

DEFENSE CUTS PLAN A MIXED BAG FOR BASES

Some take heavy hit, while others spared; lawmakers are raising questions.

By JAMES ROSEN
McClatchy Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — Sweeping budget and personnel cuts proposed Monday by Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel would hit some military bases hard while protecting others.

With the Army targeted to lose as many as 80,000 active-duty troops from its current 520,000-strong force, reaching its smallest size since before World II, major installations from Fort Jackson, S.C., to Fort Hood, Texas, could see their operations scaled back significantly.

The proposal to shrink the world's mightiest military force comes as the United States seeks to redefine its role on the world stage, with the Iraq war over and U.S. combat engagement in Afghanistan winding down, a two-front strategy involving lengthy occupations that severely tested military capabilities. It also reflects the competing demands of spending restraints, national security and politics.

Eliminating two dozen A-10 attack planes at Whiteman Air Force Base near Kansas City, for instance, is part of a broader move to retire all of the aging Warthogs, saving the Pentagon several billion dollars. But lawmakers from Missouri

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NATION & WORLD NEWS

AG seeks rule on cyberattack notices

After a spate of large cyberattacks on retailers, Attorney General Eric H. Holder Jr. urged Congress to adopt a national standard for notifying consumers of a breach. **Page A-3**

Ukraine faces major economic challenges

With a manhunt underway for the deposed Ukrainian president, the country's most pressing problem is a fast-approaching economic disaster that they cannot solve without international assistance. **Page A-4**

A silent epidemic



Helen Benson and her daughter, Serenity, hug at home in December. Helen knows her drinking during pregnancy caused the challenges her daughter faces. "I think I dealt with the guilt when I was first getting clean," she says. "I don't have time to feel guilty, because if I take time to feel guilty, I'm taking time away from my kids."

PART 2

Such an easy baby. Serenity only cried when someone held her. She looked healthy enough, her mother thought. A nine-pound newborn with a wisp of blond hair and cloudless blue eyes. But so quiet.

What infant doesn't wail to be fed or changed or coddled, her mother, Helen Benson, wondered.

"I knew something was wrong from the get-go," she recalled.

Benson asked her family doctors about it in the small South Carolina town where Serenity was born. Benson had used drugs and drank until she blacked out throughout the first six months of pregnancy, she confided to them.

Don't fret, the doctors said. You must be a good mom to have such a quiet baby.

It wasn't until Benson moved to Alaska that she learned her baby was born with a fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD), one of a collection of permanent disabilities caused by exposure to alcohol in the womb.

Like mercury, lead and radiation, alcohol is a teratogen, which means it causes abnormalities in the body and brain of an embryo or fetus. While some researchers disagree on whether exposure to a small amount of alcohol can cause measurable damage to a child, no amount of drinking, at any time during pregnancy, has been proven safe.

If a mother binges early in pregnancy, alcohol can re-form a child's face, causing a smooth philtrum (the vertical groove between the upper lip and nose), a thin upper lip and small eyes. As the child gets older, he or she may exhibit a variety of behavioral issues, from irritable aggression to a risky eagerness to please. But for most, their disability is not ob-

vious.

As many as nine in 10 children with an FASD are diagnosed with something less visible than full fetal alcohol syndrome. That diagnosis specifically requires that the child have the hallmark facial features and be under-sized in height and weight. Even so, FASD children may suffer behavior and learning problems as severe as those with full FAS, or even more so.

A child with an FASD can suffer damage to parts of the brain that determine intelligence, memory, language ability, motor skills and senses like touch and hearing.

Life for an FAS or FASD child can be even harder if parents and teachers don't understand their affliction.

"Their nervous system and their brain is working differently, but they look like regular kids on the outside," said Dr. Susan Astley, a University of Washington fetal alcohol syndrome expert who has diagnosed almost 3,000 people over 20 years. "We'd never punish the blind kid for not being able to see the blackboard (just) because their disability is visible to us."

