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# Heart of the Treasure Valley: Forever family

What began as a temporary situation for Sera Hepner and her grandparents turned into a new home

- Idaho Statesman

Edition Date: 01/26/09

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For years now, which is to say most of her life, Sera Hepner has actively advocated for the rights of grandparents raising their grandchildren. Photos in the living room show her with Idaho Sens. Mike Crapo and Larry Craig, and Rep. Mike Simpson in Washington, D.C., where Sera was a delegate to last year's grandparent rally. The most remarkable thing about this is that Sera is 7 years old.

She says: "I was telling them that children should be able to go to grandparents. They should be able to adopt them faster than real slow."

Her advocacy comes from her own experience growing up.

"My real parents weren't taking real good care of me. I was in a boarding house for a while (a foster home) and then I came to live here."

Here is with her grandparents, Catherine and Terry Hepner, in Eagle, for the past five years.

Sera's parents were arrested on meth charges when Sera was about a year old. Sera was in a foster home for nine months until the Hepners were allowed to take custody and become her guardians.

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**Katherine Jones/Idaho Statesman**  
 When her parents went to jail, Sera Hepner came to live with her grandparents, Catherine and Terry



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Sera's father, who had a history of drugs and violence, got a multiple-year sentence for manufacturing and distributing methamphetamine. Sera's mother, who is Terry's daughter, pleaded guilty to child endangerment charges and a lesser charge of drug possession.

Catherine says: "We had no way of protecting Sera from this guy. When the father gets out, (Sera's mother) was the one with child endangerment. He looks like the better parent."

Guardianship was a temporary arrangement until Sera's mother could take her back. Their concern was: so could the father.

Catherine says: "Guardianship bestows upon us the rights as parents, except it can be easily overturned.

"There is a legal precedent that gives biological parents rights that are primary over the rights of a child. Biological parents don't have to say 'I'm better' or 'I can provide better.' Kinship care might generally provide better, but biological parents don't have to come up to any standard. ... They just have to have a basic way of supporting the child, even if it's welfare."

Terry says: "I knew (the father) was unstable. I had just found out he'd beaten my daughter; I was getting more and more protective of Sera. "

Sera's mother has since remarried, is stable, doing well and has moved on with her life, without making an effort to include Sera. She agreed to the adoption to keep Sera safe. Terry teases Sera: "Who adopted me and mommy?"

"I did. And you adopted me."

Catherine says: "Adoption is nice. This is the first school year where I didn't have to explain. We could just go in as mommy and daddy."

Sera is a quintessentially cute second-grader. And while she has blossomed with her now-parents, she still bears hidden scars from her past.

Catherine says: "She was taken (into custody) at 13 months. She was in foster care for nine months. In the course of a year, she had three different moms at the pre-verbal stage. That's a real delicate stage for bonding."

You can't tell it now, but for a long time, Sera didn't want to be held - a symptom of neglect and abuse. Catherine points out that raising a grandchild, particularly from a broken or drug-using home, isn't the same as raising your own child. "These are special-needs kids," she says. Sera's first three-word sentences were suicidal.

Hepner. What started out as a temporary arrangement became permanent when they became a "forever family" and adopted Sera. "She was bonded to us; we were bonded to her. There was no way we were going to let that get way," says Terry Hepner. "I love my daughter (Sera's mother) so much. She's made some dumb mistakes and she's had to pay for them. But I don't think Sera should have to pay for them."



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## ELSEWHERE

- A fact sheet for grandparents
- Idaho grandparents as parents
- GrandRally: Grandparents and other relatives raising children

## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

### Want to attend a GAP meeting?

GAP meets from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. the first Monday of every month (unless it's a holiday; then it is the following Monday) at 3852 N. Eagle Road, Boise. It is the Boise First Community Center (the Nazarene Church). Child care is provided. For more information, call 323-7538 or e-mail [craw2@qwestoffice.net](mailto:craw2@qwestoffice.net).

### KNOW SOMEONE LIVING 'FROM THE HEART'?

Each week Idaho Statesman photojournalist Katherine Jones spotlights someone in the Treasure Valley who influences our lives not only by what they do, but how and why they do it. Know someone we should know? Call 377-6414 or e-mail [kjones@idahostatesman.com](mailto:kjones@idahostatesman.com).

If you  
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" These are kids who do not trust adults. You think, 'If I only love them enough, everything will be fine.' These kids don't know love. They don't understand life the same way you understand life. They think you show love because there's something in it for you.

"Meth-using parents literally ignore children. They binge and crash, go into a stupor. Kids can cry, but mom won't wake up - this could be for days. I could not lay my head down or close my eyes without Sera going into a panic attack. She couldn't verbalize it, but she was afraid of the same thing.

" ... Would I do it again? In a heartbeat."

The Hepners are active in a local grandparent support group. Catherine has become adept at utilizing resources available to kinship caregivers and receivers, like therapy, and as part of the group, actively lobbies for more legal, financial and emotional awareness. It's different living with grandparents.

Sera says: "They used to be my grandparents, but now they're my mom and dad."

Catherine says: "We're just a fun time when the cousins come to visit. But Sera doesn't have anybody to go visit. I try to give Sera 'grandmother moments,' like when we have ice cream for dinner or throw all the chores out the window. It's not enough. "

But, say the Hepners, "the way we put it is: She adopted us."

Terry says: "Sera was the one who wanted to call me daddy, like all her friends have a daddy. At that point, I knew she was going to be my daughter."

Catherine says: "She said when she grew up, she wanted to marry daddy. So we talked about the different ways that families are formed. We were a different kind of family, and the idea of adoption grew from that.

"We talked about foster families, group families, heart families.

"We started out as a heart family and we become a legal family."

Meanwhile, Sera beams her smile on legislators and continues to advocate for grandparents and grandchildren.

"To help kids who aren't lucky enough to be adopted."

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