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The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

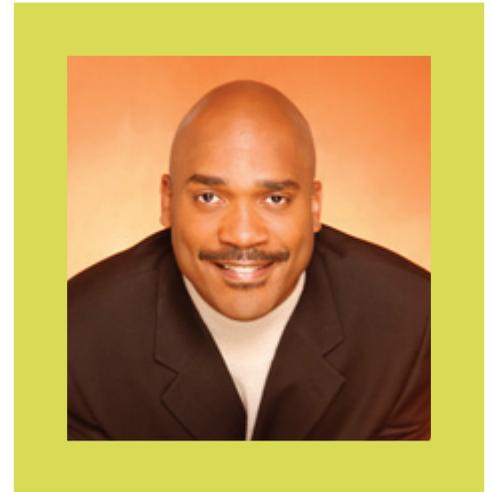
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Family Stories

Surviving Foster Care

A Day With Shane Salter

Interviewed by Roxanne Agur



Q. For those who aren't familiar, tell us a little about your background.

A. I was born and raised in New York. My mother gave birth to me when she was fifteen. About 3 1/2 years later, she had my brother. While she was pregnant, she started doing drugs. When I was four and Keith was 6 months old, she left us in our apartment and went on a drug binge. We wandered out in the street where a policeman found us, after which we were placed in our first foster home.

We stayed there for a year while they tried to find our birth family and see if there was a chance we could be reunited with them. There wasn't. We were then placed in another foster home where we stayed for seven years. When we arrived in this family, my brother and I suffered from severe calcium deficiency. He was delayed in walking and I had some serious problems with my teeth and fingernails. This family was instrumental in making sure we got the medical and dental attention we needed, as well as providing us with a private school education. They had a son of their own. Our foster father had been an orphan himself. He was totally committed to giving back to children what he had always wanted.

We had been in foster care too long, but my mother would not relinquish her rights voluntarily. When the court insisted an adoption plan be made, our foster parents were not able to commit to adoption because they were experiencing marital problems. As a result, we were placed with a third family for adoption. We were prepared with pre-adoption visits, but once we moved in with them, it only lasted for about two months. They decided that we were not what they wanted. They called the agency and told them they wanted us out of their home. They said I was the problem: that their son and I didn't get along; that we were constantly fighting — he was

fourteen and I was eleven; and that I would lie and had a bed-wetting problem. I may have been stealing then, too; I don't remember.

After they decided to get rid of us, they drove us to the agency and dropped us off in front of the building with our suitcases and took off. I remember that day very well. It was really traumatic because they just dumped us off. The social worker had come the night before to tell us we'd be moving, but they hadn't told us how it was going to happen.

We were then put into another foster home for about a year. That foster home was really just... terrible. I was emotionally neglected there and emotionally — borderline — abused. I developed an ulcer. Around this time, I met my maternal grandmother and sister — who had been born while I was in foster care — for the first time. I was also told that my mother had died. She had died about three months before, but because of all the trauma we were going through, the agency had opted not to tell us until later. We stayed with this foster family for awhile until it became apparent that it wasn't a healthy environment for me. So we moved again.

Up until this point, Keith and I had been placed together. This time, we were moved to separate group homes. We stayed apart for fourteen months until we were reunited for adoption. They had found a family that was willing to adopt us both. We moved in, but I kept running away. I no longer wanted to be adopted. I had thought I still did, but when I got there — after living in the group home — I had acquired a certain degree of independence that I was more comfortable with. So I convinced the agency to let my brother stay with this family, and I went to another foster home. I learned later that he had wanted to go with me.

I went on to two other foster homes and then ran away again to go live with my birth father. I was really excited about meeting and living with him, but I soon discovered that it wasn't what I had imagined. He was a hustler and sold drugs. While I was living there, I watched my uncle get shot and actually kill somebody else. After seeing that and after dealing with all the drugs, I went back to the agency and asked them to take me back. They put me in another group home. That's where I stayed for two years until I "aged out of care" at eighteen years old.

