

This will be the hardest thing I have ever done but I will do my best to honor my daughter. I know she would be encouraging me and cheering me on as she always did. Whatever it was that I was doing, she would jump in to help me. Cleaning, working in the garden (one of her favorite things to do), doing the dishes after large family dinners, staining the fence, anything. Even picking up dog poop with me in the backyard while we talked.

So I know she is going to help me through this as well.

I wish with all my heart that Rachel had been with us since her birth but she wasn't. I always wished that I could have protected her little heart from all the trauma she experienced. She went into the foster care system at an early age after her birth mom left to buy milk and never came back. When she was in kindergarten she came home from school to find the person she lived with deceased on the floor of their apartment. It was then that she was taken to the child crisis center before being placed with a foster family. She lived with them for several months as severance proceedings took place and her case was transferred to the adoptions unit. By the grace of God, we were notified by her case manager because we had adopted her biological sister, Grace Anne, a few years before. She thought where she was would be her forever home and so when our family was contacted about adopting her and she moved to our home, it was yet another abandonment in her eyes.

The only positive part of what happened in Rachel's early childhood is that it made her strong, determined, self-reliant and fearless.

I will never forget the day I got the call about Rachel. We were at a store buying beads to make necklaces in preparation for our daughter Lindsey's wedding. Having put our foster care license on hold, I couldn't imagine why CPS was calling but I knew I had to answer it. I gave Lindz my card to pay and went outside to take the call. As I learned of this little girl that needed a family, my heart began to pound in my chest and tears began flowing down my face. There was not a moment of hesitation, doubt or question. Rachel was going to be our little girl so I went right back in that store and bought enough to make one more necklace for the wedding.

Rachel had spent her early years mostly caring for herself so when she came into our family February 14th, 2009, it was a brand new life for her. At first, her fierce little spirit kept her from being a child and letting me care for her. As I would try to help her brush her long beautiful hair she would say "I can do it myself". And one time she got a frozen can of juice out to make and when I offered to help her she said "I always make my own". At one point I actually remember telling her that I was the mom and she was the little girl and I wanted her to just be a child that was free to play and explore and be happy with no worries as childhood should be. She finally began to realize this truth and that she was safe in her forever home.

Because parental rights had already been severed, proceedings moved quickly and Rachel was adopted May 14, 2009, exactly 3 months after coming to our family. This date was so special to her that she had it tattooed on her forearm in Roman numerals.

A favorite memory I have of her is one evening before her adoption date she was sitting on the kitchen counter watching me roll bean burros for dinner. She asked if she was going to have a new name after her adoption. Since she was 6 years old, I told her that was up to her if she wanted to change her name. She said she wanted a name that was in the bible like all of her adopted siblings. She chose Rachel since it was close to her birth name Rochelle. I told her that I thought that was a beautiful and fitting. And with her long, thick, dark hair she probably looked a lot like the Rachel in the bible. And then she said she wanted the same middle name as her sister Grace. So she became Rachel Anne. She was always so proud of choosing her own name. She often wrote about it in school and whenever asked to tell something unique about herself it was that.

Rachel was always an excellent student. She thrived in learning new things and doing her very best. She started in 1st grade at Greenfield Elementary. She wanted to have a pool party for her adoption celebration and invited her whole class to come, including her teacher. She was so happy and so proud.

Rachel's love for horses developed early in her life. She would sit on top of the fence looking out at the pasture and say "I just wish we had a horse". So we got one knowing the healing power of loving and caring for a horse. It was equine therapy in our backyard for helping to heal our girl's heart. She fell in love and her days were spent brushing, bathing, and before long on the back of her first horse Dixie. One morning I came in the kitchen early to look out the window at her on the back of this 15 hands tall horse happily riding around fearlessly. She was such a little girl that she would "park" Dixie next to the fence while she climbed it to throw her leg over. She was always so determined to do things she wanted to do. She always found a way.

