

### First Time I Saw a Person with a Disability

In 2003, my mom received a phone call from my Aunt Shelly. She explained how she was fostering a three-year-old, a two-year-old, and a 7-month-old. My mom could not believe it. Later in the year after my aunt and uncle were situated with the three boys living at their house, my aunt called my mom and asked if we would fly to Florida to meet Travis, Brandon, and Zane.

As I walked through the front door with my mom, dad, brother, and sister, my aunt and uncle attached us with hugs. Then, they lead us into their living room where the boys were. My Aunt Shelly was explaining something, but I was not listening because questions were running threw my head. What if they do not like me? What if they do not share their toys with me? The typical questions thought of by an eight-year-old.

When we reached the living room, my aunt turned off the movie the boys were watching. I sat by my mom while my Uncle Mike picked up a baby from his crib. I noticed he had a big head, but did not think anything of it at the time. My Aunt Shelly told a boy on the floor to come and sit on her lap and he did. She introduced him and it was like any other introductions: awkward, uneasy, and uncomfortable. Travis was staring at us with big, blue, scared eyes with his arms neatly folded in his lap. Then, she told us the boy on the floor was Brandon. Brandon did not even acknowledge us, but instead continued to play with his Tomas the trains. Lastly, my Uncle Mike said this is Zane on my lap.

My mom, dad, aunt, and uncle started chatting, but then realized I was listening. So they left to go talk in private. The rest of us just kind of stared at each other, except Brandon. He was too concerned about his trains. I started the conversation, but I do not remember what I said. However, I do remember Travis did not know many words and he was extremely shy. Additionally, Brandon never looked up at us or left his spot even when we called his name. At the time, I never thought anything of it; I just thought Travis and Brandon were nervous to meet new people.

After about an hour of trying to awkwardly get Travis involved in our conversation, my aunt called us into the kitchen for dinner. I sat across from Brandon. Not once did he look up from his plate of food. Then, I glanced at Travis and he was timidly looking at us. Luckily, after dinner my Aunt Shelly played a movie, which meant I did not have to attempt to get Travis to talk.

One week later when my family and I got back home, my mom told me Travis's, Brandon's, and Zane's horrifying past. Also, she explained to me why they acted the way they did. Nothing she said clicked. I did not understand what she meant by the words "autism", "special education", and "different". After she explained it to me in even more detail, I still did not comprehend. I thought she was speaking gibberish because to me the boys were not different. They were just young children who were nervous to meet five new people.

On June 16, 2006, my Aunt Shelly and Uncle Mike were the official parents of Travis, Brandon, Zane, and Andrew. Andrew was fostered a year later when they found out there was another brother. While sitting in that courtroom, I realized that my mother

was crazy. Those boys were not different than any other child. They are loving, caring, and happy to be part of a family.

Reflecting back on these memories makes me wonder what would have happened if my aunt and uncle never fostered my four cousins. Where would my life be heading? Would I still be the same person I am today or would I be different? Would I like that version of me? I will never know, but I can say this. I am extremely blessed to have Travis, Brandon, Zane, and Andrew in my life and it is all thanks to my aunt and uncle. My Aunt Shelly and Uncle Mike are the reasons why I want to teach to special education children. They not only gave the boys a loving home, but they also gave them a bright future.