

Hope astray but not lost

It wasn't the wedding ceremony that she wanted, and certainly not the wedding dress that she dreamed of.

By Melissa Pointer

At age 16, my future 27-year-old husband seemed so old to me.

I had graduated early from high school where I had been a good student, even thinking about furthering my education. But there I was on February 7, 1990, standing in a simple white dress for a quick wedding ceremony in my family home in Kentucky.

As I looked over my shoulder, my father stared straight ahead with my stepmother sitting next to him on a dingy couch. I was sure that this was

her doing.

Cal, my future husband, was statue-like as he stood next to me. The preacher stood before us with his bible in hand. He's saying something that's not registering, and then asks, "Do you take Cal to be your lawfully wedded husband, to honor, cherish and obey until death do you part?"

Obey? Whatever happened to love? Isn't that supposed to be part of the vows? I wanted to scream "no" and run away, but I knew better.

Maybe this was my only

"Dreams" to page 22

"Dreams" from page 21

way to escape the life I hated so much.

I said, "Yes," and became a teen-age bride. The wedding cake was store-bought with a gold foil "best wishes" decoration that the preacher's wife put in a small plastic bag for me. She told me to freeze a piece of cake for our first anniversary.

I didn't care about that. All I wanted to do was run away. This was not the wedding I had dreamed of, the husband I had imagined, or the life I wanted. For a moment, I closed my eyes to wish for the scene to change. It didn't.

I looked over at my father and new husband as Dad handed Cal something, patted him on the back

and welcomed him to the family.

The preacher needed our signatures on the marriage license. I skimmed it and checked the appropriate boxes, but I stopped on one of the questions. "Are you related? If so, how?" It seemed like a silly question at the time, but my future friends turned into a huge joke later about small town interfamily marriages in Kentucky.

I signed the bottom of the license and handed it back as we left. After Cal lit a cigarette and pulled out of the driveway, I decided that as a legal adult now, I should learn how to smoke. As I choked and coughed, Cal laughed with an obnoxious sound, grating my ears like fingernails on a chalkboard.

Our wedding night at the only hotel in the area



Melissa's second child and only son, Calvin. He showed signs of autism at an early age.

was spent in a cheap, filthy and alcohol smelling room.

We stayed at my father's house for nearly two months after the wedding until things became too strained. Then we loaded our few belongings into a 1979 Chevy Impala and headed north to Chicago to live with Cal's family in Riverside.

His sister hugged me warmly and welcomed me into her home, a nice bright and cheerful apartment that even had a television set. To me it was the lap of luxury.

We moved into our own place two months later, a little over a year later I learned that I was pregnant with an unwanted first child.

I didn't want kids at all. I had dreams and goals. I was going to start classes at Morton College next month.

How could this happen when I was trying so hard to prevent it?

Cal already had two daughters that I had to take care of half the week, how would I take care of a baby, too?



Calvin on a cell phone and skateboard.

I told Cal that night and was less than shocked at his response. "Good, now maybe you'll give up your crazy idea of school." He was afraid I would become educated and not be his little possession anymore. I was determined to escape this slavery of a life I had come to know.

After my daughter was born in Feb. 29, 1992, I looked at her as if she were an alien and feared never escaping.

I went about life preparing bottles, changing diapers, cooking meals, washing laundry and cleaning the house. At times, I snuck in some homework in the laundry room downstairs. Cal had destroyed the books he could find, so I hid things in the laundry room.

By May 1993, I had somehow earned a 3.8 GPA in my two years of college, even with the limited study-

ing. It was time to end this loveless, and sometimes violent, marriage.

With my daughter and our clothes, I drove back to my dad's house in Kentucky because it was the only place I ever had called home.

My father was still this emotionless figure that I was supposed to respect. After three months I made

the journey back to Chicago where Cal already had given up the apartment and was sleeping on his ex-girlfriend's couch.

Without a home, we lived in a tent at Hide-Away-Lakes campground until it was too cold, and then moved to a cheap motel with weekly rates. I was now four months pregnant with my second child.

One day when I was sitting at McDonalds watching my daughter in

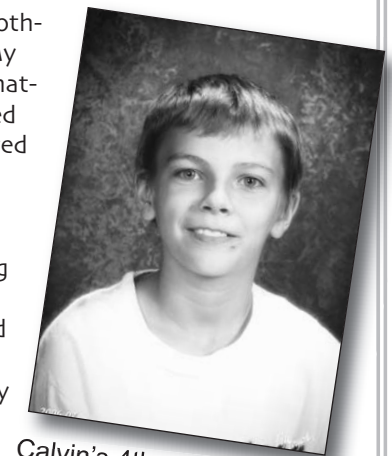
the Play Place, a young woman about my age started talking to me. Becky became my savior, my confident, and my best friend.

