

One Drop Many Ripples

By James Taylor

It's truly amazing how my life goes living with FASD and the other disorders I live with each day. Sometimes I am sailing along and at other times it's like the storm of the century has struck without warning.

I was born in 1971 to a very young mother and older father who had little or no income and serious addiction issues. You could say I was the life of the party. I was born what was called a blue baby in a bathroom, somewhere while my mother was living it up. I was rescued by a mystery person. My mother didn't notice I was born until three days after my birth. My father was out working where he could.

The journey of my life has included many years of medical appointments and surgeries at Sick Kids Hospital as well as many other hospitals. When I was born my FASD did not have a name, but thru history there is record of it in one way or another. In my youth I could have been really called the many million dollar kid as I have had more than twenty seven surgeries in the early years of my life. I've had cranial, plastic reconstruction surgery as well as heart surgery to keep me alive.

The disorders I have because of the impact of FASD, is like the colours of the rainbow. Sometimes I can be very green with envy, tickled pink, and sometimes just down right violet. This affects my life and the people around me. My life was not easy growing up and many times I would be on the outside looking in. Many times I blame myself and often believe I am at fault and a burden to the world.

Being parents with issues, it was hard to maintain themselves and care for three children too. To a point that my aunts cared for my younger sister while they tried to care for their two boys. As a child, protective services came into the picture. They noticed the basic needs of life weere not there, such as heat and hydro. The living conditions were somewhat seedy at the best of times. They tried to aid my parents in any way they could, but my parents were full of challenges. Protective services decided it was time to take my brother and I away to a place called York cottage. My birth parents had the right still to see us there. I didn't get upset when they took us away as it didn't seem to phase me. I wasn't attached to my family like other kids might be.

As the surgeries and medical appointments continued a lady noticed me at Sick Kids and we became distant friends together. As the connection grew so did her curiosity about what happened to me. She started promising gifts and treats to get me to sit still and play and to engage with her. As my trust with her grew, so did the bond between us. As the months and seasons changed I really looked forward to the next time this lady came by my room or the play area at Sick Kids. I had no idea about stranger danger and she seemed to be reaching out with many forms of kindness and offerings of treats. As seasons came and went I saw more of her than I saw of my parents. She gave me treats, always smiled

and I thought she cared about me. She was a new comer to Canada. She had this welcoming warmth and a very thick, weird voice as I found out that was Dutch. It's truly weird to wonder what kind of life I would have if the lady with kindness and care didn't take a liking to me. According to my sisters I was very homely and huddled in corners. I was in bad shape from infected ears and my face was deformed appearing odd shaped, hollow and I had a bone sticking out of my forehead. I also soiled myself a lot but I must have smelled like roses to her as she seemed to see beyond the smell, and the looks as I made an impact.

The doctor at Sick Kids hospital arranged for me to live with this lady on weekends in Toronto. She seemed to have done some kind of homework to be able to put up with this little Roo. I was very hyper and she had a caring heart. She was already involved in Children Services. To my delight she manages to win me over with her kindness and goodies

I had a hearing coming up with children services about becoming a crown ward. As I approached the place there was strange people there with my brother. There was that lady in the back of room and I must have just smiled or felt comfortable with her. I was confused in the court room as there was a man in a black bathrobe. I guess I started and was told not to laugh at him. As the hearing went on a judge asked if I would like to live with my mom and dad, I said yes. As I said yes I pointed to this lady in the back of the room as I ran to her giving her a big hug. The Van Vughts officially became my new parents.

Within a few days I was delivered to her home in Toronto and introduced to the other foster children in her care. She also had her own children. As my surgeries and medical appointments were an ongoing event for me, the new family was there for me in one way or another. As we moved to a place in Glen Alda, Ontario she still provided care like any family does. I was a problem child in many ways. I would free the animals, flood the barn and so forth but she never threw me back in the system. From the long drives to Toronto and sleepless nights, they were there through the thick and thin of my childhood.

As I became a teenager the new family grew on me. My foster dad had me helping him with his Butcher business and he taught me the ins and outs of the shop too. Having issues at going to school I had my learning mostly done at their home or elsewhere from Sick Kids to Five Counties.

