

Personal Essay

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The most influential person in my life has been my mother, whose determination and compassion have shaped the person I am today. I was born prematurely in Oklahoma and almost didn't survive. I had to stay in the NICU section of the hospital until I was placed in foster care. My birth mom wasn't able to take care of me due to drug addiction, so I was adopted by my foster mother when I was one year old.

My mom didn't just adopt me—she adopted six other children as well. She has also cared for over 30 foster children, and we were the ones who couldn't return home to our parents and didn't have relatives we could live with. Most of my siblings have behavioral challenges, and several have mental health problems as well. I have had many health problems, some of which I am still dealing with today. In addition to adopting seven children, my mom has done all of this as a single mother.

We lived in Oklahoma until I was seven, at which time my family and I moved to Alaska. My mom had wanted to live in Alaska since she was a child and decided that getting out of the city would be best for us. My oldest sister was starting to get into trouble, and my mom wanted her to get away from the friends she was spending time with. So, by herself, my mom moved with six children to Alaska.

My mother is a teacher, and we moved to the village of Napakiak for the first year. That was a difficult year, as I was bullied quite a bit. The kids in the village were behind academically, so the education we were receiving was not very strong. My mom liked living in the village, but

because of the bullying and concerns about our education, she decided it would be best for us to move. While we lived there, my mom continued to foster children and adopted a child from a nearby village. He has FASD and struggles quite a bit. The next year, we moved to Ninilchik, where we still live today.

My mother works hard both at home and at work. As a teacher, she has always impressed upon me the value of education and the importance of always doing my best. She is often the first person at school and sometimes works in her classroom during the summer preparing it for the next year. That has taught me that I don't have to be paid for every hour I contribute to a job. Sometimes working extra hours, even without pay, is necessary to do the job well. Most of all, she has taught me that any job worth doing is worth doing right.

My mom has also shown me the importance of helping others, even when it is difficult. Adopting so many children with so many challenges has not been easy. She has raised us to help each other, and as the oldest boy, I try to be a good example for my siblings. The example my mother has set continues to guide the goals and values I hope to carry into my own life and career.