She loved being a part of 4-H and participating in all the equine activities. We spent evenings weekly at Horseshoe park in Queen Creek where she worked on her riding skills and built friendships. She loved to go to all the gymkhanas and run barrels and poles. And she could wrangle a goat in goat tying like no one I've ever seen. She won many awards and ribbons for her skills. One of her favorite days was being awarded the 2015 Maricopa County Horse Finals All around gymkhana champion. She won a big buckle and proudly displayed it in her room. We spent countless Saturdays together while she competed in gymkhanas all over the valley. Her sister, Faith, rode with her for a couple years and would go along with us but didn't love it as Rachel did. We spent a lot of very special time together with the horses.

Rachel loved being outside and in nature as much as she possibly could. Her favorite thing to do was go camping as a family especially when we took the horses. She loved campfires, sunrises and sunsets, gazing at the stars, camping by the lake, in the mountains, anywhere she could be outside. And often when we were not camping she would still sleep outside – sometimes on the trampoline, or on the swing next to the fire. Once when her horse Jamocha was sick she set up a cot next to her in the stall and slept out there for several nights to make sure she was okay.

Rachel loved to be active and fit. She loved to run, work out at the gym, eat healthy and take good care of herself. She played soccer from the time she was little through high school. In 8th grade she wanted to try football and so was the only girl on the team and was respected by all the boys because she could do everything they did and outrun many of them. She went to American Leadership Academy in high school where she started helping manage the wrestling team but could not stand sitting on the sidelines so she came home one day and told me that coach wanted her on the team. Honestly it was a little hard for me to go to meets and see her competing but as usual she did well and showed those boys how to do it.

Rachel loved school but was eager to get out and start her life so she pushed herself to graduate a year early at the age of 16 with honors. She had done so well academically that she earned a full scholarship to NAU. We were excited to help her move into that next phase of her life but at the last minute changed her mind because it was too far from home. My girl was fiercely independent but also wanted to be close to home and her family. So she never became a Lumberjack. Instead she stuck with her passion of working with horses and started her business. She called it AZHansenHorses and worked diligently to build and grow her skills and knowledge. She worked at a boarding facility in Queen Creek for awhile and for a trainer in the cutting world in Cave Creek. Through these experiences she met so many wonderful people and built relationships, friendships and contacts in the horse community. Through this she met her friend Lisa who introduced her to the world of rescue and training wild mustangs. She always had 2 or 3 at the house while she worked them and found good homes for them. Her heart was so full of love for all animals that needed care and attention and she was always willing to give it.

During the hot summer days when she could not train, she studied and put herself through real estate school. She had planned to start her career in that field and tie it in with her passion for horses by listing and selling horse properties

The quality I admired most in my girl was her loyalty to family. She loved family gatherings, holidays, birthday celebrations, pool parties, camping and going to the lake. She always offered to help make food and decorate. She was generous in contributing whatever was needed. One of her favorite things to do was make beautiful chacuterie boards for us. I will shed a tear now every time I try to do that without her.

Rachel had a strong and deep connection to me that made us very close. She wanted to be independent but also wanted near me. She called multiple times a day to check in. And when she was living at the ranch or in her apartment, she would come over daily just to talk. When she broke her finger recently and couldn't work horses, she spent her days hanging out at home with me.

Though this process of honoring a life taken so suddenly and abruptly from my daughter is still unimaginable, I know that God is in charge of all things and each life. She was a child of His first and she knew that. She had a strong faith and a tender heart. I will be forever grateful to God for allowing us to have the years that we did with her. We have so many beautiful memories that will carry us through the time of grieving and someday help to bring healing to our hearts. I will never understand why she was taken so early in her life but I trust that one day we will be with Rachel again. So until then may we each live our lives to the fullest as though each day could be our last. And hold on to each other and those we love tightly because we never know when our time on earth may come to an end.

My promise to you Rachel is that I will "hold us together" as the sign you gave me for Mother's Day says. I will love and care for all you left behind that you loved so deeply.

And I will always honor and cherish your memory and see that you are with us in all we do. You will be in my heart always. So this is not good bye. This is not the end.

It's just that I will miss you dearly until I am with you again.

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