I learned a lot from Joanne and Marty. From household chores and learning the different cuts of meat and making amazing things. My dad would take me to the Legion to help him out or take a nap so mother could rest. There were times that my dad would come home and have a bite only to turn around to travel to Toronto to make sure we could make our appointments. I am to this day wondering how they coped with little services and supports we received in a small hamlet but they did. To this today, their teachings are still within me.

On many times the Children Aid Worker who came to check on us got to be our guests for lunch. In the winter the roads would not be driveable and they would end up sleeping over before heading back when it was clear to do so. I didn't realize they were workers, I thought they were friends. Back then they didn't wear badges.

There were times my foster sister and brother told me of ways I would challenge the foster parents like freeing the chickens and letting the horses out. But they were never mad or upset with the times I challenged their limits in one way or another. They said I was a lost boy when I came in and had a wild look in my eyes. Many times the family had to keep a watch on me as I had many sleepless nights and cried sometimes in pain or to be held. Sometimes I couldn't sleep from the pain or my nightmares. The sandman must have passed by my stop or I chased him away.

I had a great childhood with the Van Vughts and the little ways they went beyond the life of a parent, guardian or adult. As in every family there were the bitter and sweet times from not getting along to moments they would embrace you. My dad had many talents from witching wells for people in the community to being a butcher. But mostly, he was a very protective father figure that would go to the ends of the earth for all the people around him as so did my mother.

It was amazing how we all had little jobs. My bigger sisters and brothers would have to watch over the little ones while I always watched them. I needed hands on a lot and a watchful eye near me as I was very hyper at times or sometimes needed comfort. I got very easily bored, would get into things I wasn't supposed to and slept very little. They sure protected me at times when other kids would call me a monster, freak or unicorn boy. My foster sister enjoyed defending me by "letting off a little steam" on them and after, for some odd reason, they would come over to say sorry.

I enjoyed the hands on experience helping my dad with the Butcher Family Business. It was awesome. As a young boy I enjoyed getting messy as I learned the different cuts of meat and the understanding of the workings around the shop. As we ran a home based business, the home would become a shop and everyone had a job to do.

When we would go to see the city doctors they got to know how kind the family was as my family brought some wild game or other treats for them. Sometimes you would see them coming out like kids in a candy store hovering around the box of goodies we brought. Today, if I give someone a treat like we did when I was a kid; often the other person doesn't understand my generosity and takes my gesture the wrong way.

There were times it seemed my dad never got any sleep as he would take me to the Legion where he bartended at night. If I got tired there was always a place where I could sleep. I pretended I was camping without the bugs and the closed in tent and do things like clean the tables and stuff. I knew most times being at the Legion would lead to a trip to Toronto the next day.

My mom and dad were amazing as every parent is to their children. They seemed to know how to deal with my issues and stress. It may seem odd, but I had time out in the smokehouse. I was safe in there and I was able to vent my frustrations. One day Children's Aid Society split us apart. It didn't matter how happy we were, CAS decided that my foster mom Joanne was too old to be a foster parent and decided it would be best to take the foster kids away. To this day I have nightmares about this event with police and social workers as I saw my home disappearing from the back window of a car.

When I arrived in a Children Aid Society Receiving home in Peterborough I was confused and very upset. They rushed me to the Nichols Building of Civic Hospital because of my temper and aggression. I was a lost teenager filled with confusion and rage. I lost my home and once again was uprooted from my life with a caring family to being sent to this place and that place.

As the shuffling from place to place happened, my foster family came to visit many times and never gave up. My family visits were like a little oasis from the madness. People in the home kept telling me that they were not my parents and that hit me hard inside. As the months went on I was displaced to a new foster home almost weekly. I fought every time I could to have my mom and dad back. I couldn't follow all of the rules, understand the level systems or trust anyone.

Sometimes they would do things that were unspeakable to us, but no one believed us as it was just swept under the rug. One time I got to see my mom at our home. I was about to tell her, but a person came in and took me back to that place. I would sometimes act out from these events and got further in trouble by dropping a level or losing privileges. As a person with FASD, the consequences had little or no effect.

