

Adopting an Open Heart



In Recognition of National Adoption Month

"When people tell us how lucky Susie is to have us, we know better," says Martha, mother of a little girl she and her husband, Steve, adopted from China. "We are the lucky ones."

Like many women who wait until later in life to have a baby, Martha encountered fertility problems. The problems didn't douse the couple's desire to have children, so adoption emerged as an attractive option. Rather than undergo expensive, iffy fertility treatments, they put their financial resources towards an international adoption. After two weeks in Hunan Province where they adopted Susie, they have never looked back. "It is an awesome thing. I can't say enough good things about it," she declares. "I discovered that pregnancy and motherhood are two separate things. I couldn't love her any more if she had come from us. Being parents is what it's all about."

Many Americans have opened their hearts and homes to adoption, with joyous results.

Although couples make the choice to adopt for a myriad of reasons, infertility is the most common. Once they decide to adopt, they have several options, all requiring the assistance of a lawyer. Martha and Steve chose an international adoption, and they've enjoyed the large support network of other parents who have adopted from China. In an agency placement, the agency has custody of the baby. Parental placement, or private adoption, puts birth parents and adoptive parents in direct contact. Although infant adoption is the most common, older children are also available, equally in

need of the love and support of responsible parents.

In adopting Susie, Martha and Steve got assistance from Richmond-based Jewish Family Services. The nonprofit has helped couples in the adoption process for the past 50 years through their award-winning program, Adoption with Love. Adoption with Love offers the home studies required by Virginia law as well as the personal guidance of an adoption social worker throughout the entire process. The agency also provides counseling and support to pregnant women considering adoption. According to social worker Jessica Carty, Adoption with Love handles 30-40 adoptions of all types per year.

Wanda and Ernie Rogers adopted their two children Jansen and Lexi from South Korea one year apart. After a relatively short wait of seven months for each adoption, an escort flew with the baby from Seoul to the United States. As Wanda and Ernie waited nervously at the airport gate with their camcorder ready to meet their first baby, the pilot volunteered to film the event for them. A crowd of disembarking passengers from the flight gathered around to witness the occasion and cheer them on. "It was incredible! I call it my birthing moment," Wanda reminisces with a chuckle. "The whole thing has been extremely positive. It's the best thing we ever did." Wanda and Ernie are already looking forward to taking their kids to visit Korea when they are older.

After dealing with fertility issues, Janey and Dave Neff privately adopted their son Luke and daughter Lily through the help of an agency. Because they were

open to adopting a child of any race, both adoptions took place within a matter of months. Feeling blessed with her two healthy and happy children, Janey cautions people not to miss out on the joys of adoption for fear that the birth mother may change her mind. Like pregnancy, there are occasional complications, but in Virginia, once a parent voluntarily relinquishes all rights to a child, the law allows the parent only 30 days to change her (or his) mind. Furthermore, if a judge terminates parental rights, it is a final decision.

Local attorney Colleen Quinn, a partner at Cantor Arkema, is one of Virginia's foremost authorities on adoption and assisted reproductive technology law. She has provided counsel in hundreds of adoptions, surrogacy, and assisted reproductive technologies arrangements. Her clients include adopting parents, birth parents, and intended parents. "For a birth mother, the decision to give up her child is often the greatest act of love she can make," she says.

For those couples seeking to adopt a child, Ms. Quinn advises, "The key thing is to be persistent. Many couples hit a point of desperation, but you have to accept and embrace the search process in a parental placement or the wait in an agency placement." She also notes that many couples with conception problems become pregnant right after adopting. "It's uncanny how it happens," she reflects with a smile.

One thing is clear—the love between a parent and child, whether adopted or not, is natural. Recalling the words of Susie's mother, Martha, they are all the lucky ones. **V**

For more information, contact

Jewish Family Services at 282-5644 or www.jfsrichmond.org

Cantor Arkema, PC at 343-4375 or www.virginiaadoptionattorney.com

Braley & Thompson, Inc. foster and adoptive services at 563-9401 or www.btkids.com

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