

## A year with foster family a lifelong template for boy

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Some days, the boy would go bounding into the sunlight with the kids he thought of as his brothers. Other days, he would retreat to the attic in his foster home to sob over his mother's pictures and her few remaining dresses. It was just a year, but those days shaped his whole life.

In 1983, Paul and Dottie Brennan welcomed a foster child into their Maunawili home. Over the years, they would take in 20 more, but Fred was their first. Paul, a Ph.D. in anthropology and linguistics, and Dottie, a teacher at Good Shepherd Preschool, had four sons of their own, ranging in age from 17 to 11. Dottie heard about Fred from another mom at Good Shepherd. The Brennan family, originally from the Midwest, had lived for a time in the jungles of New Guinea and were unafraid of new adventures.

But the circumstances of 10-year-old Fred's life were beyond their realm of experience.

Fred Van Cleave was born in Honolulu and raised by a single mother after his father abandoned them. His mother, who had emigrated from Vietnam, was stricken with breast cancer, and during her surgeries, radiation and chemotherapy, she had no family to take care of Fred. The boy would stay with her at Kuakini Hospital for weeks at a time, sleeping on a cot in her room and watching her waste away.

One nurse, Alberta Yamada, took it upon herself to look after Fred. She and other Kuakini staff fed him, made sure he was comfortable and kept an eye on him while he kept his vigil. On the night his mother died, Yamada took him to her home.

Yamada made sure Fred was placed with a foster family. The Brennans got him when the first family had to relocate to the mainland.

"He was pleasant, alert, gangly, a smart little guy," Paul Brennan remembers. "He had big glasses and long hair and three colored pens in his shirt pocket. My boys would tease him, 'Are you going to the bank to sign your checks?'"

"The Brennans were not your normal family propped in front of the TV watching sitcoms," Fred said. "They were active and healthy, they encouraged creativity. The boys were into art and swimming, basketball, surfing, running."

The Brennan boys treated Fred like a brother, teaching him things and getting on his case. Jason, the youngest, had to share his room with Fred, and there were fights over rules and chores and the typical stuff brothers fight over. "My diary is full of references to Fred," Brennan said. "There were visits to the principal's office, homework that didn't get done. But we got through that."

"For me they were just examples of everything -- of how hard work pays off and of how to be a good person," Fred said. "It was the first and last time I was exposed to a real family."

Fred was a city kid. He and his mom had lived downtown on the 12th floor of a 16-floor building. He had never

climbed a tree before, never ridden a bike. The Brennans took him hiking on Olomana, snorkeling at Hanauma, looking for opae in mountain streams. "They didn't just feed me and clothe me. They taught me values," Fred said.

But after a year, just before his 12th birthday, Fred's father came back into the picture. He persuaded the state to let Fred travel to Mississippi for a month's visit. Fred was full of trepidation.

"Fred's mother had two dying wishes: One was to have someone take care of her son, and the other was please don't let my son go to his father," Brennan said.

Fred had no choice in the matter. Brennan, who is also an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ, went with Fred from Honolulu to Dallas and put him on a plane to Mississippi. "I told him, 'I will see you in a month. I will be waiting for you in L.A., and I will find you.'"

A month passed, and Brennan waited in the Los Angeles Airport. Fred never came. His father had canceled his return ticket the day he had arrived in Mississippi. "I had to get on the plane back to Hawaii alone," Brennan said. "My boys were as crestfallen as I was."

Fred's life with his father was unstable at best and abusive at worst. His father, whom he describes as a con man and a heavy drinker, moved them from town to town in the south. After three years, Fred's father abandoned him for the second time in his life, this time along a Texas roadside. Fred found his way back to Mississippi and was taken in by the single mother of a school friend. Fred stayed with them until he graduated from high school, and then got scholarships to attend junior college. Then he was on his own.

It took him 12 years to reach out to the Brennan family.

"I didn't feel I could make contact with the Brennans again until I had my life in order. I wanted to be able to say that I was OK."

"He didn't ask for anything," Brennan said, "just affirmation of the tie that still remained."

This week, for the first time in 27 years, Fred came home to Hawaii. He is 39, married and an administrator at Methodist Hospital in Memphis. "I'm not rich and I'm not famous, but I'm stable and productive. And I'm happy," he said. When Paul, now 73, and Dottie, 74, asked him what he'd like to do during his stay, he said he wanted to visit his mother's ashes, but other than that, "I just want to sit in the living room and soak it all up."

The nurse who took him in the night his mother died, Alberta Yamada, came over to the Brennans' house to see him, too. She brought with her Fred's wallet, which had fallen behind the bed he had slept on when he stayed with her family. She had kept it all these years in the hope that she'd see him again. Inside the wallet were pictures of Fred's childhood before his mother died.

After that first phone call in 1997, Fred wrote a letter to Brennan for Father's Day. "Fred isn't much into sentimental stuff. The letter was hard and lean and right to the point," Brennan recalls. "He wrote, 'I just want you to know that you taught me how to ride a bicycle, how to swim, how to sail down the hill in a go-cart ... and survive!' He said 'You will always be my family and I love you.' How can you do better than that?"

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