I started to spend some time with a special worker who seemed to connect with me like a brother – I trusted him. We would go on road trips and explored places. Sometimes I got the right to spend time in my childhood home with my worker, have a hearty meal and share the love I grew up with there. My worker loved the visits too as he had grown up in the same Dutch culture as me.

As I got older more trouble came to light as I started to live on my own although still supervised by the Children's Aid Society. At one point I went to a party and said the wrong thing to a young lady and got a not so kind visit from the local police. I had mimicked what the other guys were saying to a teenager, but I was 20 and she was considered a minor. In my mind, we were the same age, but in reality I was an adult. I was charged with sexual invitation. Today, that charge has been erased as I received a full pardon. This was before the Harper government changed the rules so people with that kind of offence who were innocent and misunderstood could no longer get pardoned.

I went to jail for a few months. I once again had company from the CAS and the kindred spirited visits from my family. It was safe in one way from the predators while sitting in jail, but I couldn't let go of the past. I heard voices in my mind, laughing at me. I kept trying to figure out what happened to me but I couldn't put the pieces together. I didn't know why I was in jail. I did my time which seemed to add more emotional baggage inside. Yes! I still had to be supported from CAS and the family stayed along for the ride too.

The level of support I received changed after I was released from jail. It was a routine to see the probation officer. I did follow the rules except when she had to change our meeting times. I was supported through a special program that offered 24 hour support. My life is not a 9-5 work week day. I needed support 24 hours a day. I could call the help line and a worker would check on me. Lots of times, I couldn't say what was wrong or what I needed.

My old neighborhood didn't want that kind of trouble, so I was swiftly moved to a rundown apartment in a seedy area of town. I had little or no social skills or street smarts. My troubles seemed to follow me and I continued to have outbursts and more trouble with the law. Thanks to my probation officer, she managed to convince the Children's Aid to move me once again. They moved me from an animal house neighborhood to a basement apartment near the Civic hospital. My sisters came to fix it up with curtains and the comforts of home. But as I got older and the services shuffled around to where I was not getting the CAS care, I was moved to a more affordable place. So back to another shady area of town in a ground floor apartment I go, but a very roomy one too.

Again as I felt kicked to the curb as CAS ended their support - I was a child in an adult's body with very little support and understanding. I could not handle doing things outside my place from getting food or banking alone and going to appointments. Once again I had the family helping me with daily tasks, the same things that others would take for granted. As the times my family couldn't be there, I would have to eat whatever I could get at the local corner store and washed my clothes in the sink.

Some of my old workers from CAS would come by once in a while to help me. I had little support from Adult Protective Services even. Sometimes I felt so alone and afraid I would try to end my life as the nightmares and voices inside my head wouldn't stop. Oddly, I would be intruded by a call or a knock on the door or something would stop me.

I liked the place I lived in as it had lots of space and was in many ways like home as there was space for family to stay over and a big kitchen. One day my place got broken into and the burglars basically rummaged thru as they took they took things of value. My support person told me to move from the area as I was too scared to live there. The moving became an ongoing thing as I would forget to pay the rent or didn't get along with neighbors. I didn't like their loud music, constant interruptions, asking me for things etc.

I finally got the support from the Canadian Mental Health Services in Peterborough and that worker should be given a purple heart or something. When I first met him I thought the APS was trying to get me a friend or something. There was this man that looked like someone who was from another time and place as he had shaggy hair and a full long beard on him. They told me he was my new support and I kind of laughed at him. I am amazed how he seemed to maneuver the mind field in my tangled life from the couple years with little support. It was like a medevac coming into a battlefield that started with simple trip to get groceries to learning who I was and how I ticked.

My foster family was happy there was help for me as they continued to come in once in a while to bring treats and things. My family they made sure the worker knew things about me and by chance we bonded over culture backgrounds.

It's truly amazing how there are amazing foster families out there and some will go to the ends of the earth for a child. There are also foster families that are cold hearted and hateful to the point where you wish you were dead. I had both types of experiences from the caring to the cold hearted ones.

