

Spotlight: Searching for Self, Searching for Family

# Adoption Today

October 2010  
www.adoptiontoday.com

International and Transracial Adoption Resource

## Searching for Self

Stories on:

- \* Exploring Birth Countries
- \* Meeting Birth Family
- \* Adopting from Vietnam
- \* Search and Reunion
- \* Connecting with Culture
- \* and so much more...

## Bonding with Barbie

*One grandfather shares the joy of meeting his newest grandchild adopted from Vietnam*

## Legacy Fulfilled

*Adoptee Bert Ballard returns to his country of birth for the first time to adopt a son*

## Adoptee Rights





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# The Journey of Self-Discovery

**L**ife is a journey of self-discovery. From the time we are very young, all of us, must discover who we are and what we want to be and do in our lives. For adoptees, that journey can be wrought with additional obstacles and challenges. The disconnection from birth family, lack of early history and often a loss of culture can seem like endless mountains to climb. On the road to defining who they want to be, adoptees often struggle with more questions and unknowns than most people, sometimes making the tween and teen years more challenging. Guiding those children on their search for self-identity is critical. Providing them with the tools in which to investigate their past, their heritage, or whatever part of them they need to know is essential.

Some adoptees begin their search for self and never find the end of the road, while others settle into a place of contentment with the knowledge obtained without delving further into their past. Each journey of self-discovery is very personal and each individual must make their own determination of how, when and if they will search for the pieces of their history.

This issue dedicated to Searching for Self, Searching for Family is much broader than the typical search and reunion stories. Searching for Self is more than searching for birth family connections. For some adoptees, it's about fighting for the right to see their own original birth certificate as in the article titled, "Fighting for Adoptee Rights" in this issue. For others, searching for self often leads to finding a piece of identity while visiting their birth countries, as several adoptees discover in the article "Exploring My Birth Country, Discovering Me" by Becca Piper.

Throughout this issue we have woven together stories from adoptees who have traveled the world to those who have

stayed closer to home to discover who they are. Each article exemplifies the importance of adoptees owning their own story and searching for the missing pieces of their lives. In addition, each story provides a unique glimpse at an adoptee gaining a new perspective on their own lives, and learning a little bit more about themselves. These stories should provide parents a glimpse of what their children may at sometime experience, along with ways to help their children discover who they are and who they want to be.

Adoptees often long to know more about their birth parents, regardless of deciding to search or not search for either one of them. It isn't unusual for adoptees to spend many hours of their lives wondering about their birth family and why they were surrendered for adoption. At this stage, often with little information to validate their beginnings, reality merges with fantasy, creating desires which encourage our children to seek more information and move toward reunion attempts.

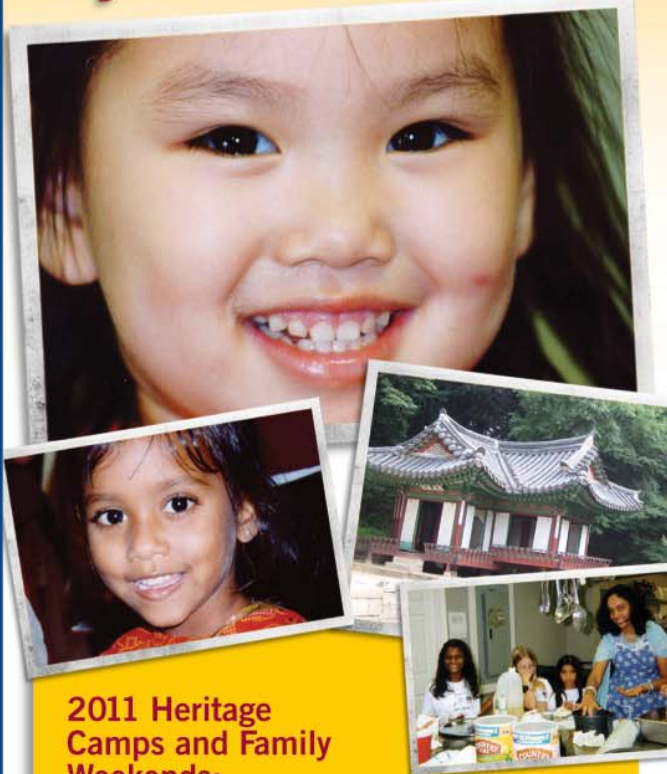
It is our job as parents to let them know that searching on whatever level is OK at age appropriate times. We need to give them the information they need to move forward on their journey for self-discovery. And we also need to be there for them when they return and embrace them as the greater, more fulfilled people they have become while searching. Watching our children, helping them and encouraging them on this journey exemplifies the role parents must take in any child's life — teach, encourage, support and let them go. The love you provided along the way will bring them back to your fold and help them appreciate your guidance and support along the way.

To all those on the journey, good luck!

*Kim*



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### on the cover

**Jayden, 1**, from Vietnam, was welcomed to his family by parents Bert and Sarah Ballard and big sisters 8-year-old Adria and 6-year-old Kyla in May. They currently reside in Waterloo, Ontario.

### ***Adoption Resource Center Prepares for Annual Conference***

The Center for Family Connections is gearing up for its fifth biennial international ACTION conference that will take place Feb. 3-5 at Hotel Marlowe in Cambridge, Mass. The conference, Adoption Connections Training Institute: OneWorld Neighborhood will provide training, treatment, services and education tools for families children and professionals. This year, The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute will co-sponsor and present at the conference. For more information, visit [www.kinnect.org](http://www.kinnect.org).

### ***Conference to focus on Ethics of Adoption in the 21st Century***

The sixth biennial adoption conference sponsored by St. John's University will take place Oct. 14-16 in New York City. Teaming up to co-sponsor the event are Montclair State University and the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute. Focusing on "Open Arms, Open Minds: The Ethics of Adoption in the 21st Century" will include presentations from Adoption Institute staff members. Keynote speakers include professor David Smolin who specializes in ethical issues surrounding adoption; Beth Hall, co-founder of Pact, An Adoption Alliance; and Joe Kroll, executive director of NACAC. A number of other adoption professionals will present during the three-day event focusing on ethical adoption issues. For more information, visit <http://bit.ly/9y15Qx>.

### ***Pearl S. Buck International to Host a Korean Cultural Trip***

In October, Pearl S. Buck International will host a 10-day adventure throughout South Korea. Beginning October 17, the trip will travel a number of cultural and tourist destinations, for travelers to enjoy. Pricing starts at \$3,544. For more information, call (215) 249-0100 or send an e-mail to [info@pearlsbuck.org](mailto:info@pearlsbuck.org) with any questions you may have.

***Brooklyn Museum Offers Unique Opportunity to View Korean Masterpieces***  
The Brooklyn Museum in New York City will

give the Korean Art Society a private viewing of the Korean masterpieces in its storage area. The Brooklyn Museum has been collecting Korean art for 100 years, and was the first museum outside of Asia to open a permanent Korean gallery. The Korean government recently spent five years cataloging Brooklyn's important Korean collection, and copies of the catalog available for Korean Art Society members. Because of space and budget limitations, only a small portion of the collection is on display. To learn more, write to [robert@koreanartsociety.org](mailto:robert@koreanartsociety.org).

### ***Center for Family Connections Hosts Monthly Training***

On Oct. 27, the Center for Family Connections will hosts its monthly parent training on Couples Therapy in Adoption and Complex Blended Families. The training session is for parents and professionals focusing on a variety of different topics. This year the FaCT training is offered to both parents and professionals. People may attend individual sessions for \$55 (\$35 extra if you want CEUs). Individual sessions run from 9 a.m. to noon on each day. For more information, call (617) 547-0909 or send an e-mail to [cffc@kinnect.org](mailto:cffc@kinnect.org).

### ***Ohio Supreme Court Rulings Could Impact Birth Fathers' Rights***

Two recent Ohio Supreme Court rulings could weaken the state's putative father registry according to the article, "Adoption Rulings May Boost Birth Father's Right," in the Aug. 8 issue of The Columbus Dispatch. The rulings, in favor of two different fathers, may negatively impact adoptions in the state, critics fear. One of the fathers had registered on the putative father registry while the other had not, but says he has an established relationship with his daughter. To read the article, visit <http://bit.ly/a7n9Tm>.

### ***National Adoption Day Coalition Issues Reminder of National Adoption Day 2010 Events***

National Adoption Day 2010 will be Saturday, Nov. 20. Celebrated across the United States,

more than 350 community events take place each year to finalize the adoptions of children in foster care and celebrate adoptive families.

In all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and Guam, the widespread cause will include events ranging from courtroom adoptions to local celebrations.

As a result of the thankless efforts of adoption advocates, policymakers, judges and lawyers, a total of more than 30,000 children have been adopted from foster care on National Adoption Day during the last 10 years.

"We believe we are overcoming the many misconceptions Americans have about foster care adoption," said Rita Soronen, executive director of the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption and member of the National Adoption Day Coalition. "Americans are developing a deeper understanding that many more people, even those in nontraditional families, can adopt. We hope that individuals from all walks of life will consider themselves adoptive parents and get involved in adopting from foster care."

November is also National Adoption Month. While, National Adoption Day is just one day in a year-round effort to raise awareness of children in foster care and encourage people to get involved.

"There are 123,000 children in foster care waiting to find permanent, loving families. It is unacceptable that any child should not have the opportunity for a safe, loving and permanent home," said Renette Oklewicz, director, Freddie Mac Foundation and member of the National Adoption Day Coalition. "National Adoption Day is a collective national effort to raise awareness about the significant need for foster care and adoption, and a very important way we help improve the lives of children in foster care around the country."

For more information about the events taking place locally and foster care adoption, visit [www.nationaladoptionday.org](http://www.nationaladoptionday.org).

### ***Evan B. Donaldson Hosts Annual Benefit in November***

The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute will host its annual “Celebrating . . . Our Families, Our Children” benefit on Nov. 13. Hosted at The Beach Club in Santa Monica, Calif., the event will honor the David Bohnett Foundation and pay tribute to the late Annette Baran, a champion of humane, ethnical adoption practices. For more information about the event, call Michael Teta at (818) 906-0240 or [adoptioninstitute@mtaevents.com](mailto:adoptioninstitute@mtaevents.com).

### ***UNICEF Issues Position Statement on Intercountry Adoption***

Recently, UNICEF issued a position statement in regard to intercountry adoption. “UNICEF supports inter-country adoption, when pursued in conformity with the standards and principles of the 1993 Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Inter-country Adoptions – already ratified by more than 80 countries. This Convention is an important development for children, birth families and prospective foreign adopters. It sets out obligations for the authorities of countries from which children leave for adoption, and those that are receiving these children. The Convention is designed to ensure ethical and transparent processes. This international legislation gives paramount consideration to the best interests of the child and provides the framework for the practical application of the principles regarding inter-country adoption contained in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. These include ensuring that adoptions are authorized only by competent authorities, guided by informed consent of all concerned, that inter-country adoption enjoys the same safeguards and standards which apply in national adoptions, and that inter-country adoption does not result in improper financial gain for those involved in it. These provisions are meant first and foremost to protect children, but also have the positive effect of safeguarding the rights of their birth parents and providing assurance to prospective adoptive parents that their child has not been the subject of illegal practices.” To read the

position statement in its entirety, visit [http://www.unicef.org/media/media\\_55412.html](http://www.unicef.org/media/media_55412.html).

### ***FRUA Hosts Annual Education Conference in Pennsylvania***

FRUA will host its 7th Annual Educational Conference focusing on “Education and Development: Where We’ve Come From; What Lies Ahead.” The conference will take place Oct. 15-16 at the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia in Philadelphia, Pa. In partnership with the International Adoption Health Program at The Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, the conference will include two days of information-filled workshops for families and special workshops for teens. For more information, visit <http://www.frua.org/resources/conference-info>.

### ***Governor Presents 73-Year-Old Adoptee With First Original Birth Certificate Issued Under New Feigenholtz Law***

Gov. Pat Quinn presented Joel Chrastka, a 73-year-old adoptee from Berwyn, Ill., with a non-certified copy of his original birth certificate, thereby making Chrastka the first adopted adult in Illinois to receive his original birth certificate under a new law which Quinn signed in late May.

“When I was born in 1937, adoptees’ birth records were never sealed,” Chrastka explained, “But, by the time I was an adult and had learned about my adoption, my original birth certificate had already been retroactively sealed for 100 years.”

Sponsored by State Rep. Sara Feigenholtz, D-Chicago, who is herself an adult adoptee, and Sen. A.J. Wilhelmi, the ground-breaking legislation won strong support in both chambers of the Illinois General Assembly and made Illinois the seventh — and most populous — state in the nation to reverse mid-20th century laws mandating the automatic sealing of adoptees’ original birth certificates. Adoptees born in Illinois prior to Jan. 1, 1946, may now obtain an unaltered, non-certified copy of their original birth certificate by sending a special request form to the Illinois Adoption Registry

and Medical Information Exchange accompanied by a \$15 fee.

Feigenholtz and other adopted adults older than 21 who were born in Illinois after Jan. 1, 1946, will have to wait until Nov. 15, 2011, to begin requesting copies of their original birth certificates. In the meantime, a year-long informational campaign will inform the birth parents of adoptees born after Jan. 1, 1946 that their names will become available to their surrendered children once they reach the age of 21 unless the birth parent specifically requests anonymity through the IARMIE.

“I feel like today is a part of history,” Quinn said. “And a very special part of history. This new law is making a difference for families everywhere.”

Chrastka, who was placed with his adoptive parents at birth but only learned of his adoption at the age of 43, was excited about the prospect of finally learning about his origins.

“It will mean the end of all the mystery,” Chrastka said. “Where it goes from here, I don’t know, but at least I will have the answers to all the big questions I’ve been wondering about for most of my adult life.”

Feigenholtz, who has been in contact with her birth mother for more than two decades but has yet to hold a copy of her original birth certificate in her hands, echoed Chrastka’s sentiments: “Today is the dawning of a new era in adoption in Illinois where we can say that all families, no matter how they were formed, are created equal,” she announced. “Today marks the end of the secrecy in which our lives were shrouded for 63 years . . . and the beginning of greater openness and truth.”

Full details on the new law, as well as the applicable forms can be found on Feigenholtz’s website at [www.staterepsara.com](http://www.staterepsara.com), as well on the Illinois Department of Public Health website at [http://www.idph.state.il.us/vitalrecords/vital/non\\_certified.htm](http://www.idph.state.il.us/vitalrecords/vital/non_certified.htm).

