

GOOD NEWS STORY

This edition of FCQ's Good News story is one that is very close to my heart. It is about loss and heartache, but it is also about hope and resilience - and the real life story of how it truly does take a village to raise children.

In 2009 I was blessed to have foster carers, Kerrie and Michelle enter in my professional life. Kerrie put her hand up to be a FAST Rep and it was soon clear to me that her passion for children in care matched her fiery red hair - something not to be messed with! Kerrie along with her daughter, Michelle were committed to a cause, raising children in care to be the best that they can be surrounded by community. Before long Kerrie and Michelle were primary carers for six children between them, all with differing complex needs. Kerrie and Michelle approached all the demands and challenges that came with fostering in their stride, they were committed to positive working relationships with the entire care team, including Child Safety, their Fostering and Kinship Care agency and birth families. Life was certainly a challenge at times, but it was good and Kerrie and Michelle would not have had it any other way.



Kerrie, right to the end was so completely focused on children.

In December 2014 Kerrie and Michelle were dealt a devastating blow when Kerrie was diagnosed with terminal cancer and was only given 6 months to live. Kerrie was not going to be told when her time was up though, and through the next 18 months Kerrie lived her life surrounded by her community, including her family, Child Safety, her agency, friends and of course the children that we have no doubt, gave her the strength to triple the time she had left with us. I recall visiting Kerrie in the hospice prior to her passing away - her smile still lighting up the room and her thoughts still entirely focused on the children. She said to me that she had no doubt the children would be okay and that she had told each of them that whilst she may not be there to give them a physical hug, she would be there in spirit and all they needed to do to feel close to her was to give Michelle a hug.

Kerrie passed away on 23rd May 2016. I was privileged to be asked to speak at Kerrie's funeral and seeing the faces of agency staff, CSOs and even birth parents whereby Kerrie and Michelle had cared for their children at some point, made me smile from within. Kerrie would have been so humbled and honoured to see how much the community cared for her.

Soon after the funeral, FCQ arranged through our charity Angel Identity for cushions to be made out of Kerrie's clothing for children who were now in Michelle's sole care.

Following my last conversation with Kerrie, we wanted the children to have something physical to hug that reminded them of Kerrie. These cushions are treasured belongings of each of the children to this day, some of them sleeping with them and some of them simply going to them in times of sadness or need.



Memory pillows made from Kerrie's clothing for the children in her care.

During Kerrie's battle and following her passing, Michelle spoke of the absolute support and unwavering help and assistance she received from Child Safety and her Fostering and Kinship Care agency. This took the form of emotional support and practical assistance. Michelle spoke about the CSO and Foster and Kinship Care Agency Support Worker for the family providing incredible support. They knew the family well and responded to the needs of the children and family as a whole. Michelle highlighted that communication was the key during this time, everyone was on the same page and what needed to be done was just done and that meant the focus on the children and family unit remained.

Michelle spoke about the family always having had trusting and supportive relationships with the whole care team, therefore when faced with this tragedy the care team just knew what to do. There had been previous CSO and Fostering and Kinship care worker changes, however transitions to new CSOs and support workers were always seamless because they spoke to each other meaning that when they came to meet the family, the new workers had a very good understanding of the family already and most importantly the carer family and children did not have to re-live their whole life story again.

Michelle was also strongly supported by her family, her brother who was originally a household member, went through the process of becoming a respite kinship carer so that he could provide respite for the children in home during times when Kerrie was going through her treatment and Michelle was by her side. The family spoke further about how they would support Michelle in the care of the children with the knowledge that Kerrie was going to pass away and as a result of this, Michelle's sister, Sam, also started her paperwork to become a kinship carer for the children. This family was operating in a way that we all hope for, that is they were wrapping their arms around Michelle and the children collectively - at no point were the children seen as anything but part of the family.