Things that happened during the teen years were unspeakable, from the mental and emotional abuse, to times you wish you were not alive anymore. The adults in the group home had split personalities. What I mean is that they were sweet and kind to the CAS workers and anyone coming to visit us. In those times, you ate what you got as they would have the table and meals set up and we would be around to roam the home and be clean. When the people left we would go back to being hungry, dirty and sometimes feared what was next. If my foster dad knew of this horror, I am sure it wouldn't be a pretty sight as he would have harmed them for their actions against me.

I was in danger but my mind could not recall a lot of the pieces, I was like a deer in the headlights. At times, I believed people were out to get me, but I truly could not remember what, where or how it happened. I have at times been told by my support of the events, but I don't recall anything about them. It was better not to rehash what had happened so I was taught how to reroute to look for a better tomorrow. This helped me learn how to adjust.

It was in my early teens that some amazing things came into place. I even got an ex metro cop who retired from the force that lived near me and we became very good friends.

Having a new CMHA worker, I was able to clear up many things and learned to trust him. My hippie like worker had to find the right formula to create a supportive pathway through trial and error, almost twenty years later, we are still maintaining and repairing.

As CMHA was there for me, it seemed like my family fell from grace. Both my foster parents died within a year of each other. It was an awful and emotional time to lose them but in my heart they are still motivating and their life skills training are still within me. I never closed my chapter with the family as their care and kindness is still with me. They gave the world to us and mended our many broken hearts. All of both the natural and foster children are still in contact in one way or another.

Many times as a child I was sick or was in Sick kids for surgery or a checkup or some other reason. I was mostly homeschooled and once in a while I would go to the nearby school to see a special ed teacher. This teacher got to know me and I bet you my foster parents were keeping them informed on things too. One time she knew I was going to sick kids and gave me a hand stitched owl that had the letter J on the back. I would carry it everywhere until one day I lost my little buddy. When I went to school to get a book or something, I would seek out the other family members to say hi and they would lead me back to the library. But when that stupid loud bell went off I would scream or would try to destroy it. The teacher and my parents figured out quickly to cover my ears or make sure I was not near the noisy red round menaces.

Being that Sick Kids was like a third home as I would be there many times and sometimes for months at a time, my family stayed with me. At times, they would sleep in chairs but seemed to know when I was stirring as they would not let me get far as we all know that parents have this amazing built in radar system in them. My parents seemed to deal with issues as they came up from my siblings fighting to handling the CAS or the school. Sometimes I would get very angry or upset and my parent's method for

calming me down was to put me in the smoke house. It may sound cruel, but it worked. Of course there was no meat in there or fire as they used it as a time out space. I was able to blow off the rage inside.

One of my parents would be on the outside waiting near the unlocked steel door monitoring me to make sure I was safe and to know when I calmed down. Yes, this process involved many steps as I would have to really be sorry and be willing to mend the fence with the person I yelled at. Mom or Dad would have to scrub the soot off of me from being in the smoke house. It was a great way to vent without harming others. I would feel a release of anger afterward and sometimes smelled very tasty too.

The family has taught me many valuable things in the course of my childhood. We had a strong bond that has carried to all of the family whether foster children or biological children. We are still connected in one way or the other today. My foster family helped me in so many ways from getting my hearing back to ensuring I was taught many life lessons. They mended me and I believe I would not be whom I am today without them. All this was done, without any knowledge of FASD. It was like they were given a learner's permit and expected to know how to drive even though I was mostly in the fast lane.

It's truly weird how the Dutch culture has been embedded in my life. Many of my support workers have some sort of Dutch history or appreciation of the culture too. I can recall many times my worker and mom would share Dutch stories and teachings along the way. My CMHA worker has been able to support me through a lot, which has included; housing issues, being put in jail, suicide attempts, paranoia, undesirable friendships, and general day to day tasks. We have learned along the way together how to deal with FASD, its triggers, strengths and weaknesses without any kind of formal manual or "battle plans".

