

## THE PETERSON FAMILY

The Peterson family of Hubbell, Arizona, is a Navajo family who live in a very rural area with limited educational, health, and social service resources. The Peterson family consists of:

- Glinibah, the maternal grandmother (53).
- Lora (35), daughter of Glinibah and the mother of Daniel (18), Brandon (12), and Samuel (6) who has cerebral palsy and mental retardation.
- Floyd (30), the father of Samuel who left the family shortly after Samuel was born.
- Edmund (24), Lora's younger brother who visits from Flagstaff, Arizona, where he and his girlfriend Maria (23), who is Hispanic, both work as special educators in the public school and have one son (4 months).

Life for the Petersons has been rough over the past eight years. In 1990, as part of a government attempt to move Navajo families from the Hopi reservation, the Peterson family, begrudgingly, moved to a relocation site 90 miles from their ancestral lands. In return for their move, they received a new HUD home and a grazing permit for their large herd of sheep and cattle. Although the family felt much guilt and anger towards the government's "coerced" relocation, all family members had grown tired of fighting with both government officials and the Hopi tribe and agreed to move.

Three months after moving to Hubbell, Lora gave birth to Samuel who was diagnosed with cerebral palsy. The hospital counselor gave her pamphlets concerning cerebral palsy and provided information to contact the traveling Indian Health Service staff members who could provide in-home service for her son. The family's reaction to the diagnosis was initial confusion and then depression. They had never had a family member with a disability and did not know how to culturally interpret the infant's disability. However, Glinibah, the matriarch of the family, was certain that the spirits of their ancestral family were showing their displeasure for abandoning their homeland through Samuel's challenges.

Five months after Samuel's birth, Floyd left his family and moved back to the Hopi reservation. Glinibah urged Lora to accept a job as a weaver at a local trading post and assumed total care for Samuel with support from extended family members and the local clinic. At the trading post, Lora met new friends in the community. Lora had always dreamed of having a social life beyond the remote cattle farm and considered her new co-workers as a source of emotional support and enjoyment.

Samuel's early childhood was a happy time for the Peterson family, despite Samuel being assessed with moderate mental retardation. He also endured several bouts of pneumonia which required intensive hospitalization services. Glinibah sponsored several healing ceremonies for Samuel through money she made from weaving rugs and saddle blankets. Edmund, Lora's brother, decided in his senior year of high school that he would attend college and major in special education to show his support for his nephew, despite Glinibah's discomfort with his attending a "white man's school." During this time, Samuel enjoyed numerous daily activities, including helping his brothers feed the family cattle, listening while Brandon read his school books aloud, morning strolls with his mother, and listening to his grandmother tell traditional stories and sing songs. One of his favorite events was participating in pow-wows with his brothers and Uncle Edmund in Flagstaff. Edmund's girlfriend, who was also in the special education program at Northern Arizona University, had made a special Mickey Mouse grass dancer outfit that Samuel wore while participating with his family in the pow-wows. Samuel felt special in his family as he was the center of much attention and love.

When Samuel was seven, hard times set in for the Peterson family. Within a span of eight months, their livestock was reduced by half due to new grazing laws. Daniel started drinking heavily with friends as his time in the pasture decreased. During that time, Samuel had a series of illnesses that required hospitalization in Phoenix, which required Lora's continual presence. Money was becoming tighter as Lora was unable to work and her need to purchase a wheelchair-accessible vehicle for transporting Samuel became increasingly evident. The hospital social worker suggested that she apply for Social Security Insurance benefits for Samuel although Glinibah was against

receiving outside help for her family. Just as Samuel was regaining his strength, Glinibah was diagnosed with diabetes. After Samuel was brought back home, Lora applied for SSI but discovered that Samuel needed verification papers that he was attending school to receive benefits.

Samuel's education had been the source of much confusion and cultural discussion for the Peterson family. Glinibah was adamant on keeping Samuel at home because she did not trust the school system to provide her grandson the love and attention that she could give at home. It violated tradition to send a child with special challenges out of the home. Glinibah's goal was to protect her grandson and teach him the traditional Navajo ways. Edmund, by then working as a special educator in the Flagstaff public school system, insisted that Samuel be in the local community school in an inclusive classroom with support. He agreed that Samuel's cultural teachings were important for his identity as a Navajo. However, he felt that Samuel needed a wide variety of support systems and educational opportunities to reach his maximum potential. Lora knew that she should not argue with her mother because Glinibah raised Samuel and was having health problems. Yet, Lora liked Edmund's suggestions. She felt that Samuel should have the opportunity to make friends, learn to read and do math, and, basically, lead as normal a life as possible.

