



WHAT I WAS MEANT TO DO by Blythe Thimsen

JOE SALMON spends his days as a security officer at East Valley High School, where his tall frame and calm demeanor serve him well. When it comes time to clock out from the job, however, is when Salmon's real work begins. He heads home not to relax in front of the television or spend a lazy evening by himself. Rather, Salmon begins one of the most important jobs of his life: foster dad.

"It came from my childhood," says Salmon of his interest in helping children who have lived through trauma. "I was kind of a troubled kid to say the least. Growing up, I didn't have a dad, and then I had a difficult stepdad." Finally, one of his friend's father overlooked his self-professed "troublemaker" behavior, providing fatherly guidance and investing in him. It made all the difference for Salmon. "It really piqued an interest of what a positive role model is

in my life, and how that had changed a lot of the bad decisions I had made. Realizing that's where my interest was, that's when I started working with kids, and I just kind of naturally went to kids who had problems."

After working with kids for five years in Anchorage, Alaska at a psychiatric treatment center, he moved to Spokane to be closer to extended family. With 14 nieces and nephews, he has plenty of experience working with children. In Spokane, Salmon began working in a drug and alcohol treatment center for youth and as a case aide with foster kids before starting at East Valley High School seven years ago. He said, "I still wanted to do the group home for kids, so I found Morning Star after my coworkers recommended it, and I applied there as a part-time residential counselor."

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May is
NATIONAL
FOSTER CARE
Month

Salmon worked at Morning Star on weekends, but once he bought a house, he decided he was ready to become a foster parent.

In 2017, he took in his first foster child, a young boy who had been living at Morning Star. "It was cool to see the change in the child going from residential treatment into a home," says Salmon. "When you get a child out of that situation and they are in a home where it's kind of more normal, then you can have your consistency with them and work with them on specific goals."

"It can be awkward at first because you have a new little person in your house and they don't know what to expect, but I always say, 'Here's the rules, here's the things we can do.' I go off the basic rules that Morning Star incorporates into their programs. They know the expectations in the home because it is consistent with the same rules at Morning Star, then we adjust as we go along," Salmon explains.

The first boy who stayed with

Salmon was 7 years old and lived with him for 14 months before being adopted on the East Coast. Salmon was this boy's ninth home in his seven years of life.

"It's hard," he says of having a foster child move on to a permanent home. "I developed a healthy attachment to this child, but knowing he is doing well and to know he never has to move again, that is the reward right there!" Salmon worked with his adoptive parents to transition him into that home, knowing it was best for him.

Between placements, Salmon strategically takes time off to regroup before welcoming a new child into his home. His second foster child was an 8-year-old from Morning Star who had experienced a failed placement. "They were either going to put him back in the Ranch or try to find a different home for him, and since I already knew him, I agreed to take him in," says Salmon. That child lived with him for 9 months before being placed with a

family in Florida. Currently, Salmon is with his third foster child, a 13-year-old boy who has been with him for over a year.

"Usually, the kids will go through a honeymoon period," he says. "They will come in and just want to show their best, and I think the hardest part is figuring out who the child is and their needs. When the honeymoon period is over, you get the behaviors. It is just being consistent with saying, 'Okay, here are the boundaries.' Once they figure that out, it is almost like you can watch them relax or be at peace, because they know what to expect, that there won't be a big surprise. They know that if they push your buttons, you are not going to have them move out. Once you show a child that, you have built a foundation for them that they may never have had before."

Boundaries are not the only piece to fostering, though. Some of Salmon's favorite parts of being a foster dad? "Activities and vacations!" he says excitedly. "Every year I get a week off in February. My first foster child, it was his second time being on a plane. We went down to Universal Studios. It was his first time ever being in a theme park, it was a lot of firsts. We had a blast. My second foster child, we went to Disneyland. It was his first time ever being there. Just had a blast. My current foster child, we went down to Universal Studios for his first time on a plane, first time to a theme park, first time seeing the ocean. He loved it! We were playing on the beach, hunting for crabs—we just had an absolute blast!"

While his kids no doubt remember the fun times, Salmon hopes they take away even more important memories of their time together. "Hopefully, something I do makes a difference, so that they can take it with them for the rest of their life," he says of his influence on his foster children. "Sometime, when they are

thinking about making a bad decision, maybe they will stop and think, 'Joe would say this.' You don't always get to see the change, you don't always get to see the difference, but I've had foster children come back 10 years later that I worked with in Alaska who have called me up and said, 'Hey, you are the only staff I remember, I just wanted to say thank you, and here is where I am at in life.' They just want to keep that contact, so I know there is a difference being made. You just don't always get to see it right away."

That difference is what keeps Salmon doing what he does. "You are possibly giving this foster child the best part of their life that they will have. So that is rewarding. I don't want to say it outweighs the heartache of them leaving, but if you get to see that difference that you made, it definitely makes you proud and want to continue the work."

Will he continue being a foster dad? "Probably for a while," he says, "because Morning Star is amazing at supporting me as a foster parent. The care that they give, I never feel like I am doing this alone. There is a whole team up there that I know I can call. It doesn't matter if I talk to the case manager, the supervisor, Audrea, anybody, I know they will help. If they don't have the answers, they will find the answers. So if I didn't have Morning Star, I don't think I would be able to do it, just because it can be stressful at times, but knowing they are there 24/7 makes it more like you are working with family. They are always there to help and always offering extra help."

Even with the help of Morning Star, some people worry, thinking they could never serve in this capacity. "People's objection to fostering is always, 'I'd get too attached.'" says Salmon. "Yes, that's the point: it is not about you, it is about the child. You could be the best attachment they ever experience. I get to be the parent I never had. I get to be the person, for that child, that I didn't have. Just knowing I was able to help them and see the difference in their lives ...to hope it will continue on for the rest of their life, or that it at least gave them some tools to help them be successful regardless of the situation they will be in."

People are often surprised when they find out Salmon is a foster father. "People are like 'Oh, you are such a good person', and I am like, no I am not. It does not make me a great person. I enjoy doing it and I am blessed that I get to do what I enjoy. Not a lot of people get to do that at work. Not having father figure can do damage. If I have the power and the ability to do it to change someone's life, I am going to do it. I feel like I am doing what I was meant to do."

Morning Star Foster Care Program's recruitment and retention of foster families is funded 100% by mission supporters in our community. Please consider helping our initiative to provide quality therapeutic foster care homes in our community so children can grow and thrive as young adults.

Thank you in advance for being the light for foster families in our community.



Sincerely,

Audrea Marshall

Audrea Marshall, MOL
Executive Director

Morning Star Boys' Ranch
Morning Star Community Services
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