# As closures continue and numbers decline, federal policymakers turn focus on future of intercountry adoption

By Kathleen Strottman

In just a few short weeks, the 111th Congress will draw to a close. Hopefully, before they adjourn sine die, Congress will have passed legislation necessary to help the 1,300 Haitian children who hope to be adopted by American citizens obtain permanent legal status in the U.S. and provide equivalent immigration benefits to children adopted from Hague countries as those adopted from non-Hague ones. While each of these pending bills will have a significant and meaningful impact for thousands of adopted children and their families, they do not address the larger looming question: what is the fate of intercountry adoption as a means for orphan children to find permanent, loving homes? Below are just some of the recent events that will undoubtedly influence federal policymakers' thinking on this vitally important question.

## **Russian Adoption Case**

It has been nearly six months since a Tennessee mother returned her adoptive son to his native country, but the effects of this decision are still felt on intercountry adoption in Russia and elsewhere. The United States and Russian government continue to work toward the completion of a memorandum of understanding. The focus of their efforts are on improving ways in which adoption agencies both select and prepare prospective adoptive families, as well as ways to increase the compliance with regulations requiring families to submit post-adoption reports. But this case did more than to prompt this agreement. First, it focused worldwide media attention on the fact that children who are adopted from other countries, and in particular those who are institutionalized at an early age, can have significant needs and called into question whether or not adop-

tive parents were willing or able to provide for these needs. It also reignited age old cries for prospective adoptive parents to consider adopting domestically instead of going abroad. Finally, it suggested that even in countries with relatively more sophisticated systems of intercountry adoption, children and families can "fall through the cracks," a fact that opponents of intercountry adoption argue justifies the need to allow international adoption in only a limited number of cases or ban it outright.

## **Special Commission of the Hague**

From June 17-25, a special commission of the Hague Conference on Private International Law was convened to discuss the continued implementation of its 33rd convention, the Hague Convention on the Protection of Children and Cooperation in Respect to Intercountry Adoption. Such commissions happen every five years and are attended by countries that are signatories to the convention, as well as those that might be considering implementing the treaty. The last of such meetings was in 2005. A review of the Commissions' conclusions and recommendations are a telling representation of how intercountry adoption is viewed on the world stage. In addition to the post-adoption services and reports issues raised above, presenters focused on issues such as trafficking, corruption and the appropriateness of intercountry adoption in post-disaster situations. The agenda also included a screening of "Paper Adoptions," a new documentary film produced by Terre Des Hommes. For more information and copies of papers see [http://www.hcch.net/index\\_en.php?act=text.display&tid=45](http://www.hcch.net/index_en.php?act=text.display&tid=45).

## **Suspensions of Intercountry Adoptions in Nepal**

On August 6, the State Department announced

its decision to suspend the processing of orphan visas for children adopted from Nepal. Nepal's closure marks the last in a string of other countries where adopting a child has become increasingly more difficult or no longer possible (Vietnam, Guatemala, Kyrgyzstan, Cambodia, Romania, Rwanda). In making the announcement, the State Department cited its concerns that the adoptions being completed were not supported by sufficient evidence of the child's orphan status. This decision was motivated in part by pressure from orphan care organizations such as Terre Des Hommes and UNICEF, who issued a report on adoption abuses in 2007 and have since been calling for the U.S. to suspend adoptions in order to focus on creating a Hague compliant system. The continuation of adoptions in Nepal by the United States was also cited as cause for concern by the Hague Permanent Bureau, who did a review of insufficiencies in the adoption process nearly two years ago.

A frustration voiced by many intercountry adoption supporters is that suspension of adoption has not proven to be an effective means of producing reforms in intercountry adoption or do they lead to the protection and well-being of children. While proponents of suspension argue that the decrease in the number of children abandoned for intercountry adoption is proof that the suspension is working to protect against fraud, related statistics on increases in sexual trafficking, child labor, child abuse or street children are not considered as part of the equation.

## **Media Focus on "Illegal Adoptions"**

During the last year there have been several high profile stories in the media about fraud and abuse in adoption. In some cases, these



stories were focused on specific issues within specific countries, for example, the use of humanitarian parole to unite prospective adoptive parents with their children after January 12. (NY Times, August 4, 2010). In other stories, the focus is on the issues within intercountry adoption overall that justify the call for reform. (see Foreign Policy Article entitled "Anatomy of An Adoption Crisis" by E.J. Graff, September 12, 2010). Regardless of the focus, articles such as these leave most readers with the perception that fraud and abuse is pervasive throughout intercountry adoptions and that the opportunity for corruption is so great that performing ethical adoptions are all but impossible. Far less frequently covered are stories on the positive outcomes of adoption or the number of children living in institutions as opposed to families.

### Outlook for Future

The sum total of events and stories like those described above has turned the conversations to questions such as: what can be done to establish a system that guards against corruption and abuse and instances where abuse does occur, what should be the consequence?

Are there ways that the United States might take a more active role in the development of child welfare systems throughout the world that embrace international adoption as a viable means to find permanent families for children, while at the same time supporting other means of permanency such as guardianship and domestic adoption. Here are two areas that will likely be the subject of Congressional debate next session.

### Universal Accreditation Legislation

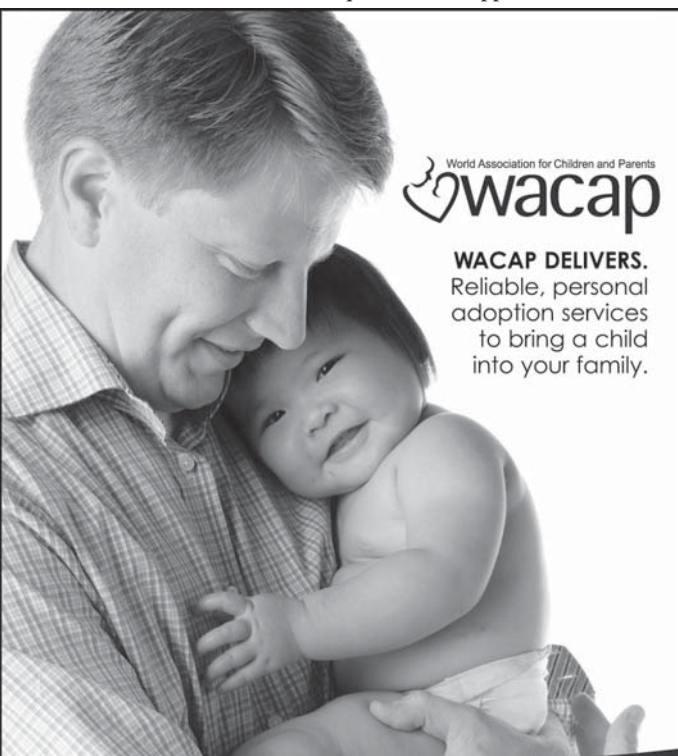
Members of Congress have begun to consider whether or not it makes sense for the United States to have two separate and distinct set of standards, one for agencies assisting families adopting from Hague Countries and another for those who are adopting from non-Hague countries. The majority agree that this "dual-track" system does not make sense and may in fact be leading to a system in which protections and safeguards are lacking in countries where they are most needed. These concerns have led members, most notably Congressman Sires of New Jersey, to consider introducing legislation to call for a single standard that would be applied to all families and agencies pursuing

an adoption abroad.

### Families for Orphans Act

Sponsors of the Families for Orphans Act have not given up on their desire to see the U.S. Department of State have a more dedicated focus and identified strategy for finding families for the millions of children living without parental care. Supporters of this law argue that it is a much needed step if the U.S. is to serve as a leader on these issues and if implemented correctly, could put in place the infrastructure and resources necessary to ensure that intercountry adoption is perceived as an important and viable part of a larger set of family based solutions for children.

*Kathleen Strottman is the executive director of the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute. Prior to coming to CCAI, she served as legislative director for Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-La.. In this position, she advised the senator on issues such as education, health care, adoption and foster care. Strottman is a graduate of Whittier Law School Center for Children's Rights Program. For more information about CCAI, visit [www.ccaiinstitute.org](http://www.ccaiinstitute.org).*



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# Exploring My Birth Country, *Discover*

*Adoptees return to countries of their birth  
and find a greater connection to themselves . . .*



**VISITING INDIA** through the Ties Program are best friends Lizzie, Anisha and Kaylan.



**THE FOREMAN FAMILY** visits Guatemala through the Ties Program.



**RECONNECTING** are Noelle Hemphill, left, with Mrs. Thuy during a trip with Vietnam Ties.



# ring Me

By Becca Piper

In record numbers, international adoptees are visiting their birth countries, and in the process are learning a great deal about themselves. As the founder of The Ties Program — Adoptive Family Homeland Journeys, I have spent much of the past two decades traveling with kids as they explore and experience their birth countries, not knowing what they will find in the unknown chapters of their lives.

Experience is an extraordinary teacher, and the kids I've come to know are insightful students. The "take home" lessons of the journey are profound, life changing and continually evolving.

*"Life is 10 percent what happens to me and 90 percent how I react." — Charles Swindoll*

Zoe Kunze, a Guatemalan adoptee, had spent a lot of time feeling "empty." She remembers eighth grade being especially difficult. "The most important thing I learned from traveling to my birth country was that I couldn't keep beating myself up just because I hadn't met my biological family," Zoe said. "I was letting not knowing my birth family upset me so much that the bad feelings overcame every good feeling I wanted to have."

And then, as if Zoe had 100 years of life experience instead of 14, she stopped me in my

tracks: "Emptiness in yourself isn't because of loss of people, or not knowing someone you feel should be a part of your life. It comes from letting loss get in the way of living your life."

## **Lived Experiences**

Many kids talk about the importance of real life experience in their birth country, and a recent study done by the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute validated what we hear on a regular basis from Ties' kids. "Positive identity development is most effectively facilitated by 'lived' experiences," the study reports. "Travel to the country of birth topped the list."

Molly McPeak's comments clearly back up the Adoption Institute's findings. "I knew I was adopted from China, born in Anhui Province, found somewhere in Tongling City, but when you actually get a chance to go back to your roots, everything seems to come together. I learned who I truly am. It felt like the missing part of me was finally found."

An important part of the "lived experience" arises as kids tackle the big question: "Why was I placed for adoption?"

Reflecting on his time in Korea, Grant Betzig said, "While learning about the history of adoption and meeting my foster parents, everything finally connected. I realized my biological parents weren't giving me up in an act of selfishness, but in an act of generosity

and love by allowing me to live with a family that would be able to love me and provide for me."

Whether the "why" is social stigma, government policy, family dynamics or poverty, international adoptees often feel more settled when they have a firsthand understanding of why decisions were made.

## **From Lifebooks to Facebook — Welcome to My Space**

A child's sense of self is initially provided by a parent, eventually grows to include outside influences, and results in a place kids are able to claim as their own. In her article, "From Lifebooks to Facebook — Welcome to MySpace" Bea Evans says, "The opportunity for a child to visit his or her birth country helps fill the gaps by providing a stronger sense of story, self and identity."

Liana Foreman is aware of how this transition has changed her sense of self. "When telling people I am adopted from Guatemala, they ask, 'Do you remember it, or have you been back?'" Liana's uncomfortable response always sounded something like this: "I was very young when I was adopted and I don't remember anything."

Traveling to Guatemala brought the country and culture into focus, giving Liana the tools to respond from firsthand knowledge, and with a deeper understanding of her relation-



**ENJOYING** a trip to Korea through the Ties Program is Grant Betzig and his family.



ship with Guatemala. “Now, I can tell people what a beautiful country Guatemala is and about the culture,” Liana said, referring to how easygoing people tend to be in her birth country. “My friends tell me I am really laid back. Being in Guatemala helped me understand why I am the way I am.”

### **I Am Not Alone**

The shared experience of families traveling with other families creates both bonds and assurances. The connections kids make give adoptees a community of peers, people who have “walked in the shoes” to remain connected for a lifetime.

“During the trip, I met other kids who were dealing with the same identity issues I was,” reflects Anisha Pitzenberger, who was 17 when she traveled with India Ties. “All of a sudden, I realized I was not alone. Talking with the kids I had so much in common with gave me a whole new insight into who I was. I formed a very strong bond with two of the girls I met on the trip. One of them is getting married in a few months and I am thrilled to be her maid of honor.”

I often think it is the greatest gift of the journey — the gift of community built around two worlds and shared experiences.

### **Belonging**

*“My birth country gave me more than a key to my past. It also opened the way to my future.”*  
— Emily Freeman, Peru

Belonging — it’s something we all need, and for international adoptees frequently feels out of reach. Emily, who was 16 when she first traveled to Peru, and is 21 now, shares, “For most of my life I felt different. I considered myself to be different from everyone else and I felt that I wasn’t worth as much. I would see all these beautiful girls running around with their blonde hair, blue eyes and perfect figure. It seemed I could not be more out of place. Even in my family it felt that way. I used to look at family photos and see how much I would stick out. I felt like I didn’t belong anywhere. Going to my birth country changed that for me. I can now look at a group of people and be able to say that I am beautiful and I belong.”

Anisha Pitzenberger touched on this too. “After

visiting India, even though I knew the physical differences were still there, I was able to accept the differences, and even be proud of them, because I understood where I came from.”

### **Global Connectedness**

For 14-year-old Hannah Kinzer, born in The Philippines, an ah-ha moment came to her on the final day of Filipino Ties, 13,000 feet in the air, circling the little islands she had grown to love. “That’s when I realized, my home community is only a small place in the whole world. It’s only a little bubble in a sea of cultures, ideas, traditions, climates and people. I understand now that the world is a lot bigger than your home, your friends and your town,” Hannah said. Like a philosopher, old beyond her years, she continued, “I am only one person, and my town is only one place. But one thing stays the same. In all places, cultures and countries there are people who are trying to lead decent lives. The world is becoming a lot more connected, and my eyes have been opened to the wonder of Earth’s global family.”

### **Gratitude**

Because The Ties Program subscribes to Harry

Holt's belief that "Every child deserves a home," our programs do not advocate that children should feel grateful to be part of a family. Perhaps that is why I am so surprised to hear the kids talk about gratitude so frequently. Hands down, it has been the top item on a long list titled, "Things I learned about me."

Romanian-born Andrew Casey states "I learned I was extremely lucky to have been adopted because I would have lived a life of poverty. I needed to become much more family oriented, as well as appreciate and be thankful for everything I have. It was a turning point in my life to not only appreciate my family, but try to become closer, and function as a whole rather than as an individual."

Even at age 8, Noelle Hemphill returned from Vietnam with gratitude front and center. "Being able to live in America under a leak-free roof, and being able to live with my wonderful family in a safe house is really a privilege."

Like an echo reflecting the thoughts of many who have walked this path, Kaylan Johnson said, "I learned how thankful I was to have the life I was given."

### **Birth Family (or not)**

While more international adoptees are meeting birth family than ever before, the percentages are still low. In both the meeting (and not) kids are learning a lot about their needs and themselves.

