



A HOME AWAY FROM HOMELESSNESS

FORT MASON, BUILDING 9
SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94123

PHONE: 415.561.5533
FAX: 415.561.5535

WEB: WWW.HOMEAWAY.ORG

EMAIL:
INFO@HOMEAWAY.ORG

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EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

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Dear Friend,

This is a story about Lenny, a little six-year-old boy who came to live with my husband and me at the end of August, but this could be the story of any child at Home Away. He shares the same need to dream a life, to have birthday parties and sleepovers, to make wishes on the first star, to have his picture tacked to the door of the refrigerator. In short, Lenny and the children of Home Away all have the same ache --- just to be a child.

"I've been waiting for a mommy and daddy for a long time," Lenny told the social worker who placed him with us as foster parents. "I want a teddy bear, two parents who love me, a night light and I want to be read to at night."

Becoming a foster parent, or adopting a child, is a weird process. Debilitating really. Months and months of looking at pictures of children. At first, I entered each and every face, and just as I feel with every child at Home Away, my heart yearned with love. By page fifty or so, however, sitting in that little office, I found I had hardened. I had become a consumer, and the very worst kind, a consumer of kids. I left the place a little dead inside, sickened not only with the state of our society but with myself.

And then one day, sometime in July, we turned the page and there he was. "That's the one!" my husband and I said almost at the same time.

Three weeks later, reality detonates and the little boy who will become our son is standing right in front of us, so present the air seems to snap with electricity. Skin the color of California hills in summer, Lenny is shining so bright he's almost hard to see, like trying to read an impressionist painting up close. And talk? Life billows from his lungs. He begins speaking the moment he enters the room. "I had to crawl under the bed and call 911 when my daddy was hitting my mommy," he says. And a few seconds later, "Here is a car, some crayons, and would you like a cup of coffee?" He lays out two miniature cups and we are initiated, pulled right in actually, into the generous, highly-evolved, multi-tiered world of his imagination. We walk out of that room stricken, arrowheads of love sent straight toward our hearts.

And yet, for all that shimmering, Lenny looked so small sitting in the back seat of the car the day we picked him up to drive him to his forever home, a dream I wish every child at Home Away could see come true. "This is the start of the rest of our lives," he said to his stuffed animal, Chewy, and held him up to look out the window. "We've never lived on the mountain before."

Turns out neither have we. We learned quickly that trouble rustles deep in the biological bedrock of his soul; our days are steep climbs toward elation, sudden drops into dread. There is a black hole at the very center of this little boy's being and every morning we wake to the very real assignment of trying to fill up that hole, hoping a heart fully loaded can reach back, heal early grievous wounds. Lenny has lived in six different homes in the last two years and is convinced he is going to be given back; every day there is some kind of explosion, some kind of test. There are times, hurt and loss grown rancid, I feel defeated. What if all this love and caring is too late, I find myself whispering, if only to myself. What's going to happen to this beautiful little boy?

This midnight sky, these dark musings; it is during moments like these I turn towards the bright lantern of Home Away. Almost five hundred children a year, miracles all, cared for by a committed staff and almost a hundred volunteers. Every day they live this recipe of dread and joy I feel so powerfully with Lenny. Yet they keep showing up month after month, year after year, believing all along as the poet says, in the better angels of our nature. At our Beach House program children who never leave the tough streets of San Francisco can place their feet in the ocean, some for the first time. And through our School House program, Youth Leadership program, Mentoring and Public School Advocacy program, we bring safety, structure and to some measure innocence, to some very chaotic lives. And yes, that includes refrigerators patch-worked with photographs of happy kids on snow trips, river rafting and celebrating birthdays.

Long shots all, as these children unfold, revealing the magnificence that exists in the center of them, they fill us with so much possibility that they become the story of us all. Julian, age nine, on the run with his mentally ill mother, skin blooming the dark roses planted from his father's fists — ten years later here he is, attending UC Davis on a full scholarship. Linda, with us since elementary school, was once kidnapped by her father, another time forced to call 911 when her mother was being stabbed. This lovely young woman now is also attending Cal State Hayward.

This economy, these dark times: in some ways we are all asking the question Lenny is asking. Do we choose to live in the bright light of hope, dreaming large, loving, resplendent lives or do we diminish ourselves, shrink down and protect only what we have and not each other?

I certainly don't have the answer. I know I am often frightened — every day seems to be a bungee jump of the heart. I will tell you however, there are sometimes moments so perfect with Lenny I don't want to be doing anything else in my life. "I am your son from another mommy," this courageous little boy said the other day, shocking me into a feeling so physical I found myself blinking back tears. He reached for my hand with that easy and nonchalant assumption of safety and protection every child should have. "You chose the right guy."

Maybe I have it all wrong, I think to myself. Maybe it's not my hand pulling Lenny back from the edge, maybe it's his, pulling mine.

There are so many Lennys in the world: reach out your hand. Choose to believe: in change, in each other, in hope and the many miracles of Home Away. Help us continue to thrive, especially during these tough financial times. We are grateful for the continued support of friends like you. We appreciate your help now more than ever.

Warmest Regards,

Jeanie Kortum
Executive Director & Founder