National Reunification Month is a nationwide celebration of the successful reunification of families who have returned to safety and health thanks to CWS interventions and a lot of hard, personal work. Below is the story of Estrella Barnett and her daughter Alexi, one of Hawaii’s successful families, straight from the island of Kauai.

Reclaiming the Wheel
By
Wilma Friesema

It’s a rainy night in August, 2016, and after a long day Estrella Barnett is driving home with Alexi, her six-year-old daughter, who is asleep in the back seat. It’s a little after 9pm. Soon Estrella will be lifting her sleepy daughter out of the car and tucking her into bed.

Driving on the windy Kuhio Road in Kilauea, Estrella’s car starts to hydroplane. She tries to right it, loses control, and crashes headlong into a tree. Upon impact, it feels like 20 knives stab her in the stomach, but without thinking she jumps out of the car and runs to her daughter. Estrella grabs Alexi and yells for help. She thinks, I’m fine, but in reality, her spleen is ruptured and ribs are cracked. Alexi has bruises, but nothing appears broken.

Looking back, Estrella says there are days it all still feels like a dream. She can’t believe she and Alexi are alive and together again. From car crash, to a year of separation, to reunification, their journey has not been an easy one. It has, however, been fueled by determination, commitment, and love.

Prior to that fateful night, Estrella struggled between being a young, creative, singer who partied to fit in with her peers and find love, and being a single parent who took care of her daughter and worked. She absolutely loved her daughter, but being a single mom was hard. Living with her parents, she relied on them more and more to help raise Alexi while she went out with friends. Drinking was a big part of her social scene, but it was also how Estrella coped. During that time, she looked fine on the outside, she said, but internally she was screaming.

The crash brought everything to a head. After the ambulance whisked them to the hospital, Estrella woke up in a neck brace, 50 stitches laced her stomach, and she was told she could not see or talk to her daughter. As is standard practice when an accident involves a serious injury to a child, Child Welfare Services (CWS) stepped in to investigate. For Estrella the physical pain was intense, but the heartache of being separated from Alexi was worse. It felt like everything important had been taken away.

It was in the hospital that Estrella had a spiritual experience, which turned her life around. She knew, from that point on, that she was going to make major changes and that it wouldn’t be easy. Once she was released from the hospital, she went into rehab on the mainland for four months to do the personal work of shifting priorities. When she returned to Kauai she could no longer live with her parents who were fostering Alexi, so she had to find a place of her own and a new job. Attending daily AA/NA meetings was required by CWS, as was being tested for drug
and alcohol use on a regular basis. Her family distrusted her and didn’t believe she had truly changed. She could only have visits with Alexi under CWS supervision.

It was a difficult and lonely time, but Estrella knew what she wanted – Alexi – so she stayed committed to her path. She dug deep and knew she had to do the opposite of what she had done in the past. Every day she consciously chose to do something that would make her feel good about herself and capable of meeting her responsibilities. She stayed sober. She did all the services that CWS asked of her and worked with her social worker and other service providers instead of resisting their support. She sang and found solace in music. She attended AA/NA meetings, therapy, and practiced yoga. She attempted to prove to her family, over and over again, that her words had meaning, that she could be trusted. She spent as much time as she could with Alexi. She found strength in God.

Her hard work paid off. Though she did relapse twice, she realized drinking no longer felt right; that, in essence, she was betraying herself when she drank. She realized she didn’t need to drink to feel good because she was already naturally feeling that way. What she needed was her faith, her talents, her supporters, and, most of all, her daughter.

Today Estrella stays on a routine and reminds herself that the only things that can mess up your life are the choices you make. Every morning she wakes up and reads daily devotions and motivations. She runs, does yoga, or rollerblades. She also holds onto a wise perspective that she once heard in rehab. The speaker pointed out that every person, rich or poor, has 24 hours in a day. He then asked this question: What are you going to do with your life today to make it great?

There are many things that Estrella is doing to make her life great – she sings with the popular musician Makana, has her own jewelry business, she’s even working as a double on a movie set. But the main thing that Estrella does to make her life better is to be a great mom. Alexi is the light of her life; she absolutely comes first in Estrella’s heart and priorities. They love spending time together doing everyday things like cooking, playing, being creative, and even homework. Alexi, Estrella says, radiates so much love to everyone that she just naturally gets a lot of love in return. She’s a bright, energetic 8-year-old who’s a joy to be around.

Alexi is also perceptive. Estrella has been honest with her about drinking and the problems it can cause. Alexi now recognizes when adults have been drinking and will even point it out to her mom. Estrella once overheard Alexi’s friends talking about their parents’ drinking. Alexi held her head high and said, “My mom doesn’t drink.” She was clearly proud of her mom’s sobriety.

For Estrella, that sobriety still isn’t easy. It’s hard to stand up and do something different from what’s acceptable to so many. Beneath the surface, she battles the pull to fit in and to cope in the old familiar way of numbing herself “just for a day.” But every day, she realizes, she has a choice. She tells herself, today, no matter what, I won’t drink. Don’t do it, for today. When she gets lonely and sad she recognizes those emotions and then moves through them. She just lets
them be. As the number of sober days accumulate, she gets stronger. For her, that’s true empowerment because she’s staying awake to what’s truly important to her.

“When going through the process of change you hate it,” she says, “but when you get to the other side then you’re thankful for it. Also, doors open, God gives you opportunities, when you’re doing the right thing. When people see your heart, when you’re doing good, then good things come to you.” For those who struggle with the same challenges she has this advice: Be the first to stand up and create a path no one has walked down before. Be a shining light to remind people of their own inner shining light too.

Prior to the accident there was so much that Estrella didn’t know how to let go of: the partying life, the need to fit in, numbing as a way to cope with emotions. It wasn’t until she was confronted with making a choice — either let go of all of that or let go of her daughter — that she was able to embrace being a mom and all the responsibility that goes with it. Now, she wouldn’t have it any other way. She may have lost control of the wheel that night in August, but the jolt of the accident helped her reclaim control of her life.