Kyle Barry was adopted from Paraguay as an infant. He has traveled to Paraguay twice, each time connecting with parts of his birth family. "After meeting them, I finally knew who I was. My questions were answered, my mind at peace and my heart overflowing with satisfaction," he said.

For some kids, birth family connection fills a void, but it is important to remember not all adoptees want to meet birth family. And even those who go in search without finding learn



**TOURING** the Great Wall with the China Ties Program is Molly McPeak.

important things about themselves.

When Sarah Peterson traveled to Romania in hopes of finding her birth mom, "it turned out we couldn't find her," Sarah says, remembering how angry she was. "After the trip, I thought about it, and it took me about a year to a year-and-a-half to realize my parents are the people who raised me, and who were always there for me, and will always be there for me." With that knowledge, Sarah says, "I am completely comfortable now with who I am, and I absolutely love who I am."

In a poignant statement, Korean-born Aimee Sonkiss, shared what she learned about herself as a result of not finding her birth family. "Like those who have lost a parent through illness or absenteeism, I know I have an emotional burden of the uncertainty, hurt and unfairness surrounding my birth parents and unknown history. But like many others, although I can't say I've found peace, I've come to terms with it as a part of my whole. Instead of covering the emotions over and pretending they're not

there, I've learned to accept their existence and live alongside them."

The reality seems to be that kids can find a way to get comfortable with how the chapters of their lives unfold. But they need to know as much as possible about the beginning of their life story, firsthand, in order to shape their future.

### **Processing Time**

Contrary to what you might think, the majority of kids do only "surface processing" while they are traveling. The journey itself is so profound that many kids spend their time living in the moment. "While we were traveling it was very hard to think clearly about my feelings," Kayla Johnson remembers. Liana Foreman was more focused on absorbing and learning all she could. "I did not spend a lot of time reflecting," she recalls of her time in Guatemala.

Other kids report returning home and beginning the process of unpacking their thoughts immediately. Often times kids take a dip, from feeling euphoric to feeling down, which is normal.

Over time — a long time actually, the "ah-ha moments" surface, bringing kids to new realizations about themselves. "I would say it took a couple of years, until I went off to college, to fully comprehend who I was, what my life was all about, and how my Indian heritage affected me," Anisha said. "Actually, seven years later, I am still learning things about myself that I would not even have thought about had I not had the opportunity to visit my birth country."

For children, traveling to their birth country is like weaving all the threads of their life into a beautiful tapestry that takes a lifetime to complete.

*Becca Piper is an adoptive parent, and the founder and co-director of The Ties Program: Adoptive Family Homeland Journeys. For more information, visit [www.AdoptiveFamilyTravel.com](http://www.AdoptiveFamilyTravel.com).*





Photo courtesy of Light Imaging

# A Legacy

**O**n May 7, 1975, I was adopted into the loving family of Jerry and Colleen Ballard as a 3-week-old infant from war-torn Vietnam. On May 10, 2010, I adopted my son, Jayden Van Tri David Ballard, from the Binh Thuan Province of Vietnam. It was almost 35 years to the day, 35 years since Operation Babylift, 35 years since the war in Vietnam tore their country apart.

Following a reunion in 2000 with Betty Tisdale, the woman who evacuated me from Vietnam, I wrote an article entitled “A Legacy Fulfilled” that was printed in the May 2001 issue of *Adoption Today*. The article told of my experience reuniting with Tisdale and how

*me to pass it on. I hope and pray I can pass Betty’s legacy on to my children and to all those I contact in this journey called life.*

At the time I wrote those words, I wasn’t thinking about adoption or adopting or any of that. I was newly married making a general comment about the hope and optimism I felt regarding my future.

Now 10 years later as I write these words, I wonder how I arrived at this place, in this moment. I have been married 11 years, have three children (two biological girls and one adopted son), live in Ontario, Canada, and have launched a career as a professor. But when I pause to think about it, I realize there

**Now 10 years later as I write these words, I wonder how I arrived at this place, in this moment . . . But when I pause to think about it, I realize there really was a seed planted a decade ago, a seed that has taken root and fulfilled a legacy.**

how she had been inspired by Tom Dooley, a naval doctor, to do what she did. I concluded the article with:

*Legacies are made to be fulfilled, but they are also made to be passed on. The seed I have growing inside of me now is telling*

really was a seed planted a decade ago, a seed that has taken root and fulfilled a legacy.

## **Why We Adopted**

My wife and I did not plan to adopt a child 35 years after I was adopted. In fact, we had decided not to expand our family any more

at all. We actually sold all of our baby clothes, toys, cribs and everything at a garage sale. We were content, had found our equilibrium. Then we met Kai at Vietnamese Heritage Camp in August 2007.

Kai was a young boy recently adopted from Vietnam. Both my wife and I had the privilege of holding him and interacting with him while at camp, and in doing so, deep desires of adoption surfaced in both of us. Driving home, my wife turned to me and asked, “Do you want to adopt?” Without hesitation, I responded, “Yes.”

Many have asked why we decided to adopt. After all, we had two beautiful children and by all accounts had everything we could possibly need. But when I am asked, my answer is simple: “Because I want to.” I wanted to experience adopting, to understand what adoptive parents go through, to understand what my parents went through. I also wanted a boy. Life did not seem empty without a child, but it felt like it would be more full with him. I wanted that fullness.

## **The Journey to Adopt and the Return to Birth Country**

Our decision to adopt launched another journey. And while the end turned out well as our son has now joined our family, it was anything but easy. The U.S. immigration lost our paperwork. The U.S. closed down adoptions from Vietnam. We moved to Canada and



# *Fulfilled II*

By Bert Ballard, Ph.D.

had to start the process all over again. We had to apply for permanent residency, requiring the meticulous documentation of our lives since we were 18 years old. We were initially matched with one of two older boys, but their families were located after we were matched. We were constantly told it would be “six months,” “the referral’s just around the corner” or “in the next few weeks.” One of these frustrations is hard enough; piled on over three years they pushed us to many breaking points. There were many, many times we wanted to give up or asked ourselves if it was worth it.

But we didn’t give up. We stayed committed to the process and to him. We would work hard to imagine him home and in our arms. We held onto faith, even when we didn’t believe. And somehow, we found ourselves in Vietnam, a trip to grow our family and return to my roots.

The trip to Vietnam to pick up our son was my first trip to my birth country. Vietnam was an amazing experience for me. But it wasn’t an amazing experience because it was my first time back or because I found healing and reconnection. It was amazing because it was about adding to my family and about experiencing and cherishing every moment with all of them.

While in Vietnam, I saw where An Lac, my old orphanage was located before the build-

ing was turned into government housing. I met a woman who was in An Lac at the same time I was but not evacuated. We met her son and his family and heard about how hard it was for the woman to survive. I had everyone speaking to me in Vietnamese, believing I was actually Vietnamese for once in my life. I was

**As I look back on our adoption journey, I admit I began to wonder about the ethics of adopting. The various instances of corruption that dot the landscape of international adoption can’t help but generate doubts about the legitimacy of adoptions. I wanted to have assurance that our son came to us in the most ethical, legitimate way possible.**

no longer the skinniest (probably the fattest), nor the shortest (probably one of the tallest), nor the only Asian (my wife was the racial minority for once) in a crowd. My daughters were pinched, poked and touched as the Vietnamese do with young, beautiful girls. I actually thought the traffic with all the motor-bikes, cars and noises was cool. We ate a lot of meals on the streets, visited too many markets, visited a lot of pagodas and historical sites, rode in a lot of taxis, and did a lot of swimming. And of course, we picked up our son from the orphanage and spent time getting to know him, and becoming a family of five.

## ***Ethical Adoption and Welcoming Jayden***

As I look back on our adoption journey, I admit I began to wonder about the ethics of adopting. The various instances of corruption that dot the landscape of international adoption can’t help but generate doubts about

the legitimacy of adoptions. I wanted to have assurance that our son came to us in the most ethical, legitimate way possible. Even through all that happened and the sadness that came with losing our connection with the two older boys, I am glad they were reunited with their families. It was heartbreaking, but I believe the right thing happened in this case. We met one of the boys while visiting Jayden’s orphanage. He was shy and scared, but seemed right at home with the other 18 older children in the orphanage.

I sometimes wonder how it would’ve turned



**CELEBRATING** during the Giving and Receiving Ceremony are the Ballard family — parents Bert and Sarah with their children Adria, Kyla and newly adopted Jayden — and Jayden's nanny Ms. Le Thi My Thang.





out if one of those boys had become ours. While no one will ever know, I wonder how it would have changed us or him or what he would have gone through or how hard it would be for him to be raised by us. What I do know is that finding their families means they have something I never did — a connection to their birth families.

As for Jayden, he was abandoned at the orphanage shortly after his birth. He spent a few days in the hospital and was at the orphanage for at least six months before they even considered making him eligible for adoption. During that time, they searched for family, placed ads in the local paper, and followed all of the appropriate protocols. I'd like to say it was an unusual occurrence, but according to the director, the abandonment of infants is fairly frequent.

When we visited, there were another two infants, about 6 months old, who had been left there just that week. All together there were another 17 infants at Jayden's orphanage — not all abandoned, but all his brothers and sisters. Given his time at the orphanage, coupled with the boys who were reunited with their families, I am confident in the efforts made to ensure that Jayden was legitimately an orphan.

Jayden was cared for primarily by one particular nanny. He called her "Mei," the word for mom in Vietnamese. It was a relief to finally meet him, to touch him, to know he was real. But it was also difficult to have him join our family. Because of his closeness with Mei, his joining our family meant leaving the only mother and family he had ever known.

Now, just two months after joining our family, he has adjusted well, especially for a child who spent a year in an orphanage. He's happy, loves people, is empathetic, smiles and laughs a lot, is busy and smart. He gets along well with his sisters, cries for Mommy and Daddy often, and eats everything. We think there are times when he misses Mei, like when he peers into the face of another Asian woman a moment longer or when he wakes up screaming for no apparent reason in the night, but we also take heart in knowing he was loved

and that he freely gives love to others.

### **Another Legacy Fulfilled, Another Seed Planted**

Another legacy has been fulfilled. This time the seed planted in me has taken form through adding a child to my family from the country of my birth. Going through this has shown me that what happened nearly 60 years ago, beginning with Dooley and Madame Vu Thi Ngai, the director of An Lac, to Betty Tisdale. This has left a long-standing legacy, one I am a part of. It has shown me that my life is but a small piece of a larger legacy in which my responsibility is to pay honor to those before me and carry out, in my small way, the good works they began.

In many ways a second circle is now completed for me. The first was meeting Tisdale and learning about that legacy. The second was that legacy being fulfilled through my son, whose story begins in the same country as my own. The next circle? I don't know. But I'm sure somewhere another seed has been planted, that Dooley, Ngai and Tisdale's legacies live on, and in another way, it has been fulfilled.

I will pass this legacy onto my children, my three Vietnamese children. It is their choice how to respond, but no matter what they do, this legacy that began in a war-torn country 60 years ago resulting in my adoption and my son's adoption is part of their story forever. I am full of optimism as I watch to see how they will fulfill it in their own way. For as Tisdale once told me, that is the nature of a legacy — it lives on in those who choose to let themselves be moved by it.

*Bert Ballard, Ph.D., is an assistant professor at the University of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada, as well as a Vietnamese adoptee. He writes, researches and speaks on adoption in scholarly and practitioner settings. He and his wife, Sarah, have two daughters, 8-year-old Adria and 6-year-old, and are new adoptive parents to 1-year-old Jayden from Vietnam. Ballard is also the editor of "Pieces of Me: Who Do I Want to Be?" a book of stories by adopted teens. To contact Ballard, visit [bballard@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:bballard@uwaterloo.ca). For more information about the book, visit [www.emkpress.com](http://www.emkpress.com).*





# Finding Birth Parents

*How adoptees from China are making the connection*

**By Jane Liedtke, Ph.D.**

**M**aking a homeland visit for Chinese adoptees no longer is confined to seeing China and discovering Chinese culture or even a reconnection with the social welfare institute and caregivers there. Nowadays adoptees and their families are looking for more. They are seeking out birth parents and finding them.

When I adopted my daughter in 1994 the thought never crossed my mind that one day her birth parents might be accessible to us. First, we have little information to go on — “found on the hospital steps” with a small note stating her birth date as two weeks prior to her abandonment there. Second, from my experiences living and working in China prior to adoption, I thought that a family would lose face and not come forward to admit they had abandoned a child. By any stretch of the imagination, I thought it was going to be nearly impossible for most adoptees to find and meet their birth parents.

I believe many people adopted abroad and specifically from China to ensure they would not have to deal with birth parents who wanted their children back, as this was happening in America among domestic adoptions at the time. Safe, it seemed, for those who would like to have no connection to the birth family. I’ll admit I didn’t think much about birth parents at the time I adopted my daughter. Most people didn’t back then in the early to mid 1990s. We discussed birth families with our children but we didn’t dwell on it or make promises about what the future would hold in terms of meeting them.

Time went on and books such as “Mommy Far, Mommy Near” by Dr. Carol Peacock came to the forefront and we adoptive parents had to admit we’d been leaving out some critical pieces of

information for our children. I fantasized that my daughter would meet her siblings when her birth parents were in their senior years with no harm to fear. I imagined them telling her older sister and younger brother that they should go find her so they could all meet before they, her birth parents, passed away. Not unlike characters in Amy Tan’s novel “The Joy Luck Club” did.

Jump more than 15 years into the China adoption program and families inform their children differently, a lot has been written and researched about the need for our children to connect to their homeland and culture, their language, and yes — their birth family. More and more children ask their parents to help them find their birth parents and more and more parents are complying with extraordinary means to do so — including hiring private investigators, which are not authorized by the Chinese government to conduct such work.

Along the way, through the OCDF China Tours programs ([www.ocdf.org/tours](http://www.ocdf.org/tours)), we’ve had about 15 families either meet their child’s birth parents in China or have the opportunity to do so, but elected to either wait until the child was older or elected to not make the connection at all. As one might imagine, I can’t write about children by their name or reveal families in such an article as this is private for many. I’ll share in a way that will help you understand how the circumstances have made it possible to meet birth parents.

For the families that we’ve worked with during their homeland tour or orphanage visit there has been one rather consistent thread — none of them were looking for birth parents at the time they were found or at the time the connection was made possible. By fate and circumstances, the birth families have come to be known. In almost all cases, the child had been left on the doorstep

or a home in a rural area or village and found by someone local. In many cases, that person in the village either knew the family or the family came forward to them later by returning to check on the status of the child. In one situation the couple who found the child at their doorstep said to the adoptive parents, “if you will bring your daughter back when she is older, we will introduce you to them (birth parents).”

In another situation the adoptive family visited the village where the child had been found and through a series of twists of fate met the birth parents the next day. The birth parents had returned for their daughter when she would have been 4 years of age and as such the finding person knew where to locate them.

