

International Adoption

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In fairy tales, babies lie in a pond, waiting until storks come to take them to their parents. In reality, some babies wait for airplanes to pick them up in a "pond" overseas.

Pam Matthews of Austin adopted two children from Korea in 1987 and 1988. "My target was being a mother and my babies just came to me in a different way," she said. "My babies came from the airport." She is one of many Americans who adopt children from other countries.

International adoptions in the United States grew rapidly after World War II. In the late 1940s and 1950s, American families accepted war orphans from Japan and Korea. Inter-country adoptions jumped in the middle of the 1990s and tripled in the last 10 years. According to the State Department's visa report, 20,099 infants entered the United States en route to new homes in 2002, the highest in history. Infants come mainly from China, Korea and Russia.

Sixteen years ago, Pam and her husband Ron waited for Pam's mother at the Austin airport. Their friends held balloons. Pam's mother finally appeared at Gate 11, carrying a baby—a baby from Korea.

Pam ran up to her mom and immediately held the baby boy. Ron enfolded the tiny boy for a minute but could not continue for long because of the surgery he had on his arm several days before.

Then, Pam took the little one back and she did not let anybody hold him again. The 3 months old infant got a new name—Barry—after his new grandfather. Pam and Ron immediately bonded with the baby. "The day Barry arrived was the most exciting day in my life," Pam said.

It was also the end of long painful days of infertility treatment for Pam, then 36, and Ron, then 38.

Pam wanted desperately to be a mother. After undergoing infertility treatment, she began exploring adoption as an option. Since she helped at social services when she was in college, she always knew she could adopt if she failed to become pregnant.

After requesting a list of adoption agencies from the state, Pam discovered the Lutheran Social Service was taking applications. She and her husband applied, but were rejected. "We were denied because they had too many applications," Pam said.

Instead, the service mentioned Dillon International, one of the major and oldest international adoption agencies in the United States. "We applied to them," Pam said. "If we had waited another year, we would have been approved for domestic adoption. But we didn't want to wait." Within a year of the first application to the agency, Barry was already in the Matthews' country style house in Austin.

Contrary to popular thought, inter-country adoption is not difficult. First, the Matthews sent a one-page application form to the agency. Second, they submitted a longer application with verification of income, marriage certificate and evidence of life insurance. Third, the agency sent a person for a home visit to check out the living environment and to interview Pam and Ron. Finally, they went to the agency's office for a series of interviews. The process ended with the Matthews getting a letter of approval.

"Two weeks later, we got a referral about Barry," Pam said. The referral revealed Barry's family history, especially about his birth mother—how old she was, what her situation was, her educational background and so on. "The foster mother also could comment on the condition of the baby and medical information," she added. Most importantly, the envelope included a picture of then Min Kook, which means "intelligent" and "a foster home" in Korean. Pam still displays the photo in her living room.

Pam now had two choices: "Yes, I want to have this baby" or "I would like to discuss this." Her answer was, of course, the first. After completing the appropriate INS papers, all what she had to do was wait for Barry. She painted the nursery blue and bought a crib. She attached a baby seat on the backseat of her husband's car, dreaming of the moment when she would finally pick Barry up from the airport.

Meanwhile, Pam looked at the photo frequently. "After a while, I didn't look at it because it was embedded in my brain," she said. "Since I got the picture, I had a bond with the picture and Barry. Even though he was still in Korea, he was our son."

The Matthews adopted a Korean girl, named Margaret, two years after Barry came. The two children from Korea contributed to cultural diversity at home and outside. "On the 'arrival day,' they brought dumplings and Korean cookies to school," Pam said. Many adoptive families celebrate their children's arrival day as well as their birthdays. "Kids loved Korean goodies. One child said, 'I wish I were adopted. I could have an arrival day.'"

From the first day, American adoptive families must adapt their lifestyles to fit that of a new baby from a foreign country. Another couple, Barbara and Randy Jann, adopted a 7-month-old boy from Korea 15 years ago. "He could not sleep in the crib," Barbara recalled. "So, we all

slept on the floor for the first two nights." In Korea, people usually sleep on floor mats and parents lie next to their baby.

The couple named the tot Matthew, which means "a gift." "I felt Matthew was a gift from God," Barbara said. Her curiosity about the region where her son comes from led her to get an administrative job at the Center for Asian American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin.

Unlike the Matthews, the Janns do not celebrate his arrival day. "My son wants to celebrate only his birthday, just like anybody else," Barbara said. "He doesn't want to be different." Barbara admitted her son is going through a difficult time. "He is in the teenage phase right now," she said. "It's harder for him because he is a minority and we, the parents, are not." Barbara thinks her son recently lost his motivation for schoolwork.

