

"We are just a family unit"



Three-year-old Kayden sits between his two most important men in his life. His birth father, John Allen, and his adoptive father/grandfather, Craig Shepard. He may read this article some day and realize the unique bond these two men have while placing his best interests at the forefront of everything they do.

Although, this beautiful story had a difficult beginning.

Craig received a call that Kayden was about to be born. At the hospital, he encountered an Investigator from the Department of Children and Families who advised him he was named as a resource if Kayden could not be taken home by his parents.

Craig had already raised one grandchild who was now almost a young adult, and he had no plans, at 59 years of age, to raise another child. He clearly told the social worker he was not a resource.

That all changed very quickly.

Kayden was born and required placement into the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) given his fragile physical state. Grandpa Craig came to visit and when Kayden grabbed his finger the plans all changed. "He was coming home with us," was Craig's thought as expressed through an emotional tone in his voice.

Craig advised the DCF worker that he and his wife were willing to become a kinship resource. When asked when that changed, his response was quite clear. "That changed about 15 minutes ago," he said.

The placement was made but it was quite difficult at first.

Kayden suffered tremors for about six months. "We would hug him and hold him all night," Craig stated. He and his family received significant supports from DCF especially Social Worker Betty Thompson.

"Thank God for Betty Thompson," Craig stated. "She stepped in and was a big help."

Kayden's father, John Allen, was incarcerated at the time Kayden was born. "It was an unfortunate situation at birth," he stated.





John did not initially see his son for the first six or seven months of his life given his struggles. He knew Craig was a "good father" and was already raising a granddaughter.

Visitation between John and Kayden was "almost impossible" due to the COVID-19 pandemic. What also complicated matters was that John fell into a "deep depression" for almost a year and visits stopped altogether.

DCF moved towards a permanent plan of Termination of Parental Rights with the goal of Craig and his wife adopting Kayden.

John reached back out to Craig in an effort to begin developing a relationship with his son. "You can't be popping in and out of Kayden's life," Craig said to him. "Where have you been?"

That conversation led to others and the bond between these two men began to develop.

John wanted Kayden in his custody. "I have to have my son," is what he wanted. Those thoughts quickly changed to "Is that in Kayden's best interests?"

"He is rooted there. He has had a hard beginning since birth," John recalls thinking.

John recognized Kayden needed to stay with Craig and his family on a permanent basis. However, he wanted to remain an active participant in his son's life.

What John saw Kayden being afforded was something he did not have growing up. John himself was adopted and always wanted a tight knit family yet his family was not that close. Looking at Craig and his wife, he saw that they could "break the mold" for Kayden and wanted him to stay.

John agreed to having Craig and his wife adopt Kayden and voluntarily terminated his parental rights.

"You can come here anytime and see your son," Craig told John. Craig saw himself in John as Craig had experienced his own issues with substance abuse 30+ years ago and finally became sober after three attempts at rehab. He also experienced a difficult first marriage. "I can't phantom the thought of someone not seeing their child."





John describes Craig mentoring him. "He guided me with Kayden."

John actively participates in his son's life. They Facetime, celebrate holidays together and go on vacation. John has met Craig's extended family and they embraced him.

When Kayden recently had double pink eye, it was John who took him during the day. "Yes buddy," John stated to him during the interview when Kayden quickly grabbed his attention.

"We're all just one big family. Like the Waltons," John stated. "It's a family relationship. I have genuine love for them."

Craig points out that in the "long run" having John involved in Kayden's life is the best. Kayden knows John as "Dad" and Craig as "Pappa Craig."

He will need them both as Kayden is described as " little fast guy" full of energy. While Craig admits he is not getting any younger, he wants to experience all he can with this little boy. "We have some wrestling to do," he stated.

For little Kayden, he will have questions about his life as he grows older. No better than these two men to answer them and to model for him what a true family and relationships are all about.