In the case of two families we know, the local village heads were called by the orphanage director to approve the visit of foreigners to the village for the purpose of seeing the finding spot and meeting the person who found the child. When the village approved the visit they indicated that the adoptive family and child could meet the birth family upon visiting the village. When the village head called the finding person they revealed who the birth family was to the village heads and that information passed on to the orphanage director who actually was willing to share it.

In the case of one family, an article about the family’s return to visit the orphanage was published in regional newspapers, which had been initiated by the orphanage director to celebrate the return of the family to visit the social welfare institute. The birth parents came forward asking to meet their daughters and the adoptive family. After a period of time during which the family was confirmed via DNA testing to be related, the two families met. And, in the case of one girl, the neighborhood committee had taken her from birth to the social welfare institute because she was the third child born to the couple. The neighborhood committee’s role in family planning determined the fate of this child, not the biological parents.

Those seeking to find birth parents should prepare carefully — this is not something to undertake without preparation of child and family members. First, it’s not the same as travel

to China or even going to meet caregivers and foster family. This process is burdened heavily with psychological issues — abandonment, unwanted children, birth control methods, and most of all, poverty. Abandonment of a child typically occurs not because of family planning laws and regulations but because of poverty — a family can’t afford any alternatives and abandonment is opted for. It’s not just about your child. A birth parent’s decision to abandon a child is about their entire family — grandparents, parents, existing children in the home, village rules and practices, government policies and level of local control, connections (or *guanxi*) that the family has, income and future aspirations, place of work and work options, status in the community and workplace and other issues. In most of the cases we’ve been privy to, there are older siblings (most often a girl and boy), and the family did not make it widely known that there was a child missing from the family order.

### **Issues/Concerns to Think About:**

1. Is finding birth parents and meeting them an entitlement? Perhaps from our culture you may believe it is, but is it from the Chinese culture and perspective?
2. What issues will your child face in balancing roles and responsibilities with two families — adoptive and birth family? Does your child really understand what his or her future will be like having two families? How will you and the rest of your extended family handle the situation? Will you learn Chinese in order to communicate? Will you feel obligated to give money in order to resolve issues of dire poverty should it be the family’s situation?
3. Will your child be stable and emotionally sound — is he or she ready and does he or she really want to find birth parents or does he or she only want information.
4. What timeline is realistic for your child to gain access to birth parents? Are you able to afford regular visits? Will the inability to visit or communicate cause a negative impact on your family?
5. Will DNS testing be accessible to verify a family “match” (DNA testing is not legal to perform in China except in a court-ordered paternity case so most people who end up using DNA testing to verify matches will send samples to the U.S. for testing).

6. What if you discover your child was a victim of child-trafficking — how will you handle this information with your child and extended family? It is difficult enough to imagine this happening to a child but we know it has happened in the China adoption community — how will your child be able to cope? Will your family seek support services and what help might be needed in advance?

There are people who have hired private investigators, used search tools in China such as Bao Bei Hui Jia to find possible matches, and posted signs and articles in the newspaper to find birth parents. A small number have been successful and usually that success is due to the circumstances of the abandonment being unusual.

In August, OCDF launched a new bilingual website for Chinese families and adoptive families to post trying to meet up with their missing relatives. A link from Bao Bei Hui Jia will enable Chinese persons to post a photo and information in Chinese to the site. Foreign adoptive parents can post a photo and leave confidential information in English about their child. When the staff sees a potential match, we will carefully work with both sides to verify the match and then make introductions. We hope this will prove to be a powerful and useful tool for families in China seeking their children and vice versa.

See [www.ocdf.org/tours](http://www.ocdf.org/tours) for “Walking Down the Village Path” an article about finding birth parents in China. See also [www.ocdf.org/publications](http://www.ocdf.org/publications) for articles about specific families who have met birth parents in China and how their children reacted. Visit [www.abrightmoon.com](http://www.abrightmoon.com) to learn about how OCDF is helping families make connections.

*Jane Liedtke, Ph.D., is CEO of Our Chinese Daughters Foundation. She also remains active in the business community in China as a management trainer and consultant specializing in the development of Chinese managers to meet the challenges of modernization and change. Liedtke is also a single mother with a 17-year-old daughter adopted from Jiangmen, China. Beginning in 1987, Liedtke traveled to and from China for both work and pleasure.*



**WEARING** traditional Korean hanboks are a Korean instructor, left, and Heman and Lisa Mehta.



**VISITING KOREA** are Lisa's husband Hemang, Lisa Anderson Mehta, Dillon a friend.

# My Life Changing

I was adopted at 5 months old and for most of my life I have been thinking about my birth mother. Did I have her eyes, her long arms, her prominent cheekbones, her broad shoulders? I love my parents but I always wondered who I looked like. I longed for that sense of belonging.

In 2004, I contacted Dillon International for the basic information about my birth family. I received a letter explaining the circumstances of my birth, my birth parents' ages and names and where they lived when I was born. I read the letter and put it away because that was all the information I was ready for at the time. However, I had really hoped for a photo as well. The letter also stated that my birth mother did not leave her identification number so the chances of finding her were slim.

In January 2006, my husband, Hemang, and I began to discuss starting a family. We decided that it would be great to travel to South Korea to see my birth country. This prompted me to try to contact my birth mother. I contacted Dukyung Um at Dillon with my request. She was careful not to give me any false hopes,

cautioning me we had little information to work with. For two months, I thought of the many possible outcomes but tried not to get too hopeful.

Then one day, Dukyung left me a voicemail message regarding the status of my birth family search; her tone of voice was unrevealing. I took a few hours to call her back because I was expecting her to tell me that the search was inconclusive. All of my life, I believed the idea of finding my birth mom was a possibility. Now, fearing this possibility would be shattered, I definitely could wait a couple of hours to hear that news. I called her back while I was driving, and to my tremendous surprise, Dukyung said they had located, and talked to, my birth mother.

I remember this day so clearly. I was driving, crying and smiling all at the same time. Dukyung said my birth mom was in shock and was ambivalent about meeting me. The only person who ever knew she had been pregnant was her mother, who had passed away, and a distant relative. She suggested I write my birth mom a letter and send her photos. I wrote

a compelling letter and gathered the cutest pictures I could find. She was convinced.

I met my birth mother on July 4, 2006. When I walked into the room, she got up, hugged me and started to sob. She cried so hard that I was actually comforting her. I was surprised by her emotional reaction. It was difficult to absorb the fact that I was hugging my birth mom.

We sat down and she immediately started telling me about the circumstances leading up to my adoption. I was relieved and pleasantly surprised at her openness because I didn't have to ask any questions. The whole time she was stroking and squeezing my hand. I, on the other hand, was looking at her thinking, "I don't look like this Korean woman." I had spent all of my life trying not to look Korean and didn't realize that when I saw her for the first time that I would actually feel more American.

I was relieved to see that we did have similar features. We have the same cheekbones, eyes, broad shoulders, nose and hands. One of my biggest fears was that I would look more like my birth father than my birth mother and





International's Korea Program Director Dukkyung Um and



**SIPPING HEALING WATER** are Lisa Anderson Mehta, left, and her husband Hemang, along with another participant in Dillon International's Korea birthland tour.

# JOURNEY

By Lisa Anderson Mehta

since I do not know where he is, I wouldn't find that sense of belonging.

After an hour or so, our husbands came into the room. My birth mother gave Hemang a big hug. Her husband, Hemyung, hugged me as well. He was extremely supportive and accepting of Hemang and me. He told me that my birth mother cared for his mother for 20 years and is a hard worker and wonderful wife. This was his way of paying her back for her kindness and dedication. I thought that was so touching.

Hemyung then proceeded to talk to us like our father, telling us to be good to each other, work hard and support each other. Afterward, he asked if I would accept him as my Korean father. That blew me away. For the previous couple of days, we had heard stories about how important bloodline is in the Korean culture. I thought he was going to sit there passively, yet politely, while my birth mother and I "caught up."

The biggest surprise I received was when they gave me their beautiful 24-karat gold wed-

ding necklace with a pendant and bracelet. They said that after a couple of years of marriage they were going through some difficult financial times so they had to sell it. A few years later, they were more financially stable and were able to buy it again so it had a lot of meaning. I was so honored and felt almost unworthy of this family heirloom. They have two sons, whom I did not meet, so I was their only daughter. I was speechless by the unconditional love I felt from both my birth mom and her husband.

After about two hours of translating, gift giving and crying, we went out for an errand and dinner. It was fun because it felt like a "family" outing. Hemyung and Hemang had their arms around each other and my birth mom and I did as well. We couldn't communicate with each other with words but just walking down the street arm in arm conveyed more feelings than words could ever explain. On the way to dinner, I kept sneaking peaks of our reflection in the windows and mirrors to remind myself that we looked alike. Throughout dinner, my birth mom kept feeding me food. Every time I looked away from my plate, she would put

some food on my spoon. It was a little awkward but I indulged her.

We said goodbye to them and gave them a hug and a big thank you. We even made plans to meet again after our trip to Busan. From what I could tell, they were caring people. I did not realize how much relief it would give my birth mom to see that I was healthy and happy. She told me how guilty she had felt and that she thought of me every day but couldn't talk to anyone about it. She had only told her husband about me two months before we actually met. I am so glad that he has forgiven my birth mother and accepted me as his "daughter."

After all those years of thinking about her and wondering what she looked like, the reality of meeting my birth mother is still sinking in. I think it was the right time in my life for me to meet my birth mom.

*Lisa Anderson Mehta was adopted through Dillon International's Korea program in 1975. Today she lives in California with her husband and two sons. She and her birth mother continue to keep in touch through occasional letters.*



**DURING** a trip to China in 2006, Claire Collier, center, had the opportunity to meet her birth family, including from left, her sister-in-law, nephew, birth mother, brother-in-law, sister, nephew and birth father.

About four years ago, Deb Collier decided to take her daughter, 10-year-old Claire, on an impromptu journey to China to visit Claire's birth country and former orphanage. Linked with friends through the Our Chinese Daughter's Foundation Homeland tour, Collier decided it would be the perfect opportunity to reconnect Claire to her birth country.

"We just wanted to do a little cultural learning and see where she had come from," Collier said.

An only child, Claire was adopted by Collier from Guangzhou Province at 7 months old. On the return trip, Collier was hoping to give Claire a better understanding of her background and where she fit in the world — what they discovered would be more than Collier could ever imagine.

"I just wanted to give her a better sense of herself," Collier said. "She lives in a pretty lily-

white community. I just wanted her to go and be part of the majority."

Because of China's strict one-child policy, many Chinese children, specifically girls, have been adopted internationally during the past 20 years. Many of them, like Claire who lives in Colorado, have found homes in America. Most will never know their birth families, having been abandoned anonymously in a variety of locations throughout China.

For Claire, seeing her orphanage and reconnecting to the first few months of her life was important. As part of OCDF's Homeland tour, Claire and her mother visited a variety of sights including the Great Wall before visiting Claire's orphanage.

On their way, Collier wanted to try to locate the place where Claire had been abandoned. But mother and daughter discovered the family planning office was no longer located in the same place, and set out to find the new office location. By chance, the group stumbled into

the supervisor of all the area family planning clinics. The supervisor quickly contacted local newspapers and television media to help locate anyone who might have information about Claire and her birth family.

Before Collier had much time to contemplate what may happen, a man and woman came forward claiming to be Claire's birth parents.

"Just like that, all of a sudden they were in the room with us," Collier said. "Mrs. Lee {Claire's birth mother} stood back and looked at my daughter and said, 'yes, she looks like my children at that age.'"

For Collier, the meeting was surreal. Having never thought Claire would ever be able to trace her birth family to suddenly meeting them was more than she ever imagined and the similarities between Claire and her birth family were undeniable.

"Here she was, someone who looks just like my child," Collier said.

Rel  
th



*A China adoptee discovers more than her birth heritage on a trip to China...she discovers family.*

# Kindling the Connection

By Kim Phagan-Hansel

For the next couple of days, Claire and her mother spent time getting to know her birth family and learning about her family history and the first few weeks and months of her life. Claire was surprised to learn that she was not a first child like she had always assumed, but the fourth child of her birth parents. Claire has three older siblings, a brother and sister, who were born before the one-child policy was implemented and raised by their parents. After her older brother was diagnosed with a terminal illness, her parents decided they needed another child to help them in their old age, a responsibility typically of a son.

The couple first had another son who was taken from them by the family planning office and was later adopted domestically. But determined to have another child, Mrs. Lee became pregnant with Claire and hid herself away to keep family planning from taking her away as well.

“They would keep her hidden while pregnant and while she was little,” Collier said.



**COMPARING** the similarity of hands are Claire and her birth mother during a meeting in May 2006.



**THE PATH** leading to the home where Claire (Qui Li Jin) was born. Left, Claire Collier and her birth mother, Mrs. Li.

For 50 days after her birth, the Lees were successful in hiding Claire, but finally the family planning office came for her too. When Collier learned the story of Claire's early life, it only emphasized her thoughts that Claire had been a wanted child, not abandoned by a family that didn't love or want her.

"She was a wanted child or she would not have been born," Collier said. "I was just joyful. I was just so joyful for her that she was able to have that connection."

Watching Claire with her birth parents was something Collier said she will never forget. Seeing the love her birth parents had for her only emphasized what Collier had always known.

"Her birth father, you would look at him and he would have tears in his eyes," Collier said. "It was obviously the hardest on him. He was just sweet — he was tickled she was loved and cared for."

For Claire, the meeting was spectacular, something she said she had dreamed about all of her life.

"It was very shocking, but I think I'd always

had that fantasy stuck in my head," Claire said. "Now I don't have to wonder about it."

Though Claire said the visit was chaotic, she said it was nice to meet her birth family. She was able to meet not only her birth parents, but also her sister and nephew.

"It feels very special," Claire said. "I know a lot of girls who would just die to meet their birth parents and I wish they could."

Claire was also surprised to learn that the birthday she had celebrated for 10 years was not her actual birthday. In reality, she is a few months older than what her birth certificate states.

"I like the thought of being older, but we've been celebrating both ever since then," Claire said.

For Collier, she has seen how the meeting has impacted her daughter and is thankful that everything fell into place so Claire could meet

her birth family.

"It felt like divine intervention and an angel on my shoulder through the whole trip," Collier said. "If we hadn't met the birth family it would have been a wonderful trip, but being able to meet the birth family — it was just the most amazing, wonderful time in our lives."

Now, four years later, Claire continues to correspond with her birth family and learn more things about them. She hopes to visit them again some day, something Collier said she hopes to do next year.

"We hear from them maybe once a year," Collier said. "We're hoping to go back next summer and visit."

Collier said she feels a strong connection with Claire's birth family and hopes to cultivate that in the future through visits and letters.