I started to attend Sunday services at her church where the churchgoers were nothing like the Bible thumpers back home. Becky helped me get an apartment in her building, where the landlord seemed nice enough and the place clean.

We moved there in December 1994 with nothing but our clothing. My new church friends donated some dishes and used furniture, which renewed my faith in humanity.

My son, Calvin J. Pointer, was born on March 29, 1995, looking a little like Mr. McGoo with his shiny head and half closed eyes. He seemed perfect in every way, and as a chance for a better future.

With three daughters, my husband had hoped for a son. Life was



Calvin's 4th grade school photo.

“He was afraid I would become educated and not be his little possession anymore. I was determined to escape this slavery of life I had come to know.”





After numerous doctor visits Calvin is making leaps and bounds toward a normal life.

"Dreams" from page 23

going to be okay. But my son did nothing more than cry at six weeks old as I walked the halls with him for hours one day, before I finally put him in the bedroom and closed the door. I couldn't take it anymore.

After Becky's husband came downstairs and knocked on the door to ask why Cal had been crying for more than three hours, I made a doctor's appointment for the next day. Cal was diagnosed with colic but my gut told me the doctor was wrong.

Over the next 18 months, more nonproductive doctor's visits reduced to an hysterical mom listening to excuses for why Cal seemed like screaming blob.

He didn't walk, talk, feed himself, or interact with anyone. A simple touch would send him into hours of screaming.

I found the Oak Leyden organization when Cal

was 18 months. I brought my son in daily for 10 days for multiple tests on him that revealed he had a Regulatory-Sensory Processing Disorder. After other diagnoses, specialists said he needed speech therapy, physical therapy and occupational therapy to get him back on track.

Six months later without much progress, it was time for a re-evaluation with a new round of specialists, and many more hours of observing my son react as if he were being tortured, and then a definitive diagnosis.

"Your son shows a large percent of the symptoms associated with autism." My heart was breaking because

somehow I believed it was my fault.

I enrolled Calvin in a strict program for autistic children where we learned sign language to communicate with him, tactics to draw him out of his shell, and coping skills. He learned how to walk, sign and

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feed himself. The physical therapist also worked to get him to accept certain senses without screaming. With long and exhausting days, Cal had progressed at age three to the ability of a one year old.

Local school districts take over with early intervention programs when children are age three so Cal went to an early intervention preschool in Forest Park.

I had little hope for my son growing up to be normal. By this time, we had a new pediatrician who was on-board with the autism diagnosis possibly caused by brain damage during his birth.

I cried for my son when I was told that he never would mentally be more age six. I cried for my son for the injustice, and the long road to nowhere and the struggles he would face. I never had heard my son's voice except during screaming episodes.

When Calvin turned five he went to a special education kindergarten where the teacher reminded me that I was doing everything right and that Cal would be okay.

Part of me had resigned myself to life with a special needs child but he was walking normally by now, although he wasn't potty trained and couldn't dress himself. At the first school conference the teacher called me in to discuss Cal's progress, telling me he was about two years delayed at a three-year-old

mentality. As she asked my son to tell me what he had learned so far, I screamed inside that he couldn't talk and that she was very inconsiderate for doing this to us.

Then I heard, "I love you Mommy," as his first spoken words and burst into tears. As I reached to hug Cal, he didn't pull away or scream. I knew he would be okay.

Over the next six years, Cal made leaps and bounds towards a normal life. In second grade he was put into a normal classroom, with normal kids. He turned into a loving child, always quick with a smile and a hug. He laughed, he talked, he got into trouble, and he became a normal boy.

Today Calvin is just mildly delayed with an official diagnosis is Asperger's Syndrome. We have our ups and downs, good moments and moments, tears and laughter.

He will begin his freshman year of high school in the fall. Part of his day will be spent in a contained classroom to keep him from getting too far off track. He is intelligent, and dreams of being an architect. He is loving, funny, and a joy to have in my life.

My life since Kentucky has been anything but traditional, but even if I don't have it all, I'm closer than when I was a naive 16-year-old in a simple white dress. 🐾



Melissa and Calvin at the junior/senior night at COD in 2009.