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Young mother offers child a life with others

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Erica Saunders was 23, pregnant and concerned about the future of her unborn child.

"When I found out I was pregnant, I knew that abortion was not something I was interested in for myself," Saunders said. "I fought to be the best mom that I could be. I would not have finished college."

Saunders asked herself what if this was her only opportunity to have a child. She questioned if she could live with herself. Could she wake up and know she had done the right thing?

The young expectant mother made a decision that some would consider controversial. But to this day, Saunders knows it was the right decision for her baby.

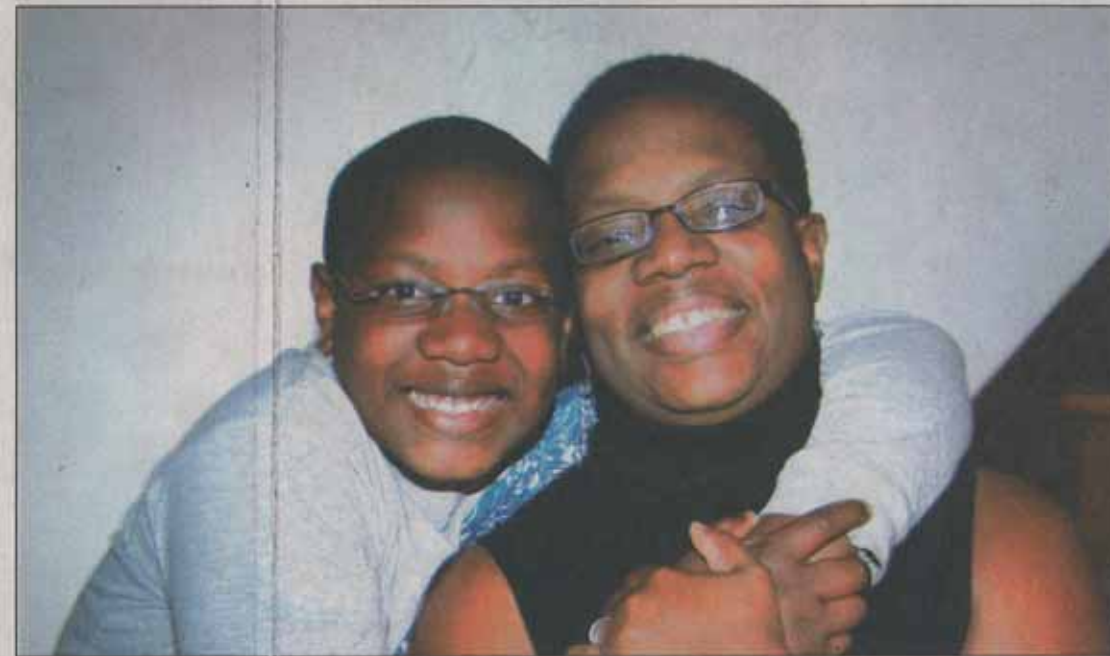
"I started looking at options for adoption," Saunders said. "I didn't know how to do this, but in my mind I didn't want any intermediate foster care."

After searching the telephone directory, Saunders found a solution. "It was called the Adoption Agency at the time," she said. "I called them, and ended up

speaking with a wonderful social worker. They invited me to come and just talk. I was really impressed by them asking what was best for me. I don't remember them saying let's talk about adoption. That's when I found out that they were an open agency and what that meant."

Open adoption agencies allow women to personally choose the family for their child, and stay in contact with them through letters, pictures or directly.

Saunders felt comfortable that the agency was concerned about her feelings. "They wanted to know, 'What's going on with you, and why you are considering adoption?'" she said. "They asked me what would have to change in my life for me to keep the child. So it really was about where I was. They wanted to know had I explored more options, and was adoption the best thing for me. They also had a birth mother support group at that time, which was an amazing selection of young women. It was just wonderful to be able to be with women who knew what you were going through. I went to a few of those



Erika Saunders and her son Merrik Saunders, 11, at their home in Germantown. —PHOTO ROBERT MENDELSON

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meetings, and that gave me insight."