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ON SUNDAY, we told the stories of four mothers who drank during their pregnancies. This is the story of their children: Serenity, Elaine, Jacob and Elijah. All four share three truths: Their disability was caused by alcohol, it was 100 percent preventable and it will influence every aspect of their lives for as long as they live.

By
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and
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Photos and
videos by
MARC LESTER

**State of
intoxication**
ALASKA AND ALCOHOL
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Justices to weigh EPA move to regulate greenhouse gases

By DAVID G. SAVAGE
Tribune Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — The Obama administration's drive to regulate greenhouse gases could hit a snag at the Supreme Court this week as industry groups and Republican-led states ask justices to block what they call a "brazen power grab" by the president's environmental regu-

lators.

Amid legislative inaction in a deadlocked Congress, the Environmental Protection Agency adopted regulations in 2011 that require new power plants, factories and other such stationary facilities to limit carbon emissions.

The agency said the rules were justified by a 2007 Supreme Court ruling that held

that carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide — seen as the chief culprits behind a warming planet — are air pollutants subject to EPA regulation under the Clean Air Act.

In that decision, four conservative justices dissented, insisting that the law covered only air pollutants that make

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Bias found in Syria war postings

Scholars say social media are edited to reflect specific view.

By LAUREN KIRKWOOD
McClatchy Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — YouTube videos and posts on Facebook and Twitter have made scenes from Syria's civil war accessible to audiences thousands of miles from the conflict. But the version of events disseminated by social media is not a completely accurate picture

of the war, according to a report from the congressionally funded U.S. Institute of Peace.

After reviewing more than 38 million Twitter posts about the Syrian conflict, a team of Middle East scholars from The George Washington University and American University concluded that rather than an objective account of what's taken place, social media posts have been carefully curated to represent a specific view of the war. It said the skewing of the social media

view of the conflict has been amplified by the way more traditional news outlets make use of the postings — for example, passing along social media posts written in English over those written in Arabic.

The analysts studied tweets that mentioned Syria in English or Arabic from the start of 2011 through April 2013. They then analyzed how "traditional" forms of media,

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1. JACOB, AGE 9

Heidi Case could tell her 9-year-old was in a bad mood. He'd come home with a teacher's note saying he'd been hitting himself at school, then he disappeared to play with the new air hockey table in the basement of the family's 4,800-square-foot home.

The playroom hummed with the activity of his five rambunctious siblings. Sometimes Jacob's older brother let him score a point in hockey, but sometimes not. Jacob's irritation boiled. Everyone seemed to be teasing him.

"Shut up!"

Just 52 pounds and bone thin, Jacob's body is always in motion. His piercing scream erupted without warning.

"Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!"

Jacob's brothers and sisters ignored the yelling. Heidi noticed that he was crumbling crackers over the new table. When she told him to stop eating there, he balled his hand into a fist as if to hit her. It wouldn't have been the first time.

Jacob's sisters hadn't given him his medication for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder that morning. (ADHD is a common co-occurring problem for children with FASD.) That explained a lot, Heidi said. The air hockey game ended with his brother scoring the winning point. Jacob picked up the puck, whipped it across the room and stomped upstairs.

No one tried to coax him into taking a bath. Jacob can't stand the feel of a towel on his skin. He doesn't like water to touch his face.

Upstairs, Heidi leaned over the marble kitchen counter and held her head in her hands. She'd been having headaches all day. Jacob finally calmed down at dinner, becoming groggier as he ate his chicken soup.

The meds are finally kicking in, his mother said.



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MARC LESTER / Anchorage Daily News
Heidi Case removes her son, Jacob, from the dinner table after he refuses to take a bath. Because of Jacob's sensory disorder, he dislikes the feel of water on his face or the touch of a towel on his skin.

