

## **I Love You from the Edges**

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*A love story of raising my young granddaughters for several years, letting them capture my heart, my life, and my soul, and then having to give them back – resulting in a painful, yet spiritual journey of growth and healing.*

### **Introduction**

When I was raising three of my grandchildren, lurking beneath the surface, behind the façade of self-confidence and optimism, was the fear of *not* raising the children. While starting over with babies was not necessarily on my bucket list, it was something I welcomed with opened arms and a grateful heart.

*I Love You from the Edges* is more than my story of raising grandchildren. In Part 1, I not only tell my own experiences and memories of happiness, struggle, and grief that spanned more than a decade, but I share stories from other grandparents and relative caregivers who openly shared their hearts with me. Learning about the experiences of other grandparents and relatives raising children can be

very helpful if you are embarking on this same journey. Learning that you are not alone may help you feel supported and compassion from others.

Part II continues with the experiences of grandparents and relatives along with *know how* suggestions on *what to do* and *how to do it*. These suggestions will include ideas on what to expect when enrolling children in school, obtaining needed medical care, finding available resources, and understanding the legal process. Since there are not sufficient resources to make this journey easy and state laws and resources vary, I will provide recommendations from those who have lived through it.

Part III concludes with a copy of the Kinship Wellness Assessment that I developed for grandparents and relatives raising children. This assessment focuses on the six aspects of health and wellness of the caregiver: physical – emotional - mental/intellectual – spiritual – social – environmental. This program was designed for grandparents to help you improve your lifestyle. Note, for simplicity sake, I have used the word grandchildren or grandparent for all types of kinship

relationships. So whether you are a grandparent, aunt, uncle, great-something, or sibling caring for children, this book is for you.

## PART I

### Chapter 1

#### *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star*

**Summer, 2002:** With only the youngest of my eight children still at home, I called my mother. The conversation went something like this: “Mother, I am so glad I still have Angela at home. I’m just not ready to not have children.” Life was rather simple with one easy, sweet-natured teenager at home. I had always loved being a mother, and now I had the time and energy to be the *perfect* mother. Angela was just starting high school, so I had three years before facing the empty nest syndrome, which I preferred would never happen. In June of that year I remarried. With Angela at her father’s for the summer, I was carefree with few concerns. I went dancing with my new husband, enjoyed site-seeing on his Harley, and settled into his home, while doing a lot of reorganizing to make room for two more people, Angela and myself. I was apprehensive about being in someone else’s space, but it was nice and I was optimistic about our future. Yet, there was a sense of change in the air. I could feel it; I could

smell it; I could almost touch it. Then in late August, my daughter Kayla, who was living in Texas, gave birth to Grace who weighed only two pounds. I flew to Houston to help take care of Myah eighteen months old and Lindsey four years old for a couple of weeks until I found ladies from a church group to help Kayla with the children. I will never forget the first time I saw Grace. Sleeping in an incubator in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU), hooked to tubes and by then weighing only 1 ½ lbs. Grace was fragile and looked breakable. I was afraid to even touch her for fear of hurting her. “It’s really not scary Mom,” Kayla had said, as she gently reached in and touched Grace’s hand. But every time I tried to touch the newborn treasure, I felt panic and couldn’t breathe. I had never seen such a tiny baby, so I just watched this amazing twinkling little star who became a most precious diamond in my world. After two weeks, I returned home. Angela was starting a new high school, and I was certain she needed her mother.

**October, 2002:** The simplicity of being a mother to one child was about to change. A phone call from Kayla altered the course of my life for the

next several years. Due to unfortunate circumstances, she needed my help. Grace was now two months old and finally ready to leave the hospital. I immediately left home and drove from Virginia to Texas bringing back with me three little granddaughters, — Grace, almost five pounds and on a heart monitor, two-years-old Myah, and four-years-old Lindsey. As Kayla helped me load the children and their belongings into my car, it took all of her composure not to break down in tears in front of the children for fear of causing alarm. Lindsey got off to a rough start. After Kayla finished helping me, she headed back to her apartment, desperately needing to get out of sight. Lindsey insisted, “Mommy did not give me a bye kiss. I want a hug and a kiss. I want Mommy to give me a bye kiss.” I assured Lindsey, “Your Mommy gave you kisses and hugs in the apartment.” She insisted she didn’t get a bye kiss. I insisted she did. We could not have forgotten hugs and kisses. I felt certain we must have remembered the necessary and proper good-byes. As I did not want to redo all of the painful good-byes, we started the drive with Lindsey in tears. Frequent stops were required to feed and change Grace along

with changing pull-ups for Myah and Lindsey. Myah, who had already learned to talk, spoke not a word the entire trip. In fact, I didn't even know she could talk. She also did not cry at all. She was just eerily silent. I didn't quite know what to make of it. Meanwhile, Lindsey talked non-stop, repeating the same incomplete sentence about her daddy the entire three day trip. I didn't want to tell her to be quiet because I knew she was already feeling traumatized. Even if I had tried to quiet her, I'm not sure I would have succeeded in controlling her obsession with her daddy. We stopped frequently; and every time we did, it always took at least an hour, even just to get gas. After three long days of fast food, motels, and gas stations, my nerves were rattled as I pulled into my driveway totally exhausted. However, the hard part had just begun; I had no idea how I was going to manage everything, but like other grandparents who faced the same situation, I did not hesitate. Kayla had been diligent in providing me with a power of attorney for the children, the children's birth certificates, and their social security cards. She wanted to make sure I had everything I needed to

properly care for the children and to get all possible services that might be available for them.

