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Mounds View's Sawtell clears a big hurdle



David Brewster, Star Tribune

Kayla Sawtell's life improved when she took a fresh approach to being adopted and to being parented. Now the Mounds View star has won a track scholarship to Howard University.

Kayla Sawtell of Mounds View struggled with being adopted. It wasn't until she stopped blaming her birth and adoptive mothers for her problems that she blossomed.

By **DAVID LA VAQUE**, Star Tribune

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Finally, near the end of a stellar track and field

career at Mounds View, Kayla Sawtell can admit her appreciation for her mother's pre-race fanfare.

"I act like I'm embarrassed, but I secretly love it," Kayla said of her mother, Kim, who cheers and employs a distinct whistle that used to call Kayla and her siblings in for dinner. "It just feels so good to hear your name announced and then hear my mom cheering."

Their personal bond needed years to strengthen as well. Kayla was the second of three biologically unrelated black children adopted by Kim and Ron Sawtell, a white couple who also raised two birth sons.

From a young age, Kayla channeled her resentment of the situation toward her adoptive mother. Kayla made her peace with adoption, and her mom, about two years ago. But Sawtell still desired a reunion with her birth mother and the chance to look into a familiar face.

Then last summer, Sawtell sent a Facebook friend request to Kaletha Smith Grover. A response came the next day, one that included the magic words, "I think I am your birth mother." Weeks of contact led to a September reunion in Minnesota, one that fulfilled Sawtell and both moms.

"It's gone so smoothly," Sawtell said. "I really feel like I have two families now."

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'You're not my real mom'

Being adopted never used to agree with Sawtell. When it came to stubbornness, Kim said, "On a scale of 10, Kayla would be a 30."

When scolded or frustrated, Sawtell would attempt to wound Kim by saying, "You're not my real mom."

"I'm not going to say it didn't hurt," Kim said. "But my argument with her was, 'I'm sorry that you don't think this is where you belong. You're going to have to take the argument up with God because we are convinced you belong here.'"

Before Smith Grover gave her daughter up for adoption, she named her Kayla Ranea. By sheer coincidence -- by God's design, both mothers now believe -- the Sawtells named her Kayla Renae.

When Kayla was born, Smith Grover was already a single mother of one, struggling to make ends meet as a Private First Class stationed at Fort Benning, Ga. She tried for three months to support her son and Kayla -- "the most beautiful thing I ever saw," she said -- but her efforts proved unsuccessful. She brought Kayla to New Beginnings adoption service.

"I didn't want my child to suffer, but when I left her I cried all the way back to the house because I left a part of me," Smith Grover said. "Every year on her birthday I called the agency and told them

to let her know I never forgot about her."

Burying the blame

Kim Sawtell got her daughter involved in track and field in the seventh grade, much to Kayla's chagrin. She would have preferred not to push herself against bigger, faster athletes in Mounds View's traditionally strong track and field program.

Kayla tried to quit, but her mother would not budge -- just one more battle in their long and sometime painful war of wills. Then, as a sophomore, Kayla had a revelation.

"She came downstairs one day, stood in front of me and said, 'Mom, I've realized that I cannot blame everything bad that's ever happened to me on being adopted,'" Kim said. "I said, 'That's quite the thought.' And she said, 'I think my life is going to be easier now.'"

No longer burdened by the weight of her inner turmoil, Sawtell finished her sophomore season with a flourish. She won a Class 2A championship in the 100-meter hurdles and placed second in the 300 hurdles.

Sawtell finished third in the 100 hurdles and ninth in the 300 hurdles at state as a junior and earned a scholarship to compete at Howard University, a historically black college in Washington, D.C.

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"Now that I'm going off to college, I'm realizing how much I really love my mom," Sawtell said. "She kept me in track, and look where it got me."

A moment to live for

The June 22, 2009, Facebook connection between Sawtell and Smith Grover led to several phone conversations and, ultimately, a reunion on Sept. 3 at the Minneapolis airport. As Sawtell waited to catch a glimpse of her birth mother, calm gave way to nerves. When Smith Grover came into sight, Sawtell "knew it was her. I just couldn't stop smiling. It was amazing."

Moments later, Smith Grover took Kayla in her arms.

"I hugged my baby," Smith Grover said. "I told her she was beautiful; I told her I was so sorry; I told her, 'I'm glad to finally meet you again.' It was the moment I'd lived for."

Kim Sawtell watched while "hopping and jumping with joy. It is so great to see your child finally get what they have desired for so long. This was a wonderful thing."

Sawtell spent Thanksgiving and spring break in Florida getting acquainted with her new family. In June, Smith Grover will attend Sawtell's graduation party and the Class 2A track and field meet, where Kayla hopes to run so she can hear both her moms cheer her on.

Running at state, however, is secondary to the personal hurdles Sawtell cleared on the way to discovering herself and her place in the world.

"Family is about love and support and bettering each other," Sawtell said. "That is definitely what my family has, regardless of color."

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