I have an alphabet soup of mental health disorders and issues that will always impact my wellbeing. I had many med changes to try and figure out which combination would best help stabilize me. This wasn't easy, each med had its own side effects – some would calm me down, others would make me violent. The foster family helped me through these times without any degree or support. They welcomed each person like their own. The challenges each one of us had was no big deal to them. With needing to use the external brain theory, the word violent should be violence, but I couldn't truly express how I was feeling. Over the course of many years I have been trying to find my past and have moved forward through a lot of dead ends and conflicting information about my family and myself.

In the fall of 2006, I found my real sister and also found out that I was an uncle. We shared many stories together. We even were able to have some visits and I got to go to her wedding as her B.O.B. "Brother of the Bride" which took a toll on me. But in the last few years we have had a limited connection, but we are at a comfort level. I am still seeking out other family connections, but with the red tape and mish mash of files, it is not very easy.

One day I hope to meet Sarah McLachlan as her music is a comfort to me. One time a friend Emily took me to the Lilith Fair Concert to watch Mary .J. Blige and she became enemy number one that day. Mary J. Blige was very loud and not like the others at the concert. I couldn't process her music, style or words. All of the other acts were very soothing and tranquil.

I have used my life experiences living with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder to teach others and let others peer into what FASD is thru videos, talks and Sarah McLachlan's music. I indeed said Sarah McLachlan as she and her management has inspired my movement thru songs embedded with the stories and pictures as I felt that her music has touched on my feelings. As I love to go to places and engage others on this subject that's most parts the underdog in mental health. We have been making movement lately with FASD, but it's been hard to move forward as many of my support people have died and are lost souls to me. I had the greatest mentors who never gave up on me no matter if my day was rainbows, thunderstorms or both.

In my course of living I have made many attempts on ending my life, which foiled in one way or another. Sometimes feel I was a burden. When I lost my parents it was like someone turned off a lighthouse as they always were about to mend fences, comfort me and help me move forward. When I lost my friend mentor or support person to cancer I felt shipwrecked and wanted to drown. So many times I feel like I should visit them as times I hated life and being on the system, but my attempts to go there seem to not work. My CMHA worker is the one who has kept me going with a few crashes here or there. As with the police who know me and other services that help mend the waters when I need a helping voice to guide me.

2014 was like no other year for me as I reached out beyond all the fears and emotions and connected with my birth mom and other members of the family. We shared many laughs and sorrows but I followed my heart and after four decades we have connected. It's been a strange feeling to have connection with my birth mom and finding out my father's lifestyle was not the greatest. As she fell thru the cracks and almost gave up ever finding her children. But with courage under fire, CMHA and others, I did that and we are mending the fence once again.

I have said to many around me that one day if I get into some kind of riches I would open up places honouring both Marty and Joanne. As they are everything to me and it's very hard to live through life without their love. Many times I have informal contact with other brothers and sisters and we all have their teaching and love. One time as a child I lost a brother whom never listened, to the many warnings, and he ended up losing his life. As some of the other family was skating in the safe area and he decided to fool around close to the rapids. Not having cell phones and today's gadgets around he fell thru and by the time one of us got to the house and back he was dead. Many still go where that boy is and Visit his grave and wish he would have listened. My parents bounced back and used that lesson to heart for years afterward and they never closed their doors to us. My birth mom has told me how she was sad and wishes her life was more stable at the time as she too had alcoholic and abusive parents. She now has many medical and mental health issues, but her two sisters have been there helping her along the way.

Finding out that my birth dad had died in Kingston has put my research on another path to find more about the family. I know from the foster family he was there for visits in Toronto with my brother Dean and my birth mom would never show up. One day I will go and pay respects to Robert, my father, in one way or another as I have done connecting in ways I have with Marie and that family.

The neurological disorder I have is not a stop sign on life, but is a construction zone with detouring, hazards', speed bumps and traffic jams. Having the ability to share my life on this level is my hope is that others will understand more. As every person has paths in life, I am lucky to share mine with you. There is no vacation with disorders like this. As you can see throughout this story, I use language in a different way than most people.

This has been a very emotional time to put together my life story and hope you can understand how hard it was to focus on this project. I thank FASD Peterborough, CMHA, CAS, Peterborough Police and others for their understanding and kindness in my life.