Over the years, the Adoption Agency has evolved into an organization called Adoptions from the Heart.

Eventually, Saunders met two couples that were interested in adopting an African-American child. "I was able to read their bios and learn about them," she said. "I ended up choosing the family that I wanted it to be. They turned out to be an amazing family who had a young boy at the time. I met Fran, Ernie and their son, and we talked and shared. I remembered crying like crazy because I knew I had to say goodbye [to my baby]. I had found the couple."

Saunders gave birth to a girl, Megan. "I didn't know it was going to be a girl," she said. "She was named by the adoptive parents. It was important for me that Megan had one identity. I still vividly remember the day Megan had to go, because I got an infection and couldn't leave the hospital. I decided Megan needed to start her life. She was healthy, so I decided that she needed to go start her life. She was lying on my stomach and I could feel her little breath and her body movement. Marlene the social worker came in, and I looked at her and tears

started streaming down. We met Fran and Ernie in the lobby of the hospital, and Megan left me and went with her new family. It was a tough, bittersweet moment. I went back to my room and cried. It was difficult, but something I had to do."

In open adoptions biological parents have limited contact with the adoptive parents and the child. "I received pictures about six months, then once a year," said Saunders. "This was something that was understood going in."

The time came when Fran and Ernie asked Saunders if she wanted to visit them in Canada, where the family resided. "I was definitely up for that," she said. "I saw Megan when she was a few months old."

The relationship between Saunders, Fran, Ernie and Megan has worked out extremely well. "I have wonderful conversations with Fran over the phone," said Saunders. "I feel very blessed. Not every relationship is like this, but mine is. We are making our way. There is no manual or Dr. Spock for this kind of thing. Megan's happiness is the main thing."

Now 15, Megan is thriving, going to school and involved in sports and music. She also has a job. "She is doing what a typical teenager does," said Saunders. "She has always known about me,

which is always a plus."

Megan was informed about the adoption when she was very young. "It has always been a part of her life," Saunders said. "I'm certain that she has to deal with all of this when she gets older."

Megan's adoption is a transracial situation. Fran and Ernie are white. "When I met them, their son was African-American, and they made a conscious decision of wanting someone for him to identify with," said Saunders. "They wanted a child, and they were blessed with a son who happened to be African-American."

When Saunders first considered adopting Megan, the other couple interested was an African-American couple, who only wanted a girl. "I didn't want to put a negative spin on anyone's decision, but I didn't know whether or not I was having a girl or a boy at the time," Saunders said. "My most important thing was that my child be loved and cared for. I did wonder if Fran and Ernie could raise a Black child, but my mother taught me how to be a good person, not a Black person."

While the transracial adoption works positively for Megan, Fran and Ernie, there are challenges, like hair care. "When I visit them, hair is an issue," said Saunders. "They didn't know how to ask me, and I didn't know what to say to them. But I helped them, and I had a chance to do my daughter's hair. In Canada, there's a smaller amount of racial issues. There is racism everywhere, but it has

worked out for them in Canada. Things have gone very well and Megan is very comfortable. So far, so good."

How has Saunders come to terms with her decision of adoption over the years? "I have had difficulty, but never regret," she said. "I had to mourn the loss of my daughter, and I'm sure Megan will get to a point where she will deal with it in her own way. But Fran and I are certain that we'll all find our way. It's good that we have the openness, and it is not hush-hush or secretive. I think we are doing very well."

Adoptions from the Heart was founded by Maxine Chalker in the basement of her home 23 years ago.

"I had already worked in adoption for eight years in a public agency," Chalker said. "I adopted myself, so it was a personal interest. I started it because working in a public agency all the kids were in foster care, and I just didn't think that was the way to go. I knew that people wanted healthy babies, and we started with U.S. adoptions."

Adoptions from the Heart has always been involved with open adoptions.

"In 2005, we placed 25 African-American infants and 27 biracial children," Chalker said. "In 2006, we placed 22 African-American infants and 24 biracial children. For the first three months of this year, we've done four African-American and eight biracial children."