

FASD Video Series Transcript: Julie

Narrator: Lived Experiences with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders.
Julie.

Julie: My name is Julie Gelo. My second husband and I moved out to Seattle, Washington, and we became foster parents. And we have since now adopted formally through the courts 13 children, informally, close to 10. So, we do have a lot of children and now a lot of grandchildren, and six great-grandchildren.

We had Faith and two more daughters, and my husband had three children. And then we came out here and we were foster parents, and these first two boys were out of control. And so, everything that we tried with the first two boys that we had tried with our other children just wasn't working. And so, my second birth daughter had gone to a health class where the speaker was talking about fetal alcohol spectrum disorders, and she came home with this packet of papers and she said, "Mom, you better read this." So, I started to read it and I'm going, "Oh my God, oh my God." I called a social worker and I said, "Is it possible that their mom drank?" "Well, yeah." And I said, "Well, have they ever been assessed for fetal alcohol spectrum disorder?" "What is that?" I thought, "Oh, now we're really in trouble." I don't know what it is. The social worker doesn't know what it is. And in the packet, there was a business card for the newly-formed FAS DPN clinic and I called the number. I asked if we could get put on the list, and they did, and we took the boys in because we didn't have actual documented alcohol exposure, but we did get diagnoses of neurological brain damage. And then subsequently from there, we had probably another 45 foster kids or so after that. All of them, we did end up with mostly documented alcohol exposure, and so I was taking all of them down to the clinic for diagnosis. And every time I would come home, I would think about, you know, I drank just as much if not more than most of these others' mothers did when they were pregnant with their kids. I always vowed as a child that I was never going to drink like my dad, and yet I was drinking by the time I was seven.

I gave birth to my oldest daughter, Faith two days after I turned 18, and never thought anything about it. Although the doctor that was my doctor back then, even though I was 17 years old said, "Julie, it's all right. You can have beers. It's okay. You know, it'll help you relax." It was written in the common practice notes in the hospital that when they brought the babies out to the mothers, to the nursing mothers, that they would also bring a can of beer because they believed that the malt in the beer would help bring in the breast milk. And I know that there are still obstetricians and gynecologists who are still encouraging women. They say, "Well, if you don't drink during the first trimester, you'll be okay." Or, you know, "If you only drink wine, you'll be all right." But I would just keep coming back and coming back to my fifth step and stuff and really thinking about how much I had drank and going over and over about who my drinking had harmed the most. And so, I called her and I said, "You know, Faith, would you want to know if my drinking had ever changed anything about your body or your brain or your learning or anything like that?" She came down to the clinic with me. And when we left that day, I was the birth mom of a daughter with full fetal alcohol syndrome. I had 17 years in of sobriety by that point.

And I thought that I had worked my steps over and over and over, and nothing had prepared me [Julie tears up] for the level of blame, shame, guilt that I felt that day. And when, I kind of sat with her at the table that night and I said, "You know, Faith, I am so sorry. I am just so sorry. And I wouldn't blame you if you hated me, you know? And if you never wanted to talk to me again." I know that she's struggled with certain topics in school, math other things, but she's got strengths too. She is so resilient.

Brandon is our adopted son, and he is now 29 years old. He came when he was 10 days old, and they were almost positive like right at birth that he probably had FAS. He was growth deficient as a newborn. He was microcephalic as a newborn. His mom was inebriated at the time of birth. He was still weighing only a little over five pounds at three and a half months. He had a feeding tube in by that point, so it wasn't real hard to meet all of the criteria.

When we took him to his first neurology appointment, they told me that Brandon wouldn't live to be a year old. And they said, "You know, if he does live, he'll be so..." Well, they didn't use the words "intellectually disabled. They used the old word. Now he is 29, and not only does he walk, he runs. He played basketball, track, bowling. His team in Special Olympics won the state tournaments in basketball four years in a row. But now his strength is music, and that's his passion. And that's where I want to put my focus today.

It doesn't matter if you have differences or disabilities, or anything like that, you can do it. You can do it. You can make it.

Narrator: For more information, visit www.cdc.gov/fasd.