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Parents face heartbreaking choice: Do they give up their adopted 7-year-old daughter?

After their daughter endured 39 clinicians, multiple hospitalizations and several suicide attempts, her parents realized she would never be able to function in the family constellation

By Bonnie Miller Rubin, Tribune reporter

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It has been almost three months since Ellie left, but her mother can't quite muster the energy to clear out her 7-year-old daughter's bedroom.

"I can't get rid of everything," sighed Lori Gertz, surveying the perfect princess paradise, with its embroidered quilt, painted flowers and small dinette set. "I'm still grieving."

Ellie is now living with another family in Washington — 1,700 miles away from her comfortable Long Grove home, where she lived with her parents, two siblings and four dogs.

Despite outward appearances, life was anything but idyllic. Even the slightest frustration — not getting to watch a video or the right color cereal bowl — could send Ellie into an uncontrollable rage, putting everyone's safety at risk, especially 5-year-old Talia.

After Ellie endured dozens of clinicians and multiple hospitalizations, the Gertzes came to the sad realization that their daughter would never be able to function in the family constellation. They faced a wrenching dilemma: Do they give up their daughter to protect everyone else?

Lori Gertz told of the family's struggle in a blog, and she and her husband, Craig, 45, shared their story with the Tribune in an effort to help other families by raising awareness and calling for more resources for children with mental illness.

Eight years ago, giving up their daughter would have been unfathomable. The Gertzes had one son — Jonah, then almost 4 — and longed to have more children, but, after seven miscarriages and Lori Gertz nearing 40, the window was closing. So they turned to adoption.

Eventually, a 34-year-old New Jersey woman chose them from an online site, just eight weeks before her due date. On Jan. 5, 2003, Lori Gertz accompanied the birth mother into the delivery room. She was the first one to hold and feed the 8-pound newborn.

"No one could have felt luckier and more joyful than us," Lori Gertz said. "We have beautiful photos of that day ... proof of a mother doing only what was in the best interest of her child. I wish she had that presence of mind when Ellie was in utero."

An adoption that ends badly can draw headlines. A Tennessee woman made international news by putting a 7-year-old adopted son, alone, on a flight back to Russia earlier this year.

But little data exist about disrupted adoptions, especially private ones. About 7 percent of adoptions in Illinois' child welfare system will disrupt before the child becomes an adult, according to the Department of Children and Family Services. Roughly half are because of the death of a parent, and the rest mostly due to problems with the child.

The fact is there's little support available for emotionally damaged children — even for families like the Gertzes, with money and connections. Craig is a lawyer. Lori, a marketing specialist. They live in one of the most rarefied ZIP codes — with some of the best schools and health care — in the nation. They know people. They could fix this.

Almost from the beginning, Ellie could not be soothed, sometimes screaming for hours, nonstop. Nothing worked — not the carriage, the sling, the dark, the light, lying on her back or her belly. She could not tolerate the car seat, thrashing so violently that Lori Gertz had to hire a baby sitter just to take Jonah to school. During the next few years, they would go through eight nannies — one quitting on the first day.

"Any period of calm we ever had was always interrupted as soon as she heard the word 'no,'" Lori Gertz said. "It could be no to something she had asked for and been refused a hundred times — like a horse — but it would send her over the edge."

When she was just 9 months, the couple started seeking answers, enrolling in a "fussy baby" clinic. Over the next six years, their quest would wend through the offices of neurologists, psychiatrists, psychologists, pediatricians, occupational therapists and allergists.

Some dismissed the tantrums as a phase, while another suspected child abuse. Not one mentioned substance or alcohol abuse, Lori Gertz said.

In 2005, it took Ellie pushing Lori Gertz — now eight months pregnant with Talia — down a flight of stairs for others to recognize this wasn't about the "terrible twos" or bad parenting. This was something that could not have been prevented by the Gertzes.

When they met Ellie's birth mother, she revealed few habits beyond bingo and cigarettes, and nothing in her pristine medical records suggested otherwise.

Only after the woman's brother started e-mailing the Gertzes did they discover other vices. She began drinking and smoking pot in her teens, graduating to PCP, then crack cocaine, a routine she continued during her first trimester. "I know she was clean for the remainder of her pregnancy because she was in jail," wrote the brother.

It was Dr. Ira Chasnoff who diagnosed Ellie, now almost 3, with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, or FASD.