Heidi Case is now 37. She became pregnant with Jacob shortly after she divorced her husband, Jared. The couple have since remarried, but at the time she binge drank for the first time in her life. She learned about the pregnancy only after returning to her home state of Utah from a "party boat" cruise to Mexico.

The father, a one-night stand, offered to pay for an abortion, but by then it was too late.

"It's not always alcoholics who have these children with FASD," she said. "It's people like me who went on a cruise and had a little fun and now, not only are we paying for it as a family, but I have a son who is paying for it for the rest of his life."

At birth, Jacob was an under-sized preemie laboring to breathe. He spent 10 days in the neonatal intensive care unit.

Already a mother of four, Heidi recognized that he was different. Jacob didn't sit up until he was almost a year old. He didn't walk until he was 18 months.

"Between 3 and 4, when he started doing preschool, we noticed how aggressive he was," she recalled.

His brother, three years older, seemed scared of him. One day Jacob arrived home in a police car after menacing a neighbor with a knife. "He used to threaten he was going to kill us in our sleep," she said.

Desperate for help, Heidi and Jared heard that Alaska offered better psychiatric care and residential treatment for children than Utah. They moved to Wasilla, and Jacob spent months in treatment while one of the state's six FAS diagnostic teams examined him and rendered a diagnosis of partial fetal alcohol syndrome.

None of the couple's other children have an alcohol-related disability. Before coming to Alaska, Heidi had never heard of fetal alcohol syndrome, she said. She simply assumed her son was spoiled.

"The doctors always tell you, 'Don't drink when you're pregnant.' But what they don't tell you is why," she said.

The Cases are now intimately familiar with the effects of alcohol exposure in the womb, how it can damage a child's developing nervous system, blocking or delaying important signals from reaching the brain, creating a traffic jam of impulses and information known as sensory processing disorder.

People with a fetal alcohol spectrum disorder can have an underdeveloped sense of touch or an unusually high tolerance for pain.

Others can be hypersensitive: an affectionate caress or reassuring touch is something to be avoided or endured; a particular fabric or the tag of a T-shirt feels unbearable.

Such hypersensitivity can be traced to a bundle of nerves that carries signals between the two halves of the brain, coordinating movement, interpreting sensations and helping process complex information.

The brain of a child with an FASD can be overrun by an amplified perception of sights, feelings and sounds, Astley, the University of Washington researcher, explained. Imagine wearing a scratchy wool sweater all day in a room full of flashing lights and pounding music, she said; you'd be irritable too.

In Jacob's case, he is easily startled. His mother has learned she must ask permission before hugging him.

After Jacob's diagnosis, the Case family moved to rural Utah, where new homes meet the craggy Wasatch Mountains. The boy's stepfather, Jared, splits his time between there and Alaska's North Slope, where he works as a directional driller.

The doctors they consulted in Utah seemed to know little about fetal alcohol syndrome, Jared Case said. He and Heidi have had trouble finding a suitable child psychiatrist or occupational therapist there. Despite a revolving cocktail of medications, Jacob still rages every day.

"The hardest thing is just knowing that it won't ever go away," Heidi said. "It's not a mental illness. It's not something that can be fixed. It's brain damage."

The Cases have thought of having Jacob carry a special card explaining his disability to onlookers who notice his constant movement and whirling outbursts.

"He's not a bad kid," the card might say, "this is not his fault."



Astley

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Heidi
and
Jacob Case



MARC LESTER / Anchorage Daily News

Lounging by the pool on a cruise along the Mexican Riviera, sipping rum and Coke, in 2004, Heidi Case didn't know she was pregnant. Like nearly half of all pregnancies in the U.S., hers was unplanned. It wasn't until her son, Jacob, was 7 years old that she realized her drinking had damaged his brain.

Heidi says she was a binge drinker for only a short time of her life. In this video, she shares her experience in the hope that more women will understand the risks of drinking when they could be pregnant. Heidi says telling the story also helps her.

"I've had a lot of time to process. And the hardest thing is just knowing that it won't ever go away. It's not something that can be fixed."

