

Sisters' love abides in quest for home

By Gail Rosenblum, Columnist | Metro
Photos by David Joles



December 23, 2009 Lakeisha got a cell phone on Tuesday. It wasn't an early Christmas gift, but a reward for bringing up failing grades. It's the second-best gift she has ever received.

Lakeisha, 15, was diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma last summer. It's hard to imagine anything tougher for a teen than fighting for survival, losing her hair and battling nausea in the process. For Lakeisha, though, it's just one more hurdle to overcome. After a life in and out of foster care, she finally found a family eager to keep her. But in September, as adoption became a possibility, her "Mom," as she calls her, was nearly killed in a rollover crash. As the mother heals from a severe head injury, Lakeisha is back in foster care, wondering whether she'll ever know the simple, stable joy of being home.

This is where the best gift comes in: older sister, La-Rhonda, 17, her solace and soulmate.

"I always want to cry when I'm leaving her," LaRhonda said last week, as Lakeisha got chemotherapy at Children's Hospital of Minneapolis. (Because the girls remain in foster care, only first names are used).

"It's like, hard, weird," LaRhonda said. "She's my little sister. I know she'll be all right, but I can't protect her. When she's gone, I sleep in her bed."

LaRhonda could cry for herself, too. An A/B student, LaRhonda was recently named Student of the Week at her north suburban high school. The award came with a bumper sticker for the "proud parent." LaRhonda has neither the proud parent nor a car to place it on. She's too busy, and wise, to worry about small stuff like that.

"I wouldn't be able to go through this," LaRhonda said of Lakeisha's circumstances. "The cancer, the accident, not being able to be all good in school. She's like, super strong. I used to never say, 'I love you,' but with everything going on, she kind of needs it."

Michelle Chalmers can't picture either girl surviving without the other. Chalmers is co-founder of Ampersand Families, (www.ampersandfamilies.org and www.minnesotaheartgallery.org), a Twin Cities organization created in 2007 to find permanent families for older youth.

"They are each other's most significant source of support," said Chalmers, who noted that the girls also know how to push one another's buttons as sisters do. Mostly, "they hold each other's memories."

The girls were removed from their biological mother when Lakeisha was a baby, living with aunts, then in foster homes and other placements before being adopted by a family in northern Minnesota when they were 8 and 6. Finally on solid ground, they started participating in jazz, tap and ballet, soccer and acting. They liked their adoptive parents and their new siblings. Within six years, though, the couple divorced and the family unraveled, taking an emotional toll on the girls. They were separated briefly, then placed in two more foster homes before returning to the metro area.

Placed with foster parents Barbara and Jerry Sell of Elk River, they clicked. They dared to feel hopeful and happy again. With encouragement from Chalmers, the Sells began to consider adoption.

Last summer, Lakeisha felt a lump on her neck. Barbara and Jerry took turns staying overnight during Lakeisha's first four in-patient rounds of chemo. In September, Lakeisha was back in school, working hard. Teachers noticed how well she was doing. "Day and night difference," they said.

Crash changes girls' course

One Friday afternoon later that month, Barbara and the girls were driving near Becker when a semitrailer truck crashed into their Jeep. They rolled over. The girls were banged up but released. Barbara was airlifted with a head injury and multiple broken bones. She is progressing well, relearning how to walk and feed herself, but the road to full recovery remains formidable.

Veteran foster parents Patti and Gary Gruber of Zimmerman stepped in. They've been foster parents to more than 50 girls in 15 years. Patti drives 100 miles to and from Zimmerman for Lakeisha's twice-a-week chemo treatments. She doesn't coddle, though, and won't let LaRhonda wait on Lakeisha too much, either. "Sometimes, I have to step in and say [to LaRhonda], 'Stop. She can get it. She's capable.'"

Patti held the cell phone as a carrot for academic achievement. On Tuesday, Lakeisha used her allowance money to buy it and was "a happy camper," Patti said.

Lakeisha has completed her seventh round of chemotherapy and will have one more before being reevaluated, said her doctor, Michael Richards, staff physician in Children's hematology/oncology department. If all goes well, radiation is next, he said, noting that Hodgkin's in children and teenagers is generally highly curable. "We expect her to do very well," Richards said.

Tonight, the Grubers and the girls will enjoy a quiet Christmas Eve dinner before more than 35 family members and a few former foster daughters come for a "crazy Christmas," with many varieties of lasagna, Patti's famous cranberry molasses cake with butter sauce, and an ugly sweater contest.

No gifts will be exchanged, which is fine with Lakeisha. She has her phone, and you can't put a price on sister love. But she does dare to dream of the life she had briefly and wants to have again, for real.

"They absolutely can stay here," Patti said, "but their intention is to go back to the Sells."

Lakeisha agrees. "We are," she said, "going back."