

The Story of Melanie and Stormy A Life Reclaimed

Visiting with Melanie and Stormy Walker, one senses the bond between a mother and a daughter who simply “get” one another. Not only do they bear a striking physical resemblance, they laugh in the same easy way, have a similar smile, and finish one another’s sentences. Looking at them together, it’s hard to believe that two years ago they were each living in far different circumstances—and didn’t know one another.

Stormy’s story

Until she was placed in foster care at the age of 15, Stormy’s life was filled with abuse and neglect. The second oldest of five children, and the oldest to live with her birth parents, Stormy took responsibility for her younger siblings from an early age. Addicted to drugs, her parents were unwilling or unable to care for their children and were frequently arrested on drug-related, domestic violence, or other charges. The horrors of her childhood—from the prevalence of physical violence and drug use to the anguish caused by a lack of food and affection—are among the worst imaginable.

“I remember going to places like the Village Pantry and the laundromat to get warm when we didn’t have heat,” Stormy says of her early childhood. “We went to bed hungry. We would cry because we were just so hungry. And when they did feed us, it was sugar water or candy.”

Stormy says life as a child had an awful predictability. “Every Friday, my dad would get off work and get trashed,” she says. “And then he would come home and beat up my mom. One day, we got off the bus and there were a lot of police cars at the house. There was stuff all over the yard. And my mom had blood all over her. That day, my dad went to jail and we stayed with my grandma for a while and then we went to Middle Way House.”

Middle Way House provides shelter, advocacy, housing, and legal services to survivors of domestic violence, human trafficking, and sexual assault.



By Carmen Siering
Photography by Lisa Walker

(l-r) Stormy and Melanie with
their dogs Bear and Mia.

Stormy says the structure offered by the Middle Way House programs, and living in its transitional housing at The Rise!, did briefly improve their situation.

“Middle Way House helped my bio-mom,” Stormy says. “They set a time when she had to be home. She had to fix us meals. And they helped us kids by putting us in Boys & Girls Clubs and camps and stuff.” But when they moved out of The Rise!, her birth mother slipped back into her old habits.

“She started hanging out in Peoples Park, and got into heroin and pills,” Stormy says. “She started sleeping with men for money, for rent. We lived at Henderson Court [Apartments] and you weren’t supposed to have anyone else live there, but she had her friends living there, and I took care of all the kids, everyone’s kids. I was only 12.”

The situation at the apartment deteriorated quickly. “I would watch them make the drug and watch them shoot up,” she says. “One time they were all so strung out, I just put all the kids in my room—it was the cleanest—and I put the drugs down the toilet. And they just thought they had used it all.”

Another time, she says, she watched as a group of men put her unconscious mother into a tub of cold water. “They just kept smacking her, and I think they thought she was dead,” Stormy recalls. “I guess the cold water kept her heart pumping. Because she lived.”

Finally things reached a crisis point. “The day we got taken away from my mom was the day her boyfriend died in the house with a needle in his arm,” she says. And as bad as things had been living with her mother, that day the situation got much worse for Stormy.

That’s because she and her siblings were sent to live with their paternal grandparents. When Stormy protested to the Department of Child Services (DCS), she was told there was nowhere else for her to go.

Stormy had lived with her grandparents on and off throughout her childhood. Any time her parents were in jail, she and her siblings would be sent to live with their grandparents in Greene County. Stormy’s grandparents, particularly her grandfather, had always been abusive to her. “They told me I looked just like my bio-mom,” she says, trying to justify why they treated her so badly. “They always called me names.”

This time, while her siblings went to school, Stormy was kept home. Confined to a single room, stripped of everything, she slept on the floor. She wasn’t allowed to talk to

anyone, or do anything without her grandfather’s permission—not eat, sleep, or use the toilet. To make sure she didn’t escape, he put barbed wire and electrified fencing around the room’s windows. And he beat her.

“My siblings and I were so close before. I took care of them,” she says. “But he would beat me in front of them and they would cry. He would tell them that this was what would happen to them if they talked to me. The worst night he beat me, I decided I was going to run away. Or I was going to kill myself.”

The violations occurring at the house weren’t unknown to authorities. In fact, DCS workers had visited Stormy there before. But the intervention she was waiting for didn’t come, and each encounter with authorities seemed to make her situation worse.

“Every time I would talk to DCS, he would get the papers [the documentation sent to the guardian each time a child talks to DCS workers] and I would get beat,” Stormy says. “And [my siblings] saw that, and they didn’t want that to happen to them.”

