

A Legacy of Family

First Person Essay

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I have always *loved* my family, but I didn't fully appreciate them until two unique experiences altered my perspective. The first was my parents' decision to "adopt" an orphan in Ghana. The other experience was a 2014 missions trip to Hillcrest Children's Home in Arkansas. These events opened my eyes to what life could be *without* my family, and just how blessed I am to have the legacy I do.

My parents have been married for twenty-five years, and I have five siblings. We live together in all the joys and challenges of family life. I am no different than most teenagers, often taking my parents for granted, expecting much of them, giving very little back, and bickering with my siblings about mostly insignificant things. While I will not claim all of that has been reversed in my life, I have come to see that I should not take my parents' love and provisions for granted. Not *everyone* has those things. I should appreciate my siblings more as well. The blessings of family and home were concepts I had never given much thought to, but I found out just how critical they are.

My first revelation came after our church took a missions team to Ghana several years back. I, myself, did not go, but the stories and pictures from that trip touched my family deeply, and my parents decided to "adopt" an orphan girl in Ghana, the only way they could, through monthly financial support, letters and small gifts. They explained that she lives with children, of all ages, but she has no parents in her life. I began to imagine that reality: no mom, and no dad. There are adults to care for her needs, making sure she is always dressed, fed, and taught in school and church. They love her the best they can, no doubt; but it can't be the same for a little girl, younger than my littlest sister, to not have a mom to model after, or a dad to play with her and protect her.

There are many orphans where our "African sister" lives, and she is better off than most of them. Many have been abandoned to the streets, where they survive on their own, or sometimes sadly, they die. That is a scenario I cannot fathom for a child just five years old. The letters we receive reveal that "Rosie" is happy, healthy, and learning. She thanks us profusely for the little things we send her, like crayons or a toothbrush. These are things I just *have* and do not consider special at all. My parents would really love to adopt her and bring her home with us, but unfortunately that is not possible due to international adoption laws. My church is returning to Ghana this summer, when I hope to go to the orphanage and meet my "sister" for the first time.

Two summers ago I traveled to Hillcrest Children's Home, an orphanage operated by the Assemblies of God, here in the United States. The situation is vastly different than in Ghana. Most of the kids at Hillcrest were not abandoned, but were forcibly removed from their parents due to drug use, physical/sexual abuse, or parents going to prison. Their stories impacted me immensely. There was a sibling group of six, much like my own family, who were *begging* to stay together at Hillcrest, because a family wanted to adopt just *two* of them. The thought of being separated from any of my siblings was unbearable to me and it my heart broke for this family. Due to traumas some kids had endured before coming to Hillcrest, they had emotional issues and that required counseling and medication. One girl had severe Post Traumatic Stress Disorder after witnessing one parent shot by the other, in her home. Others had been abused. Comparing their situations to mine, we were worlds apart. I suddenly recognized the depths of love, peace, and normalcy I had grown up with, that tragically,

these kids had not. I met two young men at Hillcrest who made irrevocable impressions on me-

The first guy was named *Shady*. Yes, he had a strange name, and he recognized my questioning expression, when he introduced himself to me. He explained, "My mom was so high on drugs, she gave me a crazy name like that! Can you believe it?" He was a fun guy and we immediately hit it off. I learned of his rough past, but that he had gotten to a much better place. Adult Christian couples at Hillcrest are "house parents" to groups of boys (or girls). They share a house with the kids, living life like a real family, though none of them are biologically connected. For Shady, that simulation of a family, taking him to church, doing homework with him, feeding him meals, and treating him with Godly compassion, has been enough to turn his life around. Though he never was adopted and still lives with his Hillcrest "family," he is still doing well, thankfully. I was able to reunite with him at National Fine Arts 2015, using his talents for God, which overjoyed me.

The second guy, *Chance*, also had a name reflective of the dicey past of his parents. He had been removed from them due to physical abuse. I did not have the chance to get to know him well, but I watched him closely. He was a good-looking kid, popular with everyone; but none of that attention had been enough to erase the damage he had endured. Via Facebook, I later read that Chance was removed from the orphanage due to drug possession. What became of him, I do not know, but I do know it will take the power of God to break his patterns of pain. Meeting Chance, though painful, instilled in me great gratitude that I *don't* have a legacy like his to overcome.

Psalms 127:3-4 and 128:3-4 (NLT) offer the following commands and promises, as God's plan for family:

*<sup>3</sup>Children are a gift from the Lord; they are a reward from him. <sup>4</sup>Children born to a young man are like arrows in a warrior's hands . . .<sup>3</sup>Your children will be like vigorous young olive trees as they sit around your table. <sup>4</sup>That is the Lord's blessing for those who fear him.*

God calls parents to view their children as **gifts**, which my parents have done. They have not abandoned us, but loved us. They have not abused us, but protected us. They have not broken laws, but upheld them. They have not shirked responsibility, but embraced it. Therefore, I have never faced separation from my family because my parents have served God, obeying His word. I have not suffered any of the things that I realized these others have had to deal with in their young lives. My family is blessed, just as God promised in His word. I am undeserving of such a blessing, one that Rosie, Shady, and Chance will never know. I'm so thankful to have such a legacy of family.