

My name is Rebecca Milewski and I am the adoptive mother of a wonderful little boy named Jackson.

Jackson was placed in our home by way of the foster care system in 2015. Two and a half years later, we finalized his adoption into our family. After six years as foster parents, my husband and I decided it was time that our foster journey came to an end, but that we would always remain open to accepting any of Jackson's future biological siblings. We withdrew our foster license, based on the understanding that we would be contacted and then approved for kinship care if a baby brother or sister came along.

In March of 2019, I received a phone call from Children and Family Services informing me that Jackson had a 6-month-old baby brother and inquiring if we would be interested in adopting him. We absolutely wanted to adopt him and wondered, "Why hadn't we been contacted for the initial placement?" When I asked, I was told these types of scenarios were happening too often at the agency: "Baby Boy" had been placed with another foster family upon discharge from the hospital and we were never contacted, despite policies in place to search for family members and preserve sibling placements.

The caseworker and permanency support worker came to our house on the very same day we received the phone call about Jackson's brother. It looked like things were going to move quickly. We were approved for kinship care, but then nothing happened. No visits, no contact of any kind from the agency. I reached out multiple times by phone and email to caseworkers, supervisors, and senior supervisors. Finally, after much advocacy on my part to bring these brothers together, visits began.

It was such a precious thing to see these two boys together—what a gift to have a brother! And not just to have a brother, but a brother to grow up with, to live with, to experience childhood and all of life together. I am also the mother of 3 biological girls. My daughters are able to enjoy an experience that for most people is so ordinary, one that is never usually even considered—the privilege of growing up in their family of origin. As fierce as my love is for Jack, as deeply as he is loved by everyone in the family, I understand that our love will likely not be enough to take away the heartache he may one day feel when he is old enough to fully comprehend his adoption experience.

But along came Jackson's brother—and this was his biological family, someone who shared the same DNA, the same family history, had the same chubby face and large round eyes, who shared the same mother. And through the brokenness that is adoption, here was a gift, for both boys—the gift of brotherhood.

To us, the notion that brothers should grow up together seemed so obvious. But little did we know that every step of the process would be an uphill battle. We did not foresee that an 18 month legal dispute would ensue, and that we would ultimately discover that many decisionmakers in the foster care and adoption world don't truly value the rights of siblings to grow up together.

Baby Boy was placed with foster parents who were informed that they would be adopting him. I fully understand and empathize with the shock and grief they must have felt upon discovering that the baby had an older sibling whose adoptive parents also wished to adopt to him. As foster parents, we experienced more heartache than we ever could have imagined. But there are no guarantees in foster care. What is known to be true one day, may not be true the next. Foster care is a brutal and bumpy ride for everyone involved, and for foster parents who legitimately care about the best interests of their foster children, their hearts will be broken over and over again.

And here we were, in the most awful of situations, whether it be from agency negligence or oversight, and at the heart of the issue were two little boys who belonged together. All research points to the benefits of children growing up with their families whenever possible. Growing up with biological siblings is in the best interest of the children. This is why Children and Family Services has evidence-based policies such as the *Search and Engagement Policy* to locate family members for placement when children enter foster care, and the *Sibling Policy* to protect the rights of brothers and sisters to be together.

The list of events in our case is long and overwhelming, but to provide an extremely condensed version of the story, the foster parents hired an attorney to fight the agency's decision to place Baby Boy with his brother in our home. The Guardian Ad Litem, who showed no evidence of experience or knowledge in permanency and adoption, (or even child development for that matter), also took a stand against placing the brothers together. Court hearings were repeatedly canceled, then came COVID-19 which delayed the process further, and by the time a hearing took place, Baby Boy was nearly 2 years old and I knew the odds of him being placed with his brother were greatly stacked against him.

In the end, the judge determined that Baby Boy would remain where he was, in the home of the foster parents with whom he had been erroneously placed.

Never have I felt such injustice, not for myself, but for my son and his brother, and all they have lost. These children had the misfortune to be born into foster care, and because of that, they were denied the basic human privilege of growing up together.

To further complicate matters, from the very beginning of the case, the foster parents' plan was to relocate to another state, 12 hours away. Not only does the physical distance drastically reduce opportunities for continued sibling visitation, but the state of Ohio has no legal framework in place for mandating sibling communication or visitation once Baby Boy's adoption is finalized.

It is entirely possibly that these brothers may remain isolated from each other until they both reach adulthood. We remain hopeful that communication and visitation might continue following the adoption, but there is no way of knowing what the future holds for Jackson and his brother.