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## Team Nelson 2.0: Our Foster-to-Adopt Journey

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## **Team Nelson 2.0 – Our Foster-to-Adopt Journey (by Melinda and Jack Nelson)**

Team Nelson 1.0 started September 11, 1999 when we (Melinda Lee Burgess and Jack Lee Nelson) got married. Jack's two sons from a prior marriage (Alex, born 1987 and Erich born 1990) lived with us, graduated from high school and now have adult lives of their own. Life changed after they were gone and we started the "no kids, just us" phase of our life (Team Nelson version 1.1). But soon after, we realized that what we both wanted was to raise a daughter - just one girl.

After a few months thinking about adoption, in October 2009 we decided to attend a foster/adoption informational meeting. We learned about various agencies, the procedure of becoming licensed and the next steps to becoming foster-to-adopt parents. On the way home from the meeting, we decided to expand our family and declared that we were beginning a new phase, "Team Nelson 2.0."

We selected Covenant Kids to be our advocates as we began the foster-to-adopt journey. We became a licensed foster family in February 2010 and had two foster placements calls within three hours and ended up with one boy and one girl - unrelated. We loved them and cared for them, but both ended up in reconciliations after a few months. It was incredibly hard to let them go and we doubted if we could undergo the pain again. A few weeks later, on July 27, two very scared boys walked into our lives - what we thought was to be a temporary basis..

Xavier was 4 years old and Anthony was 22 months old. We spent the first couple of weeks becoming acquainted with each other, trying to establish a routine, learning more about the children's history and playing dinosaurs and trains. We could immediately tell both boys were developmentally behind. We had to quickly learn about setting appointments for doctors, dentists, speech therapists, occupational therapists, play therapists (psychologists) and what to do for Xavier's learning disabilities. We were fortunate to have support from of the boy's pediatrician, who recommended appropriate speech and occupational therapists as well as psychologists. We learned to welcome all these professionals into our home. A year later, we learned all about public education and the world of school psychologists and therapists as well as how ARDs and IEPs work for our child in need of Special Education.

At the boys first permanency conference, the biological mother did not attend. Anthony's biological dad was not in the picture and Xavier's biological dad was unknown. At the CPS case manager's request, Melinda met the biological mother and maternal grandmother. The next day, Melinda drove the boys to their weekly parental visit. That day was the first (slight) hint of adoption. The next several months were full of highs and lows. Anthony's biological dad started attending visits. At various stages of the journey we thought there was a chance we could lose the boys. Melinda packed their belongings twice believing they would go to various relatives.

But each time God had a different plan for them and we kept praying that his plan would include us.

As months passed, we quickly realized that we needed additional support to help the boys as well as a new network of people who just “get it.” We turned to an adoption ministry at an area church. We began to attend Fostering Hope - a network of foster parents - where we learned that others were struggling with the same issues (learning disabilities, anxiety disorders with disturbance of mood and behavior, sensory issues, post-traumatic stress disorder and other attachment issues as well as school issues). We attended “large group” meetings that dealt with various topics (most we were experiencing at home) and then attended the “Empowered to Connect Conference” featuring Dr. Karyn Purvis - finally someone who had strategies we could incorporate in our home. We began to incorporate her methods into our day-to-day life and our lives became a little bit easier. We still had good days and bad days, but we felt we were taking more steps forward than backward. We have since completed Empowered to Connect Parenting Training as well as TBRI training.

We realized that as foster parents we enjoyed spending more time with our foster parent friends because they were more of a valuable resource to us. They gave us ideas how to manage “the system.” We had several different caseworkers within the Department of Family Services and our own agency.

We were diligent about sending pictures before each parental visit and Melinda visited with the parents each week to keep them updated on Xavier and Anthony's life. We wanted the boys to understand that we accepted their biological family. This gesture not only helped our relationship with the biological parents, it relieved some stress with Xavier and Anthony.

In May of 2012, we experienced our first mediation. Our CPS caseworker felt confident, due to some specific circumstances, that the biological parents would voluntarily terminate their rights. Instead, the biological father's newly-assigned attorney had to immediately take six weeks of emergency medical leave (which would not allow for the original trial date). This resulted in a reassigned trial date and a six-months extension. We were disheartened, but the kids were still in our home and, given what we knew, we were confident that we would eventually be Xavier and Anthony's “Forever Family.”

In November of 2012, we were back in mediation and this time the parents had signed over rights to the children. Jack and I both felt that it was important for the boys to continue to see their biological parents. We anxiously waited for the termination decree so we could start the process of adoption. Due to a self-admitted, inexperienced CPS lawyer (her very first case) and series of typographical and grammatical errors, it took four termination decrees and almost an entire year to get a correctly written and signed one. We calmly waited it out, never overly concerned. To us, it was now just a matter of time. It was not “if” it was going to happen, it was “when” it was going to happen.

