

# Her Name was Sara

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By Sandra Parker, Institute for Human Services

Without exaggeration, Sara was a beautiful child. Her perfect complexion and large, bright eyes could inspire makers of fine, pristine, porcelain dolls found in the most exclusive of shops. Sara was also a typical 18 month old: not fragile like the dolls would be, but ornery, energetic, uncoordinated, funny, sweet, and innocent. She was adored by her parents, best buddy to her three-year-old brother Jake, and the only granddaughter on either side of the family.

One of Sara's favorite activities was bath time with her brother: sharing toys, laughing, splashing, and taking turns painting one another's face with soapsuds. As it was on a particularly beautiful, sunny morning, with all their favorite toys floating in the water, Sara and Jake began their usual bath routine. Just minutes later, Jake reached around Sara and turned on the faucet. Sara's screams began soon after. Jake too cried out but was quickly able to escape by climbing out of the tub. Sara, though, was too little. Although she tried to get out, she kept slipping back into the hot, hot water.

As I stood beside her bed at the Columbus (now Nationwide) Children's Hospital, I wiped away a single tear as it released itself from her closed eye. Her face was all that was visible. Sara had suffered 3<sup>rd</sup> degree burns over 75% of her body. Sheathed in layers of gauze, IVs dripped necessary fluids and medications as her induced coma allowed her the benefit of "sleep" and a temporary reprieve from excruciating pain.

Doctors explained that a mere five seconds in 140 degree water would cause 3<sup>rd</sup> degree "full thickness" burns. The water temperature from the "hot" faucet at Sara's registered 160 degrees. Photos of her body revealed injuries more horrific than anything ever seen before in my life, or for that matter, since. To spare you, I will refrain from further description.

From Children's Hospital to Shriner's Hospital in Cincinnati, Sara was in treatment for months. Although my "official" work had long ago been completed, Sara's parents kept me apprised of the many highs, lows, successes and heartbreaks they experienced during her recovery. They sought support, comfort, and reassurance when things were difficult, and called in relief when things were going well. There's no denying that their daughter's accident had resulted in a unique bond between us.

One day I received the best call of all. Sara was going to be released from the hospital within a few days. She was going home!

When I last saw Sara, I was completely taken aback once again when I looked at her sweet, angelic, *perfect* face. She wore a pink dress, matching sweater and the cutest bonnet. I couldn't quite wrap my mind around the fact that she looked so *beautiful*. As I walked away, I remembered a certain promise -- that in death, there will be no more pain. For Sara, that meant no more scars or even missing fingers and toes. Sara would shed no more tears. Why? because two days before she was to go home, Sara died of complications.

In the first few days after Sara's accident, I was consumed with thoughts about her; about the anguish and horror she had experienced and whether she would survive. I thought about her brother and what it would be like for him as he grew older and understood what had happened. I thought about her parents and how unimaginable their heartache must be. I felt desperate to help but knew of nothing I could do except be there for them. This was no longer *just* a children services case. Although I could have assigned the family to one of several very capable caseworkers, I held on to this one. Looking back now, I'm sure all of this was a result of my own trauma, yet I didn't realize that. It never occurred to me that I might not have been okay.

As for others in the agency, I don't know if they recognized how deeply enmeshed I was in this case. Perhaps they knew and were afraid to say something. Or, because I was still taking care of my other responsibilities, maybe they didn't know. When I returned to the office after Sara's funeral, though, I think it was apparent to everyone. As I entered the building, someone asked me how things had gone and literally, I just doubled over and sobbed with a depth of emotion I didn't realize was there.

This was undoubtedly the most emotionally difficult case I experienced during my years in child welfare. What aided in my "recovery" was the support from *everyone* in my agency -- director, supervisors, caseworkers and others. They recognized, acknowledged, and shared my pain. They also found constructive ways to help me move forward. Contributing their own money, they encouraged me to purchase several children's books and donate them in Sara's memory to our local library. They also had me select a special rocking chair to be donated to the Shriner's Hospital in Cincinnati. On the back of the rocker we attached a brass plate with the words "In loving memory of Sara" and the years of her birth and death. And lastly, to convey our support and caring to Sara's family, we sent them photographs of the books and chair, along with a message of compassion signed by all the staff.

As I write this, I'm thinking how deeply I regret Sara's death and the heartbreak experienced by her family. But you know I don't regret being a part of it all. For a long time, I kept Sara's photograph on my desk to remind me what our work was all about. It served as a reminder too, to be "tuned in" to others; especially to the caseworkers I supervised, and to offer them my support and encouragement.

If I knew where Sara's parents were now, I would seek them out and let them know what a difference they made in my life. I would also tell them that in Sara's brief time on earth, she too, made a difference in the lives of so many.