It was in the last group home that my life really took a dramatic turn. I started taking school more seriously. I realized that the fantasies I had in my mind about what life would be like for me were not based on anything realistic. I knew that if I really wanted to succeed, I needed to start taking advantage of the system and any opportunities that were around me. I became a straight-A student, graduated as Valedictorian and went on to college.

My first marriage was to a young lady who lived in the group home next to mine. She was pregnant with my daughter and I wanted to do the right thing. I wanted to make sure my kid didn't go into foster care. I thought that — just by genuinely having the desire — we would be able to conquer the world together. But she wasn't ready to raise a family, so we separated and I was given custody of my daughter. I was a single parent for four years, and then I met Gloria. We married and have two children together, plus the child I brought into the marriage and two adopted children.

MESSAGE TO FOSTER KIDS:

Q. You speak of the final years at the group foster home as a time of great growth and self-improvement. What or who do you think motivated this?

A. Well, I really believe a lot of it came from fear of failure. I had come to know what my birth family was like and I was afraid that I would be like them. I also developed a relationship with the church and got really ingrained in the youth component of the church. That kind of kept me straight; the expectations were rigid, so they kept me disciplined.

Q. How has the apparent lack of attachment in your childhood affected your life?

A. I've been working through some very difficult attachment disorders. Fortunately, I am married to a woman who understands the baggage that I carry from my childhood and is extremely supportive. I'm not sure anyone else would be able to do as well she has done. I don't think I would be the "success" people think I am if I hadn't had children and a family. It is my family that really keeps me on track; I can't waste time focusing on the things that are wrong but instead focus on the things that can be right. In terms of attachment, I have real severe mood swings as well as difficulty in attaching and allowing someone to help me. I tend to be the nurturer but not the one who solicits or accepts nurturing. That sometimes makes it very difficult in relationships with my children, my spouse, my friends and co-workers. I am very protective of my inner self.

Q. Have you dealt with any anger? Do you feel you are protecting those that abandoned you and that maybe they don't deserve that protection?

A. My 12-year-old daughter once asked me a question that I thought was very deep. She said, "Daddy, how does it feel that people want to be around you now that you are a success? These same people that didn't want to be around you when you were a kid. What does that make you feel like?" I said, "Tiffany, it was very hard, that they didn't want to be there for me when I was a child — but I survived anyway. Now that I am adult, it's up to me to show them the way that you should treat people. They will have to answer for the choices they make." I hope my daughter saw that as a teachable moment. You treat people as you want to be treated, not the way they treat you. If you live by that, then you become an example and you're able to live with yourself. That's most important. That's what we can control — ourselves — how we treat and respond to people.

MESSAGE TO PROFESSIONALS:

Q. You just mentioned a teachable moment with your daughter. Are there moments in your life that stand out as such?

A. I had a Black male social worker who had become very accustomed to me acting out and throwing temper tantrums. Because people responded and listened to my tantrums, I learned that this was effective, so I kept doing it. But one day, this guy grabbed me by both arms and shook me, in a real vigorous way. He said, "Look, you're going to cut this out. You can do better than this." He went on to say that my behavior was unacceptable, and so forth and so on. And I tell you, what makes that experience so memorable was that it was the first time any social worker had ever showed me that they were human. This was a real person and this person was being personally affected by what I did. To have had that experience and to see that this person, who was a professional being paid just to do a job, really truly cared about me — that was real important.

MESSAGE TO THE COMMUNITY:

Q. Was there anyone who took you under his or her wing?

A. Not really anyone in particular. I just kind of threw myself on anybody who would listen or give me a meal or take me in. It was a group of people. I had a Big Brother from the Big Brother program who was also real instrumental. He was single and doing really well, so I thought I wanted to be like him. One time when I wasn't doing too well in school, he said to me, "I don't associate with failures and if you choose to be a failure, then I won't have anything to do with you." That was one of the motivating sources that turned me around. I believe my life is a compilation of the right people at the right time. There weren't long-term relationships, but particular relationships at particular times helped carry me over obstacles. I just learned very early how to pull on the best from people and to take what I needed when I needed it.

