

Calvin's Story

Mine is kind of an unusual story. I was raised by military parents who showed me the world through Air Force travel. I've lived in 7 different countries and used to speak three languages. I know I can't blame my parents for the situation I'm in now, but I often wonder if moving so often while growing up contributed to my inability to settle down.

My name is Calvin and I'm a single father of two very sweet little girls, Micah and Josie. Their mother, Sophia, and I were married when I was 18 and she was 21. I know, I know. What were we thinking? We were in love! She was going to a private D.C. university pursuing a law degree, and I was what you'd call a "townie" with no desire to pursue anything but a football afternoon with my Washington Redskins. While Sophia studied for hours and occupied her time going from class to class, I worked the lunch and dinner shifts at a great Italian bistro in the West End neighborhood of Washington, DC. It's where we first met. My hourly wage wasn't much, but the tips were pretty good and the free food I took home at the end of an evening helped our budget.

I had never really lived on a budget growing up. My parents supported me all the way through high school, basically giving me money for all the things I thought I needed, but, more to the point, wanted. I never gave that arrangement a moment's thought, which is why I was left ignorant about balancing income, expenses and spending. In high school, my parents' silent expectation was that I would follow in my sister's footsteps and go off to a state university. What they didn't know was that all the moving around we did while I was growing up left me with a taste for more travel, more excitement, and more freedom. Senior year in high school was punctuated with long discussions about the value of a degree followed by arguments of why I needed time off from school, which then typically escalated into shouting matches that lasted well into the night. That's when they cut me off, and that's when I left home.

Well, I actually just moved across the Potomac River into the District, but for the first time in my life I was on my own with no parent-provided income and no real skill set to land me a real job. Scary? Absolutely. But, that's when I met Sophia. She walked into the bistro late one night, cell phone to ear, backpack full of books slung over one shoulder and music playing loudly from a discarded ear bud dangling from her iPod. She ordered a late night carry-out dinner but realized she had left her wallet in her apartment earlier that day. I offered to walk the food to her apartment, collect the charge and walk back to work. The problem was I never went back that night. Sophia and I talked through the night and well into the morning. We fell in love that night. I kept my job while she worked towards her law degree.

Fast forward to today, four years later. I'm a single dad, with an 18-month-old and a three-and-a-half year old. Over the last three years, my skill set developed into diaper changing, housecleaning and play dates. Eight months ago Sophia earned her law degree and began clerking for a Justice when one unusually warm day in February (while being her typically disorganized and daydreaming kind of girl), she stepped out onto M Street in Georgetown just as a taxi rounded the corner. Witnesses say she never looked up. The driver said he never expected a pedestrian to keep on walking right out in front of him. As a result he never slowed and Sophia is now gone forever.

I've moved back across the river to a small D.C. suburb where my girls and I live in public housing. I couldn't afford our D.C. apartment any longer. Money tucked away from Sophia's paychecks was gone and I was frantic.

Recently I heard about a program called Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). It's a government program that supports single parents who want to get back to work while raising small children. I spotted the flyer one day at our local public library. So I called them. I was desperate to start playing the role of the responsible dad. I have to admit I was a little skeptical about this whole TANF program, but it looked like the temporary safety net I needed. I was given my own counselor who listened to my story, let me talk about the girls and what I thought the future would hold for them, but most of all I talked about Sophia and the plans we had made over the last four years.

I was told TANF is available to temporarily help out families with small kids while helping the parent get back to work. It's a welfare-to-work program, but it comes with some strings attached, too. That was OK with me. The counselor explained that I had to be enrolled in some kind of job-related program and that my benefits couldn't last more than 60 months. I thought, "Man, we're in trouble if I can't get my act together in five years!"

The job counselors helped me enroll in a computer technician training program at a local community college. I wanted to land a job that would eventually allow the three of us to be on the same schedule when the girls went off to school. The TANF counselor told me about the huge IT departments many of the area's very large school districts employ. So, my goal was to get this IT degree and get a job with one of them. Because I go to school online, I had to buy my own computer and I had to get Internet service. I take nine credits each semester and I do most of my work while the girls are sleeping at night. During finals week, I get some child care help from a babysitting co-op. At other times, I help the members of the co-op with child care they need.

I'm also getting some help with food stamps through a program now called SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program). While I realize all of this help is temporary until I can get my feet back on the ground and begin working a meaningful job to support the three of us, I'm grateful for the help these programs provide me. Just the other night Josie woke with a fever and ear problems. Sure enough it was an infection. My Medicaid benefits paid the emergency room bill. Medicaid is there to help people like me who are categorized as "low-income" individuals with kids. I guess that's the polite way of saying I can't pay my bills. That's OK with me. I just have to stay focused and know that these benefits programs are a bridge to a brighter future when I have a full-time job with medical benefits and can afford to put a better roof over our heads.

Two weeks ago, I landed a part-time job at a local computer repair shop. I work 15 hours a week and earn \$9 an hour. I was a bit concerned about losing my government aid benefits, but these programs **encourage** you to get out there and find a job. Before I got the job, we got \$574 a month from TANF. Now that I'm working, I earn about \$520 a month after taxes and get \$250 a month from TANF. Our food stamps went from \$396 a month to \$353 a month. I found out our rent won't increase for the first year I'm on the job, so we have more money to live on now than before I started working.

I'm working enough to need child care, but I receive a child care benefit that helps me pay for the two girls to be looked after while I'm working and going to school. My food stamp allowance has been decreased slightly, but I feel a new level of pride when I can pay for at least part of the groceries with my own money. I also found out that we qualify for the Earned Income Tax Credit, which will give me a huge refund that's more than five months of my take-home pay!

All of these steps are baby steps, but I'm beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel. And, I'm beginning to see a new beginning for Josie, Micah and me.