"I think we're bonded with that red thread," Collier said.

*Laughter, tears, heartache and more can be shared in the pages of Adoption Today magazine. Consider submitting your own personal journey today . . . write to [editor@adoptinfo.net](mailto:editor@adoptinfo.net).*



# POWERFUL

## *The Ballad of a Shy Right to Know Activist*

By Penny Callan Partridge, MSW

What a meeting,  
what a group we are,  
dragging ourselves to Harrisburg  
to see if the Catholics can agree  
to stop promising anonymity  
so maybe future adoptees can  
have the right to their origins.

What a sweaty hot day  
and what a thing to do  
before I move away:  
to wind up these long years  
of bumbling along however  
I can in the interest  
of access to origins.

What a group as I  
said before: one Catholic,  
one Jew for Jesus, one  
totally tranquil mother of  
fourteen (each with special  
needs) and one apparently  
infuriating Protestant.

When Diana tries to talk about  
the importance of access to  
birthparents for medical reasons,  
Sister B says, "But people  
use this medical thing  
when what they really  
want is much more."

And I say, "Well, we  
do want more. Whatever  
we can or cannot put into  
words, even for ourselves,  
WE WANT OUR  
BIRTHPARENTS  
TO ACKNOWLEDGE US.

And she says, "YOU,  
Penny Partridge! You  
told people they could  
bypass the agency and  
contact their birthparents by  
themselves!" And I say, "Yes!"  
— a moment in which I fill with pride.

This nun I'd thought so  
powerful and she  
this mad at me?  
And I don't feel guilt  
— just proud I  
let people know  
they had a choice?

My friends thought it looked  
like Sister B wanted to  
crawl across that table and  
strangle me. But I was seeing  
how far I'd come to be as bold  
before nuns, priests, lobbyists  
and administrators as I was being.

Sister B went into  
retirement soon after that.  
A sister took her place who  
thought our pamphlet on the  
search was great. And I  
held onto this day Sister  
B made me feel powerful

*Penny Callan Partridge, MSW, is adopted herself  
and a parent by adoption. An early adoption activ-  
ist, she is often called the Poet Laureate of Adop-  
tion. Her latest book includes poems about being  
adopted and stories about her poems' readers and  
listeners. Order "The People They Brought Me"  
through [www.pennycallanpartridge.com](http://www.pennycallanpartridge.com).*



# Fighting for

By Penny Callan Partridge, MSW; Jeanne A. Howard, Ph.D.; Susan Livingston Smith, LCSW and Georgia Deoudes, JD,

**Four** adopted people are sitting around talking about our various experiences with activism. One of us has been a tenacious lobbyist of state legislators for more than 30 years. The goal of her lobbying is a state law that would give the adopted (born in her state) access to their original birth certificates.

This lobbying has not been confined to the hallways of her state capitol, but has also involved a lot of networking, both within her state and across this country and a few other countries. Activism is never done in isolation and perhaps it is no surprise that the natural networker among us has lasted the longest in terms of almost constant attention to what can be done better, what else, and how soon. Though she says her faith in democracy has been shaken throughout the years, it is clear to all four of us that she would give her last breath to help the adopted have the civil right to know their origins. Others of us did not last as long with that kind of effort.

The other one of us who actually enjoyed lobbying legislators was brought into the cause in late middle age. A county clerk helped him locate his original family. When he realized her kindness to him had involved breaking the law, he vowed to help do away with that kind of law. He went on to find much help from two legislative aides whose minds he had helped to change. Since moving to another state, he has continued to be involved in a network of adopted people helping each other in terms of search and support.

One of our little group had found lobbying an awful experience. She didn't like having to ask for something like her own original identity — that other people could withhold this from her by law made her feel a maddening powerlessness and a deep “illegitimacy” even though that stigma is supposed to have lessened. What this young woman did instead was to build an organization that would help triad members support each other and teach the general public to understand adoption differently.

The fourth member of our group had a similar experience with actual lobbying. And she too helped grow an organization for mutual support and public education. She then turned to writing, specifically poetry, as a way of articulating and witnessing to the experience of the adopted, including their attempts to gain legal access to their origins. This is only a tiny sample of efforts made by adopted people and their friends during the last four decades.

So where do things stand now in relation to those efforts? For the





# Adoptee Rights

Compiled by Pam Hasegawa



**NEW JERSEY ADOPTEES** Joanne Spencer and Michele Fortier join Adoptee Rights Coalition's 2009 demonstration in Philadelphia during the National Conference of State Legislators. The coalition began the annual event in 2007.



**PEOPLE GATHER**  
at a 2009 Adoptee Rights rally in Philadelphia.



“Records II: An Examination of the History and Impact of Adult Adoptee Access to Original Birth Certificates” by Jeanne A. Howard, Ph.D.; Susan Livingston Smith, LCSW; and Georgia Deoudes, JD, was published in July by the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute. The authors’ survey of state legislation regarding adoptees’ original birth certificates presents the current situation accurately, succinctly and eloquently.

“At a time when an array of complex adoption-related concerns are being discussed from Haiti to Moscow to Beijing, within the adoption community in our country, one seemingly simple question continues to receive the most consistent, intense attention: Should adopted adults, like all other Americans, be allowed to have their original birth certificates? Indeed, for more than a generation, no other adoption issue has generated more debate or caused greater division.

Today, more efforts to restore adult adoptee access to original birth certificates are being mounted than ever before. In the three legislative sessions that have begun since the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute’s November 2007 publication of “For the Records: Restoring a Legal Right for Adult Adoptees” (of which this report is an update), original birth certificate legislation has been introduced coast to coast. In the 2009-2010 sessions alone, lawmakers in at least 11 states considered the issue — and in at least one, Illinois — they have enacted a statute in recent weeks significantly expanding original birth certificate access, making theirs the seventh state to do so in the last decade. During the same period, Massachusetts has implemented a narrower original birth certificate access law, while activists in several more states, including New Jersey and Rhode Island, have been organizing, fund-raising, and taking other steps intended to result in yet more legislation.

Though support is clearly growing for the “open records” movement, as it is often called, proponents are hardly declaring that victory is on the horizon. Most of their efforts have been unsuccessful, and many of the original birth certificate laws that have been enacted are compromises that grant access to some adoptees but not to others; these compromises open an emotional divide among advocates on whether they are championing the majority or betraying those left behind.

A major reason such compromises are offered — and why more states

have not enacted access legislation — appears to be that much of the debate has been muddled by misunderstandings about the history of the issue, misconceptions about the parties involved, and mistaken concerns about the consequences of changing the status quo. It is commonly argued during the legislative process in every state, for instance, that OBCs are sealed to protect the anonymity that birth mothers were promised, and that changing the rules now would undermine their lives and be harmful in other ways, such as increasing the number of abortions. An examination of the research and other evidence, however, shows that all those assertions are flawed or incorrect.

... A lengthy examination and analysis of the arguments on both sides of the debate leads to these primary findings:

- Barring adopted adults from access to their original birth certificates wrongly denies them a right enjoyed by all others in our country, and is not in their best interests for personal and medical reasons.
- Alternative solutions to providing adopted adults access to their OBCs, such as mutual consent registries, are ineffective and do not adequately address the needs of adopted persons.
- The overwhelming majority of birth mothers do not want to remain anonymous to the children they relinquished for adoption and support (or do not oppose) those children’s access to their original birth certificates.
- Providing adult adoptees with access to their original birth certificates does not threaten the integrity of adoptive families or the institution of adoption; indeed, the evidence suggests that the opposite is the case.
- In other countries and in America that have restored adopted adults’ access to OBCs, or never sealed these records at all, there is no evidence of any of the significant negative consequences critics predict.

Based on these findings, the Adoption Institute recommends significant changes in current adoption law and policy in order to restore adopted persons’ rights to information about their origins and heritage — and to achieve equality for the members of all families, regardless of how they are formed.

The report recommends:

- Every state should restore unrestricted access to original birth certificates for all adult adoptees, retroactively and prospectively.
- State laws that provide access to original birth certificates to a limited number of adult adoptees should be amended to enable them all to obtain these documents and thereby be treated equally.
- No agency, attorney, social worker or other adoption professional should promise birth parents that their identities will remain concealed from their children.
- A national adoption registry should be implemented to enable all adopted persons and their birth parents, no matter where they reside, to participate.
- Confidential intermediary services should be available throughout all states, even after original birth certificates access is restored."

and concludes, "Some opponents of restoring access to original birth certificates cast adult adoptees' desire for this basic information about themselves as a matter of curiosity, a simple interest that can be satisfied through other means, while others express seemingly substantive concerns about the implications of altering current law. Some proponents of unsealing OBCs focus on search, reunion and medical information as the key issues, while others say the bottom line need not include any of those issues because the debate is really about equal rights and social justice.

Wherever one stands, this much is clear: The laws on the books in most states do not benefit the vast majority of the affected parties, and therefore should be changed. Modern adoption practice, with its emphasis on openness, honesty and family connections should be the operating model. It is time to end the secrecy that has not only resulted in shame and stigma for nearly everyone concerned, but also has undermined the institution itself by sending a signal from the start — at the time a birth certificate is issued — that adoption has something to hide.

The full text of "For the Records II" is available at <http://adoptioninstitute.org/index.php>.

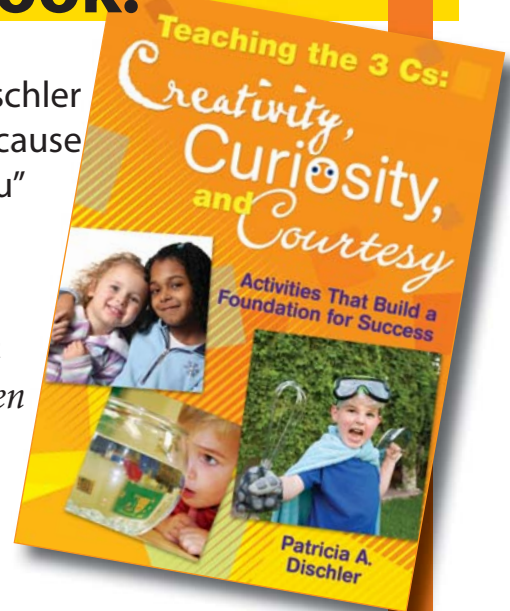
*Jeanne A. Howard, Ph.D., policy and research director of the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, and Susan Livingston Smith, LCSW, the Institute's program and project director, are both professors emerita of Illinois State University's School of Social Work and leading researchers in the field of post-adoption services. Georgia Deoudes, JD, is the previous legislative and policy director of the Institute.*

*Penny Callan Partridge, MSW, is adopted herself and a parent by adoption. An early adoption activist, she is often called the Poet Laureate of Adoption. Her latest book includes poems about being adopted and stories about her poems' readers and listeners. Order "The People They Brought Me" through [www.pennycallanpartridge.com](http://www.pennycallanpartridge.com).*

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**Helping Children — One Child at a Time**



# Search & Reunion

By Claudia D'Arcy and Lewellen Singley

*Adoption Blogger and Adoptee LewEllen and Birth Mother Claudia know firsthand how an adoption reunion is a journey most undertake without a map. Every reunion journey is as unique as the individuals and circumstances, but there are commonalities that can be helpful when shared. Reunion changes each of us in ways we may have never imagined and it changes us forever.*

I never officially decided to search for my relinquished son.

In 1987, I was 19 and looked to adoption as the final answer to the pregnancy that would “ruin my life.” To redeem myself, I tried to be the best birth mother at my progressive Massachusetts agency. So, I never wavered, I never showed any conflict in my decision and I never ever considered doing one thing that was not best for my son’s placement.

As a birth mother, I was taught to allow the adoptee to find us on his or her terms. I left my baby behind with pieces of me so he could have a clear sense of who he was, where he came from, and his heritage. I went home, hoped for the best and began counting down the years to age 18 when he could have my contact information. Throughout the years, I updated the agency, I never dropped my maiden name and always left forwarding addresses. It was like a game of Hansel and Gretel throughout the years, leaving a trail of breadcrumbs so he could find me again.

---

*I’ve never been a people pleaser, but I was a good adoptee. I didn’t search.*

*I didn’t search because I thought I couldn’t. In my late teens, I made some attempts, quietly, without telling anyone, a phone call, a letter sent to social services. I always got the same response, “We can’t help you.”*

*Finding seemed impossible, so I buried it and went on with my life. I thought of myself as completely unique, not of my adoptive family, and not of a birth family that I couldn’t imagine. I thought I was OK.*

---

Fast forward 13 years later and the dawn of the Internet.

I had continued on with my young life as before, as if I was not a mother. I went to college as planned, married, had more children, pretended I was OK with adoption. Of course the first word that I typed in the search bar, would be “adoption.”

I had never met another birth mother. I never had a real opportunity to talk about adoption and really share the experience of relinquishment with anyone who could really understand. I told myself that I needed to find out more about reunion and “get ready” for Max and entered the online adoption world. Thus

began the journey that continues to alter my existence to this day.

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*Years later, my husband spent way too much money on what in those days was called a personal computer. My husband was excited about being able to access the Internet. I thought he was a giant geek.*

*I had to admit that the weather information was pretty good, and that picture of the guy in the Tron costume was funny, but I didn’t see the computer as being terribly useful.*

*Then we had a snowstorm that included four days of snow, ice and sub-zero temperatures, in mid-March. My husband was out-of-town at a conference, my cable TV went out, and I couldn’t get my car out of the driveway. Out of sheer boredom, I turned on the computer. I had no idea what to do with it, so I typed in adoption.*

*That’s where it began, three days of obsessive reading that would turn into more than a year of obsessive searching. I felt like a detective, getting a scrap of information and chasing it down to a dead end, then finding another, and doing the same. Something that had meant little to me*



**TOGETHER AT LAST** are Claudia Corrigan D'Arcy and her sons, 20-year-old Max, left, who was relinquished to adoption at birth and 16-year-old Garin Sheeley on Aug. 19, 2007.



*had become the focus of my life.*

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Time passed while I was online and Max was 16. I told my second son about his brother and questions ensued:

“What’s his name now?”

“I don’t know,” I answered.

“What is he like?”

“I don’t know,” I repeated.

“Where does he live?”

“I don’t know,” was all I could say.

All I could do was show him the letters, pictures, documents and parent profiles that I had kept safely in a box all these years. It suddenly wasn’t enough. Previously, I could never commit to breaking the rules. Adoption was about sacrificing and giving the most for the welfare of the other parties involved. But suddenly, there was another child of mine involved and as a mother, a little piece of me deep inside said “I wonder what I could find out?” and so I sat down and began to Google.

