

# Adoption changed teen's outlook on life

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Dominique Sousa has been pro-life since birth.

Every day she thanks God for the life she has, one that wouldn't have even begun if her mother, just 16 at the time, had decided to abort her 17 years ago. In choosing life, her mother set Dominique on a path that led to her adoption into a home that has made her the person she is today.

Now, Dominique gets to be a voice for those who are voiceless.

"That's mainly the reason why I'm pro-life. It's because I'm adopted," said Dominique. "Everyone's life has meaning whether it's like something really, really big or something really, really small. You can make an impact in your community or you can make an impact globally."

The Cambridge, Ont., teen shared her story with 500 educators, family and friends at the annual Fr. Patrick Fogarty Awards Dinner in October. She was representing 160 of her fellow students who were being honoured at the 2016 Student Representative in their school board districts.

The room was captivated as she told them how she was one of 2,000 babies that are being adopted in Canada each year. In Canada alone, there are over 30,000 children waiting to be adopted into families, but many of these children wait in orphanages and foster care systems until they "age out" at the age of 19.

Dominique was one of the lucky ones.

"It's a big part of me," she said. "I felt like if I left it out, the speech would be kind of meaningless."

Since she was about two years old, her adoptive parents, Zel and Mario Sousa, told her stories about her adoption. She has home movies of her parents sitting her



Dominique Sousa poses with her adoptive grandmother, Ermelinda Pereira, at the Fr. Patrick Fogarty Awards Dinner where she received the 2016 Student Representative award. (Photo courtesy of Dominique Sousa)

down with a stack of picture books that explained her adoption as a gift of life.

"A life is a life and that's part of our Catholic upbringing," said Zel. "It's all about had her birth mom not chosen to give birth to her, it would've been a sadder place without her."

The decision was not an easy one. Dominique's biological mother knew her own mother had given up her first child for adoption when she was 17 years old. She saw how much it hurt her not to see that baby every again.

"She could've easily chosen to have an abortion so that her mom would have never found out that she was pregnant," said Dominique.

Dominique was adopted at 11 months old by Zel and Mario in

September 2000.

At first, Zel and Mario were hesitant to make it an open adoption, which allows for information sharing and controlled access in a contract between the biological and adoptive parents.

"I know my parents had reservations about this like, 'Why are you going to bother? She's yours,'" said Zel. "The thing is, is that somebody else is going to tell them that and we don't have any control over that.... And if I don't build that rapport with them on honesty and transparency, that's not going to get me anywhere in life."

Zel said allowing Dominique to have a relationship with her biological mother has been the best decision they've made for her.

Now, Zel and Dominique

attend workshops at the Kitchener Family & Children Services; to share their open adoption stories to other hopeful adoptive parents.

"I think there's really great benefits in hearing Dominique's story because she is experiencing it first-hand," said Zel.

Dominique said she wants people to know that her adoption is a vital part of who she is as a person.

"I feel like if I didn't have that relationship (with my birth mother), I wouldn't be as adamantly pro-life as I am right now," she said. "She did a lot for me by giving birth to me and facing her mom.... It's a benefit to know where you are from. You have the answers to all these questions and you don't sit there wondering."

Dominique firmly believes that

to be a pro-lifer, she has to learn everything she can.

"I've gone to a lot of conferences to try to get more knowledge on it because I can't be pro-life without understanding what it really means to be pro-life," she said.

One of the youth conferences that has struck her most was one she attended in November 2015 in Hamilton.

"I really like that one because it explained to us the impact of euthanasia laws in other countries," said Dominique. "That really resonated with me because my grandpa had dementia and my grandmother had Alzheimer's disease."

Dominique has many fond memories of her grandparents taking her out for coffee dates, shopping trips, and even vacation trips to Portugal.

Three of her four grandparents have passed away, but Dominique cherished the moments she had with them.

"They've always been the most special people," she said. "They've done so much for me and have never expected anything from me in return except for respect."

She and her younger brother, Xander (who is also adopted), would visit their grandmother at St. Andrew's Terrace nursing home every week. She even started volunteering there every Saturday, a job she continued even after her grandmother passed away.

She is on her way to finish her Grade 12 year at Monsignor Doyle Catholic Secondary School in Cambridge and hopes to study geriatric care at Conestoga College.

"One of the most important things that you have to remember is that if you want to understand someone, you have to try and walk in their shoes," said Dominique. "You have to try to understand people in order to understand the value of human life."