But her sister did, in fact, talk to someone about what was going on, approaching a school counselor on Stormy’s behalf. And because of the previous court hearings and DCS visits, a CASA (court appointed special advocate) volunteer was sent to the house. That volunteer was Vicki Halt; it was her first CASA case.

Today, Halt is the administrative assistant to the director of CASA in Greene County, so she’s seen and heard a lot. Still, Halt says, she will never forget Stormy’s story. “Every case I’ve had since then, nothing compares to that one,” she says. “I remember going into the house to meet her, and when I walked in, you could tell they didn’t want me there. I was so scared. But I knew Stormy couldn’t stay there.”

As for Stormy, she says she knew Halt was going to change things. “The CASA was so scared when she came to visit because my grandfather’s scary,” she says. “He wouldn’t let me talk to her with the door closed. So I told her I couldn’t talk to her because whatever I said, I was going to get it when she left. And she just looked me in the eyes and told me she was going to get me out of there. She gave me a hug and she told me she loved me—and she didn’t even know me. She filled me with such joy. I know without that moment, I would have killed myself.”

Halt left and reported back to her director. She says she was surprised to find Stormy was already in the system. “And in

the reports I read, it said they had documented she had marks on her, that the sheriff had been out to the house, but no one had done anything,” Halt says with some astonishment. And while it didn’t happen immediately, Halt made good on her promise.

“We removed her. We made sure she got out,” Halt says. “Her siblings were all CHINS (Children in Need of Services), but their cases were dropped. They admitted all of the anger was directed at Stormy.”

For the first time in her life, Stormy wasn’t going to be living with a family member—or in immediate danger of neglect or abuse. At the age of 15, she entered the foster care system.

A mother’s tragic loss

Melanie Walker is the CEO of Tsuchiya Group North America and president of TASUS Corporation, a Bloomington-based auto parts manufacturer. She also serves on the Indiana University Board of Trustees. While Stormy was living a life of neglect and abuse, Melanie was loving and raising a son, Landon, whom she adopted as an infant. The two enjoyed one another’s company—traveling and sharing the kind of relationship any mother and son would envy. But, Melanie says, Landon inherited a depressive disorder. It was something he struggled with. In January 2015, just shy of his 23rd birthday, Landon took his own life.

“His suicide was not a rash decision,” Melanie says. “He came home from Texas, where he had moved just months earlier to try to start a career, to begin an independent life. He said he needed to be with someone who loved him. We spent two weeks together, sorting through life and the next steps for Landon. And then, after giving me the hug and ‘I love you’ that he gave to me every night, he took his life. I believe it was a thoughtful decision, even a loving decision, a coherent decision. And I respect it. I have to respect it. Because it was his decision.”

Melanie says her grief was immediate and intense. “He was my only child,” she says. “The first year was spent grieving the loss of him as a person—I don’t have Landon. The second year was grieving the loss of not being a mother.”

From foster care to family

For Stormy, being in foster care meant being part of a functional family for the first time in her life. On the surface, that sounds ideal. In reality, it was a struggle.

She met her first family on the day she entered the foster care system. “When



(top) Stormy's first school photo. She was in kindergarten at the time.

(above) Melanie's son, Landon.

(top, right) Judge Erik Allen at Stormy's adoption in Greene County Courts.



we went to court, they were in the back,” Stormy says. “They met me at the courthouse and I went home with them from DCS. I lived with them for a year.”

But living in foster care is difficult, even in the best situations. Stormy says her first foster family was loving and kind. She was with them for a year. “But the bad thing about fostering is, you never know what’s going to happen,” she says. “I mean, you literally never know. My first family told me they were going to adopt me, and the very next day my stuff was on the porch. My caseworker picked me up from school and told me I was going to a new home.”

There were two more families over the next two years, and Stormy was almost 18. “But that was fine,” she says. “I was done with foster homes. I wanted to be adopted. I wanted my own family.”

Indiana has an extended foster care program for young adults ages 18 to 20 to help them as they make the transition into adulthood. Called Collaborative Care, those enrolled must attend school or be employed. In return, they receive financial assistance and continued health coverage—the kind of support young adults often receive from their families as they begin their lives after high school.

Stormy was eligible for this kind of program, and she knew others who were in it. But she wanted something more.

“For most of them in Collaborative Care, it doesn’t work out,” Stormy says. “You want someone, so you go back to the ones who abused you. You go home, and you end up like your parents.”