---

*I told myself, and everyone else, especially my new Internet friends, that I was merely curious. I wanted to know where I had got my fabulous cheekbones. I said I wasn’t even sure that I wanted to make contact if I found them. I was still a good adoptee.*

*But deep down something was changing. I needed to know my family, I needed to know why I was placed, I needed to know who I was.*

*As I got closer to finding, when I was at the point I was near certain who they were, I wanted to stop, but I couldn’t. The drive to finish what I had started seemed instinctual. I felt out of control, at the mercy of the fates, and sure I was headed into something that would change my life forever.*

---

It was as if the flood gates opened and without ever deciding, the search was on. From the good, rule following, ever minding birth mother I transformed to a desperate mother who only had one thought consuming my every waking breath; finding my child. It was a feel-

ing of anxiety multiplied by 16 years of pent-up mother-fear. For three intense days I did nothing else but hunt for my child on Google.

And on the third day, after 3 a.m., I knew his name, where he lived and the name of his school. I went to bed that night completely exhausted and spent, but I knew for the first time in years that my baby was alive and that I could get into my car and drive to him in four hours just to breathe the same air. That was enough, I didn’t make that drive for more than two years.

---

*Even though I had said that I wasn’t sure if I wanted to do it, I contacted a woman who I knew was my sister almost immediately. It didn’t come as a surprise. She had always known that I was out there, she knew I might contact her some day. She was kind, but she told me that I was a secret, her mother’s deepest secret. I was the thing that could never be mentioned. I must never contact her.*

---

I broke the “birth mother rules” and contacted Max before he was 18. Being a birth mother has taught me that we can’t try to rewrite the script of life so that it fits within the confines of how we think it is suppose to be. I contacted him when I found him because that was when it happened seven months and 10 days before his 18th birthday. Sometimes the truth can be fairly simple.

I know that people will think me wrong for reaching out to him. I have been called selfish, but I can say that it was not a selfish act. Rather, for the first time I allowed myself and what I wanted to be equal to the other parties of the adoption. For the first time it was not 100 percent about what others wanted and expected, whether the other parties were the agency, my family, my son’s adoptive parents or society. For the first time, I gave myself an even playing field. I can live with that whether or not it is understood.

---

*I did not understand. I had never been a secret in my adoptive family. There had been no attempt to hide my adoption from me, or any-*

*one else. It wasn’t shameful, it was just a fact. They understood my need to search before I did.*

*That’s when I became a bad adoptee. I knew where my mother was. I would go against my mother’s wishes and see her. I took time off work and made travel arrangements. I didn’t tell my birth sister.*

*The day before I was to leave, my birth sister called me. I didn’t expect to hear from her. She told me my birth mother had died the day before. I didn’t believe her, she must have found out about my plans somehow.*

*I turned to the Internet friends who had become so important to me — the adoptees, birth parents and adoptive parents who understood. They helped me confirm that my birth mother had died, and grieved with me.*

*I was to have no hugs, no seeing a face like mine, no reunion, only grief for a woman I would never know.*

---

Being a birth mother is really hard. Signing a piece of paper might remove a child from one legally, but it does nothing to erase what we feel in our hearts. There is still no clear road-map to the reunion journey and still so many of the “birth mother rules” are written by professionals and experts who have never walked in our shoes. Even with a good reunion, there is no clear cut happy ending and I struggle constantly about when to contact him, when to visit, should I call? Will it be too much? It hurts to see so many struggle as I do with these feelings, yet both adoptees and birth parents are besieged with them on a constant basis.

I am lucky as I had great support around me with the online adoption community because I was not alone and had support. Others are not so lucky. I can only say that for anyone — adoptee or birth parent — considering a search, to find those who understand the journey, the emotions and the process. The rules made by the professionals are often hard to follow.

Plus, as Max says, rules are made to be broken.



**SPEAKING OUT** for adoptee rights is LewEllen Singley.

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*Now, nearly three years later, as painful as it was, I'm glad I did it. The things I know now, about my birth family and about myself, have changed me, made me stronger and more understanding. I do hate the system that made my birth family feel so much shame, but I know that I am not a bad adoptee.*

*To want to know where you came from is universal and should be the right of every adoptee. It should be something that everyone who loves an adoptee wants for them. Everyone involved in adoption should support one another in their quest to know who they are, through their own stories, experiences and unique perspective.*

---

It is that struggle and belief that lead us to “Pieces of Reunion” — a collection of stories from all members of the adoption triad about

their reunion experiences. Sharing not just how our reunions came about and progressed, but how we feel, adds to everyone's understanding.

If you have a story you'd like to share, we would love to hear it. Go to our Call for Submissions and tell us about your experience at <http://www.emkpress.com/reunionbook.html>.

*Claudia Corrigan D'Arcy has spent almost 10 years independently researching adoption issues in preparation of the successful search and reunion with her own son in 2007 whom was placed for adoption. She has spent countless hours learning from, talking with, and educating others on adoption issues through her work, with adoption lobbying and activism and at national adoption conferences. She hopes to see national Adoptee Rights laws in*

*place and a complete overhaul of the unethical adoption industry. She has been writing on her blog about almost every aspect of life as a birth mother since 2005. She has appeared on The Montel Williams Show as an expert in adoption scams and served on the blogger panel at the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Research Institute/ Ethica Adoption Ethics Conference. When not talking about adoption she is the director of social media at DragonSearch. Her writing can be found many places online including her blog, Musings of the Lame, Grown in My Heart, Adopt-a-tude, Divine Caroline and many others.*

*LewEllen Singley is an adult adoptee, she blogs at According to Addie as Melanie Recoy. When she isn't working on the upcoming “Pieces of Reunion,” she enjoys knitting and mailbox baseball. Singley lives in the mid-west with her husband and three cats. They all have issues.*



# JARED

## VIETNAMESE ADOPTEE.



*Vietnamese adoptee Jared Rehberg shares and sings about his experiences. AT caught up with Rehberg during his busy touring schedule for an exclusive interview. Here Rehberg shares his adoption journey and the importance of finding himself in his music and putting words to the feelings so many adoptees share.*

***Give us a little background on your birth and adoption story, as well as your childhood.***

I was born somewhere in Vietnam in 1974. Based on a collection of stories told to me, it was in or near Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon). During my short stay in Vietnam, I was cared for by Betty Tisdale and Madame Ngai at the An Lac Orphanage. During the week of Operation Babylift, I came to America in early April 1975 with 219 other children from An Lac. The history of the Babylift can be seen in a film I co-produced with filmmaker Tammy Nguyen Lee called "Operation Babylift: The Lost Children of Vietnam," which can be found at [www.thebabylift.com](http://www.thebabylift.com). This film tells the lost story of more than 3,000 children who left Vietnam at the end of the war. My parents drove down to York, Pa., to pick me up. My dad was a college math professor and my mother was a chemist. I have an older sister adopted domestically and a young brother adopted from Korea. We grew up in a small town in Massachusetts called Northboro. I was active in music, sports and the arts. I didn't talk about adoption much, but I had thoughts and questions I didn't know what to do with. There was some teasing and bullying during grade school. Overall I was lucky to get through with just a few scrapes and bruises.

***How would you describe your experience growing up in an adoptive family in America?***

The memories I have are a bit fuzzy now. Looking back at 36 years old is probably only an interpretation of what I might have experienced. I still have silent movie images of being really short and looking up at the world. I lived in a pretty white town in Massachusetts. I

# REHBERG

## SONGWRITER. ADOPTED BY DESTINY.

Compiled by Kim Phagan-Hansel

knew a few Asian and black students in school. I remember being scared of Asian people when we went to Chinese restaurants. I think it was the foreign language and people staring at me.

I grew up with an adopted sister and brother. We each had our own issues internally. Besides all looking different, we were a normal family unit. I do remember some nights during high school when our house felt like a hotel because of our busy lives. It was pretty obvious when we traveled in a pack that we were an adoptive family. As I grew older, we would look like random strangers in line to order food at a fast food joint. I was reminded that there was no way to know we were a family.

But I can't thank my parents enough for their patience and love. I was sometimes distant, obnoxious and hard to deal with. My actions usually had nothing to do with my family. I was just frustrated about not being able to understand my own struggles and questions. I sang my song "Somewhere in the Middle" at my wedding dinner to thank them for helping me become the man I am today. They never let me fail or gave up on me.

### ***What role has music played in your life and at what age did you first start connecting to music?***

I taught myself how to play the ukelele in kindergarten. Later in the fourth grade I took up the violin. I think I got bored and frustrated and quit. In the fifth grade I upgraded to the saxophone after a short stint with the French horn. I played disciplined jazz and concert band/orchestra from 1985-1993. I was part of many special music groups at school and we won many local school awards. I was proud to



**JARED REHBERG** performs at Vietnamese Heritage Camps.

receive the Louis Armstrong Jazz Award my senior year. After years of discipline, I picked up the guitar in my parents' closet and learned some chords.

### ***How connected have you been to the adoption community throughout the years?***

I started my life work with the adoption community in 2001. After the Operation Babylift Vietnamese adoptee reunion in Baltimore, Md., I was inspired to learn more about my heritage and past. I began an inner journey to rediscover myself. I found some things I liked and many things I didn't. I began writing songs about my journey and future. Around 2004 I started traveling from Stamford, Conn., to New York City's Chinatown to perform at an open mic. Soon after I moved to New York City. My music connected me to heritage camps with Catalyst Foundation, Holt

and Colorado Heritage Camps and adoption events across the country and eventually in Vietnam. I love performing for adoptive families and children adopted internationally. I hope my music will spread to the domestic adoption community.

### ***A lot of what you write is connected to adoption, why have you felt compelled to write and sing about adoption?***

I think the music helps me just as it helps my listeners. There is definitely something therapeutic about the experience of writing from the heart and from the past. There is a feeling of release during each performance. The emotions can take you places you never dreamed of. There are many shows where I go through the motions and other moments where I breakdown a few walls and find new questions and emotions I had saved for another day.



### ***What is your goal musically?***

My goal was to inspire kids at the camp to play an instrument and appreciate music. I hoped that they would try to use music to get in touch with their feelings and maybe write some songs and perform like me. My songs were meant to start dialogue about unique experiences. I wanted to ask questions and archive different stages in my inner journey. Making some extra money and traveling has been a bonus. I never thought I would be signed to a major label and rock an arena. My focus has helped me appreciate what I do have and not what I don't have. I'm so lucky to have the fans and support from family and friends. If you like my music, please recommend me at your favorite heritage camp or adoption fundraiser.

### ***Have you ever done a birth search to see if your connection to music is genetic?***

I have no records from my birth family so there will be no search. I think there must be a gene out there. I've used my history as an inspiration to open the doors of creativity and imagine the new life I can make from the life I was given. I hope that whoever made me knows that I did the best I could along the way and that I plan to continue taking advantage of the life that was given to me. The closest I got to my birth family was when I went back to visit Vietnam in 2005 on a special anniversary trip with World Airways. I got the chance to perform "Waking Up American" at the reunification palace in Ho Chi Minh City. There was a moment when the cameras flashed and I sang to a silent room that somewhere out there could be my birth family. I will always be grateful for their choice to let me go.

### ***What has been one of the most difficult topics to write and sing about?***

I think when I break down walls inside and discover painful areas, it both strengthens me and sets me back. I am human and will confess my longing to know some unanswered questions. I'm embarrassed about some of my past behavior and wish I could go back and apologize to the people I hurt or drove completely crazy. I write about more than adoption. I have written tributes to loved ones

who passed away and unrequited love. One of the hardest songs to sing was a song for my friend Jeff Yu who passed away from cancer at age 23. I always dreamed of getting to know him as an adult. I never knew the value and experience of our time together as an adoptee until he was gone. Jeff was my first connection to anything Asian. Jeff was also discovering his own heritage so it was the right speed and comfort to open the doors to a culture I never knew about, but was connected to by birth.

### ***How has your music impacted other adoptees?***

I hope I have reached the young and older generation and helped open the door to their own inner journey. The can of worms is there and it takes courage to open it up. Curiosity usually leads adoptees to search their past. It took until age 25 to be able to put to words how I felt and explain that hurt inside. I have received e-mails from parents who say my music is hard to listen to. I would never want to hurt an adoptee, but I think we all have a moment when we feel a tug and decide how to handle the discomfort. Some people ignore it and move on. Others write and sing. I have young fans who listen to my music all the time. I'm honored and touched to hear that my music will be saved for new generations. I always look forward to receiving e-mails from younger adoptees and hearing about their journey.

### ***How has your music helped you connect with other adoptees?***

My music let's them know they are not alone and that I walked in similar shoes as them. The older adoptees understand the questions I'm asking and can start the new dialogue alone or with their family and friends. I hope some of my music will inspire an adoptee to visit Vietnam, or a parent to adopt a child from another country.

### ***What do you want to tell the world through your music?***

I want to tell the world that it's not easy growing up adopted. We have a unique view of the world. The love and support from your family and friends will help build a bright future. The value of creativity, education spirituality, respect and love will strengthen



your journey. There were so many people in my life who were there for me at the right moment to teach me something and lend a hand. As an adoptee, we have a unique experience like no other. For some, we struggle with a face that does not match our face. For others, we long to know the details of a past that remains fuzzy. I don't know how my life began and I am left to wonder for the rest of my life.

### ***Which song that you've written means the most to you, why?***

I've never written a song that didn't have meaning to me. I think the song that speaks to me the most is a new song I wrote called "Something to Save." This song is a look back into my past as an Operation Babylift adoptee



**VIETNAMESE ADOPTEES** gather during the 2010 Vietnam Heritage Camp. Pictured from left are Tricia, Kevin, Leigh Ann, Jimmy, Kim, Jacob, Ying and Jared Rehberg.

at age 36. I spent the last 10 years deep into my life work and finally took the time to sing a song about accepting the life I have. For all the adult adoptees who are just now connecting to other adoptees and beginning their own inner journeys, my song is for them. I debuted my new song at the Vietnamese Heritage camp in Colorado in July. I was so honored to have a few of my adoptee brothers and sisters present. For the younger generation, I hope this song will offer some comfort.

***What's coming up for you on the music front? Any new songs or albums?***

I hope to continue writing and sharing stories with the adoption community. I may not record a full length album for a while. I think

the acoustic route is more realistic. I have new songs I want to write that are not about adoption. I also owe my wife a song. I'm always blessed to be invited to perform at fundraising events and camps. This special gift of mine gives me so much back.

***What's coming up for you personally ... how do you feel today about your adoption experiences?***

Today I feeling like I graduated from the inner journey. I know who I am and understand the past I was given. It will not always be easy, but I am lucky to have loving family and friends. I continue to focus on my wife and one day start our own family. I want to write a children's book to share my journey with illustrations.

I recently became a coordinator at a heritage camp in Colorado. I'm on the board of a great non-profit out of Dallas, Texas, called Against The Grapin Productions. We create and support Asian American artists as we create art to tell our stories.