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Heidi gives Jacob a good-night hug. “For me, obviously, emotionally it’s still really hard,” she says of Jacob’s diagnosis. “And the way that I deal with it is just making sure he lives the best life that he possibly could live.”



Jared Case, at center, talks with his wife and five of their six children in their Utah home. From left, they are Olivia, 6; Heidi, mom; Jared; Alissa, 17; Emily, 15; Haley, 13, and Jacob, 9. Not pictured is Raymond, 12.

Nine-year-old Jacob climbs on the counter to the microwave.



Heidi says she has been having migraine headaches. In addition to Jacob’s FASD, the Cases also have a daughter with autism and another with Asperger’s Syndrome. Her husband, Jared, is gone more than half the time as a driller on the North Slope.



Photos by **MARC LESTER** / Anchorage Daily News

ve oven to heat hot dogs before bedtime. His parents say feeding Jacob is hard because of his pickiness and the erratic times he's hungry.



an half the time, working



During a game of air hockey in the basement family room, Jacob yells, "Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!" at his mother and siblings. Heidi says Jacob's "rages," which often include swearing and throwing things, are an almost-daily occurrence.



Jacob has a playful moment with his father, Jared. Jared, who is not Jacob's biological father, says he has tried for years to try to find appropriate care for Jacob.

‘Rose
are red.
Violits
are blue.
You’re
the best
Mommy
that I ever
new!!’

2. ELAINE, AGE 10

Ten-year-old Elaine crashed into her mother’s arms at the end of the school day. They hugged for a full 15 seconds before walking to the elementary parking lot, pitted ice cracking beneath their boots.

“I can’t believe you’re not wearing a coat,” Jamie Gagnon said.

“I’m a polar bear,” Elaine replied, “I’m never cold.”

Gagnon opened the car door. The dry smell of cigarettes — her last remaining vice, though never with her daughter in the car, she said — vanished in a blast of winter air. Elaine talked excitedly about the stories she is writing.

Once home, Elaine made a beeline for her room, eager to show off the Littlest Pet Shop dolls her mother bought at Value Village.

Elaine loves the toys. She cries when she loses at Sorry or Go Fish, Gagnon said. At the park, she plays by herself. Though she has a few close friends, other girls her age rarely come for sleepovers.

As mother and daughter sat cross-legged on the carpet, Elaine pulled toys from a Ziplock bag. She arranged bobblehead animals in a circle — a menagerie of bulldogs, turtles and toucans.

“I call this one Justin Beaver,” she joked.

As her daughter grew older, Gagnon said, she noticed that Elaine seemed to have the mind of a younger child.



Photos by MARC LESTER / Anchorage Daily News

Jamie Gagnon's daughter, Elaine, was diagnosed with an FASD in 2012. She also has an attention-deficit disorder, but is studious and artistic.

‘WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I THINK I OR MY CHILD MAY SUFFER FROM AN FASD?’

- If you recognize the symptoms of FASD in your family and want to know more about the disability, including how to get a diagnosis, a good place to start is by talking with your family doctor or pediatrician.
- Adults curious about a diagnosis might call the nearest diagnostic team. In Anchorage, that’s Assets Inc., (907) 279-6617. A list of other regional teams is online at <http://1.usa.gov/1dTLx0o>.
 - Stone Soup Group, a statewide nonprofit that helps families caring for children with special needs, provides basic information on fetal alcohol spectrum disorders and other disabilities, and can be reached at (907) 561-3701.
 - General, easy-to-understand information for families can also be found online at nofas.org.

Now five years sober, Gagnon drank heavily during her pregnancy with Elaine. She bought rum by the gallon for much of the first two trimesters.

She lost custody of Elaine (her middle name) while still drinking. When her daughter came home, family members told her Elaine might never be able to live on her own. Gagnon sought a diagnosis two years ago in hopes of learning more about her daughter’s condition.

