taken care of by the Sisters of Charity (I remember Sr. Teresa from Blaine Hall very well) and some really nice ladies; one named Pearl Smith was my favorite. I lived there until I was nine and then they transferred me to St. Agatha's Home in Nanuet, New York, which was a large campus program about 35 minutes outside of New York City.

Although he was not a childcare worker when I first arrived, I have known Gary Mallon since September 10, 1977. He was my counselor at St. Agatha's at Seton Hall cottage in Nanuet, NY. He has always been a father to me.

He was always there for me while working at the cottage. He took me to his house in Tappan to meet his parents and siblings. I enjoyed being around his family since that first day.

I had some special needs while I was living at the cottage. I didn't read well and I had a bunch of behavior problems. Like when I first came to St. Agatha's I was pretty wild - I would run all over the place, scream, yell, I was terrified of horses and grass, too, because I always lived in the City and had never seen grass or horses. Gary always introduced me to other people and treated me nice. When I first met him I didn't know how to read and write and he was sensitive about it. He and Sister Thomas at St. Agatha's took the time to teach me how to read and write.

When he left St. Agatha's in July of 1979 and went to Grace House (a CYO Center for Youth in New York City), he always kept in touch with me and came to visit. On February 1980, I was invited to Grace House where he was working. On the first day at Grace House, I had a good time. I was learning about how to work with people and listening to music. I hung out with other kids who were really nice to me.

I went to live in the group home in 1981 and I always kept in touch with Gary. In July of 1982, he invited me to go with him to a Renaissance Festival. On that day, he introduced me to Suzanne Ball and her sister Kate. We had a good time at the Festival and I didn't realize it at the time, but eventually Gary planned to get married with Suzanne.

Gary and later Suzanne always welcome me into their home. He introduced me to a lot of people, and they were all very nice to me. Gary always made me feel comfortable.

During March of 1985 he and Suzanne asked if I would like to be their foster daughter. I was glad to see that day. I had lived in group home and institutions all of my life and finally that day came when I came to live with them. It was on August 26th of 1985.

It wasn't always easy to be a foster child; sometimes I thought Gary and Suzanne were very hard on me. Now, I know that they had to be that way to help me grow up. But hard as it was, it was always better than living in the group home. Gary and Suzanne helped me to become independent. If it wasn't for them, I would have ended up in an adult group home for the rest of my life. Although Gary and Suzanne got divorced, I still saw both of them, but I saw Gary more.

Gary supported me all the way while I was living on my own. While I was living on my own in 1992, I was involved in a car accident and had more than 17 operations on my legs. I stayed in his apartment until I recuperated. In July of 1995 I was admitted to the hospital for another operation. After that I stayed with Gary and his partner, Mike. I lived with them and their two children, Ian and Travis, for 18 months.

After a year and a half, I needed to be independent again and Gary helped me get into Heart Share Supportive Apartments program in Brooklyn, NY. I continued to come to their house to visit on holidays; whenever they went on vacation I stayed to watch their cats and dog, and I celebrated every birthday with them. I come to Gary and Mike's house whenever I want to: I am a part of their family, I have my own keys and never have to ask if it is ok to come over - I just do.

Gary and I talked about being adopted a couple of time, but I always said, "I don't want to change my name," "Gary, you are white and I am black," and a bunch of things like that. I already thought of Gary as my family and didn't think I needed to be adopted, and I thought I was too old. But one day, about five years ago, Gary took me to a conference with him to talk about why we remained a foster parent and a foster child, and he asked me to tell the people there why we had made that choice. I said, "We never pursued adoption, Gary, because you never wanted to adopt me!" Gary looked mad when I said that (maybe because I said it like I did in front of so many people), because we did talk about it, but I had changed my mind - I wanted to be adopted, I just was embarrassed to say it because I thought I was too old. I also had seen Mike's kids Ian and Travis who were adopted and I thought to myself; maybe I should be adopted too. I didn't know how to say it, though, and

when Gary asked me that question, at the conference in front of 500 people, I just let it out!

After the conference was over, Gary and I talked about what being adopted as an adult meant and we contacted a lawyer named Beth Schwartz, who had worked on Ian and Travis's adoption, and she agreed to help us. She told us that it wouldn't be easy, but she promised to try and we worked with her for about two years. Gary told me that I would have to take the lead in gathering all the paperwork we needed because at the time I was not working and had a lot of free time on my hands and I am very good at going to official offices to get things - in one case the agency we went to didn't believe that at 35 I could be adopted and they didn't want to give me my records, which I needed. I kept telling them that Gary Mallon was going to adopt me and they acted like they didn't believe me. When they wouldn't give me my record, I refused to leave until they called Gary on his cell phone and he could explain it to them. They called him and he told them, yes, it is true. Then they gave me what I needed. Gary always says, "Leslie, you are a very persistent person!" And I am.

I am now 38 years old; my birthday is the day before my adoption, November 29th. This is my first time I have ever been adopted. I know most people get adopted when they are babies or little kids, but that never happened for me. When I was sixteen years old my social worker at St. Agatha's sent me to visit the Parker family (this is not their real name) who lived in Brooklyn, but I felt uncomfortable about being adopted by them at the time. I felt then that I would have to adjust to their new ways and I wasn't ready to do that. I was used to Gary and being part of his family before I was introduced to the Parkers. So I decided then not to go through with the adoption by the Parkers.

Now, I finally have a family who I can trust. I can have a family I can go visit on holidays and my birthday; that is very important to me. Right now I don't have any problems of getting adopted even though I am 38 years old. I guess now I am ready. I am not changing my name because it is important for me to keep my family name. I am not going to live with Gary because I am an adult, but I can still be a part of the family with him, Mike, Ian and Travis, and I can visit whenever I want.

I realize that being adopted means that I am legally part of a family. Our lawyer, Beth Schwartz, really helped Gary and me to do this adoption. It wasn't an easy process, but it was worth it. Even though I will be adopted on November 30th and forever be a part of Gary's family I will still have my own freedom as an adult.

In closing I want to tell one more story. A couple of weeks ago, I told Gary that if I died, I did not want to be buried at St. Agatha's - they have graveyard there and

when I was little I always used to visit and see all the old nuns who were buried there and all of the kids who died at St. Agatha's who were buried there. I always thought I would be buried there when I died. But recently, because St. Agatha's is closing, I have been thinking about this. I asked Gary where he was going to be buried and he said, "In St. Louis Cemetery Number One in the French Quarter in New Orleans, Louisiana, in a crypt in the wall." Gary loves New Orleans; that is why he wants to be buried there. I told Gary, "Then I will be buried there with you. He joked, "Yeah, joined together with me for all eternity." I guess he is right; we really will be joined together for all eternity.

I have had other people in my life who I knew, like people from the New York Foundling and St. Agatha's, but they all vanished and Gary Mallon has always been around for me from day one.

Thank you for reading my story.