

Pass It On®...

Being a Mother... *The roundabout journey to a dream fulfilled.*

Li lives in a small New England town. She had two dreams growing up: to be a nurse and to raise a family. She got through nursing school OK; she says the classwork was much harder than being with patients. She got married, and the road ahead seemed cloudless and bright; it always does when things are going according to plan.

But somewhere along the way, the marriage went south, and a year later, she injured her back and couldn't work. The story could end there. Many do. Life just doesn't seem to work out the way we want, no matter how hard we work or how tightly we hang onto our dreams.

As Li pushed herself in rehab, her body strengthened, and so did her resolve. She found work at a home for disabled children that didn't require her to lift patients, and there she found her family. For 30 years, she took care of kids that were too difficult for their own parents to raise. She nursed their skinned knees and wounded hearts. She helped them through confusing emotions and the frustrations of being different. But most importantly, she met Julian, a 7-year-old boy with learning challenges and a smile that melted her heart.

"I had to adopt him," she recalls. "He had been in 37 foster homes in six years. The goal was to raise him to be independent."

Every day, Julian went to work with his new mother Li and came home to the stability of a room of his own, a box with his favorite things and the love of a mother. Still, it wasn't easy. Julian was prone to outbursts or withdrawing.

"There was so much that Julian had to learn emotionally," Li says. "But I had time, and he was willing."

Over the years, their bond grew tighter. Julian earned his independence. He found a job and a place to live and became an adult. "All those things nobody believed he would ever become, he was doing," Li says.

Eventually, Li's back prevented her from doing much work at all. After all those years of lifting and helping others, Li found herself unable to do much physically. Her back deteriorated, and she needed help with the chores that come with daily living. And there was Julian. Who would check in on him?

But life has a way of surprising us, turning just the way we need it to. Julian checked in on his mother every morning before work. He tended the garden, shook out the rugs, lifted the laundry baskets. And after work, he held his mother by the elbow and helped her to the chair on the porch where she used to sit and watch him play. "He still melts my heart," Li says.

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