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“As a Mississippi State University student, I will conduct myself with honor and integrity at all times. I will not lie, cheat, or steal, nor will I accept the actions of those who do.”

## My Untold Story

Who could ever imagine that three little words could change one person's life forever? Like Ashley Rhodes-Courter, I can. Even though my words were not exactly the same, when my adoption was final on August 7, 1998, the feelings were remarkably similar... worry, emptiness, sadness, and loneliness. I was only 13 years old at the time. Like Ashley, I also had very little trust in anyone. Every one that ever came into my life always eventually left. I also remember being upset from being rejected by my biological family several times. Although I was only in one foster home and then a children's home, I still moved around regularly as a child. Before I was adopted, the longest I had ever stayed at one place was at the foster home where I lived for about three years. Unfortunately, the foster home was not the experience I had hoped it would be. I only experienced rejection and sadness along with being starved half to death and treated like Cinderella.

In my mind, my childhood began as any other child's would...school, friends, playing outside, and spending time with my parents in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. Little to my knowledge, my world would soon be turned upside down. My father was sexually abusive to me, and unfortunately my biological mother was clueless for many years about what was happening. I'm still unsure as to what provoked her suspicion, but when I was about five or six years old she caught him. This painful experience led to my father going to jail, my parents divorcing, and my biological mother being left to take care of me. My biological mother had many health issues, worked very little, and was eventually involved with drugs. She wasn't able to financially support us, therefore, we moved around quite frequently. Most of our "homes" mainly consisted of run down trailers, government housing in the projects, anyone who would take us in, or, in desperate situations, our car.

These events would only be the beginning of my complicated childhood. When we were just about out of options for places to live, my biological mother turned to one of my uncles who lived in Louisiana. However, my uncle was also involved with drugs. I remember terrifying drug busts, sleepily riding around at all hours of the night, and attending school in Mississippi even though I lived in Louisiana. My school situation intrigued me, which caused me to question my biological mother about why I had to go to school in Mississippi. She said it was because I was a ward of the State, and we weren't supposed to be living in Louisiana, therefore, I had to continue to attend school in Mississippi.

I remember begging to be a cheerleader my fourth grade year while we lived in Louisiana and I attended school in Mississippi. I was told some strings were pulled to get me in, and I loved it. On Halloween day that year, I patiently waited after school for my biological mother but she never showed to pick me up after school. I went home that day with a woman that worked at the school who had also babysat me in previous years. She and her husband would become my foster parents. The explanation my biological mother gave for not picking me up was she thought I had cheerleading practice after school that day. Because of her drug abuse, I didn't have much contact with my biological mother after that, although I do remember her trying to see me a few times. Like Ashley, when I would ask about when I could see her or when she was going to get me, the usual answer was "soon". I was also told on several occasions that she was working on getting her life together and that it wouldn't be long before I could go live with her again.

That day never came. I stayed with the foster family for about three years. Unfortunately, this family constantly mistreated me. Although they never poured hot sauce down my throat, I often starved while living there. The only activities I was allowed to do was clean the house, sit in my room alone, or go outside. Her daughter and I were frequently locked outside. Their

grandparents who lived across the street noticed these things but when they tried to do something about it, their complaints were ignored by the State.

Eventually, the foster family decided they didn't want me, so they tried to make it look like I was crazy and put me in several mental hospitals. Fortunately, I did have a great case worker who noticed this and tried her best to help when she could. She helped arrange for me to go to The Mississippi Baptist Children's Home in Laurel, MS. When I left the foster family's home, I was 12 and in the seventh grade. I weighed about 65 pounds and was about 4 ½ feet tall...extremely underweight from being nearly starved. From the children's home, I was adopted by a wonderful family from Union, MS. I left the children's home for good on December 20, 1997. I was terrified and didn't know what to expect. Just like with past situations, I didn't expect them to want to keep me, but they did. As Ashley did, I slowly learned to trust my new family, even though, to this day, I still don't feel like I can truly depend on anyone.

I often wonder what my life would be like had I gone back to my biological mother or if the State would have stepped in when complaints were made about my foster family. I remember my caseworkers often complaining about how sad it was that children like me were not cared for better.

I've wanted to share my story for a long time and just wasn't sure how to do that, until now. Ashley's story, *Three Little Words: A Memoir*, has inspired me to want to share my experiences with others. The memories I have shared here are only a small fraction of events that took place in my life. I want to show other children with similar experiences that overcoming their past is possible, and that they can live their own lives how they want, regardless of their past. For years, I've wanted to write a book about my life. Perhaps now is the time.