

NO HIGH HEEL SHOES
THE STORY OF MY KINSHIP HOME

By
Sharon Durken

We hear a lot these days about grandparents raising grandchildren. But it isn't as often we hear what the children have to say about the experience of growing up in a relative caregiver's home. So I am going to start by telling you my story, I call it "No High Heel Shoes".

I came to live in my kinship home when I was a little girl. My mother had moved away when I was 2 and when I was 5 my father died. My Aunt Helen and Uncle Henry, my dad's bachelor brother and maiden sister lived on the family farm near Glencoe, where all 9 of the Durken brothers and sisters had been raised. My dad and I moved out there after my mother left. When he died, they became my guardians.

Living in a kinship home meant that I was safe. That is what I remember most about living with Aunt Helen and Uncle Henry. By the time I was 5, I'd lost both my parents. I could on some level accept mother's leaving, but I couldn't understand why she never visited and I got only a few letters early on and one Christmas she sent me yellow angora mittens. Growing up I knew from her parents, my grandma and grandpa who visited from California that she had remarried and had 6 children and was living in the cities. Not so far away, yet too distant to touch. The hardest part was accepting that my dad had died and was gone forever.

My biggest fear was being left alone. I'd cry when Aunt Helen went to the monthly St. Ann's Society meeting. I'd fret that she'd die in a car crash or never come back. That fear of abandonment was a big obstacle my kinship family and I had to deal

with. It haunts me today, but now I understand it. As a child I didn't, but was blessed by having an auntie who didn't scold me when my insecurities surfaced. This was during the 50's when skirts were long and full. I insisted on holding on to Aunt Helen's skirt anytime we went out in public whether it was shopping or walking down the aisle in church. She asked if I could hold her hand, especially in church. I said, "No, you might pull it away." I knew she might have to let go of my hand to open a door or shake hands, but she'd never be without her skirt in public, so hanging on to that was safe. Finally she said, "Ok, when you don't need to hang on to my skirt you can let go, I'll still be here." Eventually I did; and she was. She used the same approach about sleeping in my own space. "When you are ready for your own room, let me know and we'll go pick out wallpaper." I was in my teens when I felt ok about having my own room. The wallpaper was blue and white and I got to pick it myself. There were no psychologists to tell Aunt Helen how to raise a child who had been through early childhood trauma. She used common sense, Aunt Rose, her school teacher sister, and lots of prayers to get us through.

As a kinship caregiver, she and others who are raising children are the lifeline for children like me who loose their parental connection for various reasons. Aunt Helen was close to 50 when I came to live on the farm. She and Uncle Henry didn't go bowling or swimming like some of my friend's parents. Aunt Helen had had polio as a girl and had difficulty walking. Therefore, she couldn't wear high heel shoes, which I thought was a great hardship, because I didn't have any high heels to wear for dress-up. That was the one thing I thought was wrong with my kinship home. The rest was great and I knew it. I only hope I told them that when they were alive.

Another of the gifts they gave me that I didn't appreciate until I was an adult was the fact they never spoke ill of my mother. When my own children were young I met my mother and step-siblings. Aunt Helen said, "It's good you've connected with them. We're old and when we're gone you will need family to support you."

Because of the love and nurturing I received in my kinship home I was able to accomplish the things I have. Without Aunt Helen and Uncle Henry I might have been raised with strangers without the deep sense of belonging to the Durken Family and community that I feel and have instilled in my own children. That sense of belonging to a family, tribe, and community is so important. But without the relative caregivers who open their hearts and homes to children, we'd be alone and lost among strangers. I salute our kinship parents.

Aunt Helen and Uncle Henry were the only relatives raising a child that we knew of in Glencoe those days. Even today when there are supports for grand kin many tell us they feel alone. There is support, guidance, and someone to listen and help with child rearing efforts. I am blessed to represent such an organization as the Executive Director of Minnesota Kinship Caregivers Association (MKCA).