

Second Place Winner

Thalia Soto, 17-years-old

Letter to author Ashley Rhodes-Courter concerning her novel *Three Little Words*

Dear Ashley Rhodes-Courter:

I read *Three Little Words* in about three days. The night I started reading, it was midnight and even though I had to be up at seven, that book was in my hands till 3:30 am. I literally couldn't put it down. I can't imagine being thrown into the system as a three-year-old, and being tossed between 14 foster homes. That's so much to endure and try to understand, especially at such a young age. I know lots of kids go through this and it breaks my heart. I want to share with you my experience, even though I was only in care for two years, I didn't deal with even half as much as you did. Believe it or not, they were the best two years of my life and I'll cherish every memory.

There was one week left in the Seventh grade until we were out for summer break. My mom and I got into one of our usual spouts about God knows what. Sometime into our argument, the police showed up and took me. Just tossed me in the back seat and took me. I didn't know what was happening or where I was going. I won't lie: I was scared. We showed up at a building (which I later found out was the Franklin County Children Services building) and they put me in a small room. After a while, a lady came by with a box of movies and said I could watch one. That was the first time I saw *A Night at the Roxbury*. Just when it finished and I was going to pick out another movie, a lady came to the door and told me to gather my things (I had nothing with me); she was going to take me somewhere. I got in the car and dozed off in the back seat. I didn't know where I was when I woke up (I later learned I was in Newark, Ohio). We were parked on someone's lawn. We went to the door and the police lady knocked. It opened almost immediately.

Her name was Michele Hart. There was a tub of baby kittens in the living room meowing their hearts out. Michele let me upstairs to a room with a bunk bed, two dressers, and someone already asleep in the bottom bunk. She showed me where the bathroom was and said goodnight, and let me be. I didn't know it at the moment, but she would be the one to change my perspective on life. Michele Lee Hart was the best thing to ever happen to me. When I came to her, I was a 13-year-old that didn't feel life was worth living. Michele had 10 kids in her home almost at all times. When I arrived, two were biological, one was adopted. When I left, a total of three were adopted.

I was always busy with Michele. The age range of kids was mostly 2-15 years old, but always changing. Her biological kids played basketball, so for both summers Michele and I, and seven other kids, would sit in the sun and watch them play. Those were the good days. I always had fun with Michele. I could talk to her about anything. We did a lot of laughing. We'd watch *Family Feud* after dinner almost every night. She'd make this "yellow meal:" she knew it was my favorite. It was pork chops with some fancy seasoning, corn, mac and cheese, and cornbread—my favorite meal in the world. Even my grandma's spaghetti can't beat it.

November 1, 2014. Not only was it Michele's birthday, but my time with her was up. It was time for me to go to my biological mother in Dublin, Ohio. I was excited to be back home

and see all my friends again. I can't remember for sure, whether it was April or May of 2015, but it was definitely Spring when Michele texted me and asked if it was a good time to talk. She knew I worked as much as I could, but I could always make time to talk to her. I had just got off work and was sitting, eating some fries before heading home. I told her to call. It turned out to be the worst phone call ever. I never wanted to hear those words come out of her mouth, and was shocked when they did. "I have Stage 4 breast cancer." I felt like the wind had been knocked out of me. She let me know that she was starting chemo soon, and said not to tell anyone; only her parents and I knew. Not even her own kids knew yet. We were both positive as much as possible. I knew she was a fighter. She was the strongest woman I had ever met.

Sometime in June, I got to stay with her for about five days. I remember feeling at peace. I felt safe. I felt at home. Fast forward to November, 2015. My Michele was in remission. She beat it, right?! Wrong. After about 2-3 weeks of her being cancer free, the cancer came back stronger than ever in her liver and lungs. The beginning of December she was in the hospital for fluid in her lungs. We decided to make plans to visit over winter break. I scheduled a week off from work starting December 27, 2015. I had a job interview that morning, but I was more excited about seeing my Michele in a few short hours. I remember sending a text, telling her I was excited to see her, and to let me know when I could head her way. I got home, sat at the kitchen table, and got on Facebook. I saw it. Her oldest son had posted, "My mom is gone." I thought my own heart stopped beating. I let out a blood curdling scream. My mom rushed over to me, but I couldn't speak. I threw my phone and ran to my room. I didn't want to believe it. I couldn't. She was my hero. She helped shape me into me. She was my true mother. I had taken a week off work to visit her, not to attend her funeral. That wasn't supposed to happen. I got into contact with two other kids that were reunited with their biological families. Elyza stayed the night with me before Michele's funeral. We cried together the whole night. I was glad I had someone who could understand. We picked up Dajohn the next morning and headed to Beverly, Ohio to see our one true mom one last time before she entered the ground. When I say Michele was popular, that's no exaggeration. Family, friends, and even teachers from Newark made the drive to Beverly to say goodbye. The line was out the door and then some. There wasn't nearly enough chairs to seat everyone. Lots of people had to stand. Needless to say, it was crowded in there. Mamaw Sherry, Michele's mom, asked if I wanted to speak. I wanted nothing more than to hug my mom one last time, but speaking would have to do. I told everyone how much I loved Michele, and how sad I was she wouldn't get to see all her kids grow up.

The grieving process was hard. I don't cry every day, but she still weighs heavy on my mind. I'll never find someone like her again.

There are such things as good foster homes. They're just hard to find. I'm sorry your experience wasn't as loving as mine. Reading your book showed me that I was lucky to have Michele. I know I was and it's something I'll always cherish. In my opinion, we need more Michele Harts in the world. We need more foster parents that are in it for the kids, not the money. Being a foster parent shouldn't mean "temporary home," it should mean having someone that loves and cares about the child's well-being, regardless of the fact that they aren't biologically related. Michele did that for me and so many other children.

I'm glad you found your forever home. That's how all these stories should end. No child should have to deal with what you did. You're a warrior. You made it. And now you're sharing your story with kids all around the world. I think all of our stories need to be heard. Every experience is different, but they matter.

Sincerely,
Thalia Soto