

The Family Ties that Bind: Sisters' Relationship Sustains Them through Foster Care, Adoption and Kinship Care

In our exploration of the lived experiences of youth from foster care, Michigan's Children's spotlights the life stories of three sisters who experienced the child welfare system, foster care and informal kinship care – and the power of sustaining sibling love.

Over Christmas last year, the Cox family sisters gathered in anticipation and holiday cheer at eldest sister Brittany's home in rural Tuscola County for a sisters Christmas. They brought dishes to pass, played games, and had easy, catch-up conversations aimed at renewing bonds and strengthening family ties.

But the special day was just the beginning of a new, family ritual for the women, now leading busy and purpose-filled adult lives as a mother and returning college student, successful human relations professional and child advocate, and first-time college student soon to embark on a new career. Brittany, 29, Angelica, 26, and Mickayla, 23, had spent some of their developing years apart, removed from their parents' care, and in and out of foster care. Separated by family trauma, they were eventually adopted by an uncle, and one by one moved on to establish their own lives, often with great hardships, but always with a strong watchful bond over each other and particularly youngest sister Mickayla. "We've always supported each other when we've struggled. Definitely, it's always been us," said Brittany, who became Mickayla's caregiver in later years.



Siblings Brittany, Mickayla, Angelica Cox (left to right) Christmas 2020.

Nearly 13,000 children experience foster care in Michigan, with most removed from their family homes for abuse or neglect. Lack of stability and access to resources and support result in poor outcomes for many. Half of youth leaving foster care are homeless or incarcerated. Fewer than half will graduate from college; only 3 percent will earn a college degree, according to the National Foster Youth Institute. But advocates say that maintaining and strengthening sibling relationships are key components to child well-being, serving as a protective factor and offering support in a challenging system.

The Cox sisters agreed to share their story to shed light on how the system works, and can be improved to help other youths experiencing the welfare system. Their story spotlights the complexities and struggles young people experience in the system – feelings of loneliness, abandonment and continuing trauma, and the need for timely interventions – along with places where professional welfare workers made a positive difference and other times where resources fell short. In their case, survival and success were rooted in the support and security that came from staying connected, even in the most imperfect conditions.

Brittany, Angelica, and Mickayla are a second-generation foster care family. According to Angelica, their mother, Michelle, spent time in the system, leaving emotional scars and few resources to aid her when she was raising kids. As children, their ordeal began with an event that turned their lives upside down. The sisters went into foster care in the late 2000s from the home they shared with their mother and her husband, the father of the two youngest girls.

Brittany was just a toddler when her parents split up. She stayed with her dad, a factory worker from Caro, until she was 9 years old and her mother regained custody of her. By then, Michelle had had two other daughters, Angelica and Mickayla, with her new partner and husband, who adopted Brittany. The family lived together until Brittany, around 15-16 years old, confided in a teacher that she was being abused by her adoptive father, a man she described as having a short fuse. The Department of Social Services investigated and for a short time mother and daughters stayed in a homeless shelter. But when authorities learned their mother was returning to her husband, welfare workers looked for another option for the girls. "We never really had good role models growing up. We had a rough growing up," Brittany recalled. "We were not ever able to go back to her."

Their uncle, married with children of his own, lived nearby and agreed to care for the children as wards of the state; he later adopted all three girls when the oldest were teens. Although he was Angelica and Mickayla's biological uncle, they barely knew him. Though he was well-meaning, life wasn't smooth. Soon after they were placed, the girls were uprooted again after their uncle's wife moved out and he took time to sort out his personal life. Angelica and Mickayla were temporarily placed in another foster home for about a month with people they didn't know. The girls were distraught and slept in the same bed to comfort one another. Angelica said her uncle wasn't perfect, but he "really wanted a mom" for the sisters and later formed a relationship with a woman who moved into their home with her own three children. Youngest sister Mickayla recalls a tense home life when food was scarce at times; she had trouble sleeping, and cried all the time. She missed her mother, and viewed their supervised visits as too brief. Counseling was prescribed, but Mickayla refused. Looking back, she said she didn't feel prepared to reveal her feelings back then.

After 2.5 years of living in her uncle's home, Brittany graduated from high school and was accepted at Western Community College as a Seita Scholar, a program offering support and services for youths from foster care. She said she wasn't ready to be on her own, and the emotional turmoil led to her dropping out. She and her boyfriend had a child together, and she went to work in a small factory back in Tuscola County. While she earned little, her ambition helped her move up the ranks as she took care of her son as a single mother. In 2013, Angelica left home to attend Michigan State University, and after years of working long hours, managing a convenience store, studying hard, and living meagerly, she graduated early, made the Dean's List, and finished her degree with success. She also benefited from a scholarship program for youths from foster care that partially covered the cost of attending college. (She now works in human resources, with a passion for recruiting.) Mickayla, the youngest, continued to live with her uncle's family long after her sisters left and until a rowdy exchange between him and his second wife turned ugly. When she was in her mid-teens, Mickayla moved in with her sister Brittany as her guardian.

When her sister came to live with her, Brittany said her household income as a rural factory worker was a meager \$9.50 an hour, plus \$50 a month in food assistance for herself, her baby and sister. She also earned too much for medical assistance. It was a threadbare existence. Brittany worked long hours, and a caseworker's visits every couple of weeks offered welcomed guidance and support for them. Brittany

recalls with gratitude that the caseworker helped arrange transportation so that Mickayla could continue attending Caro High School, an 80-mile round trip from her sister's home. In retrospect, Brittany said additional financial help was sorely needed but unavailable. As an informal kinship care provider, she said she wasn't entitled to financial assistance for her sister.

