

FULL-LENGTH VERSION

Vocation of a Social Worker, a True Calling

As a social worker in adoption, we often feel like the babies we work with are “our” babies. If we do our jobs right, we will never have a direct relationship with these little ones, but the weight of the responsibility of being there to care for them during the most vulnerable moments of their life is still there. This is true during the most textbook of open adoptions where we show up to support and comfort the participants through a placement, but it is even more so when we have an unexpected baby (or babies) who are ill and in need of a little extra love and attention.

While infrequent, from time-to-time we have a case where an expectant mother shows up at the emergency room, actively in labor, saying she cannot keep her baby and wants no connection after the birth. Although a mother cannot normally relinquish her parental rights for 72 hours after her baby is born, we, as a licensed adoption agency, do have the option of having the mother sign temporary custody over to us. While yes, we, as a licensed adoption agency, are taking custody, this incredible responsibility feels like it falls directly to us, the social workers, since we are there to ensure the well-being of the wonderful little blessing of the new baby. The weight of this first hit me when I started at CSSM a decade ago and our Executive Director at the time, Rosemary Miller, said, “Congratulations, it looks like you had a baby!” I sat confused for a minute until it clicked and I realized I was signing all the authorizations for care as if I was the baby’s parent!

When a woman chooses to completely put up walls and disconnect from her child, and we take custody, we become that child’s parent of sorts. When I, as the social worker, am standing in a dark, quiet NICU room, looking down at this precious gift from God desperately fighting to live, with all the tubes and lines coming and going from them, I suddenly feel the swelling of my heart to care, love, and the determination to give this baby the best of everything. The little one needs me, not as a mom, but as the bridge between them and their mom and dad, working hard to find the one adoptive family who has been waiting for them. This is where I cannot stop at 5:00pm on Friday and take the weekend. It is up to me to be the one who is there for them, no matter the time of day. I tell my husband that the knots in my neck have knots.

After gaining experience over my years at CSSM, I now try to know as much as I can at all times. What do the doctors know, what do they think, what do they see as potential outcomes, could there be a disability? Essentially, I ask them to give me a crystal ball for the future of this precious angel. This is because I have families to call. Families who have been waiting for this call. Families who have been dreaming of the perfect addition to their loving home. Families I may have to ask, “are you ready for a baby that may have some challenges or difficulties?” These families will want all the answers I can give them and they, like any parents, will want reassurances that the baby will be fine. Reassurances I sometimes cannot give. It is hard to be completely objective, as I try to be

in this situation, when my heart so desperately wants them to love this precious little angel who so needs it. Part of me knows it is in everyone's best interest that families be aware of any possible situation so the families can make sure they are the perfect fit for this baby. They will be the ones at medical appointments, meeting with teachers for IEP's if a disability exists, and spending sleepless nights worrying about their child's future. Yet, all I can think of is that beautiful child alone in the NICU and a scared birth mother who begged me to help her find a family for her child.

Understandably, some families do not give me an immediate yes. Couples want and need to understand what they are saying yes too. While I wait for them to pray, discuss, discern, and decide, I worry and pray. After this, I get anxious, which makes me worry and pray again. I will say, though, when I walk into a NICU room with a family who has said yes, and all the hospital team lines up to see the first time the adoptive couple lay eyes upon their child, it is like winning the lottery. I see their joy and fear turn into immediate love for the angel in front of them. Seeing this, I finally take a deep breath, breathing unburdened for the first time in days. I cannot wait to call the mom to tell her, her baby found their family. She will cry and will thank me, grateful that her choice to place her child ended up with her child in a wonderful, loving family. This is just before the real work begins. Soon, there will be paperwork, attorneys, home visits, counseling, and court dates. During this time, the real miracle happens. That sweet baby feels the love of their new parents. The connection, heartbeat, and warmth of a living person, their family. They blossom and the positive physical change that occurs is a sight to behold.

So yes, to say that I feel forever connected to this baby is an understatement. I leave a piece of me with each one of them and in turn, take a piece of them with me for always. As the knots ease out of my neck I think, "I truly have the best job in the world."

*Written by: Michelle Perlick, Director of Adoption
Services and Social Worker for Eastern Montana*



A decorative border of green holly leaves and red berries frames the entire page.

ABRIDGED VERSION

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When I walk into a NICU room with a family who has said yes, and all the hospital team lines up to see the first time the adoptive couple lay eyes upon their child, it is like winning the lottery. I see their joy and fear turn into immediate love for the angel in front of them. During this time, the real miracle happens. That sweet baby feels the love of their new parents. The connection, heartbeat, and warmth of a living person, their family. They blossom and the positive physical change that occurs is a sight to behold. To say I feel forever connected to each baby is an understatement. I leave a piece of me with each one of them and in turn, take a piece of them with me for always. This is when I always think, "I truly have the best job in the world." -this is an abridged version of the original piece. The full length piece is available on CSSM's website, at www.cssmt.org.

Written by: Michelle Perlick, Director of Adoption Services and Social Worker for Eastern Montana