

More Than My Darkest Days

By Michael Grindheim

Adopted at age 7 from Ukraine, Michael Grindheim struggled in his new adoptive family, and that adoption ultimately failed. Re-adopted by the Grindheim family, Michael shares his experience surviving some of his darkest days, and supports he found to help him to a better place. Michael and his adoptive mom share their thoughts on that experience.

Q: When you tried to commit suicide at 9 and 10, what do you believe were the driving factors that led you to do that?

A: I was adopted at age 7. Knowing where I came from, it was challenging coming to America, having to learn a new language, learning the culture, learning the people — how to socialize and be around people.

It's like I won the lottery, but with that came a price to pay.

What a child will learn from ages 3-9, I had to learn and experience all in two years, just to catch up.

My first adoptive parents worked around the clock to ensure that I could get the proper education and one day be socially appropriate with my own age group.

Then I went to school and learned that I wasn't like everyone else. I was different and no one could relate to me. I felt alone and scared. The pressure of life and the aim for perfection started to weigh on me.

After two years in America I started thinking that this life may not be for me.

And on top of all that, there was a lot of family drama. I was having to learn how to cope with my new family — like I am still learning. Families that are made through adoption take so much more work. There's never an easy moment. The drama at home and the pressure of life created a constant depression for me. And at that time, I had no one who could



Taken a couple days before he was adopted by his first family, Michael Grindheim, left, had no idea how his life would be turned upside down when he moved to another country.

relate to my struggle. I felt if this was what my life was going to be, it wasn't worth living.

Q: What help did you receive at that time? Was it helpful?

A: My first parents never knew about the suicide attempts. After a couple years of family drama, my parents started to worry that my "outbursts" weren't just normal behaviors and sought out numerous therapists to medically provide me with some peace.

For me, it made it all the worse. The stress level in the home went even higher.

My first parents really tried it all, every method under the sun.

After seeing the therapists and how far off they were from understanding who I was and what I had been going through, I felt that if I told them I tried to commit suicide they would have sent me away with more "labels" and more meds. Once again, I felt alone and scared. I didn't feel safe communicating my concerns with anyone without being labeled or judged.

Q: What was it that really helped you get to a healthier place of thinking and healing?

A: When I was adopted by my parents now — Kevin and Tammy. That was the turning point for me. Already seeing and experiencing so much at a young age, I felt right away they were my only hope.

Thanks to my parents' experience in adopting children previously, they offered me a level of stability and security. They were not threatened by my emotional behavior at the time and were able to help me deal with my emotions head on and overcome my fears of what my life used to be.

Behind the outbursts was an attempt to show my pain and get the parents to understand I wasn't OK. It was a calling for help.

With Tammy and Kevin I didn't have to show my pain, they always knew it was there and that I needed help and they knew the help to give.

I could for the first time feel that someone on earth may actually know what I was going through and provide the help that I needed. By going back to the basics, Tammy and Kevin provided me with all natural, all organic food, eliminating toxins, preservatives and chemicals in the food.

Through this I was able to think clearly and not be manipulated by chemicals in the food. They knew that I didn't need medications and were able to eliminate them as well. They gave me a space where I didn't feel I had to compete and was able to focus on healing and adjusting

to this new life. With Tammy and Kevin I was homeschooled. This allowed me to have time to learn outside the classroom about gardening and farming. Being productive and taking it back to the basics kept me motivated and there was no time for depressing, negative thoughts to arise. By the second year with Tammy and Kevin I felt safe and stable. I never again felt the need to end my life once I stepped into their family.

Q: What are your thoughts now when you look back on that dark time and what do you think could have helped you then?

A: I'm happy those days are behind me. There were many dark nights where I had to tell myself to just breathe, put the knife down, don't let this moment be your last. It is great to know that those cold, dark days didn't get the best of me. I mean, I barely made it through alive. But I made it!

But not alone.

I was alone for so much of my childhood. Boredom and loneliness are two things I don't come across these days.

I stay productive in things I love and that make me smile every day.

For others who may be struggling, stay close to your friends and family. I know many days you feel you're alone but you're really not. God has built a support group around you. They are there for you. On those better days, make little notes and put them everywhere. Have them say true things like: I am loved. I am a blessing. I am never alone. These little notes will help you see the truth on the darkest of days.

Michael Grindheim is 24 years old and at this age he has seen it, lived it, experienced it, and is now writing about it. Most of the things he's gone through in life have not been by choice. Grindheim enjoys gardening, photography and helping others. Growing up he and his brothers spent free time working on yards for the widows and neighbors that they saw could use the help. Instead of playing games or watching TV they would put our energy to good use.





Raising Hurting Children

By Tamara Grindheim

Michael was 11 years old when we met him. I saw his photo and read he was in need of respite care. In the description he liked art, legos and was struggling in school. His photo was this tiny, sweet looking little boy. Of course, you know there is a lot of struggle to come if the parents are at the end of their rope. I think the creativity and struggling in school are what confirmed to me he may have a better chance in our home. In my mind, the child becomes a permanent part of our home even if they are here temporarily. I have to or I would treat them differently if I didn't consider them a permanent part of our family. My husband Kevin and I feel deep in our hearts that these children need a permanent place to call home. They have never had any place permanent and they need a place to call home when they are adults.

