

MORE THAN BLOOD: (inset) **Liz Hipes**, 12, receives kisses on both cheeks from her parents before prom night. "I wouldn't have the morals that I have, or the mindset, or the standards for myself to succeed in life if it weren't for my adoptive parents... My life would be totally different," Hipes said.

photo courtesy of l. hipes



A FOREVER HOME

Senior shares the journey from foster care to her adoptive parents' home

by May Nguyen

Heroin. A surge of pleasure directly shot into the bloodstream. Agitated, warm flushing of the skin as the aftermath. The brain grew hungry for the same rush. Again and again. Nothing can stop the craving once the morphine compound enters the body. Not even a newborn baby, just shy of two months old. Not even her soulful cries, nor the helplessness in every abrupt movement she made, nor the vacant stares of her baby blue eyes, dredged in a curtain of hot sweat and tears.

For two hours, **Liz Hipes**, just a baby, was stuck in the backseat of an overheating Camry, with her tiny lungs pulsating, hyperventilating, choking in desperate need for air.

"My birth mother was a heroin addict. She would use every single day, and it became a very dangerous place for me to live in," Hipes said. "At one point she was so desperate for drugs that she would leave me in her car to sell her blood to get more heroin."

The critical situation forced Ohio's Department of Social Services to step in and separate the two-month old infant from her troubled biological mother. For the next month, she traveled between four different foster houses in search for a more suitable environment before arriving at her last and now forever home, the Hipes family.

It was love at first sight.

"[The Hipes] took care of me from two months old to two years old, and then at two years old they adopted me," Hipes, 12, said. "We have video tapes of the court and our family being in court, testifying, saying that 'We would like to take care of this child for the rest of her life'. I watched little me and I watched my interaction with my adoptive parents and I think how much better my life is. My birth mother didn't even show up to court."

The instant connection was undeniable, as Hipes' little fingers intertwined with her adoptive parents. They entered

the courtroom, strange-eyed, bewildered-spirited, with heartbeats thumping in their chests, long pauses between their breaths, butterflies in their stomach; and exited a family.

And she never looked back.

"I used to have a picture of [my birth mother], so I know generally what she looked like when I was really young," Hipes said. "I only know her first name and that's it. I don't know anything about my birth father. I don't know his

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name, who he is. Nothing... I mean, I can go and look them up. I don't really have the desire to just because I feel like I'd be disappointed and I'd have this fantasy about who they would be and I would be disappointed by who they actually are."

Restricted visitation hours over cold meals of mac and cheese, chicken nuggets and French Fries on the dinner table subsided as Hipes started being able to comprehend what was going on around her. Between the stories being told by her adoptive parents to discreet whispers of her

biological mother, Hipes grew up struggling to find her own identity, to uncover who she really is outside of the adoption.

"There are times when I feel like [the adoption] is the only thing I remembered about myself and the defining thing about me. But then there are times when I forgot that I'm adopted and that just goes out of my mind. I think about the kind of person I am today and how I've grown and how my adoptive parents have shaped me in the way I live my life," Hipes said. "Being adopted definitely raises some questions and doubts and you have trouble with trust and forgiveness of the birth parents. But... being raised in a wonderful home, I have learned that there is more to me than just my adoption."

Hipes' family stayed in Ohio for a short while before moving down South to Conway, N.C., and eventually to Mount Pleasant as she began her freshman year of high school. According to Hipes, if it hadn't been for her adoptive parents, her life and who she really is today would have been dramatically different. At two years of age, the little girl had learned to live, to love, and to trust again.

"If I get to send a letter to my birth parents, saying anything I wanted... I'd update them about my life, and how much I've grown and changed, and how my life is so different since being in their home. And I guess I'd also tell them to not worry about me, because my life is happier, and safe, and secured. I'd tell them that I forgive them," Hipes said. "Sometimes my adoptive parents have concerns about what I want to do if I found my birth mother. But I just want to remind them that they are my parents and I love them unconditionally, just like they have shown the same love to me."

An old Polaroid photograph tucked away. A name no longer called. A blurred face no longer remembered. She is home.