I would love to say that this is where heartache and loss for this family stopped, but unfortunately this was not to be. Just eight months after Kerrie passed away, Michelle was diagnosed with Breast Cancer – the family were ready to face yet another enormous challenge and Michelle went from the supporter to the one that needed supporting and in Michelle's words 'it was really hard to be the person that needed to lean on others, I was used to being the one leant on'. The care team, inclusive of extended family went into action mode, Sam's assessment was fast tracked in time for Michelle's surgery, communication was respectful and open and the family were given the support they needed during this time and subsequent chemotherapy treatment to deal with the challenges that came their way. Michelle speaks about the children continuing to have their 'circle of security' around them and that she has never raised any of the children on her own as she has done it with the support of the care team.



Michelle & Sam always full of laughter

During the next few months, Michelle went through fortnightly chemotherapy – the side effects so bad that Michelle would need to spend the night of her chemo in hospital before being able to return home. Sam spoke to me about how everyone around Michelle just accepted that Sam was now the person they needed to communicate through. Sam spoke of times where Michelle was on the chair in hospital having treatment and she would take Michelle's calls from the school, Child Safety and the fostering and kinship care agency and they were all fantastic in just knowing that they could speak to Sam and she would deal with it herself or if needed, communicate to Michelle and get back to them.

Sam spoke of the importance of the practical assistance that was required, for things as simple as the children's hair. Sam told me that during Michelle's worse recovery days, their brother would drop the children at school where Sam would meet them to do all their hair nicely. This was important to the family as they did not want the children standing out or feeling different to what they usually did, they wanted to keep normality in their life as much as possible, so these small things really counted.

All forms of support were put in place to assist the family and even the birth parents of children they had placed in their care offered assistance with one birth mother taking on all of the transport to and from contact in recognition of how Michelle was feeling during her treatment and not wanting to put any additional pressure on her. This birth parent and others would text Michelle to ask how she was and demonstrated genuine care and concern for Michelle.

As you can imagine the impact on the children has been very real, first they watched their 'nanny' go through treatment and then pass away and then with this still very raw for them, they were now seeing Michelle go through what they could only see as the same process. They both got sick, they both had surgery and they both lost their hair, so for the children to believe that there was to be a different outcome for Michelle was one difficult to understand or accept.

The amazing news is that there will be a different outcome for Michelle, the cancer has been removed and her prognosis is fantastic, but it has taken a great deal of talking and reassurance for the children to accept this. This has meant some honest conversations with the elder children where they are comforted in knowing there will always be and has been plans put in place in the case that Michelle is not ok. For these children their lived experience of a care team that truly wraps themselves around them, a care team that is the very definition of a village raising a child, has been the very thing that has made this journey one that is manageable.

Now for those of you reading this who know the carer family I am writing about, you will know with all your heart that when asked about the top things that have gotten them through, humour is high up on the list. Michelle has maintained an amazing strength and humour right throughout these incredibly difficult times – there has not been a time that I have met up with Michelle during this time where she has not brought me to laughter; this is her tool in life and this is what she brings into the children's lives, so even in the darkest of times, you will hear this family laugh and that noise is beautiful.

Other top priorities that have helped this family through from both Michelle and Sam's perspective when asked were the following:-

1. Communication;
2. Their Community network;
3. Michelle's ability to accept help from her community network;
4. Time out – self-care, Sam and Michelle spoke of the need for their time together, whether this is spent shopping, having coffee or just being in each other's company;
5. And they told me not to forget their trusted essential oils, each of the children have special mixes that have helped them deal with daily challenges and both Sam and Michelle have an identical pack because the children are always with one of them.

I said at the beginning that this story was very close to my heart and I thought it would be a difficult one to write over many days. I can tell you that the words have just flown and that is because what I actually found is this was not difficult to write at all, it was an absolute privilege to write – the family have told their story and I have simply captured it. It might be a story of loss, but it is also a story of courage and resilience, it may be a story of heartache, but it is also a story of love and compassion and most of all this is a story of how children who are cared for by community in the truest sense can face adversity in the most heartbreaking of ways and they will be OK.

I would like to say a huge thank you to the Child Protection community who have wrapped themselves around this family and made this journey that little bit easier.

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