When her CASA, Vicki Halt, asked Stormy what she wanted to do after she turned 18, Stormy made it clear. “I never had a family, and I never was a kid. I never got to do any of those things kids get to do,” Stormy says. “I told her I felt like if I didn’t have a family, I might get into drugs or end up pregnant. Or I might kill myself. I wasn’t doing well. I wanted Thanksgiving and Christmas. I told her I wanted a forever home.”

About this time, Melanie says, an acquaintance who knew about Landon’s death asked if she might be interested in meeting an 18-year-old girl who was looking for a family. “I remember telling her I’m the person who, if I go to the animal shelter, I don’t come home empty handed,” Melanie says with a laugh. “So I told her I really had to think about it.”

But two days later, Melanie had made up her mind. She met Stormy on May 2, 2016, at Bob Evans Restaurant on West 3rd Street, along with another couple who were also interested in adoption. Stormy’s caseworker and her therapist rounded out the group.

Melanie says with so many people around the table, she mostly listened to the conversation throughout dinner, never



(above) Stormy's new family: (back, l-r) Stormy, mom Melanie, aunt Lisa Walker, aunt Dixie Walker, uncle Eric Mueller; (front, l-r) grandmother Ruth Walker, grandfather Richard Walker, and uncle Nathan Walker.

(opposite page) Stormy and Melanie at home in their kitchen.

really getting a chance to talk to Stormy. But when they started to leave, she asked Stormy if she would like to talk over coffee. "And she said, 'Me? With you?'" Melanie says, smiling. "And then her caseworker asked if we wanted to go get coffee, and we said we had it covered."

The four of them went to Starbucks, and while the therapist and caseworker sat at another table, Melanie and Stormy got acquainted. "I remember I told her about my home and my life. She said she really wanted to be adopted, that she didn't want to be a foster kid," Melanie says. "I told her I wouldn't do it any other way. Adoption was the only option for me because once I commit, I'm not letting go. We both cried, very happy tears. The next night I took her to

pick out a prom dress. And the next night I took her to meet my sister, Lisa. Then I flew to Ithaca [New York] to share this with my parents, because I wanted their support."

Stormy moved in within a week, which, Melanie admits, isn't how things usually work. "But it was immediate love," she says. "It was odd. Both of us had a hard time getting our arms around that." She says the rest of the family feels the same way about their new family member. "Stormy is just family," she says. "They all love her. She is our family. You can't help but love her. She's beautiful, inside and out."

The two of them take a minute to think about all that has happened since that dinner at Bob Evans. When it's pointed out how easily the two of them seem to have taken to

their roles as mother and daughter, and how easily Stormy calls Melanie “mom,” Stormy looks thoughtful for a minute, then simply says, “Well, that’s because she *is* my mom.”

“Someone to parent them”

After so many years of neglect, abuse, and loneliness, Stormy got her happy ending. But what about all the other children who are in foster care?

Kristin Bishay is the executive director of Monroe County CASA. She says that her agency’s most recent numbers show 697 children in foster care in Monroe County; 156 of those children are age 12 and older. Those who age out of the system at 18 have the option to take part in Collaborative Care.

“In theory, Collaborative Care is a great tool for these kids,” Bishay says. “But what’s happening is a lot of them don’t take advantage of it because it means they have to remain in the system, and they feel the system has messed with their lives so much that they won’t agree to sign up.”

Is adoption the answer? For some young adults, it may be. “There are some older kids who want to be adopted,” Stormy says. “And if they tell their caseworkers they want a good home, they’ll look for them.”

Melanie adds, “It’s not something that crosses your mind. If you’re raising a family, you might feel a sense of relief as your kids get older. But the reality is that there are these kids out there, who are raised for the most part, who just need guidance and love and someone to parent them.”

After losing Landon, Melanie says she knew she wanted to be a mother again. But the path she took with Stormy wasn’t one she would have expected. “I would have done something eventually. I would have figured something out,” she says. “But I would never have imagined there was a young woman or a young man who needed a family. And I don’t know that I would have thought of adopting a 12-year-old. Or even a 15-year-old. At 58, for me, this is the best of both worlds. I have a great young woman who is

launching into life, but I have the freedoms that you have when you are raising older children. That’s something for possible adoptive parents to consider.”

For her part, why did Stormy want to be adopted at an age when many of her peers are eager to move out on their own? What does she get out of it? “I get love and care,” Stormy says. “I feel like you should always have a parent. I don’t think you can do it alone. My friends stay here sometimes, and they have all said they need a mom or a mentor or someone.”