“I wanted to know how to help her. I did this (to her). I better fix it, to the best of my knowledge,” she said.

The diagnostic team concluded that Elaine was born with an FASD.

“Those caring for and working with (Elaine) need to keep in mind that her behaviors are not willful. She ‘can’t, not won’t,” the team wrote.

Elaine is also athletic, healthy and studious. As with many children with a fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, she struggles with math. She also fears arguments and is overly generous.

Children with FAS or FASD sometimes display “dysmaturity,” meaning their emotional ages are much younger than their actual ages.

“They want a friend and they want to please. And they are sweet,” said Marilyn Pierce-Bulger, a nurse practitioner and member of the Anchorage diagnostic team. “That then makes them vulnerable to individuals who want to take advantage of them.”

Elaine has been a kind-hearted companion, Gagnon said, not just an easy baby but an easygoing kid.

The trophies of a busy child’s life paper the fridge in the family’s South Anchorage apartment: a perfect



Pierce-Bulger

attendance award; an “A” spelling test (Elaine has an “individualized education plan” for math at school but ranks at the top of the class for reading, her mother said); and watercolor paintings of a yellow sun and a field of grass, with a poem written in careful script: “Rose are red. Violits are blue. You’re the best Mommy that I ever new!!”

Gagnon waited until Elaine left the room to discuss her drinking and her daughter’s diagnosis with a reporter. “She’s so smart. Smarter than a whip. It’s hard to talk around her because she catches on way too quick.”

The diagnostic team might see subtle hints of FASD in Elaine’s face, but her classmates see a pretty girl in a pony tail.

Gagnon had never told Elaine about her disability. “I don’t know what I’m going to say,” she said. “Hopefully she won’t hate me.”

Later that night, she said, she decided to talk to Elaine for the first time about fetal alcohol syndrome and her drinking.

“I could have died!” was Elaine’s first reply.

Should they share their story with the world, Gagnon asked Elaine, as she recounted later. She wanted people to learn from her mistake, but she didn’t like the idea of her precious, complicated daughter — a kind girl who writes ghost stories about haunted bathrooms and gets her feelings hurt playing board games — reduced to a label.

“I asked her permission if we could (tell this story) to help someone,” she said. Elaine agreed, her mother said. “She doesn’t want anyone to feel the way I felt back then.”

3. ELIJAH, AGE 8

The boys tell different stories about how Jerriick, 10, fell from a third-story bedroom last July.

Jerrick said his younger brother, 8-year-old Elijah, pushed him. Elijah said Jerrick thought he had super powers and was playing in the window.

He tried to stop Jerrick from falling by throwing him a blanket to hang on to, Elijah said, but the older boy plummeted to the parking lot below.

The fall fractured Jerrick’s pelvis and ankle. He wore a back brace for an injured spine for three months.

Jerrick’s left foot still bends inward when he runs. The only sign of Elijah in the family’s small Government Hill apartment now are photos and artwork on the walls. Elijah appears as an auburn-haired boy with a round face and a toothy, nervous smile.

“He looks like every other kid in class,” said his mother, Susan Essary, 32.

Tacked above the couch was one of Elijah’s paintings, a shapeless swirl of purple and green, like an angry bruise.

“That’s a snowman,” Essary said. Elijah’s signature trails off one corner of the page. Each letter is backward, as if written in a mirror.

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Gagnon prepares Elaine to leave their apartment to play.



Gagnon says she hopes people can learn from her mistake of drinking while pregnant. “If we could help someone,” she says, “it’s worth it.”



Gagnon says she struggled with alcoholism while pregnant. She sought an FASD diagnosis in 2012 to help her care for her daughter. “I did this. I better fix it, to the best of my knowledge,” she says.

The alcohol his mother drank while pregnant isn’t Elijah’s only problem. An older brother died at eight months of age from a head injury that happened while in the care of his father.

The couple later divorced. Essary moved to Alaska and remarried.

