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Kristin's Story on Survival and Opportunity

My life changed when my daughter was born, and then again when she was six months old and I became a single parent. That change brought struggle, insecurity and vulnerability that remains a part, but not the whole, of our lives.

Before my daughter was born, I taught elementary school. After she was born, I decided not to return to teaching because the pay did little more than cover the cost for child care. So I chose to move back in with my parents so I could raise my daughter full-time. This was one of the best

decisions I made for her. It gave us the chance to have a few years together not struggling for our livelihood on a daily basis.

When my daughter began kindergarten, we were able to find a place of our own after I secured a job. It was a good and necessary transition, but we struggled to find stability as we became more independent. It was tough finding a safe and affordable home to live in, and we moved around a lot. When my income exceeded the eligibility requirements for the Oregon Health Plan, I went without health insurance—only to find myself with a life-threatening health condition and mounting health care bills.

Being a single parent, you live with stress and anxiety every day. You think about everything you spend. You say the phrase in your head and to your daughter on a daily basis, “we can’t afford that.” This refers to clothes, better food, eating out, playing a sport, participating in a camp, taking a vacation and so on.

You keep your eye on the ball at all times—that ball is survival. You never know when things will change, so you plan for the worst-case scenario. Doing without becomes your way of life. Being resourceful becomes your way of life. Living with stress becomes your way of life. With a great deal of perseverance, I have succeeded in making a more stable life for my daughter and myself. But it is still not easy and the fight continues daily.

I know my story is not unique. Nearly every single mother can tell a variation of this same story. The question I live with every day is this: Why have we set up a system that seems to punish single parents and their children? I believe we should be providing the same basic needs to everyone—affordable child care, health insurance, healthy food, affordable housing, livable wages, and a quality education. We need a safety net that levels the playing field so everyone can live a full and satisfying life. Suffering is not the solution to changing people’s lives. People’s lives are changed by providing resources that create security and open up opportunities.