The first year was the most difficult for everyone. Initially, I had to get the children signed up for Medicaid. Because (of the fact that) we were grandparents, the children qualified for Medicaid, at least that was the case in Virginia. It was very important that I applied immediately, as the hospital in Houston would not even release Grace to me until they were certain that I had made a doctor's appointment. She needed to be seen immediately upon arriving at her new home. The first medical appointment was with our family practitioner. This was followed by many appointments for Grace with a neonatologist, a pediatric cardiologist, even with a pediatric ophthalmologist. During the blistery cold winter, with an infant carrier in my right hand and the heart monitor in my left, bundled up, I trudged from the house to the car, from the car to the hospital, and home again, sometimes with Lindsey and Myah in tow. Tucked away in the diaper bag was the power of attorney that gave me permission to do all of this. Eventually, I provided all medical providers with the legal custody papers; but until



then, they accepted what I had. Feeding Grace every three hours 24/7 for a year took its toll, as I was going through menopause at the same time. Many nights I woke up to the *screaming* of the heart monitor. I would get up, make sure Grace was breathing properly, reset the monitor, change my nightgown because it was soaked from night sweats, and go back to sleep—that is, until I needed to feed her again. Often I strapped the baby to me in a front infant sling and carried the monitor on my left shoulder as I took care of Myah and Lindsey. For obvious reasons, I was not sleeping well. When I did sleep, I had nightmares. I dreamt I was missing my plane, riding backwards on a bus, or was simply lost. I was exhausted. I had a hard time keeping up with my home-based business, which consisted of extensive computer use; the normal tedious chores of housework; as well as helping the little ones adjust to a new life without their mother. This proved particularly difficult for Lindsey.

During one of Grace's visits to the pediatric cardiologist when she was about seven months old, I placed Grace on the patient bed and stepped back while the doctor listened to her heart. As I backed

away, she started to cry. To my surprise the doctor said, “Oh that is good to see.” “Why do you want her to cry?” I asked. I didn’t know why it was good to see Grace cry when I stepped away. He explained, “Premature babies sometimes do not bond with their caregivers, even their own mothers, after having spent so much time in the hospital. It is obvious that she has developed a strong bond with you. I am glad to see that.” I had not thought of that, but then I had never had a premature baby before.

After the first few months, Myah and Lindsey went to daycare, and Lindsey went part-time to the public school Project 4 program. I was fortunate to live in a county that provided daycare to grandparents who were raising grandchildren. Because the children qualified for Medicaid and a child-only TANF grant (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), they also qualified for daycare. A child-only TANF grant is based on the children’s income, not the grandparents. Since the children had no income, we qualified for a small monthly grant, along with daycare, Medicaid, and WIC (which provided formula for the baby along with other healthy food for Myah and Lindsey.) I later learned

how fortunate we had been as not all counties in Virginia provided daycare. Grace did not go to daycare; she stayed home with me until she was four because of a weak immune system. When she turned four, she started the public school's Project 4 program as Lindsey and Myah had done. Again, I was fortunate as not all counties in Virginia even had the Project 4 program.

Becoming a full-time "mommy" to babies and toddlers had been natural for me when I had my own children, but I had never been a fifty-year-old menopausal woman with babies. Regardless of the colossal difficulties, I loved living with these little girls. They truly were my twinkling little stars as I rocked and sang to them daily, building an unbreakable bond between us. It did not take long for the girls to choose their favorite bedtime songs, usually the longest ones.

Six months after the children arrived in Virginia, we filed for custody. By law the children needed to be in the state for six months before we could proceed. I wanted to make sure that Kayla was in a position to finish raising her children before I gave them back to her. Without a legal custody order

there would be no assurance of that. I knew a simple Power of Attorney could be revoked at any time, and I had no legal rights as a grandparent, except those given to me by a judge. This upset Kayla terribly, as she believed I was over-reacting. I did not think I was, but then I often think I'm not over-reacting, even if I am. Kayla asked if I would agree to joint legal custody with her, while my husband and I had sole physical custody of the children. This meant that she had a right to be involved in all decision making with regard to the children, but they resided solely with us. I agreed. Visitation was also addressed and was set to be as agreed upon between us, as needs dictated and not as a carved in stone schedule. Even though it was not a complicated custody order, it still cost us thousands of dollars in legal fees and was a humiliating and hurtful experience for Kayla. Legally, everything seemed to proceed smoothly, that is until we clashed over the agreement a few years later. During the first year, Kayla left Texas and moved to an adjoining state where she would be only four hours away. This allowed her to visit the children in our home, and occasionally we took them to where she lived. It was

not ideal, but we all dealt with it the best we knew how. Now years later, I have a different perspective on everything. During those early years, it was hard to see clearly when I was smack in the middle of a constant crisis and living on adrenaline.

## **Chapter 2**

***Rub a dub, dub, 3 girls in a tub***

***And who do you think they be?***

***Lindsey, Myah, and Baby Girl Grace***

***And all of them lived with me***

(Future peek at 2018: After Myah and Grace returned to their mother for 6 ½ years, they returned to my custody when they were thirteen and fifteen years old.)

