



The Stories to Tell

Sitting in the hard wooden chair and looking around me, I was trying very unsuccessfully to fight back tears that were quickly and prolifically welling up in my eyes. If I could blink them back, I'd be fine, but once they spilled over the edge of my eyelids and cascaded down my face, I knew it would be a lost cause.

The room was bleak, marked by fluorescent overhead lighting, cinderblock walls and industrial, multicolored carpet – the kind that hides stains well, but you wouldn't dare lie down on it, because it was hard and rough, utterly uninviting. I felt alone and unsure of what to do.

Who could I call? Who could I talk to? The answer to both, was no one.

I was 18 years old, sitting alone in my dorm room at Westmont College, in Santa Barbara, California, after my parents had driven away, leaving me for my first year of college. Suddenly in that moment, it sunk in: I was alone. I was on my own. I didn't know a soul at that school. I didn't have a friend I could turn to, I didn't even have a car to drive myself anywhere. A drive to get to know my new town, a meaningless errand to run or a purpose for going somewhere - anywhere - would have been welcomed at that moment.

I looked at the dingy beige wall-mounted phone in the corner of the room, with its curled cord connecting the cradle to the handle, but I couldn't think of anyone to call. My parents were gone, my friends were all scattered to different schools in varying cities, and this was before cell phones were ubiquitous, allowing you to get ahold of anyone, anywhere, anytime. No one would be available midday.

I was the only one in the room so far, and I wouldn't see my roommate, a stranger with whom I'd been assigned to live, until that evening. Homesick only 12 minutes into being on my own, not knowing who "my people" were going to be, who

I was going to turn to in times of struggle, who I was going to grow close to, with whom I'd overcome obstacles or celebrate successes, I felt isolated, trapped and so very alone in the world.

Fast forward to today, and I obviously survived quite nicely. My situation wasn't that rough once the initial fear wore off. The truth was, I was at a private college in one of the most beautiful cities in the U.S., for which my way was paid, providing me with an incredible education and experience. I had food, shelter and spending money. I was housed with 23 other students who were in the same boat, and that strange roommate turned out to be one of my dearest friends, with whom I still get together today. I spent my days in the classroom and my weekends at the beach. I flew home during school vacations and holidays, and my family who lived in northern California came to Santa Barbara to visit me while I was there. I was never really alone; I always had a safety net.

That feeling of loneliness that I experienced that first day was very real though, and I can almost physically feel it engulf me as I think about it, now. That same, pit-of-the-stomach feeling of loneliness and fear swept over me when I first heard about what local foster children face when they "age out" of the foster care system at age 18 and are suddenly left alone to navigate their way in life.

While my loneliness, fear and trepidation lasted only a short while, their's has no end in sight. Having to find their way in the world on their own, these 18 year olds – many of whom are only part way through their junior or senior year in high school – face the challenge of finding a place to live, providing food and learning all of the ropes of being an adult with no one to turn to, no one to bail them out and no safe harbor in which to rest. It is heart wrenching to think about what this group is facing, and how lonely, fearful and isolated they must feel.

When it comes to deciding which stories to fill the pages of each issue of *Spokane Coeur d'Alene Living* with, there is never a shortage of interesting options for me to consider. There are fun stories, educational stories and opinion-based stories that all have compelling reasons to be on these pages. The stories that mean the most to me though, are the stories that open my eyes, both as a writer and a reader. These are the ones that cause me to pause and to wonder how I can help. What small step can I take – can we take – to help those around us experience the blessings we have? When I stumble across stories with messages that can profoundly impact us as readers, and through which we can be moved to change the lives of others, I believe those are the stories to tell.

On page 51 is the story of Safety Net, the local non-profit that was founded to help this vulnerable group of "aged-outs" know that they are not alone, that someone is there to help them. I hope you will read this story and ask yourself what you would do if it was you who was out there alone? How can you help this group?

May you enjoy this story, and may it help us all to remember that together, we don't have to be alone. ■

Blythe

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