

After years of turmoil, 2 siblings in foster system land in loving home



After four years in foster care, Alexis and Laron Turner were adopted by Rufus Grayer Sr., whose niece was their adoptive mother before she died.

By **Bonnie Miller Rubin** · Contact Reporter
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In a tidy brownstone in North Lawndale, three people — two children and one widower — will be celebrating their first Christmas together as a family.

Rufus Grayer Sr. adopted his great-niece and great-nephew, Alexis, 15, and Laron Turner, 12, last month, after the siblings bounced around foster care for four years. The 68-year-old does not share a single chromosome with these youngsters, who were the adopted children of his niece, but they are family, bound together by choice.

"I think they came along at just the right time," said the retired truck driver, who had already raised five children with his wife, who died in 2010. "They helped me heal and filled a void in my heart."

That same year, Alexis and Laron were grappling with a profound loss of their own. Their adoptive mother, Grayer's niece, Sondra Turner, died unexpectedly at age 42 of cardiovascular disease. Turner, who was single and a city employee, became their foster mother in October 2003 after the children were removed from their home by the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services because of neglect. Alexis was 3 years old and Laron just 8 months.

It would be another six years before the parental rights of the children's biological mother were terminated and Turner could legally adopt them. In the meantime, the children had bonded with Turner, who, for all practical purposes, was the only parent they had ever known. The adoption was official in March 2010, and she died four months later.

"She was a really good mom," said Alexis, the more talkative of the pair. "We did fun things like go to Disney ... and she took me to ballet and Girl Scouts."

Said Laron: "There would always be lots of family around. Then we saw her in the hospital ... and she was gone."

And with Turner's death — and no will or guardianship instructions in place — their ordered lives were thrown into a tailspin.

As minors, the siblings returned to DCFS, just two of the approximately 14,600 children in the state — and almost 400,000 in the U.S. — who are living without permanent families in the foster care system.

For the next four years, brother and sister were constantly on the move, logging five addresses, including those of an aunt, a brother and Turner's ex-husband, according to DCFS.

At every stop, Alexis and Laron said they felt like outsiders, always trying to fit into crowded households, where resources and parenting skills were already stretched thin.

The disruption took such an emotional toll on Alexis that she needed to be hospitalized. "Every night, I didn't know where I was going to sleep," she said. "No one was there for me."

Laron says little about the turmoil, summing up his emotional state in a single word: "Depressed."

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— Teresa Bernu, the Turners' case manager at the Center for Law and Social Work

In July 2014, the children ran away, ending up at neighbor's house. The neighbor was a friend of Grayer's oldest daughter, Janet, who called her father. After receiving the call, he brought them home that same day.

"I didn't think twice," Grayer said. "I told them they could stay here as long as they liked. It tore me apart to see what they had been through in their short lives."

As for Grayer's age, all adoptive parents and guardians 60 and older must submit a comprehensive medical evaluation, including documenting no physical or cognitive limitations that would prevent the prospective person from parenting, according to DCFS.

"He is so stable and calm, which is exactly what these kids needed after so much turbulence," said Teresa Bernu, the children's case manager at the Center for Law and Social Work, the agency that handled their adoption.

"I wish we had a home like this for every child in foster care right now, because it would transform this city," Bernu said.

Accumulating research shows how important it is for a child to have a loving, consistent and responsive caregiver early in life, when neural connections are being formed. When an adult's responses to a child are unpredictable or simply absent, the developing architecture of the brain may be disrupted, leading to lifelong problems in learning, behavior and mental health, according to a report from [Harvard University's Center on the Developing Child](#).

But Grayer insists he is the one who is fortunate. His own children — ages 26 to 52 — are busy with their own lives. After the death of Naomi, his wife of 44 years, the clock seemed to barely budge and loneliness was his constant companion. Now his days are filled with cooking, overseeing class assignments and enforcing curfew and other rules, such as no fighting in the house.

Despite the fact that the Mississippi native has only an 11th-grade education, he is determined that his new son and daughter will keep up their grades and attend college.

"I like it when people are strict with me," said Alexis, whose favorite subject is math and who hopes to be a doctor. "When my teachers fuss at me, it makes me want to get better."

Since moving in with "Pa-Pa," Laron's report card went from D's and F's to mostly A's and B's, and just last month he was honored as a "scholar on the rise" at Legacy Charter School, which the children have attended since elementary school. If the seventh-grader doesn't get into the NBA, his fallback position is marine biologist.

Throughout the turmoil, Legacy has tried to wrap them in love and attention.

"We wouldn't have it any other way," Legacy Principal Lisa Kenner said. "They were going through such heartbreak. We feel that it's our professional and ethical responsibility to make school a place of sanctuary, imagination and healing."

Last month, the siblings went to court and told the judge they wanted Grayer to adopt them. It was the end of a lengthy journey in the system, with constant visits to therapists, attorneys and social workers. Then the three came home to a celebratory dinner of pork chops and candied yams — Grayer's signature dish and Laron's favorite.

By early December, Pa-Pa already had gifts carefully arranged under the tree. On Christmas Day, this newly minted family plans to go to church and then enjoy an even more bountiful meal — turkey, ham, biscuits, greens — shared with a house full of extended family.

The siblings believe their mom would be proud of their resilience. Their advice for other youngsters in crisis?

"Believe in yourself," Alexis said. "If you believe in yourself, you can do it."

Said Laron: "Just keep going, no matter what. The important thing is to just keep going."

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