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## Angelina Jolie's Adoption

The Media's Obsession and the Truth

April 01, 2007 / Martha Osborne



Everyone, including my own mother, knows by now that Angelina Jolie traveled to Vietnam in March and adopted a 3-year-old little boy from the Tam Binh orphanage in Vietnam. The world seems glued to the drama of this mega-star and her adoption of her son, Pax Thien Jolie.

There's been quite an uproar in the adoption community. Email lists, bulletin boards and phones are alight with questions and speculation. And yet the general press appears frequently to get the story half-right, or never to address the questions closest to our hearts. We adoptive families are both part of the general populace, and also a world unto ourselves. The masses may wonder about this movie-star-mom growing her family in 'alternate' ways, while the adoptive community hosts quite a different range of inquiries. Questions such as:

- Did Angelina choose her child? (*the answer is no*)
- Why did Angelina only spend a week in Vietnam while other adoptive families spend 2-3 weeks processing their paperwork?
- How did Angelina adopt a child as a single parent when she was living with Brad Pitt?
- Did Angelina pay to expedite her adoption?
- Are Brad and Angelina adopting to expand their fame?

In the big picture, there is one side of this story; the story the entire world will hear and unfortunately, believe. In our world, there is the following story. One which involves most of those involved in this adoption and which I know to be the truth after talking to many of the parties involved. But first, let us be fair and address the history of this situation. In the end, all of the questions will be answered.

The unfortunate tabloid-fueled presentation to the world is this: **Angelina Jolie: Movie Star and**

**Collector of Children**, went to Vietnam on a whim, ended up arbitrarily visiting an orphanage in November of 2006, picked out a child to add to her string of multicultural kids, and paid bribes to the Vietnamese government and to an US adoption agency to make it happen fast.

This is clichéd fiction that people accumulatively pay millions in magazine prices to read.

The truth is, Angelina Jolie is the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Goodwill Ambassador and mother of 4, three through adoption. As a UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador, Angelina uses her status as a superstar to generate media coverage about the plight of refugees and the conditions under which they live. She has traveled widely to remote refugee camps and receiving centers in countries including Tanzania, Namibia, Cambodia, Pakistan, Thailand, and Ecuador.

She has met thousands of men, women, and children forced to flee from their homes and struggle to survive as refugees. "You go to these places and you realize what life's really about and what people are really going through," says Angelina. "These people are my heroes."

As adoptive parents, knowing this about Ms. Jolie, why wouldn't we understand her desire, on a much more private level, to make a difference in the lives of the children that she so often witnessed suffering?

When adopting Maddox, Ms. Jolie had been filming in Cambodia for nearly a year; Living and working day-by-day with the people of that country. Nothing actually divides Ms. Jolie from any of us, except that generally Americans have grown used to our movie stars being dysfunctional, political, self-aggrandizing personalities. So how do we handle a mega-star adopting? A truly crazy-famous, strong, intelligent activist woman who chooses to build her life and family in her own style?

I believe the answer is: we follow her example. We embrace that which does no harm, but only seeks to promote the welfare of children. Many will argue that adopting as an unmarried couple negates the good of giving a child a family. Though on one side this may appear to be a moral issue, the question also must be asked, *Who will parent all the children in orphanages?*

Surely, loving this or any child cannot be wrong. And legally, since Ms. Jolie is not married she had to adopt as a single parent. Vietnamese law states that you have to be single or a married couple (man/woman) - since she isn't married she had to adopt single. The requirements of

Vietnam do not state that you can't live with anyone. Each agency must make their own choice of whom they will accept as applicants. And each family must also choose: how will they grow?

For Ms. Jolie and Mr. Brad Pitt, the answer has been more complicated than what the world may view as 'normal'. But as adoptive parents, how can we not embrace their choices? After visiting numerous orphanages and privately saying to myself, "If only I had the finances," and finding myself wanting to do so much more, I know I am not alone in understanding how someone could choose this eclectic but fulfilling way to build a family. How much more so it must be for someone who regularly travels to refugee homes and orphanages to do humanitarian work?

However, the world press, those who crushed her windshield while in Vietnam, attacked her car, released private information to the world including her new son's passport and her adoption papers, they aren't interested in you hearing about her good works. The supported schools, AIDS programs, new water wells or medical programs for orphans. You've heard their version of this story already.

#### **Now I'm going to tell you the real story.**

In the early summer of 2006, Ms. Angelina Jolie: Mother, Partner and parent with Brad Pitt, movie star and humanitarian worker was visiting with her daughter Zahara's pediatrician, Dr. Jane Aronson.