By the time Elijah entered day care, his mother saw troubling signs. He was aggressive with other children. When he spoke, the words spilled out in a cascade, making him harder to understand than others his age.

In elementary school, Elijah’s backward handwriting alerted teachers to the possibility of a learning disability. Writing that trails off a page can be a symptom of pre-natal brain damage to the same nerves responsible for a child’s sense of touch, movement and ability to organize.

Elijah’s teachers sat Essary down. Had he ever been tested for fetal alcohol syndrome, they asked.

“What’s that?” Essary replied.

Growing up in Colorado, Essary saw the U.S. Surgeon General’s warnings on liquor bottles but she heard little about the dangers of drinking while pregnant. Even as she learned about FASD, Essary assured herself her son didn’t have the disability. He didn’t look like the pictures the doctors showed her, the kids with a flat, thin upper lip and closely spaced, almond eyes.

Before her divorce, the boys saw domestic violence at home, Essary said. She assumed then — and now — that’s where some of Elijah’s anger came from.

One day when he was 7 years old, Elijah was told he couldn’t play video games. He ran out of the house and started punching a car window. Sometimes he choked the cat.

Astley, the University of Washington expert, said FASD doesn’t necessarily mean someone will be violent or aggressive. In fact, the opposite could be the case. Each child is its own mix of disabling effects. Where it occurs, violent behavior might spring from environmental circumstances or a mental illness unrelated to alcohol.

“Alcohol tends to have it greatest adverse impact on more complex cognitive skills like executive function, higher order language skills, abstract thinking,” she said.

In Essary’s cabinet she keeps the paperwork from Anchorage’s FAS diagnostic team. It says Elijah has a form of FASD, with an IQ in the 70s. She drank enough before she knew she was pregnant to cause permanent brain damage and likely behavior problems, but not enough in the third week of pregnancy to create the trio of facial features necessary for a full FAS diagnosis.

Elijah had other problems with movement and coordination, the experts found. For example, he catches a ball by letting it hit his chest and clutching it, the way a much younger child would.

“He’s young. I can let the school know he has a form

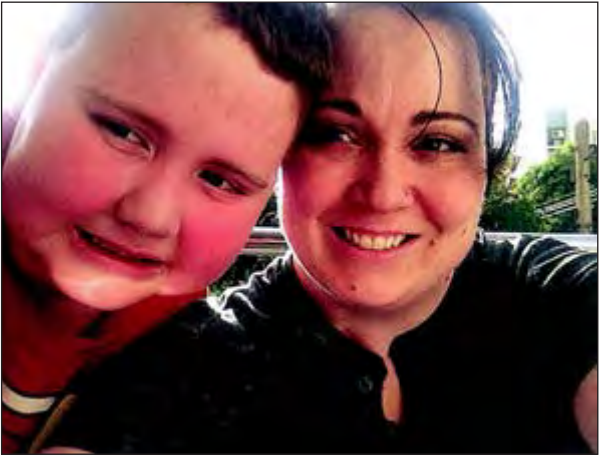


Photo courtesy SUSAN ESSARY

Susan Essary and her son, Elijah.

of FASD,” Essary said. “We can get him the help he needs with special education.”

Only a fraction of children diagnosed with fetal alcohol syndrome live with their biological parents. Some, like Jacob, spend time in treatment. Others grow up in foster homes, or with extended family or adoptive parents, who face formidable parenting demands.

An FASD child might lie when it would be easy to tell the truth. He or she might manage time poorly, chatter incessantly, be quick to anger or become resentful. Like children with attention deficit disorders — and many children exposed to alcohol in the womb are also diagnosed with ADHD — they often act impulsively, without considering possible consequences.

As they grow into adults, the brain damage may make it harder to maintain relationships, raise children of their own or keep a job.

Some FASD adults require state-paid public guardians to manage their money, pay their bills and help them shop. Fewer than one in 10 adults with a full fetal alcohol syndrome diagnosis can live without assistance, according to University of Washington researchers.

