



After Cindy and Chris Muta of Macungie made the heartfelt decision to adopt a child, they chose an "open" adoption through Adoptions From The Heart (AFTH), one of the largest placing agencies of domestic infants on the East Coast. "We felt the concept would work for our daughter and for us," says Cindy, "and that we wanted her to know and have a relationship with her birth parents."

When Maxine Chalker, MSW, LSW founded AFTH in 1985 from the basement of her Ardmore, PA home, open adoption—which allows birth and adoptive parents to select each other, meet and have on-going relationships—was a rare and controversial concept. But Chalker, who was an adoption social worker at a child welfare agency, felt strongly that open adoption was the best way to serve the needs of the "adoption triangle"—birth mothers, adoptive parents and children. "Children benefit from knowing their birth parents," says Chalker. "It helps to have their questions answered so they can grow up honestly."

Chalker knew from personal experience. As an adoptee, she experienced a difficult search for her birth family and understood the is-

ssues faced by adopted children. Today, AFTH has nine offices in seven East Coast states and handles both domestic and international adoptions throughout Europe, Asia and South America. Since its inception, AFTH has placed more than 5,000 children from the U.S. and abroad in loving homes.

For the Mutas the process began when they applied for a child in February 2007. An intensive home study, which can take up to three months, was the first step. A profile is drawn up and shown to the birth mother so she can choose prospective adoptive parents for her child. By the end of August, there was a match, and the Mutas' daughter, Shiloh, was born on November 6. "We saw her in the hospital and spent time with the birth family," says Cindy. "We hit it off very well and will have a continuing relationship." Muta feels that knowing her birth family will help Shiloh understand how much she is loved by both families. "AFTH walked us step-by-step through the process and helped make this a wonderful experience," says Cindy.

Will and Debbie Fulmer of Bethlehem also adopted through AFTH, but chose interna-

by Nancy Moffett

ADOPTIONS FROM THE HEART

tional adoption. "We weren't comfortable with the 30-day waiting period during which the birth mother can change her mind," says Debbie. "We wanted to know that once the children were ours, they were ours." Yes, the Fulmers have two daughters from China: Nina, 5, and Maggie, 4. "We chose China, as we're part Asian in our family," Debbie explains.

The overseas adoption process took longer, of course, due to the extensive paperwork required...about one year for Nina, less for Maggie. But Debbie notes that AFTH arranged their trips to China and, once they landed, a representative took care of everything and helped them through the process. "It's a great weight taken off you," she says.

However, according to Chalker, the recent implementation of the Hague Convention on Protection of Children treaty by many countries is making international adoption more difficult because some countries don't have the resources to implement the regulations. "The treaty was passed to make sure adoption is done safely, but the result has been that international adoption has dropped off and will continue to drop off," she says.

Another result is that the process has been slowed...instead of a few months, it now can take up to two years or more to adopt.

Kathy Lieb, district supervisor of the Allentown branch of AFTH, notes that the office handled 10 domestic and 10 international placements last year. "Most birth mothers who choose our agency want the option of open adoption because they will have a clear picture of the family the child will enter," says Lieb. "It helps them feel at peace with their adoption plan."

The birth mother sees profiles of prospective parents, chooses a family and then meets them before the child is born. She also may decide how much contact she wants with the family as the child grows. For the first six months, adoptive parents send photos and updates on the child to AFTH once a month and at least once a year until the child reaches age 18. The information is shared with the birth mother. "We also have an annual picnic where birth parents and adoptive parents often meet if that is their agreement." The time frame for domestic adoption is unpre-

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dictable, according to Lieb, but the average wait is two years or more.

Both Lieb and Chalker encourage people thinking about adoption to consider taking a child from the U.S. "There are many newborn American children who need homes," says Chalker. One of the advantages of domestic adoption is that parents have much more background and health information about the children they adopt and can contact the birth parent in an emergency.

"Some people think of open adoption as co-parenting," says Chalker, "but that's not the case." And they may be concerned about the birth mother changing her mind during Pennsylvania's 72-hour sign-off and 30-day finalization periods. But, birth mothers who work through AFTH are counseled to make sure they understand and are comfortable with their decision both before and after the birth. According to Lieb, they know they are making a loving, caring plan for their child.

Other services AFTH provides include conferences such as the one that was recently held at Delaware County Community College. Numerous sessions addressed issues faced by adoptive parents, such as transracial adoption, medical matters, open adoption and legal issues.

Even though the adoption process isn't always easy, both Cindy Muta and Debbie Fulmer agree that it's very rewarding.

"Shiloh is a wonderful, happy, pleasant baby," says Muta. Fulmer recalls that it was strange to suddenly think of herself as a parent, but with their daughters thriving, she says, "We are the ones who feel lucky."

With the help and on-going support provided by AFTH, "you will be successful," Chalker tells prospective adoptive parents. And her commitment has made a huge difference not only in parents' lives but in the lives of the thousands of children who now have loving families thanks to AFTH. ■

For More Information:

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