

Finding Myself 4,241.1 Miles Away

My parents must have known what they were doing when they named me Hope. I have always been able to find the last ray of hope in any dark situation. When I lived in Alabama, my parents worked extremely hard to provide, but we still struggled financially. Many times, we had no vehicle, and my dad would have to walk miles to work. While being homeschooled, my mom got a job at our apartment complex to help pay the bills.

During my whole life, I remember my dad telling me these amazing stories of growing up in Alaska. Stories of how they showered in the rivers, and lived in this one room cabin with no running water during the summers. He described these beautiful mountains that reached higher than the clouds. My favorite story, the one he told the most, was about how as a child he once had to save his dad from a charging bear.

My dad always wanted to move back to Alaska, but we could never afford it. When my grandma got Multiple Sclerosis, it became much more important to move and help her get through it. Somehow, in amazing, desperate determination we did it. We moved to Alaska. We planned to move into the same small dry cabin my dad grew up in. Because it was so small, we couldn't bring very much. I packed everything I wanted to keep in one box and one suitcase.

My friends all thought it was a crazy idea and that I would be better off staying in Alabama. My entire family on my mom's side lives in the south. Plus, I had an amazing job at the Birmingham Zoo, where I loved teaching the patrons about the animals and exhibits. I didn't want to leave any of that. However, I truly believed that even though I would be leaving all of that behind, I would find something even more spectacular on this journey. And I was right.

I remember so well the first time I stepped out of the Anchorage airport. The first thing I noticed was the mountains. I cannot begin to try explaining what it is like to see the mountains for the very first time. The drive to Cooper Landing was even more beautiful with the ocean on one side of the Seward Highway and the mountains on the other.

When we arrived to the cabin, it was much smaller than I imagined, but much cuter and cozier too. It was 16 by 16 and had only enough space for a bunk bed, queen bed, table, refrigerator, stove, and woodstove. Living here, I got to have a sense of what it would have been

like to be a pioneer. The cabin was completely surrounded by the forest. I spent so much time in those woods exploring, playing with my brother or dog, roasting hotdogs with my family, hiking, and climbing trees. The wildest part for me though, was walking through the woods at night to the outhouse, wondering if there was a moose or bear walking with me. Let me tell you, I learned pretty quickly not to drink water after 6 PM!

Even though to my friends in Birmingham, it appeared living in a one room cabin was a worse situation than living in the south, it actually changed my life in the best way possible! By keeping a positive attitude and remaining optimistic, every challenge became an adventure, I knew I could overcome. I lived in that cabin for two years. It was the best two years of my life. The small community was so friendly! I started volunteering at the SeaLife Center which turned out to be such a better fit for me than the Birmingham Zoo. It also helped me confirm my desire to be a marine biologist. Plus, my family bonded in so many ways, having late night conversations, reading together, and working together. When I look back, this adventure will always be one of my favorite memories in life. It has taught me about determination, the importance of working hard, and most of all about hope.