Barbara sometimes feels her son's discomfort at being Asian. "My son likes country music," she said. One of his country music pals always dresses like a cowboy. "Matthew would also like to dress like that—jeans and everything." He, however, doesn't try. "He believes he looks funny because he is Asian," she sighed.

Once she tried to teach Matthew that he was an Asian-American as most adoptive parents do. Matthew immediately replied, "I am American."

"He feels he is singled out," Barbara said. "If a white guy is walking down the street, no one says he is Anglo-American or Caucasian. We just think of him as American." She thinks people overly distinguish Asians from others.

In order to overcome the difficulty together, the Janns try to spend as much time with their son as they can. "We are talking about going to Korea," Barbara said. "Once Matthew said he wanted to visit Korea."

The Matthews family visited Korea in 1996. In Korea, Barry and Margaret met their foster mothers, saw the place where they were born, ate plenty of Korean food, and did a lot of sightseeing. "My kids had a great time there," Pam said. "Barry got homesick." Pam noted that Barry did not want to go home after spending two weeks there.

"One night, he went out to a little porch, where he could see city lights," Pam recalled. "He was out by himself and looked so peaceful. I think everything made more sense for him—where he is from."

Before going to Korea, Margaret questioned all the time. "But she just stopped," Pam smiled. Pam is confident that visiting Korea was the best thing they had ever done together as a family.

Children from Asia consisted of 60 percent of all adoptees in the last three decades in the United States. When the Matthews and the Janns adopted their children in the 1980s, infants from Korea accounted for about 40 percent of all international adoptions. In Korea, single mothers are not socially accepted. Thus, unmarried women tend to give birth secretly and give up their babies. In the late 1990s, Korean babies comprised only 10 percent of all international adoptions following China and Russia, 15 percent and 22 percent respectively. The Chinese government's "one-child policy" has left many girl babies in orphanages because Chinese traditionally prefer sons.

For adoptive families, support from family and community are very important. Both Pam and Barbara conclude that Austin is a great place to raise children adopted from an Asian country. "Austin is culturally diverse and has an Asian community," Pam said. "Because of the university, people are also well-educated and open-minded."

Unfortunately, this isn't always the case. "One day, we were waiting at a restaurant for a table when the kids were very little," Pam said. "A lady came up and said 'Where did you get those Chinese babies from anyway?'"

Barbara is still furious with her son's teachers in elementary school. "They expected him to be a problem because he was adopted by another race," she said. "One of them even accused him of having a weapon."

Barbara's son did not. Another boy did. "I felt sorry for my son and talked with the teacher, but I just knew she was prejudiced and did not like my son," she said.

To avoid such problems, some adoptive parents send their Asian children to Asian schools. Both Pam and Barbara sent their children to public schools. "When kids go to school, some are Asians and some are not. That's the way life is," Pam said. "When they go out in the real world, not everybody can be Korean anyway."

Adoptive families sometimes face discrimination. They sometimes tackle the identity crises of their children. Despite these difficulties, the number of international adoptions increases.

Several reasons contribute to the trend. Domestic adoption is now extremely difficult. With a rise in the abortion rate and an increase of unmarried women keeping their babies, few infants

are available for adoption. Due to the shortage of available babies, the regulations for domestic adoption are very strict and prospective parents stay on waiting lists an average of three to five years.

"You should be very rich or wait for years and years," Barbara said. "I was around 35 years old when I applied and it was too old for some domestic agencies."

In case of international adoption, on the other hand, you may have a baby within a year on average, and even single women can be accepted if they can afford to pay \$10,000 to \$30,000 fees.

When Barbara collected information about adoption, she found that there were many cases where biological mothers took their children back from adoptive parents. "I didn't want to have such a situation," she said. "There were fewer such incidents in international adoption."

With the help of the Internet, prospective parents obtain information easier and can be processed more quickly. You now can find many agencies on the Web and download all applications in a couple of minutes.

Many agencies also allow customers to select the gender of their future baby. Pam selected "either" the first time, but checked "girl" the second time because she already had a boy. "I felt it was selfish, but my mom said 'check girl, '" she laughed.

Pam devotes almost all her time to her children as a homemaker. "I just want them to grow up happy and healthy," she said. Like other parents, she has hopes for her children. "Give me grandchildren in the future," she giggles. She, of course, will willingly support her children if they decide to adopt.