Many of Stormy’s friends have been in foster care. Melanie serves as an informal mentor to them. “I’m happy to be here for them,” Melanie says. She tells the story of one of Stormy’s friends who had run into a string of bad luck—her car had broken down, she had just broken up with her boyfriend, she was having financial issues at college. “I told her I was proud of her for doing it all on her own,” Melanie says. “And she looked at me and said, ‘I’m tired of doing it on my own.’”





That says it all. She's right. You shouldn't have to do it all on your own."

Because, as Stormy pointed out, all of these young adults are looking for guidance and an adult they can lean on. One time, when Stormy had a friend over, she and Melanie got into a typical mother-daughter disagreement. "At one point, I said to her, 'I'm doing this because I love you and I want to protect you.' And her friend just started sobbing. We were both a little startled and asked why she was crying and she said, 'I just wish my mom would say something like that to me.'"

Life from now on

Though Stormy has a new life in Bloomington with Melanie, her old life—and her birth family—are still out there. "I talk to my sister sometimes," she says. "And my second youngest brother, he's just 16, isn't doing well at all. He's doing drugs." She gets quiet and then adds, "I just found out my youngest brother, Billy, has cancer. My

grandfather says I can't go to the funeral if he dies."

Melanie tries to fight for her daughter's right to stay connected to her siblings. "It would be great if she could have those relationships," she says. "But I tried to talk to her grandfather about Stormy seeing Billy and having a relationship with him. Let me just say he is a man to be feared. But if I could fix anything for her, it would be that she could see her brother."

Stormy's adoption was finalized on September 8, 2016. Today, a little more than a year later, she has her first full-time job.

"She was pretty determined to work at a day care center," Melanie says with a smile.

"I have 15 one-year-olds!" Stormy says, eyes sparkling. "It's a lot of diaper changing, but I just love being around kids. They make me happy."

When she talks about the future, Stormy doesn't necessarily know what she plans to do, but she has definite ideas about how she plans to live. "I don't have any desire to do

(above) Friends of Stormy's are frequent guests at home. Here they enjoy an afternoon at Bruster's ice cream shop in Bloomington. (l-r) Ethan McIntosh, Stormy, Ashley Hooks, Melanie, and Faith Williams.

drugs," she says adamantly. "And the way they treated me? I don't ever want my kids to end up the way I was treated. And I want to adopt, too."

She also has a heart for the people and organizations who helped her make it through what was, by any standard, a horrible childhood. "When I was at the Boys & Girls Clubs, I met [Executive Director] Jeff Baldwin," she says. "I would go to his office and talk to him and tell him what was going on with life and he would listen. I mean, he was like a dad to me. I would like to help all of those places—Middle Way House and Boys & Girls Clubs and Big Brothers Big Sisters and all the food pantries. All of those places that helped me not grow up to be like my family."



Melanie and Stormy with their companions outside their home.

Postscript

After reading this story, Melanie Walker replied with this heartfelt response:

“I need people to see that this system HAS to change. Why is it that the children in our state have to survive repeated abuse under a CHINS (Children in Need of Services) law that essentially allows for that very abuse to occur until it is ‘bad enough’? How is it that we allow for the self-perpetuation of these travesties?”

“I had Stormy’s bio-dad in our living room last night. It was the first time I had met him. He held me and told me over and over again how he is so grateful that I rescued his daughter from his abusive father (Stormy’s grandfather) and from foster care, and gave her a life that he, as her father, didn’t give her. He makes no excuses. He was an addict. He didn’t provide for his children. He never laid a hand on them, although he admits to having a very bad temper and hitting their mother.

“Here’s the sad thing: The same man who beat Stormy in her teen years, her grandfather, whipped her father with a chain when he was a boy! It scared him in so many ways. He was beaten down emotionally and physically. He was so angry inside, and had such low self-esteem, that he turned to drugs and alcohol, stealing, homelessness, and battery. That abuse stole his life. Stormy is the lucky one, but it’s because of who she is. You saw it in her—she just loves from the depth of her heart, and she had a vision that she was able to get to.

“I feel so passionately about the need for people to see that these kids are AMAZING. They are overcomers. They need love, boundaries, and freedom.

“There is the bad: abuse, homelessness, addiction, violence, prison, mental illness, hunger, neglect, lack of education, lack of resources, and a system that fails on so many levels. And there is the good: Boys & Girls Clubs, Big Brothers Big Sisters, Shalom Community Center, Susie’s Place Child Advocacy Centers, Middle Way House, WonderLab, CASA, and *Bloom*, for telling so many important stories.” ✨