



## SHE'S GOT HEART

For Penn Valley's Maxine Chalker and her Adoptions From The Heart, finding a baby for Brangelina was all in a day's work

By Molly Petrilla

When Angelina Jolie decided to adopt her third child this year, it sent paparazzi aflutter from Hollywood to Ho Chi Minh City, all waiting to cast eyes on the new chosen son. But for the Main Line agency that handled the adoption of 3-year-old Pax Thien Jolie, arranging it was an everyday occurrence.

That agency, Adoptions From The Heart, is a local firm with an international reputation. And at the helm is Penn Valley resident Maxine Chalker. An adoptee herself, Chalker founded Adoptions From The Heart in her Ardmore basement some 22 years ago, after a long and frustrating search for own birthmother left her question-

ing the adoption system.

In the mid-1980s, Chalker had been handling adoptions for Delaware County's family services department — and continually running up against the same systemic flaws. She saw how difficult it was for adopted children who had no information about their birthmothers, and who were forced to go through life asking unanswered questions. And her own sense of loss in the search for her family history made the problem personal; as a result of her closed adoption, she had to go through arduous legal channels just to access her own records. (She did eventually track down her moth-

er and is now in contact with her half-siblings.)

For Chalker, the answer to this problem was simple: open adoption, a kinder approach meant to eliminate many of the troubles adoptees, adopters and birthmothers face. It allows a birthmother to select her baby's adoptive family, and it requires birth and adoptive parents to agree on how much contact they will have before, during and after placement. Adoptions From The Heart became a pioneer in the open adoption process as one of the first agencies in the region to offer the service.

And the results, says Chalker, speak for themselves.

"A few years ago, [my husband and I] were invited to dinner by one of the adoptive families," she recalls. "Their daughter's birthmother was there too, and we got pictures of them all together. It was just a really nice thing to see."

Now, with nearly 5,000 adoptions completed, Chalker has seen her nonprofit grow from a one-woman operation to a large network with 12 offices in seven states. Adoptions From The Heart now handles both domestic adoptions and international adoptions — which aren't open because most of the children come from orphanages — and places as many as 500 children in new homes every year.

"It's done wonders," says Chalker, who still serves as executive director out of the agency's Wynnewood office. "We've placed thousands of kids and it's very gratifying."

"We got a referral for a 3-year-old boy, and the same day, this doctor in New York called and said, 'Angelina Jolie wants to adopt a 3-year-old boy. Do you know of any?'"

Still, the agency operated largely under the radar until this March, when Jolie returned home with her new son. But while the adoption thrust the agency into the limelight, Chalker says aiding Angelina was a case of serendipity, not a strategic marketing ploy.

"To be honest, it was kind of a fluke," she says. "The head of our Vietnam program [Ardmore resident Heidi Gonzalez] got a referral for a 3-year-old boy, and the same day, this doctor in New York called her and said, 'Angelina Jolie wants to adopt a 3-year-old boy. Do you know of any?'"

Through phone calls to Jolie's assistant, attorney and even the movie star herself, Gonzalez arranged the adoption — but she didn't offer Jolie any celebrity treatment along the way, Chalker says. "They didn't pay anything extra," she explains. "They went through the normal time period process."

But it's not just celebrities that have used Chalker's agency to bolster their families.

One Main Line mom says working with Adoptions From The Heart was an incredibly positive and rewarding experience.

"We [now] have a beautiful daughter who is just the center of our lives," she says. She and her husband are currently in the process of adopting another child through the agency and are "hoping our family will grow soon."

And for Chalker, building families is what it's all about. ■