

The Power of a Small Stone

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There are times in my life when I think I was meant to be a social worker. I love advocating for the underdog, and I can be extremely fierce when I think someone is being wronged. Especially when that someone is vulnerable or needs protection.

That being said, my fiery Irish temper, emotional nature and need for justice makes me perhaps just a little too unstable to effectively deal day in and day out with the realities of children who aren't cared for and loved as much as they should be.

I make a great volunteer, but as a paid professional I think I would really stink. I'd either be in jail, fired or an emotional wreck. Perhaps all three.

Lucky for me, a few years ago I found an organization called Ampersand Families (ampersandfamilies.org), and it truly is a wonder.

Ampersand exists to help older kids in foster care here in Minnesota find permanent homes. Their biological parents have had their parental rights revoked, which means that their lives thus far have been filled with neglect, abuse, and sometimes even worse. It is truly heartbreaking. But what is even moreso, is that in the US more than 30,000 kids "age out" of the foster care system every year, with no real place to call home. Ampersand works to change that by finding families for these kids. Families who will make "forever" commitments to them, which means they belong. Always.

The [Minnesota Heart Gallery](#) is a photo exhibit which strives to provide a face to the often invisible population of children and teens in need of permanent families. I have found that my camera gives me a unique opportunity to do what I can and it makes me happy that I am able to help even just the tiniest bit, by occasionally providing a photo shoot and pictures for an older child looking for a new family.

Here is a piece that I wrote for them based on my experience photographing one of their "kids" that they still use today. It was one of the most powerful experiences of my life and will stay with me forever.



The Power of a Small Stone:
Notes from Photographer Maris Ehlers

I was really looking forward to photographing my first Heart Gallery "kid," but I honestly didn't know what to expect. I remember approaching it like I do most of my sessions: with a plan to try to bring out the child's personality. However, this time, the plan clearly wasn't going to work. I asked his social worker what kinds of activities the boy liked, to which she replied "I honestly don't know. I've only met him once." I suggested she have him bring some things that tie into what he enjoys, like a football, or soccer ball, or even an MP3 player if he's into listening to his own music (like many kids his age). I remember being more than a little embarrassed when she told me that he didn't have any of these things to bring. I guess when your basic needs of love, shelter and care aren't being met, an MP3 player doesn't seem like such a "must have."

We met at a sculpture garden on a sunny summer day. Honestly, it was easy to pick them out. She was the young, effervescent social worker, and he was the closed-off kid sitting next to her on the bench. I sat down in between them and sort of bullied my way into the conversation, trying to put him at ease. He looked at me with these piercing eyes... guarded, I'd say, except that the hurt still broke through. I immediately began to realize that this wasn't going to be like most of the sessions I shoot with kids. I started to ask him what he liked to do, and I didn't get much at all. Yes, it was awkward. Somehow though, in those first few minutes, we stumbled onto the topic of rocks. With some coaxing and conversation, his entire demeanor changed. He told me about the colors he liked, why he liked agates (because they are smooth and shiny, and don't talk back). At that point, we got up to start to document our time together. I found quickly that he was very shy when it came to getting his picture taken, and so I went back to what I knew - using what he liked to make a connection, to make him comfortable. So I suggested we pick some rocks. I picked up six very small pebbles, with one tiny one, and placed them in his hands. I asked him who they were. Ironically enough, one was his social worker, and one was me, a total stranger! He did pick one for himself - it was the tiniest one in the bunch.

A tiny little pebble among big strangers.

That's when my heart melted. To this day, images from that series, of him holding and sharing the rocks with me, are some of my most favorite. Not because of technical superiority, but because they speak to my heart.

To the casual observer, this picture may just look like some pebbles in a young boy's hand. To me, they symbolize the plight of these kids that Ampersand tries so desperately to help. The rocks in his

life aren't his parents, his home, his school and his community... they are the strangers who are paid in one way or another to be there. If I've learned one thing from working with Ampersand, it's that even if the kindest and most caring professionals are looking out for a child, trying to protect them, being their rocks if you will, that isn't permanency. Only a loving family can provide a true home.

What a great afternoon we had. By the end of the session, he was asking to have his picture taken with his social worker, and I remember having to wipe tears from my eyes so I could see to focus. I remember aching for this boy. This sweet, loving, TALKATIVE boy, who loved rocks for their solidity, their beauty, and because they didn't talk back.

To learn more about Ampersand and the kids they help, please visit ampersandfamilies.org