For now, Elijah lives 1,800 miles from downtown Anchorage, in Butte, Mont., in a 68-bed treatment center for children with serious behavioral, emotional or psychiatric disorders. He still has bouts of anger that doctors try to tame with medication, Essary said.

“They told me that he would basically need help for the rest of his life,” she said.

Essary visited Elijah in Montana last week, taking him swimming in a hotel pool and shopping for clothes. He has grown more than 3 inches since she last saw him, in the fall.

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What separates FASD from FAS?

FASD stands for fetal alcohol spectrum disorders, an umbrella term that refers to a variety of disabilities and birth defects caused by a mother’s alcohol consumption while pregnant.

FAS stands for fetal alcohol syndrome, a specific medical condition that includes a trio of distinct facial features, undersized height and weight, and damage to the central nervous system. It is considered the most severe of the fetal alcohol spectrum disorders.

4. SERENITY, AGE 6

For 16 months, Serenity spent weeknights at the home of a therapeutic foster family. On her first night home for good with her mother, Helen Benson, a “welcome home” cake greeted her. The 6-year-old beamed.

Benson heated a pot of stew and picked out all the peas while Serenity drew pictures in the living room of their Muldoon apartment. She quietly colored her hands green with a marker.

Serenity’s mood darkened after dessert. She snapped at her sister and at the family’s Australian shepherd, Sasha. When her mom tried to convince her to take her pills, she turned her back.

By bedtime, Serenity was ready for a fight. She planned to sleep on the couch, she informed her mom. She planned to stay up all night and would not be going to school the next morning.

Benson calmly disagreed. She tried to lift her daughter, but Serenity stiffened her body to make it harder. On the way to the bedroom, she held on to each door jamb and kicked Benson in the shin.

As soon as she was put to bed, Serenity raced back to the couch.

“Why are you acting like this?” Benson asked.

“Because you’re stupid,” Serenity said.

On the living room wall, a handwritten sign reminded Helen of appropriate responses to her daughter. “(I Love you too much to argue” was at the top.

Deflated, Benson stepped out onto the porch, drawing deep breaths in the falling snow. “I wish I could say that, every time I deal with it, it gets a little easier . . . But every single time I have to deal with these episodes, it wipes me out.”

Inside, Serenity had surrendered the battle for the couch and vanished to the apartment’s only bedroom. Within 15 minutes, she was asleep on top of the covers, the green marker in her mouth.

Helen said she remained optimistic about having her daughter home. Tomorrow might not be anything like this, she said.



MARC LESTER / Anchorage Daily News

Serenity withdraws from her mother and sister one day last December. Despite the challenges, Helen says she’s encouraged by how things have gone since Serenity moved back home. “We’ve had some bad patches, but that’s what they are, they’re patches,” Benson says. “They’re not bad days. They’re not bad weeks. They’re bad moments.”

The little girl who was such an easy baby and quiet toddler began launching into hours-long rages by the time she was 3. The low point came in 2012 when Serenity purposefully slammed a heavy sliding door on the hand of her year-old sister.

“She became dangerous to not just me and herself, but also to her sister,” Benson said. “At that point, I knew, ‘OK, this isn’t going to get better.’ ”

Serenity spent three stints at North Star Behavioral Health, an Anchorage treatment center. The staff there recommended she be tested for an FASD. At times, she lived with specially trained foster parents on weekdays as an alternative to full-time residential treatment.

Meeting with the various experts who would determine whether she had fetal alcohol syndrome — a psychologist, a medical professional, a speech therapist and an occupational therapist — took months.

“I didn’t know whether I wanted it or not,” Benson said of the testing. “On one hand, it gives answers. On the other hand, it puts the full responsibility on my shoulders. I have to say, ‘I did this to my child.’ ”

“The key for me was just getting past my own guilt and focusing on what she needs,” Benson said.

