
LEFT ON THE SIDE OF THE ROAD

By Barbara Schwartz Davis



Although I did not grow up in foster care, I was on my own from a very young age. I hitchhiked about, traveling without one place to call home. I was a bit of a wanderer- a gypsy of sorts- always moving, sleeping wherever I found a place to rest my head. I lived in tree forts, on boats, with kind people who opened their homes. Unfortunately, due to my naivety, I was sometimes taken advantage of by people who had no care in their heart for my well-being. I had to face some very cruel people who may have taken my life if I had not outsmarted them. The beauty of this story is I gained great insights. I learned how to navigate through dangerous situations to come out **ALIVE**. All of my difficulties became my catalyst for helping others so I became a foster parent and have been in the lives of foster youth for forty years.

Barbara's life experience inspired her love to house foster youth for forty years.

It is my highest hope that my reflections will in some way strengthen others so their lives can be fuller and happier. Holding on to hurt never propels one forward. In fact, it can hold one back. Being "**LEFT on the side of the road**" by others who did not care was a hard life experience, but it was ultimately a blessing. I became motivated to help young people not let the hurtful abandonment scenarios in their own lives control their present and future. The following are key pearls of wisdom I wish to share with you.

🔑 Key 1 – Illuminate the Past

Here is a small glimpse into how I found my sense of wellbeing and have learned to pass the gift on. As I take you back to my younger years, imagine what it must have felt like for a young woman like me to be so very alone. As we go into the story, I will show you how I took my own struggles, learned from them, and turned it around to become a voice for youth in transition. Although it was a hard experience to go through, this is where I discovered an inner place of resilience.

“All of my difficulties became my catalyst for helping others.”

I have never forgotten this one night. I was left in the dark on a country road in Hawaii around 2:00am. I don't remember seeing stars. There was no one to help me, no houses, no cars and no people nearby. A man had dropped me there. But the good news was he had not harmed me. I remember standing alone.

To survive this scenario, I went to a safe place within me that I had first felt when sitting by a beautiful stream as a teenager. My teen years were not very happy, and I would find myself ditching school, as we called it in the sixties, getting into my yellow VW and driving to my favorite place in the mountains. An amazing feeling came over me whenever I went there. In that moment I felt a calmness within me that would help carry me through hard times I faced in life; a calmness which felt comforting and stronger than fear. It is that feeling which I have returned to so many times. Many people use meditation to experience this calming warmth.

The blessing for me is that this experience allowed me a gift of understanding and empathy.

🔑 Key 2 – Open the Door to Empathy

Looking back, I see how this very experience helped me to be a good foster parent. My story may be a beginning for you. It is my hope that by telling you this story you will not feel so alone, and you will know, YOU CAN pick yourself up and move into each day with newfound strength, happiness, and resilience. Some days are more challenging than others but that is to be expected, for life has ups and downs.

So many of the young people we meet as foster parents are in a state of disarray when they arrive. As we help them unpack their belongings and set up a comforting environment, it is important we make their landing as soft as possible. Some of these young people are not as angry and confused as



others, which does make it easier. Our true purpose is to do all we can to give them comfort, security and safety- not an easy job. It is so important to resist being in a rush to fix everything, but rather to take the time to see where the child's gifts are and do all we can to bring those out so they can rebuild their life and personality.

There's a quote "Rome wasn't built in a day" and neither will the relationship with this child or teenager. It is always important to remember that we can't change everything quickly, nor expect the young person to understand all rules in the home right away. There are times when we connect easier to some than others. The young people in our care are like flowers without roots. When we think about it, how can their nature take root if surrounded by a chaotic environment?

Let's revisit that moment when I was left on the side of the road and had a feeling of self-realization that gave me strength. This new emotion is a tool to use in future situations to be successful in life. So how do we learn how to do that? By listening and watching your foster child, you will see their daily behavior and things that make them upset. Help them select a calming tool a beautiful memory or visual to hold in their mind to use when needed. I visualize a lake with trees and spring flowers popping up when I clear out thoughts that are not serving me in a positive way. Guide the child or teen to create a visual that inspires them. Have them sit in a quiet space , breathe and be with their visual until they feel calm. It will uplift them and guide them to manage the chaotic memories. It will replace chaos with a the calming image, making their situation manageable.

Key 3 – Tread Lightly

A beautiful part of life experience is that it can be an amazing teacher if one chooses to take it and use it for good. Many of the best foster parents I know are people who do not have formal education or a college degree. They learned from their life experiences and have become the jewels of these young peoples' lives. It is important for anyone who has experienced difficulty to find peace within themselves and not project their hardships on others. Unresolved pain can come out in other ways. Your place is to guide them and not cause further harm.



