

**Nicole**

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**Ella**

Nicole's\* connection to little Ella\* began prior to her birth. She had been introduced to Ella's mother through a family member, and the two proceeded to develop a close bond. Nicole supported her emotionally throughout her pregnancy and helped her prepare her home to welcome a baby.

It became apparent at Ella's birth, in November 2015, that her mother had a substance abuse issue. Ella spent the next two weeks in the hospital detoxing from her in-utero exposure. The Office of Children's Services took custody of Ella and released her to the care of her maternal great-aunt, Teresa\*. While Teresa was the legal placement, Nicole lived with her and cared for the newborn, assuming responsibility for night time feedings, taking Ella to her medical appointments, etc.

When Ella was around 9 months old, she and her mother entered Stepping Stones, a residential treatment program for mothers and their children. Unfortunately, within days of completing the year-long program, her mother relapsed, and Ella was removed a second time. Again, though she was legally placed with her great-aunt, Teresa, Nicole lived with them and participated heavily in the infant's care.

After completing an outpatient program, Ella's mother regained physical custody of her daughter, only to lose it for a third time, just weeks later. At this point, Aunt Teresa requested that Ella be formally placed with Nicole as the legal foster parent. She remained with Nicole till she reunified in August of 2018, at nearly 3 years old.

By the end of the year, Ella was removed for a 4th time and placed back into Nicole's care. Parental rights were finally terminated and Nicole was recognized as Ella's adoptive placement by OCS.

In July of 2019, an out-of-state paternal aunt and uncle started showing interest in Ella for the first time, requesting FaceTime calls and, soon after, traveling to Alaska for visits.

In January of 2020, 4 year old Ella was informed she'd be going to live with her aunt and uncle. Two weeks later, she was gone.

Over 3 years later, Nicole still gets visibly shaken when she recounts what happened. She shared that Ella was "taken away from anybody and everybody she's ever known". Ella knew Nicole as her mommy. Furthermore, many of Ella's maternal family recognized Nicole as her mommy, even going so far as to write letters of support, advocating for Ella to remain with Nicole. Letters OCS wouldn't even look at.

Ella and Nicole were allowed three months of occasional Facetime contact, and then communication was severed. Ella's adoption by her aunt and uncle was not finalized till she was 6.5 years old.

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### **The Brooks Family**

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**Emma**

Emma\* joined the Brooks'\* household at just 3 days old, directly from the hospital. A member of Emma's extended family had been present at her birth and was provided with information on how to apply for placement of her but stated they didn't want to be considered. Three years passed, and Emma began moving toward adoption by the Brooks. It was then that a previously uninterested relative stepped forward and requested placement of Emma.

Amy Brooks later described, "[Emma] was fully bonded and attached to our family as her own. She'd been with us since birth. At three years old, when a relative requested placement, it would have meant her losing her 'real, but not bio[logical]' mom, dad and siblings. With no previous relative contact, she had no concept of being a foster child. We were her family."

*Information provided by Foster the Future Alaska*

In the end, the relative's request was denied by the judge after 3rd party testimony surfaced in which the potential relative placement had been overheard promising Emma's biological parent that they would return her to them in secret.

Amy Brooks recounted, " If not for that circumstance and testimony, it seemed clear that the relative placement would have been selected as priority over us, [Emma's] lifelong foster parents, who were mid-adoption process."

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### **The Smith Family**

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### **Emmett & Lilly**

In mid 2018, Amy and David Smith\* and their 4 children welcomed Emmett\*, a newborn, and his 2.5 year old sister, Lilly\*, into their home. The children had been brought into state custody due to parental substance use while Emmett was in-utero.

Initially, a local aunt had agreed to care for them but ultimately didn't end up pursuing placement, or even showing interest in getting to know them. They continued living with their foster parents and foster siblings, becoming well bonded. The Smith's were, in reality, the only family Emmett had ever known.

In January of 2020, when the children were 1.5 and 4 years old, a Termination of Parental Rights (TPR) trial was held. Near the same time, an uncle in Washington state began the ICPC process to have the children transferred to him. The children had had no previous contact with him, but began weekly Zoom visits. After 3 such visits, a Team Decision Meeting (TDM) was held to determine a date for the uncle to come meet the children in person, and a secondary date for Amy to fly with the children to Washington for the final transfer.

*Information provided by Foster the Future Alaska*

COVID travel restrictions stalled those plans and eventually led to OCS suggesting during a summer court date, after the children had lived with the Smith's for nearly 2 years, that the case plan be changed to adoption by their foster family, referencing uncertainties and concerns related to COVID. The children's tribe agreed, and the uncle was informed. He chose not to appeal the decision. In December 2020, when Emmett and Lilly were nearly 2.5 and 5, their adoptions were finalized.

\*Names changed for privacy purposes.

*Information provided by Foster the Future Alaska*