MESSAGE TO PARENTS:

Q. Shane, what would you say to a someone trying to parent children who are acting out and saying they don't want to be adopted?

A. Generally, adults are very good at using the term "unconditional love," but I don't think they practice it very well. As a child I often felt, and I think a lot of children feel this way: "Sure, you love me — as long as I'm doing right"; "Sure, you love me — as long as I'm fitting whatever image you've set for me." I think that if you show your children that you show your love them only when they're good, even if you say you love them all the time, the child often feels that your love is conditional. We do this in ways we don't even realize. "As long as I am doing what I am supposed to or what you want me to or living up to whatever expectations you have, then I can count on this love. But if I can't get the love when I'm not perfect, if I'm just me; if I can't make mistakes and feel comfortable making those mistakes and being loved through those mistakes, then there is conflict. So I would say to those parenting challenging children: Learn to be patient with them. Try to understand the depth of the pain that they are experiencing. No matter how loving the people around them, knowing that their parents didn't want them, whatever the reason, hurts. To grow up parentless or to grow up without your birth relatives around you, without people, sometimes, who look like you There are so many issues. We expect children to be able to live within our expectations, not really understanding the pain and the confusion that they're experiencing.

Q. Why did you "act out?" Were you testing for unconditional love?

A. I think for me it was not so much testing as it was craving for attention. The stealing was because I didn't think that I was getting all the things that I wanted. I would lie and exaggerate and create stories about things, just to be able to hold a conversation with somebody.

MESSAGE TO SYSTEM:

Q. What would you like to see changed in the system?"

A. I am working with a gentleman who is creating an organization called The National Association of Former Foster Care Children. One of the things I would like to see in the system is an increased commitment to preparing foster kids for the transition into adulthood. Not so much the practical skills of adulthood — whether they can manage a checkbook or pay their rent — but the emotional consequences of living without family once they leave the foster care system. They won't have aunt so-and-so to call when they lose a job, or can't make next month's rent, or get a flat tire and need someone to help them get the money to patch it up. There is an ongoing pain that young adults carry because of that lack of family support.

I'd also like to see social workers stay on caseloads a lot longer. Let's find a way to encourage and enable social workers to do this, so we can develop continuity. We are currently trying to teach children how to maintain a stable life when everything around them, even the system that is supposed to be protecting them, is unstable.

I'd also like to see additional support services provided to families are adopting children, because these families face additional risks from the day that adopted child is in their home. They become a unique family. We need to make support services available to these families as their children begin to face the challenges of who they are and start to experience difficulty.

MESSAGE FOR THE FUTURE:

Q. It's really amazing listening to you. It's like you're speaking my voice.

A. Roxanne, people who have experienced foster care have common characteristics. We're not as alone as we think we are, and it goes a long way when you discover that what you think is weird or unique about yourself is normal for others in your situation. What I'm finding is that we are very similar to adult children of alcoholic parents. Those of us who do survive tend to be overachievers, tend to be very protective of our feelings, tend to be the nurturers rather than the nurtured. It is so reassuring and validating for children in foster care to talk to an adult survivor of it, because we can talk about the truth. We can provide mentoring for kids while they are currently in foster care. That goes much further than any therapy can ever get.

Shane Salter is an African American adult foster child who was never placed with a permanent family. He is the President of Adoptive Families of America [(612) 535-4829] and is involved in building The National Association of Former Foster Care Children [(202) 265-2105]. He is married to Gloria, a reunited adult adopted person. They have five children through birth and adoption and live in Washington, DC. Shane is available as a motivational speaker and consultant. He will speak at Pact's March 8, 1997 Spring Training in the San Francisco Bay Area, and he can be contacted through Salter Consulting Services at (703) 502-8944.