Now 7 years old, Serenity has a high IQ, a good sense of humor and partial fetal alcohol syndrome, experts found. Emotionally, her behavior is closer to her toddler sister Lexie than her peers at school, Benson said.

Earlier this month Serenity became upset about a kid’s meal toy at McDonald’s. She had to be carried to the car by Benson and the family’s case manager at Denali Family Services, Benson said. Throwing anything

she could grab from her car seat, Serenity tried to kick her mother. She hit the case worker instead, putting the woman’s arm in a sling for four days.

With the right medication and people around her who understand why she can’t always control her impulses, Benson thinks her daughter will be able to live on her own as an adult.

Though her medical diagnosis says she has the hallmark facial features of FAS, she looks to the world like any other first-grader. Lexi, now 2, mistakes pictures of Shirley Temple in DVD movies for her curly-haired big sister.

Since her diagnosis, Serenity also takes two daily medications — one to reduce hyperactivity and another for mood swings.

“They don’t make me playful and they make me fall asleep,” Serenity protested on a recent day.

Benson can remember just three meltdowns in the past three weeks.

“I can handle that,” she said. “It used to be three meltdowns a day.”

The family’s Ford Explorer, which was donated by a local church, idled outside for the drive to school. As Serenity tapped on an iPad, Benson noticed her daughter’s knitted brow.

“I’m not talking bad about you, hon,” she said.

Serenity made no reply, frowning at the screen.

Benson tries not to judge herself too harshly.

“My own mother was a die-hard drunk,” she said.

Email khopkins@adn.com and mlester@adn.com

Benson began her recovery from alcohol and drug addiction while pregnant with Serenity. In 2012, Serenity was diagnosed with partial fetal alcohol syndrome. “She is the way she is because of me, yes,” Benson says. “I did what I did. I can’t change that. But what I can do is fight like hell to get her what she needs.”





Six-year-old Serenity sits at home. Serenity's mother, Helen, began recovering from drug and alcohol addiction while pregnant and staying in a domestic violence shelter in South Carolina.

Benson tries to carry Serenity to bed. Serenity's mood changed quickly, Benson says, which led to more than an hour of defiant behavior. "I wish I could say that, every time I deal with it, it gets a little easier ..." Benson says. "But every single time I have to deal with one of these episodes it wipes me out. It's really exhausting."



MARC LESTER / Anchorage Daily News

ALCOHOL & me

Helen and Serenity Benson



MARC LESTER / Anchorage Daily News

Helen Benson changed her life while staying at a shelter for abused women. Pregnant with her daughter, Serenity, she turned away from a lifestyle of alcohol and drugs that she was desperate to overcome.

Now sober for seven years, other challenges remain. In 2012, Serenity was diagnosed with partial fetal alcohol syndrome. For Helen it helps explain her daughter's behavior, which she first noticed shortly after Serenity was born.

Helen says she understands her actions caused her daughter's permanent condition. In this video, she shares her experience and explains why getting a proper diagnosis was crucial to her new mission.

"She is the way she is because of me, yes. Is there guilt? Yeah, there is. I did what I did. I can't change that. But what I can do is fight like hell to get her what she needs."



Benson surprises Serenity with a "Welcome Home" cake. Serenity had been in a therapeutic foster home for about 17 months as they both learned to better handle Serenity's behavior issues, Benson says.

It takes courage to talk about your own drinking while pregnant. The mothers in these stories did so in the hope of preventing more babies from being born with a fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. The Daily News is grateful to Helen, Susan, Jamie and Heidi for sharing their stories.

*Patrick Dougherty,
Daily News editor*

About State of Intoxication

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We want to hear your ideas, your stories

If you would like to tell your own story, or have ideas for ways that Alaska can prevent FASD or help people with the disability, please email us at alcohol@adn.com. Join the conversation on Facebook or Twitter (use the hashtag #FASD).