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KAREN BJERLAND



It's been almost 30 years, but to this day, I can still hear the keening wail from our son Jake* as my husband held him in his arms. You know the sound that an animal makes when it's hurt? It was a terrible thing to hear.

It was the day before Christmas, and Jake had just chucked our vacuum cleaner down a set of stairs into the tree. While my husband, Peter, carefully restrained Jake to prevent him from hurting himself or anyone else, Jake wailed for 45 minutes until he had exhausted himself.

Jake's behaviour had been out of control for many years, the result of childhood trauma with a young mother addicted to drugs. He had been in 19 different foster homes by the age of 2. Jake had lost the ability to trust or bond by the time Peter and his first wife had started to foster him at age 2. A brilliant child, with an IQ of 148, he was as charming as the day is long. But he couldn't sustain relationships and eventually exploded in anger.

As I cuddled Jake after he had calmed down, he said something we will never forget. "Mum, family is just too hard for me." At the age of 12, he had realized that he didn't have the capacity to live in a family atmosphere with other siblings (we have three other children in our blended family), and all the expectations that go along with it.

So Jake went back to the youth centre where he'd been living. Over the next few years, despite our attempts to help him, Jake got into trouble with the law. He spent time in juvenile detention, several mental health centres, and sadly, a lot of time on the street.

That's when he found his way to House of Friendship. He was only looking for a hot meal and a place to stay. But thanks to generous people like you, the remarkable staff at House of Friendship actually had a profound impact on the man he would become.

Peter and I are tremendously grateful for the gifts of respect and kindness our son

received at House of Friendship. We've been paying it forward as volunteers and most recently, with the decision to leave this wonderful organization a gift in our Will.

House of Friendship has our commitment, likely for the same reasons that you support them as well. They help thousands of people every year with food, addiction treatment, and housing.

But the organization also takes a holistic approach, going beyond direct service care to addressing systemic issues like poverty and inequality. That's why they also do outreach in marginalized communities to provide a buffer for people who, if they don't get help when they need it, might end up having a difficult kind of life like Jake has had.

You and I recognize there are always going to be people in our society who have a challenging path to walk. House of Friendship believes these people not only need help, but also respect. Their life is as precious as any other, regardless of what they did or what happened to them yesterday, last month or many years ago.

House of Friendship has a marvelous philosophy of walking alongside people and that's what makes them so unique. We know from our experience with Jake that people can't heal from anything if you treat them like a "client" instead of a fellow human being.

Our son is not a "patient" or a "client." He's a human being who is deserving of kindness, compassion and support in addressing the pain and barriers resulting from his childhood trauma. You can imagine how healing this was for my mother's heart to know Jake was being cared for as someone with value and potential!

I guess seeing our son go through this really shaped my perspective throughout my professional career, both as I transitioned out of my corporate career in Sales and Marketing to join Community Justice Initiatives (CJI) as Executive Director, and when I later re-joined FaithLife Financial where I eventually became CEO (2010) before retiring from that role in March of 2018.

My focus at CJI was mediation, including some reconciliation work with victims and offenders, which expanded my worldview of dignity for everyone. And these difficult reconciliation and mediation conversations were then helpful when I re-joined FaithLife Financial. All along the way, I developed a deeper respect for the "barn-raising" approach to community building, one which regards all human beings as individuals to be cherished.

What's so special about this journey is that Peter and I shared so much of it together beyond just our family life. Having met when we were both Lutheran youth ministry

volunteers, we shared our faith and also both worked at Lutheran Life (now FaithLife Financial), and then at CJI half-time to make sure we had energy as parents to invest in our family.

And now we both volunteer with House of Friendship. In retirement, I've continued to do community liaison work for House of Friendship as a volunteer. Right now, I am working with faith communities who are interested in redeveloping their mission and property for new ministry. For his part, Peter has been helping to fundraise for House of Friendship, a role he played professionally for a children's mental health centre for 20 years.

We continue to do this important work, including writing this letter to you, from a place of gratitude for what House of Friendship did for our son, and for all of the blessings that we have received in life.

I'm proud to tell you that Jake's story has a happy ending, but he did travel a long and rocky road to get there.

We received a lot of help from the Chief Psychiatrist at SickKids, who told us we had to stop trying to save Jake, because the damage had been done long before he came to us. He said that because of Jake's intelligence, his brain would eventually tell his body, "You can't keep running like this." But that reckoning might not come until Jake was 30, 35 or even 40.

In the interim, he advised, we just had to set our boundaries and let Jake know that we loved him. We also prayed that one of the situations he got himself into didn't cause him physical harm, or even death, in the meantime.

When he turned 18, Jake decided to move to Salt Spring Island to make a clean break from "too many memories and too many situations" in Ontario. We know he became involved in the drug culture that is so prevalent on Salt Spring for a few years, before moving to Lethbridge, Alberta.

I'm delighted to say that Jake did make it. Remember his stay at House of Friendship? Well, Jake developed tremendous admiration for the frontline workers who helped him during his time on the streets. That experience helped to shape the man he is today, a man with a huge heart who works at a home for older adults with severe intellectual limitations. Jake helps them to find meaningful ways to spend their retirement, such as learning to garden and cook.

Peter and I are incredibly grateful that Jake has been able to find himself in a vocation where he can make a difference in somebody else's life. He told Peter, "Dad,

I have a lot of things that I can teach these people!” For us, that’s a Godsend.

We have been richly blessed with great kids, a supportive community and friends, faith, and rewarding professional lives. If you’re like us, perhaps you have wondered the best way to manage the gifts that you have been given?

We strongly believe that we have an opportunity and an obligation to pass it along to the next generation. So it was easy to sit down with our lawyer and make a list of bequests in our Will, with House of Friendship at the top. Our faith teaches us that after we determine what is enough for our family, we have complete freedom to give.

It was a joyous decision to make that gift to House of Friendship to use where needed most, because we have complete confidence that their leadership will know exactly how to apply our gift when it’s eventually received.

Today I’d like to ask you to look back over your life’s journey and think about those times when someone helped you when you really needed it. What difference did it make in the trajectory of your life?

With a legacy gift, you can help ensure those opportunities will continue for people who don’t have the same kind of support from family and friends that you and I have enjoyed. Through the network of supports provided by House of Friendship, the people who need it the most will be able to feel that loving touch.

Research has shown that just one person can make a pivotal difference in the life of a troubled youth. I hope that my humble letter will prompt you to consider being that beacon of hope to those in need with your legacy gift to House of Friendship.

There’s a lot to contemplate when deciding to leave a gift and shape your own legacy. In fact, if I can be of help to you in any way as you consider this decision for your Will, please just send me an email at **bjerlandkaren@gmail.com** and I’d love to connect with you personally.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Karen Bjerland". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Karen Bjerland

Retired Business Leader, Legacy Donor and Volunteer