Although Samuel seemed content spending time with his grandmother, his daily activities (and subsequent feelings of happiness) had diminished as a result of Lora's increased work schedule, Daniel's periodic absences from the home, Brandon's increased extracurricular sports activities, and Edmund's increased family and work commitments in Flagstaff. Lora was also concerned that Samuel was becoming increasingly agitated when his grandmother was out of his sight. Although stressful times in the Navajo culture should be a time of everyone joining forces to problem-solve, Lora felt that she was increasingly caught in a tug-of-war between her mother's and brother's opinions concerning Samuel's future.

One week, while Lora was at work, a tribal social worker tipped off by the SSI office visited the Peterson's home with the school's special education director. Glinibah was informed by the social worker that Samuel must attend school or Lora could be charged with child neglect. Glinibah tried to explain her position of educating Samuel at home but was rebuked by a series of legal terms that she did not understand. Glinibah became furious and told the social worker that she would under no circumstances enroll Samuel in a school whose values were not consistent with her tradition.

After Glinibah informed Lora of the social worker's visit, Lora was terrified that the social workers would remove her son from the home, as they had taken many of her friend's children for neglect. She could not stand the image of her son in a foster home, so she decided to visit the school (without her mother's knowledge) to conference with, and gain suggestions from, the special education director. The meeting with the special education director only further complicated matters for Lora. The director informed Lora that she was new in the district and that the school was not "yet" equipped to handle a child who had a disability that required a wheelchair, specialized feeding, and highly individualized care. She suggested to Lora that, until a staff member could be hired (which could be several months), that Lora enroll Samuel in the Catholic Special Education school, an hour from the Peterson's home. A bus would provide transportation for Samuel, but Lora would have to drive him to the local post office where he would be picked up and dropped off daily. Lora was concerned that her vehicle could not accommodate her son and his wheelchair. She also worried about her work schedule and disliked the notion of her son being on a bus two hours per day. The special education director provided a second, and last option, that a research team from a local university send one of their interns to the home on a weekly basis to work with Samuel and the family. Lora knew her mother would not accept professional staff in her home, especially Anglo researchers. She decided that enrolling Samuel in the Catholic Special Education Program was the best decision. Lora, overwhelmed with the information, agreed to hold a family meeting and get back to the special education director in the next week.

Samuel's family meeting consisted of Edmund, Maria, Glinibah, Lora, and Glinibah's uncle, the medicine man for the family. After a long family meeting, each person brought a suggestion to the table. Glinibah wanted to take Samuel back to the Hopi reservation, where she would live in her niece's traditional hogan (Navajo dwelling) with her grandson. No social service workers would bother them there, and Samuel would have the opportunity to play with his cousins, use the Navajo language, and be close to his father's family. He would be well cared for by Glinibah and extended family members. Lora, who very much enjoyed the luxuries of running water and electricity

in her new home and the self-esteem that came with working at the trading post and having friends, did not want to return to the Hopi reservation. She stated that she would like to take out a loan, purchase a van with a ramp, and have Daniel drive Samuel to the bus stop before school, as well as pick him up. Lora considered Samuel's potential SSI benefits as very important to the family and Samuel's health. Finally, Edmund and Maria wanted Samuel to live with them in Flagstaff. Both special educators, they ensured Glinibah and Lora that Samuel would receive the best services available in the school district and in the community. Both Edmund and Maria emphasized their concerns about Samuel's specialized health care needs and Glinibah's diabetic condition. As in Navajo tradition, the elder had the last word in a conversation: Glinibah did not want Samuel to go to a public school. She also did not want him living with his uncle. She believed the uncle had lost touch with his traditional roots and language. She felt that Lora was too consumed in her work to properly address Samuel's needs, and she was adamant that Samuel stay home with her where she could teach him the Navajo language and stories. Most importantly, she would protect him from a world that was unkind to people with disabilities. She also stated that she felt like a failure because she had raised her children with no respect for, or belief in, the Navajo traditional way of life.

Wanting to support his sister and Samuel, Edmund agreed to attend the school meeting with Lora where they would conference with the special education director, a teacher from the Catholic Special Education School, school principal, and the social worker.

**Questions for Reflection:**

1. How would you characterize the Peterson's current life cycle stage? How are their needs now different from what they were five years earlier? How might their needs be similar and different 10 years in the future when Samuel is 16?
2. What are the transitions through which the Petersons have progressed? What transitions do you predict they will encounter in the next five years?
3. How does your understanding of the Peterson's family cycle help you to individualize the supports and services that you provide to them?