My life work continues. My door is always open for new adventures. After two records, a film, camps and being a board member, could I ask for anything more? I'm a lucky guy.

My music is available at [cdbaby.com](http://cdbaby.com) and [itunes](http://itunes.com) and I have a website at [www.jaredrehberg.com](http://www.jaredrehberg.com). The film website is [www.thebabylift.com](http://www.thebabylift.com). Look out for an appearance on PBS, Asian America with host Taiyo Na and my friend Kevin Maes.





# Creating a Cultural Continuity

For the past two decades, I have heard an amazing array of philosophies regarding the topic of transracial adoption. Today it remains a “hot topic” annually at adoption conferences. As an adoption professional and an adoptive mom, I have worked for years to identify the responsibilities necessary to become a culturally competent adoption agency.

This article will address a list of responsibilities for adoption agencies that I have found to be necessary as they strive to be culturally competent. Agencies willing to accept these responsibilities will be able to produce families committed to cultural competency and continuity. Love is not color blind much to our dismay and popular commentary. Even if it was, it takes more than love to raise a child. Certainly being blind to a child's race or uniqueness is not the step in the right direction.

First let's define cultural competence. Cultural competence is the ability to interact effectively with people of different cultures while being aware of one's own cultural analysis. While many will look at the term specific to transracial adoptive readiness, I would like to extend cultural competence to include a respect for people of all cultures, languages, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds and sexual orientations.

Agencies should take the awesome task of creating a cultural continu-

# Plan for Our Children

By Michele Fried, Founder and CEO Adoption STAR, Inc.

ity plan on behalf of the children they work with, by:

1. Moving cultural diversity toward cultural competence. Culturally competent practice is critical in our multi-cultural society. Hosting cultural diversity workshops is not enough. This is where continuity comes in, we must provide more than workshops to nurture cultural competence.

2. Implementing a plan that can be measured. Agencies must have pre-placement curriculums at the core of their organization. These curriculums should be implemented via classroom instruction in addition to homework opportunities providing independent and group learning experiences. Certainly what we have gained during the past many years is a wealth of creative cultural diversity questionnaires, lesson plans, videos, books and much more. A culturally competent adoption agency will embed these many exercises into their curriculum and allow their clients to experience the curriculum and determine at first for themselves, are they culturally competent to adopt outside of their race? I have learned in all aspects of life, we are harder on ourselves than others will ever be. If allowed to take a personal journey into cultural competency and examine what it may mean to us and how it may change us and our family forever, agencies will see that more



**AUTHOR MICHELE FRIED** accepts an award along with her son Zachary.

applicants weed themselves out of the process and others into the process. Agencies should require all their clients to experience such a curriculum, not just those who inquire about a transracial adoption. One never knows when they may wish to explore this avenue and having the resources and education provided early in the adoption process will certainly enable us to identify more educated prospective adoptive parents.

3. Listening to our children. Engaging transracially and transculturally adopted children, young adults and adult

adoptees into an agency's competency curriculum is an integral ingredient in a successful cultural continuity plan. "From the mouth of babes" is such a powerful parenting tool allowing us to listen and reconsider some of the ways we do things. Every child has a right to build racial pride within his or her home and community. Let him or her share thoughts and feelings about what is working, what is not and how it feels.

4. Also placing children with same race families. We would hope this would be a fact, but unfortunately it is not. Each

## **SAMPLE Cultural Continuity Plan**

Adoption STAR, Inc., believes that all children, regardless of race or cultural background, have entitlements.

I/We, new adoptive parents of

understand that all children are unique and understand that:

- Every child is entitled to know and learn about his or her birth culture or race.
- Every child is entitled to love and acceptance in his or her family.
- Every child is entitled to have his or her culture and race embraced and valued.
- Every child is entitled to parents who know that the child will experience life differently than they do.
- Every child is entitled to parents who know that being in a family does not depend on belonging to the same culture or racial background.
- Every child is entitled to parents who know that transracial adoption changes the family forever.
- Every child is entitled to have items at home that are made for or by people of his or her birth race or culture.
- Every child is entitled to opportunities of positive experiences with his or her birth culture.
- Every child is entitled to build racial pride within his or her home, school and neighborhood.
- Every child is entitled to parents who accept, understand and incorporate the child's birth culture.
- Every child is entitled to take pride in multi-cultural/multi-racial perspective on life.
- Every child is entitled to parents who seek out resources and opportunities that will continue their lifelong journey to cultural continuity.



agency must examine their placement practices. If they are honest with themselves and notice that the majority of their Black children for example, are placed with Caucasian parents, what do they have in place to increase their placements with Black adoptive parents? A culturally competent agency will have a taskforce or committee who works to increase the number of applicants for same race placements and take a hard look at what barriers that may stand in their way to increasing same race placements.

5. Being representative of the culture at all levels of the organization. This includes a culturally diverse and culturally competent staff and board of directors.

6. Developing a policy statement regarding clients only being

open to a biracial or mixed racial child. The following policy is recommended: If the applicants indicate they are open to adopting a child outside of the applicants race and culture, The agency will consider the applicants for all children of color, not just for bi-racial children or children of mixed race. Agencies often report this issue but do not often take a stand to not permit the request. Agencies must also examine the applicants who pursue international adoptions but are not open to considering parenting children of other races and cultures.

7. Developing a policy statement regarding finding families on behalf of children. It is recommended that the following policy be adopted by all agencies: "The agency's philosophy is finding families for children, not

children for families." It is an important distinction.

8. Calling the plan a cultural continuity plan. Why? The key word is continuity not just competency. It isn't that difficult once we are committed to the above seven responsibilities to feel we are a culturally competent organization. The hard part is the continuity. Continuity is synonymous with permanence, the most important word in the adoption glossary. The cultural continuity plan will set the tone much like a mission statement. It says you are an agency dedicated to all children and you are ready to assist in identifying and creating committed, competent and healthy families.

Michele Fried is the founder and chair of Adoption STAR. Before starting Adoption STAR,

Fried worked as an educator in Pennsylvania and then she and her husband adopted their first child, she entered the field of adoption. In 1989, she founded an adoption agency licensed in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Fried's own family began to grow and they chose to return to Western New York. Fried began working locally as an inclusion coordinator for individuals with developmental disabilities. Fried lives in Williamsville, N.Y., with her husband, Chuck, their children, and two cats. Fried enjoys writing, reading, running and movies with happy endings.

Adoption STAR is not-for-profit adoption agency where support, training, advocacy and resources help create forever families.

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## resource reviews

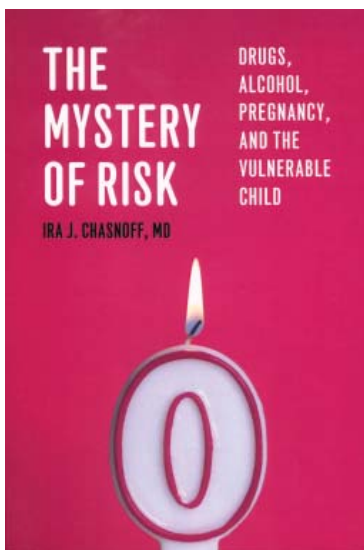
### ***The Mystery of Risk: Drugs, Alcohol, Pregnancy, and the Vulnerable Child***

By Ira J. Chasnoff, MD  
NTI Upstream, 2010, ISBN:  
978-0-9840 531-5-5, 279 pages,  
\$24.95 hardcover

Drawing on cutting-edge information from the fields of medicine, neuroscience and child psychology, author Ira J. Chasnoff shows how many of the learning and behavior problems we see in children, from poor school performance to ADHD, result from a baby's exposure to drugs and alcohol while in the womb. "The Mystery of Risk" traces the history of fetal malformation to the time of Aristotle before presenting a resounding call for preventative, integrated systems of care for high-risk children and their families.

Chasnoff illustrates that infants exposed to alcohol and drugs represent a prime example of how biological damage may interfere with the child's ability to fulfill his or her role in the family and society. The pregnant woman's use of substances has a direct impact on the structure and function of the developing fetal brain and affects the child's ability to make sense of parental cues. An infant's assimilation into the family requires the development of complex skills that demonstrate responsiveness to parental expectations. Missteps at any point result, damaging the child's foundation for emotional and relational health. This becomes more complex when the child welfare system is brought into consideration. Almost two-thirds of the children identified as affected by prenatal alcohol or drug exposure are raised in out-of-home placements, and the children frequently find themselves in foster or adoptive homes unprepared to meet their needs. Foster and adoptive families who come into relationships with the children often harbor unrealistic expectations, unaware of the challenges that lie ahead. The child welfare system's lack of support to these families only adds to the likelihood of inappropriate parenting and repeated movement of the child within the system.

This book is written for parents, caregivers and professionals who care for children whose development and behavior have been affected by prenatal alcohol and drug exposure, especially those children who have been ensnared in the vagaries of the child welfare system. True stories of children Chasnoff has evaluated and treated in the past 35 years are interwoven to illustrate the importance of looking beyond the labels of risk to a path for intervention and treatment. Ultimately, the book's goal is to facilitate dialogue among parents who care for drug and alcohol



affected children on a daily basis, professionals who provide assessment and treatment services, and policymakers whose decisions affect the ultimate trajectory of the children's lives.

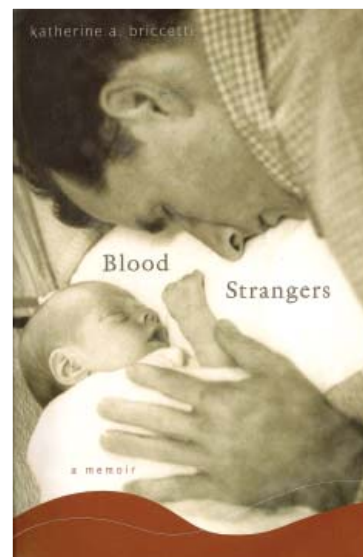
It is the book's underlying premise that labels of risk do not necessarily predict potential; risk is not destiny. Although there is no "cure" for the brain damaged by prenatal alcohol and drug exposure, we can influence a child's life for the better by redirecting him or her into a regulated, smooth and mutually interactive dance with the people that matter most in his or her life. Chasnoff's unique blend of individual case studies, conversational dialogue and scientific support create a compelling read for the uninformed and seasoned professional alike.

— Reviewed by Richard Fischer

### ***Blood Strangers: A Memoir***

By Katherine A. Bricetti  
Heyday Books, 2010,  
ISBN:978-1-59714-130-7, 302  
pages, \$16.95

Follow the journey of author Katherine Bricetti from early childhood created by one man and raised by another to mother of two sons born through artificial insemination at a sperm bank. In "Blood Strangers," Bricetti presents her feelings of disconnection to the men in her life and how that disconnection haunts her, compelling her to search for the missing links later in life. Bricetti reconnects with her father who relinquished his parental rights when Bricetti's stepfather adopted her and her brother. Upon reconnecting with him, she learns of her father's own adoption and lack of information about his birth family. A childhood filled with disconnect compels Bricetti to track down her father's birth family, hoping to feel the void in her life. As she walks this journey, she also falls in love with a woman and the two embark on parenthood with the help of a sperm donor. The lack of connection to a father for her own sons, prompts Bricetti to consider their perspective more deeply.



A well-written book, Bricetti presents a compelling story that keeps the reader turning pages. While not an adoptee, much of Bricetti's story mirrors the sense of loss and incompleteness many adoptees face. Her journey to locate her father's birth family provides an interesting glimpse at a successful search and reunion. "Blood Strangers" is definitely an interesting read and provides plenty of food for thought and discussion opportunities for the often grey areas of life. From lesbian relationships and sperm donations to birth searches and step-parent adoptions, "Blood Strangers" provides a full-gamut of topic discussions. Definitely a book worth reading.

— Reviewed by Kim Phagan-Hansel





**Mark Hagland is an adult Korean adoptee, journalist, parent and public speaker. Professionally, he is a well-known health care business and policy journalist, speaker and author. In addition, he has spent the past decade as a participant in activities and events in the transracial adoption sphere. He speaks and leads sessions every year at the annual KAAN conference; has participated in numerous adult Korean adoptee "mini-gatherings;" and writes regularly for Korean Quarterly. This is his first column in what will be an ongoing series of columns in Adoption Today. He lives in Chicago, and can be reached at mhagland@aol.com.**

# KAAN 2010: The Revelations Continue

By Mark Hagland

The twelfth annual KAAN Conference, in Harrisburg, Pa., in July, marked my eighth year of participation in that unique event. True to its sponsoring organization's full name — the Korean American Adoptee Adoptive Family Network — serves the needs of adult Korean adoptees, younger Korean adoptees, adoptive parents and Korean Americans. This was also a significant transitional year, as founder and president Chris Winston handed over the reins of the organization and conference to Stacy Schroeder, and Winston's amazing contributions to our community were recognized during the Saturday evening banquet.

For me, discovering KAAN — I was brought into the Minneapolis conference in 2002 to be on a panel, and found the experience of the conference so compelling, I immediately sought to participate more fully — has been a life-changing experience. Not only have I been able to meet, and become friends with, amazing adult adoptees and adoptive parents from all over; my KAAN participation has immensely furthered my journey as an adult transracial adoptee.

The culture of KAAN, which Winston has brilliantly forged through hard-won experience and insights, and which I know Schroeder will continue, is unique, and uniquely promotes dialogue among all groups around Korean adoption. Because of that culture, I have learned a tremendous amount about not only how my fellow adult transracial adoptees perceive and experience the world, but also about how adoptive parents do so. Naturally being a "bridge" person myself, I find all this immensely healing and empowering.

And my revelations continue, year after year. Among many other important conversations this year, I had an amazing conversation with a self-aware adoptive mom who gave me major insights into the almost-never-articulated but deep-seated insecurities of adoptive parents, mothers in particular (and most particularly, in terms of projecting issues onto the imagined birth mother) that helped me understand some

things I'd never grasped before. And in one of several panel discussions I moderated, an extremely important discussion evolved around birth search, and why it is that the most current advanced thinking around birth search posits that it is only in extremely rare and unusual circumstances that adoptive parents should initiate searches for their non-adult children (thinking that I agree with, but which I often find difficult to fully articulate to adoptive parents).

And now I come to the key element of this whole column, and that is the question of "forum." In my experience, KAAN is unique, not only in the transracial adoption world, but, as far as anyone has ever indicated to me, in the adoption world more generally, in providing a true forum for the sharing of experiences and perspectives among different "stakeholder" groups along the adoption spectrum, and for the discussion of delicate, complex or controversial topics. On the one hand, it's wonderful to me that such a forum exists at the annual KAAN Conference. On the other hand, it saddens and concerns me that I've not found anything similar to this anywhere else, or even online.