Mickayla said living with Brittany was awkward in the beginning because they had been apart for a while and initially were not close. Her emotions ran high and low, and she admits to sneaking around, and adding pressure to her sister's life. Life for the teen was fraught with self-consciousness, as she frequently felt out of place at school among peers with traditional families. She recounts that in her senior year, she was nominated as someone "who cries a lot." "I had so much emotions; I was so vulnerable," Mickayla said. Her caseworker urged her to keep her grades up, so she would have options to attend college and seek a better future. Mickayla listened. "I saved her from a lot of what could have happened had she been placed where she didn't know anyone and felt even more alone," Brittany said. "You could tell she had a lot of anxiety. She never had consistency in life. It can be a detriment to someone growing up."

Angelica also worried about Mickayla and felt guilty when she was living away at school. "I was getting those calls my freshman year, and it was hard to stay focused when you're worried about your sister. But I knew I had to take care of myself. I couldn't create that legacy for my family without striving toward my own goals. I worried about them both," she said. "It was tough for me in college. I felt I left my family hanging. I left them behind. But I knew in my heart I made the best decision."

Mickayla returned to live with her uncle for a time because of the difficulties Brittany, a working mom, had monitoring her sisters' comings and goings. But troubles between her uncle and his wife continued, creating a chaotic home life, and Mickayla left the home when she was 17 to live with her boyfriend, her partner now for the past six years.

The women today say that keeping connected and keeping tabs on one another motivated them during the rough times. "They're the extra push to keep you focused where you want to go," Brittany said. So has a focus on getting an education. "Getting an education is a great way to redefine your future," Angelica said. All the sisters have learned about and accessed the state's Fostering Futures Scholarship, which pays for a portion of college tuition costs. They've all assumed loans to pay for expenses not covered by scholarships.

Mickayla today is a few semesters shy of earning her bachelor's degree in social work. She plans to work as a school social worker or in child protective services one day. "Another reason I went to college is to help children like me. I've always had a higher purpose; my purpose is to help children." Brittany has returned to college in the past year, attending Delta Community College, at her sisters' urging. She is studying psychology, wants to work with children and teens one day, and plans to transfer to Saginaw Valley State University. Her son is now 9 years old, and has been joined by two siblings both under 3. Brittany has been in a stable relationship with the two youngest children's father, a truck mechanic, for over four years. While she works as a fulltime stay-at-home mom and her partner is the sole income-earner, household finances have taken a hit during the COVID pandemic. If it hadn't been for expensive child care costs, she said she would have returned to school earlier. Recently, she's discovered that taking online classes has allowed her to double-task at home, caring for her children while tending to her studies. Angelica is beginning a master's program at Central Michigan University after graduating from James Madison College at Michigan State University and receiving a competitive fellowship in

management recruitment. Ambitiously working through the summer months, she was able to graduate in three years and with less college debt than her peers.

Their experiences have illustrated ways the child welfare system could work better for kids. According to Mickayla, children need more frequent support and visits from social workers because children experiencing trauma need familiarity with a caseworker in order to share intimate experiences that are hard to talk about. Lightening their caseloads would help. Likewise, children process traumatic experiences differently and some aren't ready to have productive counseling sessions until after they've aged out of the system. At that point, lack of financing for expensive counseling services can keep them from getting help to move on. Angelica said she didn't feel comfortable with her assigned counselor when she was younger but found the need to seek counseling for past trauma and to improve her communications skills when she turned 22 and was experiencing personal duress. It was hard to pay for those sessions out-of-pocket. Angelica said legislation should be enacted to provide therapy for young people from foster care until well into adulthood for those reasons.

Better information and awareness of all the support that exists for youths from foster care is critical, Mickayla added. If it wasn't for her sisters who shared her experience in foster care, Mickayla said she wouldn't have learned about the federally funded ETV (Education Training Vouchers) grant program for young people who "age out" of foster care but are not yet ready to make it on their own. Besides help from the state's Fostering Futures Scholarship, Mickayla receives \$2,500 in ETV grants per semester to pay for non-tuition costs such as computer costs, phone bills, and other school-related costs. The grant helps minimize the size of loans that are inevitable for students like her and her sisters who don't have family resources to count on.

Brittany and Mickayla say they're extremely proud of and influenced by Angelica's emergence as a strong advocate for youth in foster care in recent years. Despite a busy business career, Angelica volunteers as the Foster Care Chair with the Junior League of Michigan in its work to support change in the state's child welfare system. She is a member of the National Foster Youth Institute's Michigan Leadership Corp, working to make foster care a visible issue in the State Legislature. And two years ago, she helped lead the first-ever foster care shadow day at the state Capitol. As a college student, she interned for state lawmakers, served as an intern for the Washington, D.C.-based Voices for Adoption as one who experienced an unsuccessful adoption, and was part of FosterClub, speaking before conferences and advising other youth with similar experiences.

Angelica said that legislative reforms that improve future outcomes for young people from foster care is best served by having youth with lived experiences at the table where decisions are made. That means raising voices like theirs. "The foster care system is broken. We need to take a more preventative approach so that families and children get the help they need before a child is removed from a home which is traumatic. Social workers are overwhelmed and turnover is high. My sister had three different social workers in the first month," Angelica said. She adds that potential foster parents also need better training to prepare them for the challenges of life with a child who's suffered trauma.

"I knew at a young age my past didn't have to determine my future. The biggest thing for me and my success was knowing to never be afraid to ask for help, challenge myself and know I deserve better."

[*Read Angelica Cox's personal blog on the importance of on-campus support for youth from foster care.*](#)