

"I can be Mama, you can be Mommy."



Three-year-old Jackson has the support of the two most important people in his life - "Mommy" and "Mama."

"Mommy" is Amy his birth mother and "Mama" is previous foster mother Michelle Gonzalez. It is the bond between these two women which has allowed this little boy to feel loved, connected to his family, flourish and have a great developmental foundation to succeed the rest of his life.

This story exemplifies exactly what happens with birth and foster parents join together - on behalf of a child.

"My past was ugly," explained Amy when describing her years of substance abuse and transient lifestyle. Pregnant with Jackson while incarcerated, she had no resources for him upon birth and placement into foster care was necessary.

Amy admits she was "petrified" when hearing Jackson was going to be placed into foster care. "You hear a lot of bad stories," she stated. Concurrently, COVID-19 was present in our communities and no visits could occur between Amy and Jackson at the prison. She went a full calendar year before seeing her son.

It was at Jackson's Administrative Case Review (ACR) that Amy first met Michelle. "At first I was really jealous. I know it was because I did not have my baby," she stated. Upon hearing Michelle's voice, listening to her speak, and sensing her the genuine care and concern she had for her little boy that put Amy at ease.

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"I could sleep at night knowing how he was doing."

From that point forward, their relationship grew. "She never once looked down upon me for my past," Amy stated. "She made it known she was there for me," is how Amy described her interactions with Michelle.

Visits between Amy and Jackson started virtually with Michelle showing Amy where Jackson sleeps. She explained to Amy that she put a picture of her next to Jackson's bed. "He always knew about me. Michelle always made sure he knew who I was," Amy recalls.

During that first visit, a poignant moment occurred when Amy heard Jackson call Michelle "Mama."

"That's your Mommy there," Amy remembers Michelle telling Jackson. She then had a clear message for Amy - "I can be Mama, you can be Mommy."

As time went by, the relationship strengthened. Amy was invited to Sunday dinners with Michelle and her family. She was present at picnics, holiday celebrations and other important events. "I guess you could say I was family from day one," Amy stated.

"They are my family."

Reunification occurred after Jackson was in care over three years. "I was scared," Amy remembers. Staying sober is a "struggle" and "scary" to now have your child in your custody. "Being a mom is new to me."

Two weeks after Jackson went home, Amy relapsed, and Jackson came back into care with Michelle. "Michelle never left my side," Amy emphatically stated. She took time off work, drove Amy to appointments and was her biggest support as she again gained sobriety.

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When someone truly  
can be trusted to see who  
you are and want what's  
best for you, no matter  
your official relationship,  
they are family.

OPRAH WINFREY

Once stable and able to provide a safe home for Jackson, Amy was once again reunified. She has maintained her sobriety and works in a factory operating machinery while Jackson goes to daycare. Amy continues to receive support from Michelle who provides respite for Jackson and is always a phone call away.

"Just hearing her voice calms me down," Amy stated.

To this day, Jackson still refers to Michelle as "Mama" and Amy as "Mommy."

"DCF can send you to meetings and for therapy. They do not teach you how to be a mom. Michelle taught me how to be a mom."

What would Amy say to other parents who are in a similar situation as her?

"Don't listen to what other people involved with DCF say or the negative words. You will hear the horror stories," was Amy's message. "Do the work for yourself."

"Don't lost the fight. Don't give up."

Amy's gratitude and admiration for Michelle is clearly evident. "I thank DCF for placing my son with her. Without them, I never would have met her," Amy stated.

"She never gave up on me. She the biggest part of my village. I am where I am at today because of her."

*The names of the birth mother and child have been changed to protect the privacy of the family.*