



Current Issue:  
November 2006



Wednesday, November 01, 2006  
South Jersey Weather: Partly Cloudy 69°F

SEARCH



ADVERTISE DINING OUT CONTACT

HOME

...from issue on 11/2006

SJ READERS' POLL

How will you ring in the New Year?

- At a party, with a bang!
- At home, asleep!
- Like we do every year, with good friends and good food.
- Is it that time of year again?

vote

FEEDBACK

Send your comments to the Editor of SJ Magazine

send feedback

SJ RESTAURANTS

dining directory  
search restaurants

**SJ DEPARTMENTS**

**The Adoption Option**  
The many ways to have a child  
by Stephanie Bilovsky

"We Build Beautiful Families," says the print at the bottom of the page\*, graced by a woman holding an infant and a man holding the woman. It's a theme that pops up repeatedly in discussions with adoption agencies. Hesitations and stigmas are fading as more and more couples in Southern New Jersey see adoption as a way to share their love, opportunity and family bond.



Last year, 1.7 million households in the United States included adopted children, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. That means four percent of the households in America with children have at least one adopted child.

Many of these adoptions are in response to a couple's inability to have a biological child. This inability could be due to long-standing fertility struggles, secondary infertility onset, marriages made later in life, or concerns for a mother's well-being during pregnancy or delivery. In all of these cases, and many others, hearts can be healed with the adoption of a loved one to complete a family.

"Adoption can be right for anybody. You just have to educate yourself and explore it as an option," says Lisa Rollins\*\*, adoptive parent and new member coordinator of the New Jersey Adoptive Parents Support Group. "My husband and I started to look into adoption thinking maybe it wasn't for us, but after attending a few seminars and adoption talks, we knew it was definitely the right choice."

Adoption, the legal transfer of parental responsibilities and rights from a biological parent to a non-birth parent, comes in many forms. For families considering adoption, there are a variety of choices to select a best-fit method.

Individuals driven by the desire to help a child in need may be interested in foster adoption, which involves adopting, from a public system, a child whose parents have lost parental rights. Another form of adoption is within the family, where a relative adopts a child born to a family member who is unable to handle, or uninterested in, parental responsibilities.



For those seeking to adopt an infant, there are two prevailing options: domestic, in which an American birth mother selects a family to adopt her child, and international, in which a child is adopted from another country.

It is up to the prospective parents to determine which adoption path is right for them, and that takes some investigating. "Every adoptive parent comes into the process from a different place. Even when a couple begins to consider adoption together, both individuals are rarely on the same page," says Kathy Miraglia, adoptive parent and administrator of the New Jersey division of Families Thru International Adoption, located in Sewell. "A couple interested in adoption has to look at the area's adoption agencies and talk to families that have adopted through those agencies to get into the mindset and see what feels right."

Finding the right agency is important, since each brings a unique perspective to the practice. Some agencies have a religious orientation; some state agencies focus on foster children. There are agencies that bring a romantic and emotional approach to finding the missing familial piece, while others take a more mathematical approach to matching a good fit for a family. "Research as much as you can on several agencies so you have a lot of information to then base your gut reaction on," says Miraglia, "because that's really what it comes down to, the gut reaction where that agency and this choice for adoption, just feels right."

For Maxine Chalker, what felt right was the ability for her children to have some contact with their birth mother. "I was an adopted child myself and I later went on to connect with my birth mother and two siblings. I feel it's important for others to be able to do that," says Chalker. After working in the adoption industry as a social worker, she founded Adoptions From the Heart. The Cherry Hill agency requires both the birthing and the adopting parties in a domestic adoption commit to having some amount of contact, whether it be through letters and pictures, phone calls, or some other comfortable medium agreed upon by the families.

When the families are able to contact one another, the adoption is referred to as "open." Adoptions From the Heart even provides social events such as an annual picnic where children can invite their birth mothers to meet their adoptive families. "It's a nice, safe place for them to meet because there are others meeting at the same event in the same way. No one stands out on display," says Chalker.

For those interested in a "closed" adoption, where there is no contact between the birth mother and the adoptive family, international adoptions are an attractive option. In fact, there are more international than domestic adoptions of infants, primarily because there are more international babies available.

"Since it is no longer taboo for a single parent to raise a child in the United States, there are less domestic children placed for adoption," states Miraglia.

When there are more babies available in a given type of adoption, the process takes less time to complete and, Miraglia adds, "Often when someone wants to start a family, they want to create one as soon as possible."

Though cases can vary greatly in their completion time, some types generally take longer than others. The initial phase of adoption involves an intense gathering of documents and clearances, requiring several instances of fingerprinting and notarizing, followed by a series of meetings with a New Jersey State social worker to create a home study. "This process can take anywhere from two to eight months depending on how fast the family works to gather the information," says Miraglia.

Then, for international adoption, permission must be granted by the Centers for Immigration Services. Only with this approval can the family prepare a dossier to be sent to the country of their choice (with the translation and hand-delivery services of an agency), where they wait for a child referral. This can take anywhere from six to eight

months for a Guatemalan child, eight to thirteen months for a Russian child and fourteen to fifteen months for a baby from China, again depending on the current availability of children in those countries. Once the waiting period is over, internationally-adopting parents must travel to the country of the child's heritage.

This travel, sometimes requiring multiple-week stays, can be costly, especially if the visit is requested during peak travel times. That cost may be a factor when parents determine what adoption method is right for them.

While domestic adoption avoids the cost of international travel, it often takes longer to complete. In a domestic adoption, the process time includes a review of the adopting family's paperwork and a home study, which is compared to criteria specified by the available birth mothers. Based on these criteria, proposals are submitted to good-match birth mothers, who then proceed with interviews and meetings to find the desired adoptive parents. "So, domestic adoptions can take even longer since the adoptive parents have to wait to be selected," explains Chalker.

Though quite different from one another, both domestic and international adoptions share "The Wait." This can be the most difficult part of an adoption because the work is out of the hands of the adopter. "You find yourself sitting looking at a calendar thinking 'eleven months... ten months... nine months... I wonder where my papers are now...,'" says Miraglia.

Then, one day, the wait is over. The referral is made.

"When the birth mother selected us and was willing to give us this beautiful baby of hers, it was the most wonderful thing a person can do for someone in the whole world," says Rollins, who feels as if her adopted daughter came from her own flesh.

After all, an inability to reproduce does not mean an inability to have a loving family. "Most people have a plan in life, an idea of how they think things will unfold. My husband and I expected to have a couple biological kids and then adopt, but it didn't work out that way," says Miraglia. "Ultimately, I am happy it didn't because if it had, I may not have met my three amazing children!"

If you or a loved one are considering adoption, the experts agree: Begin your research today and do plenty of it. Contact local agencies, see if there are classes, and scan the internet for local adoption resources. Most agencies offer free educational meetings and seminars where people can hear firsthand stories from both adopters and adoptees.

#### SIDEBAR

#### RESOURCES

#### New Jersey Adoptive Parents

#### Support Group

This nonprofit organization creates friendships among adoptive families, provides education on adoption issues and arranges family outings for fun and entertainment.

856-482-1300