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Family Values

One couple's journey toward creating their own perfect family through adoption... From the pages of South Jersey Magazine...



Father's Day, 2001: Jim & Therese* received a call they weren't expecting. It was their caseworker at Adoptions from the Heart.

They had been chosen as the parents of a newborn boy, and they had to get to Christiana, Delaware to meet him and pick him up. Shock, elation and frenzy ensued as Jim and Therese hurried to pack a bag, call their families and gather up their daughter, Carly, whom they had adopted through the same agency just two years before.

They arrived to meet their baby boy, whom they named Ben. They didn't get to meet the birth mother. Unlike Carly's adoption, this one was closed, meaning the birth mother had chosen Jim and Therese, but she chose not to meet them. Other than a bit of medical history, the only thing they knew was that Jim had just gotten the best Father's Day gift he could have asked for. They savored the moment and introduced Carly to her new baby brother. It seemed things couldn't possibly get better for Jim and Therese, but two years later, they did.

By the time they adopted their third child, Jim and Therese had lived for years on an emotional roller coaster. While they had experienced the glorious highs of being chosen as adoptive parents, they also experienced the heart-wrenching lows of infertility and one adoption that didn't go through—a disruption, as they call it in the adoption community.

From the Beginning

When Jim and Therese married twenty years ago, they had no idea what kind of journey lay ahead of them. Few of us do. From the outside, they seem like the typical American family, living the dream. They have three beautiful and happy children. They look way too young to have been married as long as they have, and live in a picture-perfect home in a South Jersey suburb, complete with a manicured lawn, a swing set and toys galore.

Granted, theirs is not the typical American family story, but make no mistake, they are living their dream in ways they could never have imagined when they got married. Jim and Therese met during their freshman year of high school. They got married at the age of 20, rented an apartment and set off for the future. Jim works for his family's printing company and Therese worked as an elementary school teacher. They knew they wanted a family someday, but time was on their side, and they wanted to buy a house first. They saved their money, bought the house and decided it was time to start their family. Therese wanted to get pregnant, but nothing happened. They were surprised, but not dismayed. They kept trying and hoped for the best. Another call, another boy—this time Daniel Tyler.

But those agonizing months of negative pregnancy tests turned into years. The couple went through fertility treatments, including four expensive cycles of in-vitro fertilization. One produced a positive pregnancy test, but the pregnancy wasn't viable.

After their last unsuccessful attempt at pregnancy through IVF, the couple knew the next step would be adoption. Therese started researching adoption agencies and read about an informational meeting being held that following Thursday. Emotionally, they were still reeling from the IVF ordeal, but they decided to keep going and attended the meeting. There they met Maxine Chalker, Founder of Adoptions From the Heart (a Wynnewood, Pennsylvania-based adoption agency with offices in New Jersey and several other states), a birth mother and an adoptive mother. The three shared their separate stories with the group and Therese says she felt comfortable right away. "Somehow we both knew this was the right path for us," she says. "We were still so sad, but after hearing their stories, we knew this was what we would do." They brought home a thick packet of information and forms and got to work.

Creating an Impression

As they learned, one of the most important steps in the adoption process is preparing a personal history, and providing photos of yourself to include in “the book,” which is shown to the agency’s birth mothers, who choose the family that will adopt their unborn babies. Jim and Therese prepared their bios and created a beautiful portfolio of pictures. With Jim’s printing and graphics background, the presentation was impressive. They sent it in to the agency to be put in the book. Then they waited.

Jim checked in with their caseworker, Meredith Erdman, monthly. Nothing. A year went by. Meredith suggested that perhaps their presentation was too formal, or too slick. Maybe it was intimidating to the birth mothers. Maybe the number of pictures was too overwhelming for them. Jim cut the number of pictures in half, and the couple took new photos with their newly acquired dog. Again, they sent it in and waited.

Within weeks the couple got the call they had been waiting for. A birth mother in Pennsylvania had chosen them. Their baby, a girl, was about to be born. They had to pack a bag and prepare to spend a few days there, connecting with the child before bringing her home.

At this point, the couple had told only their parents and immediate family about their adoption plans, for fear they would get to this point and the birth mother would change her mind. When they met the birth mother, however, she assured them she had no intention of changing her mind. She knew this was the best outcome for her and the baby and that Jim and Therese were finally parents. They were elated. The birth mother said the photo of them with their dog was the clincher. She loved dogs, and something about their photos made her feel comfortable. Jim and Therese brought home their baby, Carly. That was eight years ago.

Less than two years later, they got another call, another girl. Again, they drove to Pennsylvania to meet their baby. This time, they picked her up and brought her home to New Jersey.

A few hours after they got home, the phone rang. It was the call every adoptive parent dreads: the birth mother had changed her mind.