Transracial adoptees need to hear from other adult adoptees, from adoptees younger than ourselves, from adoptive parents, from birth parents, from individuals with ties to our birth countries (thus, in my case, Koreans from South Korea and Korean-Americans), and yes, even from adoption professionals, and they need to hear from us as well, and from each other. I can tell you not only that some of the conversations and discussions I've had — both within sessions and in hallways — with individuals from all those groups, have been transformative for me; and I've been told some have been transformative for others with whom I've interacted, as well. For example, an adoptive couple who came to a discussion session I led at KAAN several years ago, at which I pleaded for transracially adoptive parents to live in at least some degree of racial diversity — actually heard what I had to say, and moved their family to a more diverse neighbor-

**ENJOYING** dinner with a group of fellow adoptees during this year's KAAN conference is Mark Hagland, second from right.

hood, for their children's sake. Since then, I've become good friends with that couple, and have presented with both the adoptive dad and adoptive mom, at subsequent KAAN conferences.

I mention this last example not to promote myself in any way, but rather to underscore the immensely powerful connections that can be made, and the understandings that can be forged, between adult transracial adoptees and adoptive parents, under the right circumstances and in the right forums. Transracial and international adoption is such a complex area, fraught with so many potential misunderstandings, that it is understandable, I think, that virtually everyone I meet who is new to KAAN in any particular year, whether adult adoptee or adoptive parent, comes into the conference with some level of trepidation about what they'll experience.

And certainly, some powerful events and moments inevitably occur every year, and inevitably, some people find them overwhelming, which is why they've instituted support group sessions on the Saturday evening of KAAN, for adult adoptees, teen adoptees and adoptive parents, for individuals from each of those groups to sit and converse with other individuals from the same affinity group, and hash over what they've so far been experiencing during that conference.

One woman who has had a strong impact for the past three years is Kyung Ae Bae, a birth mother who was forced to relinquish her son years ago, and then years later, was able to reunite with him. Bae's story, particularly as she narrates it, is complicated, dramatic, heart-rending and ultimately inspiring. Similarly, many people were deeply moved this year (I was moderating another session concurrently, so was not able to attend) by a session in which an adoptive daughter raised in the United States sat with her birth father from Korea, and the two discussed their reunion and subsequent interactions.

Most of all, what has happened at KAAN throughout the years since I've become involved, is a ripening and maturing of the dialogue, particularly between adult adoptees and



**I can tell you not only that some of the conversations and discussions I've had — both within sessions and in hallways — with individuals from all those groups, have been transformative for me; and I've been told some have been transformative for others with whom I've interacted, as well.**

adoptive parents (but also among all the groups along the adoption spectrum), to the point where amazing revelations and exchanges occur in many sessions across the conference every year. That is the kind of exchange I wish could occur regularly between adult adoptees and adoptive parents in other forums as well, in order to promote mutual understanding, as well as healing and empowerment, among all of us. And it is a strong motivating factor for my writing this column. From my standpoint, we all need it. To paraphrase the famous milk ad: "Got dialogue?"





# Bonding

One of my granddaughters was directly imported from Vietnam. She arrived at 2 years of age. Small, in all proportions, dark skinned and eyed. She was from the Kinh group in her country. Her hair was straight black. She smiled a great deal. Linh was tough, though.

My daughter and son-in-law flew to a country most in my generation did just about anything not to go to. They didn't hesitate going though. They weren't burdened with the angst of a war. They picked her up at an orphanage in Saigon. She was a special needs child, born with a double cleft pallet, which wasn't properly attended to when she was born. She had no upper lip and her gums and teeth were distorted and her nose was poorly formed as well.

"They don't have the facilities like we do," they explained to us. "If they hadn't gone to get her, she wouldn't have lived much longer." There isn't much to be said, after that. When she was fed she had to lie down so the food wouldn't slip up into her nasal passages which were wide open.

Linh was small and frightened, entering a family at 3, that consisted of four other brothers and sisters, all huge in stature. Visiting there made me pause and I'm bigger than all of them. To her it must have been an orphanage for giants. Noisy with animals running around, people constantly coming in and out, automobiles everywhere, multiple television, toys to overwhelm any child, it must have appeared like bedlam to her or a higher state of Nirvana. No one looked like her, with or without the deformity. She didn't have an upper lip which meant she couldn't speak, breathe or eat properly. This made things difficult for us.

# With Barbie

By Anthony L. Mauro

She went from Asian heat to Pittsburgh and experienced her first winter. They were a military family so shortly after her arrival they were transferred to Montana, so then she got to see huge mountains.

It was hard for us to bond as grandparents. We lived in Chicago so we didn't get enough time to really get to know her and vice versa. After conferring with my wife, we decided to fly to Montana and spend a long weekend with them. It would be good to spend the time getting familiar with our newest grandchild. Being grandparents was important to us and we wanted her to know who we were. It was important to us to begin the process of bonding and showing our support. There was a deep concern on our part of her adapting to such a big change, both in her life and in her physical appearance.

The operations, to reconstruct her mouth started immediately. This would be a long process as they began to close up and rebuild her face. We were thankful that something could be done. The surgeries would take a long time and be enormously time consuming. Our hearts went out to her.

When we flew to Montana we weren't sure what to expect. The big event in Helena, Mont., was the Testicle Festival. This gave pause to my wife who is rarely at a loss for words.

Our son-in-law's, mother went out the week before. We were told, in confidence, that she returned home a little shell shocked from the visit. There was a fear on our side that "a little" might be an understatement. We were to soon learn one of the reasons why.



Their home was roomy and warm. They now had five kids, two of them adopted with special needs, Linh being the youngest. She took the changes to her life in stride, diving into her new world.

Her favorite toys were Barbie dolls and all the small pieces that went with them. She had several. Our daughter suggested clothes for the doll as a gift. The goal was to know her and her us. We did our best to communicate and win her heart. She had our hearts immediately. That first evening we sat around the living room and were updated by one and all of what was happening in the family. There were so many of them that we had to pause to digest all of the information.

My wife centered her attention on Linh, doing her best to gain her trust. The tiny girl put her head on her grandmother's chest, and then pulled away. Keeping the Barbie firmly in her left hand she raised it for my wife to see. Grandmother smiled and looked at the doll nodding. "Yes, I see," she said. "She's a little doll like you." Linh twisted the toy around pulled up the dress and the panties down sticking the butt end into my wife's face. She made this hissing noise.

My daughter laughed and crossed over the room, taking the Barbie away from her. "Don't do that," she corrected.

"What was that about?" Grandmother asked.

"Aw, she's making the Barbie, poot in your face," my daughter said.

A nervous laugh came from Grandmother. "What do you mean?"

"She isn't used to her new lips and it's hard for her to make the noise," our son-in-law explained. That wasn't exactly the intent of my wife's question.

My wife cast a look at me that would be understood in any language or culture. This wasn't going to continue.

We reappraised our thoughts on this little girl from the Far East, deciding she had adjusted just fine to her new surroundings and was taking nothing from nobody. They moved to the right state, for she was a pistol.

I couldn't help but laugh at some of her man-



nerisms. One in particular allowed me to bond closer with my wife. Linh, because she couldn't speak, used her index finger to point and direct what everyone else should do. She pointed to a chair we sat there, she wanted a ball thrown she pointed at the ball, me and then her. Grandmother was just like that with the same finger. I felt it my duty in pointing this out, announcing that she was a long lost granddaughter. Linh was just much darker, tinier, with different eyes and straight black hair. My wife is a strawberry blonde with light skin and freckles.

She laughed until Linh pulled the doll's panties down again and shoved her butt into her face. With all of us traveling in one van I realized, this was going to be a long weekend. There would be a lot of closeness to get pooted in the face along with other possible indignities not forewarned. The shell-shocked grandmother who had just left was a prime target of Linh, who did it to her often and with verve.

Grandmother worked on the grooming technique of bonding, combing hair, putting in pigtails, painting nails and things like that. My tact was to engage Linh in games, simple ones you do with little kids that are too young to speak. The type where you put a hand down, they put one on top, and that continues, slipping the bottom one out and just keep re-circulating. This was great and at the end of the game you got a face full of Barbie butt, along with the sound effects.

On top of this, she learned from the older kids how to put her hand under her armpit and quickly slapping her other arm down, making of course, a pooting sound. We solved that one by hugging her so she couldn't make the sound.

I would have to do something; Grandmother was not taking the Barbie thing well. Neither was I for that matter. Someway or other we had to find a way to make her understand that we did not appreciate the gesture.

The opportunity came when I was left alone with Linh in the living room and we just finished the hand piling game. True to form she reached for her Barbie, now naked, because

she was tired of lifting dresses and pulling down panties, and swung the toy up to my face.

Before she could do anything I grabbed the doll and without missing a beat I turned the toy on her, sticking the butt in her face and making the same hissing sound she did. I quickly returned the doll to her. My daughter came into the room.

"What are you two doing?" she asked.

"Playing," I replied smiling up at her and then at Linh.

My newest granddaughter from another land, first stared at me then up at her mother then back at me and down at the doll she held limply in her hand. She didn't understand the language yet, so I knew she wasn't thinking about what we said to each other, but trying to process what just happened. After a few seconds, something registered in her mind. Her dark eyes blinked at me twice. To my joy she gave me the biggest smile. Climbing up on my lap she hugged me. From that moment on we were buddies. She cried when I had to leave.

The games were more fun and became more complicated. When she went to stick Barbie's butt in her grandmother's face, I raised my eyebrows. She smiled and stopped. While I was present she wouldn't do it to her grandmother. I was grateful for that small blessing and made it a point to be there when the two were together. This allowed them to do the grooming without the threat of Barbie pooting in her face.

The rest of the trip was a cake walk. When we left she cried and reached up for us. Linh had accepted us and we accepted her. She may not have understood that we were her grandparents, but that would come as time progressed. The relationship has grown into just that. I'm called Tickle Monster by her, which all the kids call me and I take the name with honor. She looks forward to Grandmother singing happy birthday to her like an opera star. Her accomplishments bring just as much joy and pride as any of my other grandchildren or children. She is a continual source of conversation.

I kept the incident to myself for a long time, not sure how my, take matters into my own hands technique, would sit with my daughter and her husband. It worked and that was all I cared about. I didn't do anything like that to the other adopted or biological kids, but they didn't stick dolls' butts in my face to fart. The little spitfire has accepted the deformity that she was born with and the limitations of the reconstruction. I think she looks great, but I'm prejudiced in her favor, always will be. That's because she is my granddaughter.

As there were limits with what I would accept, there were limits to what the medical profession could do for her. She has learned what all of those are. That hasn't stopped her, just as not being able to speak to each other, hadn't stopped us from beginning the process of building on our relationship.

Living in Atlanta now, her voice has a southern lilt. She applied and was accepted as one of the kids in her grade school to be on television and announce events and news related to the school. Her essay addressed how she looks and who she is. Linh has learned the valuable lesson that this is all one can really ask for out of life.

To be accepted along with your limitations, know the boundaries, and accept others as they are, with their limitations. Bonding works both ways. She's no longer our granddaughter from Vietnam. She's our granddaughter who lives in Georgia.

She'll always be a pistol, which fits in fine with our family. We needed a small caliber weapon.

*Anthony (Tony) Mauro lives with his wife, Freeda, in the western suburbs of Chicago, where they divide their time between work, eight children and 14 grandchildren. His most recent play, Shame on Me a comedy, was produced in June by the Theatre of Western Springs. He has a number of short stories published and is working on a series of short one act plays. His daughter, Tracy Pillow, has several books published, including those telling her experiences in adopting special needs children. Her book, "Bringing our Angel Home," chronicles her story of adopting a child from Vietnam.*

# Adoption TODAY CEU Quiz – October 2010

This is an “open-book” exam. As you read the articles identified below you should be able to answer the questions.

Either photocopy or tear out this page and mail it with a pre-addressed, postage paid envelope to:

**Adoption TODAY CEU Quiz Monitor, 541 E. Garden Dr. Unit N • Windsor, CO 80550**

Pre-adoption credits are not yet required in most states. Be sure to check with your agency of record to see if they will credit you for completing the CEU Quiz.

All responses must be returned by Nov. 30, 2010 to receive your Certification of Credit for this issue.

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Learning Objective: to increase adoptive parents’ ability to apply and respond to new information and conceptual frameworks to their work with children in their care.

Please rate the following on a scale of 1-4 (1 is poor, 4 is excellent):

The information was informative: ( 1-2-3-4 )

The information was useful / helpful in my role as an adoptive parent: ( 1-2-3-4 )

The information was thought-provoking, ( 1-2-3-4 ) especially to story on page(s) \_\_\_\_\_

I would be interested in reading more on the topic(s) of: \_\_\_\_\_

**1. According to the article, “Exploring My Birth Country, Discovering Me,” on page 10, a study by the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute found which of the following to be true? (Choose all that apply)**

- a. Positive self-esteem is built through same-race relationships.
- b. Positive identity development is most effectively facilitated by “lived” experiences.
- c. Adoptees benefit from contact with birth parents.
- d. Attending heritage camp is essential for adoptees.

**2. According to the article, “Finding Birth Parents,” on page 18, which of the following are issues or concerns to think about before searching for birth parents?**

- a. What if you discover your child was a victim of child trafficking — how will you handle this information with your child and extended family?
- b. What if your child is never able to locate birth family?
- c. How will your child’s search impact other adoptees.
- d. Will your child be stable and emotionally sound?

**3. According to the article, “Fighting for Adoptee Rights,” on page 26, which of the following are recommendations from the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute for changes in current adoption law? (Choose all that apply)**

- a. Birth certificates should remain sealed to protect birth parents’ privacy.
- b. States should protect birth parents’ rights.
- c. Confidential intermediary services should be available throughout all states, even after original birth certificate access is restored.

- d. No agency, attorney, social worker or other adoption professional should promise birth parents that their identities will remain concealed from their children.

**4. According to the article, “Creating a Cultural Continuity Plan for Our Children,” on page 38, how should agencies tackle the task of creating a cultural continuity plan? (Choose all that apply)**

- a. Developing a policy statement regarding finding families on behalf of children.
- b. Creating transracial adoptive families.
- c. Being representative of the culture at all levels of the organization.
- d. Encouraging families to attend heritage camps.

**5. According to the sample Cultural Continuity Plan on page 39, adoptive parents should understand which of the following about all children? (Choose all that apply)**

- a. Every child is entitled to parents who accept, understand and incorporate the child’s birth culture.
- b. Every child is entitled to parents who know that the child will experience life differently than they do.
- c. Every child is entitled to grow up with parents of his or her own cultural/racial background.
- d. Every child is entitled to parents who know that transracial adoption changes the family forever.

**6. What have you done as a parent to help your child discover who he or she is as an adoptee? Which has been the most beneficial to your child?**



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