When we talked about adoption in our home, the boys really related to “Buddy the Dinosaur” from the PBS television program *Dinosaur Train*. Buddy, a preschool-aged Tyrannosaurus Rex, and his adoptive family of Pteranodons have helped Xavier and Anthony to better understand adoption and that a family is made of people that love you, even if you look different from them. Books like *A Mother for Choco*, *Rosie’s Family*, *I Wished for You* and *I Don’t Have Your Eyes* also helped us discuss fostering and adoption with Xavier and Anthony. Since we are Caucasian parents and the children are obviously of Hispanic descent, Xavier had to learn quickly how to answer questions like, “Why doesn’t your mommy look like you?”

Our journey had been full of surprises, ups and downs, highs and lows, and joy and loss, but on National Adoption Day 2013, after 28 months, we were surrounded by extended family and friends. Our family of four grew to a family of six. Christopher Xavier and Caedon Anthony knew that they were surrounded by love. On that day we legally became a multi-cultural forever family, but more than that, we became “Team Nelson!”

We closed our home to placements to focus on the boys and their activities, but in 2015 we decided to explore the opportunity to foster-to-adopt again. We still wanted a daughter - just one girl.

We began the license process again, and in September of 2016 we received a call for a 4-year-old girl. Shortly after that call we learned that she had three siblings in foster care as well. Her younger twin sisters were in another foster home and her older sister was in a group home. CPS and our agency helped to increase our license from one child to two and opened our home to her 5-year-old sister.

The girls stayed with us for 15 months. We experienced different types of issues introducing girls to our home with the boys. Four children sometimes overpowered the two parents. The girls’ history required a lot of attention to their special needs. We were introduced to new pediatricians, speech therapists, occupational therapists, play therapists and psychologists. The girls case went to trial and we intervened on their behalf.

Although we lost the case, the girls were reunited with their maternal grandmother in Florida. We had to come to terms with the tremendous loss. After seeing how the loss affected the boys, we questioned whether we should put them through the process again. Going through the foster process with the girls had re-opened up a lot of wounds for the boys. As a result, we had to explore advanced therapy options for the boys. Because we had the experience of researching various therapeutic avenues we found an appropriate one.

A few months later we asked to submit our home study for two new girls that were coincidentally around the same age as the ones we had before. They had been involved in a failed adoption placement. The parental rights had already been terminated and someone associated with their case believed they would fit into Team Nelson.

We were initially not selected for the girls to be placed with us. After not being selected, we decided to spend a bit more time focusing on the boys. Six weeks later Melinda received a phone call that the adoption placement (their third home in 18 months) did not work out. The adoption placement failed after only eight days. The adoptive placement family had returned the children to CPS. Melinda's first response was, "Why?" We were able to learn about several extreme behavior issues and challenges, but decided we could handle it.

Two precious girls, one 4 years old and one 3 years old, nervously walked into our home - their fourth home in less than two years. We quickly made appointments with a pediatrician and were set up with therapists, psychiatrists and a speech therapist. Our agency arranged for a Behavior Management Therapist as well. We enrolled the 4-year-old into our district's Head Start program. We had to become advocates for the 4-year-old and even introduced their Behavior Management therapists into the classroom. While the older girl's challenging behavior escalated at first, we had to remind ourselves that a lot of it was due to fear. Her aggressive behavior was only an outcry for help. She had been rejected by three other families.

We were blessed with a fantastic CPS case worker, awesome CASA volunteer and an amazing Attorney Ad-Litem. They were supportive of us as foster parents, our boys and the emotional journey on which we were traveling.

The summer proved challenging, but Team Nelson bonded over a family trip to Disneyland. We had plans to adopt the girls on National Adoption Day which was, coincidentally, Mickey and Minnie's birthday. In a private meet-and-greet with Mickey and Minnie they told the girls that we were going to be a forever family and that it would happen on the Disney characters' birthdays.

As our adoption day grew closer, it was apparent the oldest girl was not ready to be adopted. Her dysregulated behavior increased and she told several falsehoods to her play therapist that resulted in very real consequences. With all the failed placements, she was trying to push us away to protect herself from getting emotionally hurt and rejected a fourth time. With the help of the judge, CPS and a new therapist, we were able to overcome her objections in her terms and on her timeline.

We finally adopted on April 20, 2018 surrounded by family, friends and therapists. Caroline Alexis and Catherine Savannah were legally part of Team Nelson. Due to our prior Disney connection and plans, everyone wanted this to be like it would have been months prior. Everyone in the courtroom wore customized Disney shirts and Disney ears, including the judge. The day was perfect, and our family was looking forward to living happily ever after..

We have learned so much about the system. What works and what doesn't. How it is instrumental that foster parents surround themselves with a support system, a pediatrician who understands the system and how to support children from hard places. We learned that your front door is a revolving door of various therapists, case managers, attorney's and

psychologists. That you must be advocates for the children in your home and help to give them voice.

People comment that the children in our home are so very lucky, but we feel like we are the lucky ones. They have and are making a difference in our lives. We are Jack, Melinda, Alex, Erich, Xavier, Anthony, Caroline and Catherine. We are Team Nelson 2.0.