The agency had prepared them for this possibility, but still, Jim and Therese were shaking with devastation. They offered to bring the baby right back to the hospital. The agency cautioned them against driving all the way back that night, considering the circumstances. “We kept her overnight,” says Therese, “and [the baby] screamed all night. She wanted to be held and there was nothing we could do to soothe her other than to hold her. It was the longest night of my life, knowing that in the morning I’d have to bring her back.”

“It was truly heartbreaking,” Jim recalls. “Giving that baby back was the hardest thing we’ve ever had to do. Everyone was crying. We were crushed. But there are laws that give a birth parent the option to change his or her mind within a certain amount of time, and she did.”

Rebuilding, Again

Jim and Therese waited a month before they decided to put their profile back into the book at the agency. Having Carly helped them get through the abruption. Not long after they went back into the book, they received that Father’s Day call.

After they brought Ben home, things were finally settling down. Having another healthy baby helped them regain enough confidence to put their profile in the book again. This time, the wait was short, as the birth parents—just 15 years old at the time—loved the idea that Jim and Therese could give their baby a good family, with siblings. The third would prove to be the most open adoption of the three, and Jim and Therese learned how beneficial open adoption could be.

Each year, the family attends Adoption From the Heart’s annual picnic, which is designed to bring birth families and adoptive families together. Each year, Dan’s birth parents and their extended families attend the picnic to see Dan and his family. While Carly’s adoption was considered open, the agency has lost contact with Carly’s birth mother. “Dan’s birth family has really gone out of their way to see him and take Carly and Ben under their wings,” says Therese. “It’s customary to bring the birth child a little present, and they bring them for Carly and Ben, too.”

Jim says he’s surprised that he feels the way he does about open adoption. “Before we adopted, I would never have wanted to have contact with the birth parents. But now that I see how it adds to all of our lives, and to see that someday

he'll understand how he got here, I think it's the best way for everyone. They know they did the right thing, because they can see the life he has, and he can understand who they are and why they made the choices they made." Not surprisingly, Therese agrees. "The more people who love them, the better, that's the way we feel about it."

Carly (age 8), Ben (age 6), and Dan (age 4) each have a special box of keepsakes and mementos that help them understand how they became a family. To Jim and Therese, sharing this knowledge is an important part of their special family story. To them, the emotional and financial pressures of their journey toward this particular family—with these children—were worth every heartache, and every dime. In their words, it was simply meant to be.

Jim and Therese say adoption has added so much to their lives that they are always willing to share their experiences with other prospective parents who are considering adoption for the first time. They've spoken at several informational meetings like the one they first attended nearly 10 years ago. "I stand up there and I see myself in their faces," says Therese. "It was so scary, and we had been through so much. I just hope that we can help people see that there is a light at the end of the tunnel. And that their children are out there." *at the family's request, their last name has not been used.

Deciding What Type of Adoption is Right for You

Making an adoption plan is personal and based on your needs and wishes. There is no right or wrong type of adoption. Domestic adoption is the adoption of American-born children within the U.S., either through the public child welfare system (foster care) or private adoption.

* **Foster care adoption** involves the adoption of children currently in the care of the state, whose biological parents' rights have been terminated.

* **Private adoption** involves the adoption of children through a state licensed, non-profit or for-profit agency or through independent adoption. In independent adoptions, children may be placed with the adoptive parent(s) with the help of an attorney or facilitator. Please note that the use of facilitators is illegal in many states, including New Jersey.

* **International adoption** is the adoption of children from overseas by U.S. citizens. International adoptions are typically arranged through private adoption agencies. According to the State Department, in 2006 the top ten countries of origin included: Mainland China (6,493 adoptions), Guatemala (4,135 adoptions), Russia (3,706 adoptions), South Korea (1,376 adoptions), Ethiopia (732 adoptions), Kazakhstan (587 adoptions), Ukraine (460 adoptions), Liberia (353 adoptions), Colombia (344 adoptions), and India (320 adoptions). The United States strongly supports the principles of the Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect to Intercountry Adoption, a multilateral treaty existing between the U.S. and countries from around the world to strengthen protections for children, birthparents, and prospective adoptive parent(s) in the international adoption process. In selecting an international adoption agency, be certain to select an agency that is Convention-accredited. The Department will maintain a list of accredited adoption service providers at www.travel.state.gov.

Information provided by Adoption House International, Inc.

Maxine Chalker, founder of Adoptions from The Heart, started the agency to fill a need she found as she was trying to locate her own biological parents. As an adoptive child, she found it extremely difficult to find any information about her birth family. She was determined to take the secrecy out of the process. She founded Adoptions from The Heart in 1985 with that goal in mind.

For more information, visit their website at www.adoptionsfromtheheart.com.

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