

Cynthia's Story

Epilogue: 2 years watching a young mother at a crossroads

Cynthia Rosas was 20 years old and nine months pregnant with her second daughter, Chiyalia, when I met her at a youth shelter. Not long after, while we were on a bus downtown, she told me she had always related to Sacagawea, the Shoshone woman who had accompanied the Lewis and Clark expeditions.

And it seemed appropriate then to think of her as a tracker at a crossroads.

Cynthia was clean after years of drug and alcohol abuse. She was willing to leave behind her gang affiliations. She was trying to find a stable place to live, somewhere she and her boyfriend could raise both the new baby and another child, Harmony, whom Cynthia had informally given up a couple of years before.

It is rare and illuminating to meet people at those pivotal moments - when they are staring at a sort of intersection, when their stories could lead one direction or another.

Would Cynthia go on to more of the same abuse and dysfunction that had characterized much of her life so far? Or could she stitch together a version of the happy, anchored family she saw in her mind?

Of course, things were not so simple.

There are many stories, stories right next door, of teens and young adults who survive and overcome nightmarish childhoods to build new and commendable lives. Those stories are inspirational. They are important to tell. They refresh our faith in the possibility for redemption.

But sometimes, I think, they let us forget the real consequences of those nightmares that came before, of the daily chaos, of always teetering on the edge.

I believe that Cynthia loves her children fiercely.

But where do we learn love's practical applications, how do we learn tenderness when survival makes it a luxury?

I have spent about two years following Cynthia. During that time, she has willingly shared documents related to her child welfare cases. She has been open and honest in discussing her past criminal activity.

She has invited me along to court dates and appointments, meetings and birthday parties.

She let me visit her apartment early in the morning, at dinner time, at bed time. I met her friends and family members. I talked to social workers and other professionals from whom she has received services.

On Jan. 7, she called me from her room at San Joaquin General Hospital. The morning before, she had given birth to another girl, Cysi Chynies. The baby was lying on Cynthia's belly while she watched television. "She barely cries."

Cynthia, now 22, was sentenced to jail time on abuse charges related to Harmony. She said she accepts responsibility for what happened and agrees that there should be consequences, even though she maintains that it was accidental.

She hopes that by July, all three of her daughters will be with her again.

Another start. Not a clean start - there wasn't ever a clean start - but another start.

- Jennifer Torres