Jolie and Dr. Jane Aronson

Ms. Jolie had already gone through the homestudy process, approving her to adopt internationally. Dr. Jane is the founder of **Worldwide Orphans Foundation** (did you really think I could resist a plug for a wonderful charity?) which has done amazing work with orphans in Ethiopia . Dr. Jane has also adopted from Vietnam and Ethiopia . However the conversation may have gone, a call was soon made to the Pennsylvania adoption agency, **Adoptions from the Heart** .

"It was truly fate," Vietnam adoption coordinator for AFTH Heidi Gonzalez reports. "This 3-year-old boy from Vietnam had been living in his orphanage since shortly after his birth. Our agency had (just prior to Ms. Jolie's inquiry) recently received his referral and the report of what a wonderful little boy he is. His file was on my desk at the moment I received the call. Despite what others may believe, this was the first and only child presented to Ms. Jolie. It was meant to be."

**Adoptions from the Heart** accepted the challenging opportunity to assist this young boy in finding his family. "We have been working with Vietnam since 1995. There were years when we supported the children and orphanages when adoption was closed to the US . Every child is precious to us, and we work for the best interest of each child, regardless of whether or not adoption is in his or her future," Ms. Gonzalez stated.

In November of 2006, Ms. Jolie visited her son's orphanage, though she knew her adoption was months away from being complete. "She chose to visit the toddler room in general, not to single him out," shared Ms. Gonzalez, "in January she knew it was getting close, and she visited individually with Pax to begin the bonding process." By this time, the Vietnam government had Ms. Jolie's CIS approval and the first leak of the adoption had reached the world-wide press.

"Before that time, there were only two people in our office who knew of the adoption. Her file was kept under lock and key in my office," said Ms. Gonzalez. Security, lawyers, hand-carrying documents and working with personal assistants were the norm. So, was this adoption that much different from others?

"Looking back, I guess you might see it that way. But on a day-to-day basis, not really. We had a single mom who was focused on her child. She wanted to make sure he was cared for and safe and the side-bar was keeping the news of the adoption from the media. She was doing a movie in India for part of the process and on a few hours notice she would fly in, exhausted, to re-do fingerprints or do one last homestudy update," said Ms. Gonzalez, "The biggest difference was when it was time to travel for the actual adoption. We had to work with her security team and Vietnam, run through the process with them for when she would arrive, look at the security risks in each location and figure out how to minimize any problems. That was definitely different."

The hardest part for everyone involved materialized in Ho Chi Minh City . The reports of the ridiculous actions of the press were understated. They attacked her car, breaking the windshield, attempting to puncture the tires in order to take more photos, relentlessly invading the cherished time that most adoptive parents, and presumably Ms. Jolie as well, see as priceless: That in-country bonding week or two. It was not possible to be just another adoptive parent. She had to be *Angelina Jolie The Movie Star* . Her adoption signing was accompanied by the Vietnamese press, she was *requested* to submit to being interviewed by a Vietnamese government newspaper just hours after receiving her son, and gracefully accepted being photographed for hours with government officials. She was there to adopt a child a private personal experience that was very special to her and to all adoptive parents.

And she missed it. She didn't get that precious, private experience.

"She really had no problem doing interviews or sharing her photos. She had her own photographer with her, and simply asked that the privacy of all her children be respected. She wanted to have the process be special and private for her family. Unfortunately she didn't have that opportunity," said Ms. Gonzalez.

Imagine if you were in a taxi with your newest child on your lap, your cherished toddler to whom you had longed to show your love and bring into your family. Strangers were attacking the car, their mouths screaming, faces contorted, and cameras flashing into the cab of the vehicle. The world appears to desire to blame the Star. The person who wishes to build her family in a similar way that we adoptive-families build our own.

Are we part of that world? As individuals in the adoption community, we should band together and support all people who build their families through adoption.

Although accused of requesting and receiving preferential treatment due to only spending one week in Vietnam after the adoption of Pax (the normal time is 2 1/2 weeks), the truth is that the Vietnamese passport office processed Pax's passport in one day due to the media's outrageous and destructive behavior. Ms. Jolie and her family left only after it was apparent that there would be no ability to explore Vietnam as a family, and airline ticket dates were changed for everyone.

The final question, the one many silently contemplate is this:

*"What sort of Normal life will Pax Thien Jolie, or any of the children of Mega Movie Stars, live?"*

I imagine that it will not be 'normal', as I or many others may see it. Or maybe it will. It all depends on how you look at the situation. But is that so terrible? Millions of people live normal lives. They're not UN representatives. They don't raise funds for AIDS orphans in Ethiopia, or drill wells for clean drinking water. I know of lots of normal and not-so-normal people who are to be admired. But the ones I respect most, all seem to have the same name and title:

**Mom.**