We homeschooled and focused on building their character, morals, abilities and work ethics. We were trained as a therapeutic foster home and would not have survived if not for this training. We expected each child to be so much worse than they were because we were told every behavior known to man. One couple got up during training and never came back. I hung onto every word. Most of it I had never even heard of. They taught us to let the shock of the behavior roll off and continue

on. I also went to so many parenting classes given by the homeschool convention and the kinship, foster and adoption conventions. It helped me understand how the minds of broken children work. We learned how to react and how to redirect. Were we good at this? No, but we kept coming back to this to be able to get over the situation and move on.

We did not treat Michael any differently than the other boys. He was different though. He didn't come off as rough and tumble. He was more artsy. This was something the other family struggled with. This is what I embraced and ran with. With the Lord's help, we were able to give the boys so many different experiences. Oh, the stories I could tell about a city girl teaching boys to farm, process food, including raising our meat. They helped Dad build an addition that gave them each their own room. They formed a music group. They were expected to participate in every part of daily living. They became EMTs, did landscaping, and most of all, learned to serve others through church and the local emergency services department.

There is one thing we did differently than most families. When our children expressed interest in becoming EMTs, we went with them and sat through classes with them. We ran on the ambulance when they did.

We participated in every fundraiser with them. This was to ensure we could redirect from any issues or situations we thought would become harmful to them or others. Oh, are there funny stories in that arena. We were criticized as being too strict, too protective maybe, but even though the kids may not have liked us being around, it gave them a safety net and kept them a little more focused on proper behavior. As Michael grew and matured he took on responsibility and took charge of all the gardening, the chickens and other chores. He made goat cheese. He flourished in the areas he had interest in.

As you can see, I can't single out Michael. He was one of the family. A big thing we did is not put an emphasis on their past. Our goal was to take them beyond that. It seemed to be a relief for them to look forward to a life they would choose and not concentrate on the struggles and issues of their past. Over the years I would ask Michael bits about his past like the orphanage, but he really didn't say much. I left it there. If he wanted to talk, he would, but his struggles and mistakes were his past and he was not forced to share.

Hindsight is great. There were days I just didn't think I could do this parenting thing anymore. Did I do everything right? Not hardly. Would I do some things differently? Looking back, oh yes. Was it easy? Rarely. Were there fun times? Yes, I cherish and choose to remember them.

Even though Michael has just shared with me his thoughts of suicide I would like to add my thoughts. I am sure there were times my other children may have had the same thoughts. Life is hard for most children in these times. The struggle of not measuring up to their peers is real. Others may beat them down and try to take advantage just like adults in their lives may have. Then they struggle in school classes and feel they look dumb. They come home and find themselves getting in trouble there. They can't concentrate due to problems at home, chemicals in the so-called convenience foods they eat, or from not eating enough or a balanced diet. Medication is the go-to now. There are times this is truly needed, but with our guys we used additive free foods and organic when possible to allow their bodies to heal. This allowed them to come off the medications for attention and behaviors and let their bodies heal. They had better behavior and better attention off the medication and onto real foods. When children have spent their early years without the nutrients they need to form their brain and body or the love and security they need, they cannot react to situations properly or learn as quickly as others.

Loving them, accepting them where they are, taking them out of situations with constant hammering to their self-esteem, and helping them be successful at living is what they respond to most. Teaching them to prepare healthy, clean foods that will help them feel good and think clearly will make a dramatic difference. Don't expect them to love you back or appreciate all the hard work and love you pour into them. That might come later. They may throw you under the proverbial bus at any point, especially when they go out on their own. It is all part of their

process of sorting and finding out who they are and what they want. So look at why you are adopting or fostering hurting children. They have gone through more than we will ever know. They don't see things the way we do. My prayer is they will take some of what they learned and experienced in our home and fall somewhere between that and the feelings and lifestyle of the abuse or neglect, drugs or alcohol they experienced earlier in their lives.

One last thought: We were told we were saving these children from poor situations and giving them all this love, security and things. In the eyes of the children, we have taken them from the only life they know, which they think is normal, and away from the people, foods and culture they grew up with, then change everything about the way they live life and expect them to be grateful.

They will surprise you. Never in a million years would I have thought Michael would have the capability to travel to New York, and write articles. Everything else he does I could imagine. But those two things no way.

Tamara Grindheim was a single parent, foster parent and kinship caregiver for several years before meeting and marrying Kevin. She gained so much strength and knowledge during this time raising three biological

children — one with cerebral palsy and another with a seizure disorder. She had just finished an associate's degree as a registered nurse and was caring for her grandmother who had dementia and was unable to walk as well as an aunt who had Down Syndrome. After her grandma passed, she received a foster daughter who had been paralyzed from the waist down. Later she married Kevin and blended their families. That was another learning experience. Years later, when their youngest was 16, they decided to start over and adopt. Kevin's background was very hard physically and mentally. This was the only reason she considered adopting children without physical disabilities. His one statement "you know my childhood and look how I turned out. Give these kids a chance." He had Tamara's heart right then.

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