The prenatal exposure wreaks neurological havoc, resulting in poor judgment and impulsivity, explained the developmental pediatrician.

But Ellie's meltdowns "were at the extreme end of what we see," Chasnoff said.

Ellie's IQ was above average, but timeouts or loss of privileges are useless against the physiology of the brain, often elevating frustration levels and making the situation worse, Chasnoff said.

"There are so many kids like this," he explained. "The only difference is that the Gertzes are willing to be public."

Less than two weeks later, Lori and Craig — who is also adopted — received more unsettling news: Ellie's birth mother had committed suicide. They felt sad for their daughter, but also cheated that they would never get to fill in all the blanks.

"In time, I'd come to see her as an addict, but her legacy went well beyond the damage she did to Ellie," Lori Gertz wrote on her blog. "It had now affected everyone in our family."

For preschool, Ellie was placed in special education. But supports — such as social workers and full-time aides — didn't seem to work. Neither did an arsenal of anti-psychotic drugs.

Eventually, she was sent to a therapeutic day school, but whether classroom, playground or restaurant, it was Lori Gertz who most often had to carry out a kicking, hitting, spitting child.

It wasn't all bleak. There were Kodak moments — Ellie performing at a dance recital or beaming as she learned to ride a two-wheeler. But these were brief respites. Ellie turned her sister, Talia, into a frequent target, slamming her head against a wall or pummeling her like a punching bag, said medical records.

Since fall 2009, Ellie talked about suicide and was hospitalized psychiatrically four times. Bipolar disorder was now added to her burgeoning medical history, but her case continued to vex mental health professionals.

Victoria Lavigne, a Northfield-based psychologist, had followed Ellie since she was 4.

"The patient's mental illness has shown a deteriorating course," Lavigne wrote in December. "At this point, residential treatment is strongly recommended as the best course of action."

Others concurred, including this ominous warning from a Chicago neuropsychologist. "She is at great risk of causing a tragic, irrevocable event (such as harming someone else or killing herself)."

By now, the Gertzes were spending about \$40,000 a year for her care, but nothing prepared them for the cost of residential placement, which can top \$100,000 annually.

Even if the Gertzes had won the lottery, they still faced a major hurdle. Where could Ellie go? Almost no one was willing to take a 7-year-old.

"I started to feel hopeless ... like every door was closing in my face," Lori Gertz said.

"It's horrible that we live in a society where relinquishing custody is the only alternative for parents who want to keep everyone safe," said Susan Resko, director of the Child and Adolescent Bipolar Foundation.

In May, something happened that forced a resolution: Ellie reported to teachers that her mother was beating her. DCFS determined the allegations did not merit an investigation, said a spokesman. Still, for four days Lori Gertz was a wreck, fearing authorities might take her other children.

She reached out to a therapist in Washington who had suggested a foster family trained in caring for FASD kids. A year earlier, Lori Gertz had rejected the offer; now she was shakily dialing the number.

Officially, the arrangement is called a third-party guardianship, paid for by the Gertzes, giving the new couple full control over their daughter's upbringing — including education and health care — for up to 365 days. At the end of the year, both families will decide if it's in Ellie's best interest for her new guardians to adopt her, Craig Gertz said.

The details have yet to be ironed out. "If she attached to them, we wouldn't pull her away," Lori Gertz said. "From the beginning, our mission was to give her a second chance at being part of a functional family."

Therapists said taking Ellie to Washington could create abandonment issues, so on a sunny June day, Craig Gertz brought Ellie to O'Hare International Airport, where she met her foster parents.

"It was a quick handoff at the gate, with very little emotionality," he said. "I was the only one who could pull that off."

The reports back from Washington are generally positive. Ellie likes being the baby in a much larger clan. The foster family, through the Gertzes, declined to be interviewed.

The Gertzes are adjusting. They went on a camping trip, something that couldn't have happened last summer. And, for the first time in years, 11-year-old Jonah invited friends over.

In the basement, "Talia and Ellie" is still scrawled across the blackboard, a vestige of a game. "She was my playmate," said Talia. "But I also got hit a lot."

After seven years, though, old habits die hard. Sometimes, Lori Gertz said, "it's too quiet." She has yet to take her daughter's photos off her Facebook page. And they all were wounded by one of Ellie's recent letters.

She inquired only about the dogs.

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