February 28, 2013

Dear Joint Ways and Means Subcommittee On Human Services, 2013 Oregon Legislative Session, Attention Sen. Alan Bates, Co-Chair and Rep. Nancy Nathanson, Co-Chair, Sen. Elizabeth Steiner Hayward, Sen. Jackie Winters, Rep. Tim Freeman and Rep. Joe Gallegos:

Re: Oregon Health Authority
Addictions and Mental Health

Public Hearing HB

Kayla's Story

We first met our daughter when she was 10 ½. She was a tiny girl, quivering with excitement and waiting for us by the driveway. Her foster mom said she had never seen a child so very ready for adoption.

Kayla's life, save the last six months, was full of trauma. Allegedly, her birth mom found out she was pregnant while she was in jail for drugs. Her birth dad was violent; even being arrested for building a bomb. They divorced when Kayla was two and all of her birth mom's subsequent boyfriend's (and there was a series of them) were physical abusers – towards her mom and towards Kayla.

Kayla was homeless on several occasions, possibly for the first time when released from the hospital after she was born. Kayla was often hungry and if she snuck the limited food at her house and got caught, she was beaten.

Kayla was neglected as a child. We have record that her birth mom would forget where she left her (e.g. under a tree). Her birth mom's drug use contributed to the neglect.

By the time Kayla was 10, she had attended ten different schools. We have records of Kayla acting out in early elementary school. The longest she lived in one place was her 4th and last foster home, where she lived for six months. Kayla had had few (if any) positive role models, no friends, and few opportunities to develop positive relationships.

Kayla's grandfather and step-grandmother met Kayla when she was three. They lived locally so that the police would deliver Kayla to their house when the police picked up Kayla's birth mom and her boyfriend. They were unable to provide permanent care for Kayla.

Kayla became a throw away kid. She was rejected by family members who were unable to get Kayla counseling or get her on ADHD medication, she was rejected by her birth mom who chose to be with an abusive man and get into drug selling and using, and she "blew through" three foster homes.

This synopsis skims our daughter's history.

When Kayla joined our family, we quickly realized her self-esteem was extremely low. She had repeatedly been told, so much that she believed it, that she was ugly and stupid. Although testing low on IQ, we could see the creativity and the intelligence that flowed from her.

Kayla had been traumatized and that was evident in so many ways. She needed to wear ear protection at our house for weeks as a dog bark would startle her. Everything had to be organized just so. Whenever we saw a police car, Kayla assumed we were going to be pulled over and she was astonished we never were pulled over. Kayla was consumed that a fire, tornado, flood, hurricane would destroy our house. Kayla was extremely needy for attention and acted out in extreme manners. Her anger also surfaced in extreme ways.

Early on, we found a mental health counselor (Sandy) that truly enabled our family to stay together. We were encouraged to read the book The Explosive Child as that is what Kayla was at the time. Our family counseling sessions helped us to learn to focus on the behaviors that were most important; to learn to segregate what behaviors that needed to be addressed immediately and which ones could wait. Through this counselor, Kayla reached a point where she wanted to tell her story. With Sandy's help and support, Kayla's birth mom and her stepfather were officially convicted of criminal mistreatment and her stepfather was arrested but not charged with sexual abuse. Kayla stood in front of the court and read her very moving victim's statement.

During her early years with us, Kayla was stabilized with medications for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety. Later Kayla was also diagnosed with reactive attachment disorder due to her inability to bond with people. Through counseling, Kayla worked to have that label removed after lots of work on her part.

Kayla and our family continued counseling. In addition Kayla received social skills training at her middle school. School was difficult for Kayla; we knew the principals at the schools through 8th grade. Academically, Kayla did fairly well; socially, not so. Kayla was in and out the special education classroom throughout the day. By the end of 8th grade however, Kayla was almost expelled. She was prohibited from riding the school bus and certain conditions had to be met to keep her in school (no passing in the hallways, time in the special ed. room, restrictions on "free time" while at school.) Kayla also had an encounter with law and she experimented with self-harm.

We decided to enroll Kayla in a small, structured private school for 9th grade and after two weeks, we were given the opportunity to withdraw her. The administration had read her record by then and Kayla was being watched carefully. They didn't want to risk having her in their school. We knew Kayla had few options at that point. After six tumultuous weeks, we were talking with staff at Polk Adolescent Day Treatment Center about the possibility of Kayla attending that school. Her mental health counselor who saw Kayla in private practice and at Kayla's middle school, recommended Kayla for treatment at Polk Adolescent Day Treatment Center (PADTC). At the time, Kayla was on private insurance (a barrier to treatment) and she had Oregon Health Plan because of her adoptive status. Kayla was accepted as a student/client in January 2012 (only after being rejected by private insurance would the school accept her.) She attended PADTC, which included individual, group and family counseling for 11 months.

After graduating from PADTC, Kayla was mainstreamed into Dallas High School – the first PADTC graduate to do so and she is doing well. Kayla has not had any discipline issues at the school, she is maintaining a B average, she rides the bus every day...all normal things that we celebrate. Kayla comes home every day and immediately does her homework. Kayla knows she is smart and beautiful, her IQ has increased and university is definitely in her plans, possibly even graduate school. Kayla is making much better choices for boyfriends. She still struggles socially and may for some time but is making progress on that front as well. Kayla recently earned her black belt in taekwondo. At times, Kayla still sees herself as a victim but that is changing as she is learning to advocate for herself.

I attribute Kayla's success and personal growth through her personal resilience and her interactions with mental health therapists. They have helped her to understand herself and her choices. Family therapy helped us as her parents, to better understand where Kayla was coming from and to help us to work together to solve problems and to address issue. Kayla is an advocate for counseling and medications as appropriate. I've seen her encourage friends who are depressed to explore both avenues. Enrollment at Polk Adolescent Day Treatment Center was a last resort however, it was a fantastic last resort. Kayla's life positively changed after PADTC.

We, as parents, knew to advocate for Kayla. Not all parents do or know how to. We've had to make serious choices over the years between OHP and private insurance. We've seen fewer good mental health therapists accept OHP. We are willing to pay out-of-pocket for Kayla's therapy. However, we have chosen to not pay $200 for psychiatrist visits to monitor Kayla's medications. Instead, we have asked Kayla's primary care physician to take that role. It would be fantastic if she had access to a hotline regarding psychotropic and other psychiatric medications.

Our family encourages additional funding to support mental illness and trauma informed care.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

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