We are all human and certainly forever growing. Remember, if you are reading this and you are a foster parent who still carries emotional baggage from the past - tread lightly. **Be careful. If you feel triggered by behaviors that the young person is experiencing, take a time out so you do not take your own frustrations out on the youth.** No one is perfect and dealing with all life's twists and turns is no easy chore. These young people have a long road ahead learning new coping strategies that will serve them in a positive light. I support you and I am grateful you are moving forward and helping others.

It is so important to find that place in yourself so you don't live in the past and bring your emotional baggage to your foster child. If you do, you will be defeating the purpose of using your life struggle as a gift. Managing our reactions can be tricky for it is natural response to feel mixed emotions while in a whirlwind of difficult communications. These young people have come from situations in their own lives where good communication was not always modeled. He or she needs to learn to accept and deal with harsh memories and put them aside. Only then can they move forward to live in the present with newly learned enthusiasm and skills to control their emotions. This will allow them to successfully move their life into a new direction of positive outlook and emotional well-being.

Key 4 – Be a Good Listener

Another recollection I have, which may be helpful to you, is a day I was at a train station in Richmond, California. I saw a very young man asleep on a bench and felt drawn to him. As I approached him he rose, looking far more fatigued than any young man I have ever met. We began a conversation. As his story unfolded, my heart broke for him and all young people who do not feel heard or understood.

He had lived in foster care for years moving from place to place. He had a pattern of running from the group homes he didn't like. What was the most difficult to hear about were his physical health issues that had gone unaddressed. I did all I could to advise him that day. Hopefully he listened, but hard to say. He was now beyond the care systems, as he was over eighteen, with little support or even the knowledge of how to advocate for himself. He didn't want to deal with the foster care system anymore. Even if there would have been assistance for him, he'd clearly dealt with a lot and did not want anything but freedom. Exhaustion prevailed, leaving him depleted and so very alone on the bench.



We all must do what we can to listen intently to the youth in our care. Reflecting back on my own life, I remember as a teenager looking for a good listener and finding very few.

It is true, social workers are challenged to match children and teens with the right home. The stigma that teenagers can be a challenge to parent is not always true. In my experience, yes some will test the world around them which is a natural part of the growth process. For foster youth, emotions can be more intense because of past patterns of rejection and

disappointment. If you have younger children in your care, it's really important to assist them in regulating their emotional responses early so that they can formulate healthy coping skills.

Taking in a teenager who is from a dysfunctional environment and who has his/her own coping mechanisms can carry with it extra considerations and may take more time. Keep communication calm and engage them in making a plan. On a weekly basis, offer tools and suggestions to help them be successful. This balance is important and a pizza dinner may be their reward. Be a good listener!

As foster parents, you need support in this. I want to encourage new people to come forward but also encourage the social workers in charge to please support the families and the youth. Support groups of many foster parents may also be organized in your area or on Facebook or Zoom.

Key 5 – Educate for Their Safety

I do not want to see other young men and women endure the pain I experienced if it can be eliminated. Many foster youth do run away wanting to find a better life and are naive as to the dangers they may encounter. These teens are at risk of becoming trafficked or hurt in so many ways. Please make sure they have the number below to call out for safety and teach them they should ask for help. I never knew I could.

A good contact is 1-800 RUNAWAY 1-800-786-2929
<https://www.1800runaway.org/about-us/>



For those wanting to shower these youth with love and support, we encourage you to donate to Self Reflection's Inc, a non-profit organization. In collaboration with this organization, I use skills I learned from being a foster parent to teach youth, via media, publishing, and verbal expression, how they can become leaders and bring about positive change through their voices. All proceeds donated at my site www.LittleLiveShow.com go directly to Self Reflection's Inc, will go toward these efforts, and are tax deductible. Together, we can give these children the love, care, and attention needed for them to flourish.

I wrote this article for a very important reason, to encourage others to not let their own life hardships keep them entrapped within that memory. Instead, learn to see the wisdom you gained through hardship as your gift!!! Then use it and help another have a meaningful life. **Pay it forward with being a foster parent.**

Thank you for reading, I wish you the best success fostering or helping children.

Contact me if you need help.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Barbara Schwartz Davis is a family entertainer and speaker, who is committed to helping young people find loving homes. Her lively performance workshops and speaking engagements teach youth and advocates to connect with love and empathy.

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