Children born of alcohol: The story of an Alaskan Natives path to advocacy

I could not help but close my eyes at the melancholy and eerie sound, it lingered and curled and told the story of hopelessness and strength, it told the story of love and loss and of retribution, it told the story of the past and future. It was the story of Morgan Fawcett of the Eagle Moiety and child of the Kaagwaantaan, a native Alaskan youth. Of 2019, he is about 27 years old, but to see his slowly frame and wide brown eyes you instantly believe in the ageless power he has come to encompass.

 

To do Fawcett and his legacy justice, his story must begin with family. He was born with FASD (fetal alcohol spectrum disorder). Like the name implies it has a range of symptoms, According to world link, “It is a condition that varies greatly from one case to another. Some victims suffer severe retardation while others are uncoordinated and struggle with mathematical concepts. Some never grow hair and have disfigured skulls, but others merely have high foreheads and crooked. For Fawcett it left him with “scoliosis, sub mucous cleft palate, spina bifida occulta, underdeveloped muscle mass, deformed hips, nearsightedness, eyes that focus incorrectly, sensory-integration problems, intellectual disabilities and cognitive-skill deficits.” an illness and congruent pain he would have to deal with for the rest of his life. His history of alcohol does not begin with his mother, as much as his cure did not end with the flute. In fact FASD has an unprecedented impact on the American Indian community, for they are more prone genetically to alcoholism. It is a horrible drug that is linked to their history with colonizers and have manifested as an illness is Fawcett's mother. And as Fawcett insists his mother was never a “bad person, there is a stigma on moms...they’re (in terms of fsad) only victims and never perpetrators”.

She began to drink quite suddenly and quite often. She “drank 90 to 100 days during her pregnancy”. This illness could only be momentarily cured as while pregnant she was thrown in jail to force her sobriety. This was September 9th. This was the day of Morgan Fawcett’s own liberation from the constant alcohol abuse, a day he memorialized by creating FASD awareness week beginning on that day. In jail, Fawcett's mother was able to finish her pregnancy term.

 When Morgan Fawcett was born he was born extremely underweight, completely bare, and frail. He was born with a range of illnesses, many would not survive, and already he was a fighter. As a child of 6 months old, he is removed from the custody of his still alcoholic mother and placed in the care of his father. There he was emotionally, physically, and sexually abused until age 13 when a school counselor discovered it and immediately placed him in the custody of people who would change his life.

 Fawcett often gushes about his relationship with his mother, stating profusely his love for her and the bravery she has in spite of the illness. His humility at times, is vast in the face of his obstacles, yet one cannot help but remember the foundation of his gratitude.

 He was placed into the custody of his adopted grandparents Sue and Roy Hamper. There they worked with him through his significant disabilities, his short term memories, and then deemed retardation. It was not until he turned 15 that he gained the truth about who he was. He found out through research about his fsad and is obsessed with collecting information and ways of advocacy for it. He credited this pursuit to the relief of finding out he was not “stupid” as society had lead him to believe, no he was just in a position outside of his control. And it would be a great crime to call him stupid or even label him as anything other than what he has built himself to be, explaining “I want to tell my story about FASD. I want to play my flute. I want to help others.” Grandma Sue looked at him, he says, and replied, “well, how exactly you are going to do that?’” “I don’t know, Grandma Sue,” he says he told her, “That’s your job.” His short term memory as previously stated, creates a gap between him and normal children for he has the cognitive skills of a four year old, and the overall brain development of an 11 year old. When he learned the true definition of who he was his life expanded. Many children like this, most under age 7 in the American Indian community usually are late to diagnose FASD, instead being labeled as mentally regarded within school because of the congruent symptoms.

 Fawcett has made it his entire life mission to stop this “Dedicating his professional life to One Heart Creations has meant talking about his very painful experiences with FASD over and over again. “It’s not easy for me to talk about,” he says. “It does hurt me to tell it. But someone has to do it. Someone has to say in a calm, collected manner, ‘This is what alcohol does.’?” His story is testament to the power of that know left, when he learned the nature and extent of his illness he was able to tailor his unique learning style, becoming a 4.0 student for the first time of his life in college. Yet this day to day activity and studying and even mere survival is many parts due to the efforts of his grandparents, who understand when to give his energy depleting brain a break, who remind him to eat, who gives him love.

 

 Yet the greatest gift of his life, according to him, came from his Grandmother Sue who gifted him his wooden flute. The instrument meshed so well with his persona and composition, it was a direct route to his lineage, and his soul seemed to acknowledge that because without formal training he was able to compose masterful and extremely advanced pieces. “Unlike a traditional flute, the Native American model has a mouthpiece and is handled in the manner of a clarinet or oboe. Morgan's flutes vary in size, but in general, they produce a lower pitch than the European variety.” With the flute he describes wanting to go to “Pow Wows” and bring his native culture in every breath. The flute was described in an article as his medicine, as it lowered his blood pressure and relieve stress by releasing endorphins to his brain. Without the flute, he would not be able to form a complete thought. Through the gift of music he has become an activist for Indigenous people and Native Americans with FASD finding one heart creation for FASD awareness. This allowed him to give over 600 flutes to youths within four years. He is extremely accomplished as a musician with three published albums, public speaker and activist, going as far as to be awarded by the Alaska state legislature NOFAS leadership award. He even founded one heart creation for FASD awareness, “Part of the goal of Morgan's nonprofit organization is to speak with children who might have FAS before they succumb to these temptations.”

 In many instances he travels around the world giving speeches, to raise awareness and develop advocacy. In his speech about living with fads and the horrible effects of it he is studying in saying, “Having my grams or grandfather should help me out”. And this familial connection is preached in most of his advocacy. Yes, as the cultural acknowledgement of the people before him but also to explain the connectedness of the disease. Morgan Fawcett could never be described alone, in his speech before he even speaks of his advocacy and one hearts mission he develops the foundation of family. This insistence, leads one to think about connections farther than blood, that if we began to acknowledge and say thank you, and understand others for the horrible disease alcoholism is in many native American communities, for the fact that they are our brothers and it would be impossible not to care, are we not even more to blame in a mother losing her child with alcohol?

 

 Fawcett never begins a speech without playing a song from his flute. This allows his audience to calm down and focus, it is almost like a blanket that settles around the room, medicine for the soul. Many people say music is not powerful enough to raise awareness, that telling his story and playing the flute is not enough for advocacy, but I say finding a unique bridge to communication is the utmost form of advocacy. Fawcett has found this and despite all does it well.