



building a family through

adoption

by Vicki Louk Balint

photographs by Dan Vermillion

Cathi and Kirk Triplett of Scottsdale wanted children. So when they realized it wasn't going to be quick or easy to conceive, they decided to do two things. One was to make an appointment with an infertility specialist. The other was to take the steps necessary to become certified to adopt.

They met with a physician and decided to try in vitro fertilization procedures. It's a grueling tease of a process involving surgeries, injections, money and patience. Plenty of patience. But the Triplets were fortunate. After three attempts, Cathi became pregnant with twin boys, Conor and Sam, now 10.

Of course, they were thrilled. But they wanted to expand their family. After a few more unsuccessful attempts with in vitro (all told, six surgeries and permanent calluses from the shots), they decided enough was enough. A few years went by and the Triplets fell into a routine with Sam and Conor. But the desire for a bigger family was always there.

One day, during the boys' pre-kindergarten year, a friend of Cathi's who happened to be a foster mom told her about a baby about to be born. The mother was a 40-year-old methamphetamine user.

"Nobody was stepping forward to adopt the baby because (the mom) had done drugs," says Cathi. It seemed like such a serendipitous gift to the Triplets. They couldn't help but think they were meant to love this baby. And because of foresight five years earlier, when they'd done the work to be certified

to adopt, they were prepared. So they said yes. And Cathi was able to watch the birth of their new daughter, Alexis, a beautiful, healthy girl.

Two years later, there was a call from Hawaii. The social worker who had helped with Alexis's adoption had a question for Cathi. "She said, 'I am sitting here, looking at the whales, holding a six-day-old baby boy. Do you know anyone who wants to adopt?'" The Triplets picked up their son Kobe a few days later. Conor, Sam, and Alexis welcomed their new baby brother, whose birth mother is Japanese and whose birth father is African-American. "At that point," says Cathi, the kids "figured that's just the way you make a family."

The Triplets had no idea they would end up with this beautiful blend of children when they began their journey. Their experiences led them to a new understanding of what it means to parent, and what parents can mean to a child who is stuck in a holding pattern, facing life without a family.

Finding children who need homes

Adoption has always been a way for couples

and, in recent years, singles to become parents. And it still is. But the supply of newborns from unwed, healthy, drug-free parents isn't what it used to be. From 1952 until 1972, only 8.7 percent of premarital births resulted in adoption placements, according to Child Welfare Information Gateway (formerly known as the National Adoption Information Clearinghouse). This number initially dipped to 4.1 percent by 1982, perhaps due to the legalization of abortion. (Note: according to CWIG there is no research showing that women are choosing to abort *in lieu* of arranging placement for adoption; adoption rates have remained relatively steady and abortion rates since 1990 continue to drop.)

A continuing decline in placement probably reflects the fading of the stigma long associated with unwed parenting, the increased use of birth control and the fact that fewer than one percent of pregnant teens choose to place their babies for adoption, according to CWIG. Those trends most likely account for the dramatic rise in intercountry adoptions,



The Triplett family of Scottsdale: Sam (10), Kirk, Alexis (6), Cathi, Kobe (4) and Conor (10).

which doubled during the 1990s, according to the U.S. Department of State.

But it is still possible to find healthy newborns to adopt.

"I think the biggest misconception today is that you are on a wait list for seven years, and it's going to take forever to find a baby," says licensed certified social worker Beverly Quidort, who teaches a series of classes to familiarize potential adoptive parents with the process.

Quidort has spent the past 20 years certifying hundreds of parents through the home-study process. She says it's all about networking – telling everyone you know that you are looking. One couple Quidort worked with vowed to tell two new people every day that they wanted to adopt. Within three months, they'd found their baby boy.

Plenty of matches are made every year between prospective parents and newborns, children and teens who need homes. And though the adoption process can seem compli-

cated and overwhelming, plenty of resources exist to help families get started.

Where to begin

The first step in the adoption process is to do some soul searching. Think about what you are willing to handle as a parent, says Kirk Triplett.

"Set your parameters and go accordingly," he suggests. "Some people can adopt a biracial child and some could adopt a baby with Down syndrome, or one who is addicted to drugs." Take a good, hard look at your lifestyle, he suggests. "The bottom line is that you've got to look in the mirror and be honest about what you can and can't do."

Next, become familiar with the state laws and regulations that govern U.S. adoptions. CWIG suggests checking the state statute directory at childwelfare.gov for a quick overview and comparison of state laws. Information about who may adopt, time frames for consent and revocation of that

consent as well as termination of parental rights laws can be searched by state, territory or region. Introductory classes can help and are offered by community colleges, adoption agencies, hospitals, religious groups and other organizations, including RESOLVE: The National Infertility Association (resolveaz.org), a non-profit organization that supports families dealing with infertility.

Completing the home study

For any adoption, domestic or intercountry, the next step involves the completion of a home, or family, study. This information-gathering process, required by the courts, serves to both educate and prepare adoptive families. A licensed social worker employed by an agency or in private practice gathers information to facilitate a match and evaluate the fitness of the family. This can include several interviews plus a series of reports on the health of the parents, background checks, references, education,



Harrison Furlong (2) of Paradise Valley.

employment, information about the neighborhood setting, extended family, religious practices, how the parents feel about adoption and whether they seem ready.

During these interviews, parents should relax and “be themselves,” says Quidort. “It’s not meant to be a judgment process.” During her entire career, she says, only a very small fraction of the hundreds of families she’s encountered were not certifiable. The search is not for “perfect” parents, according to CWIG. The goal is “to find real parents for real children.”

Private vs. agency adoptions

For a domestic placement, parents have two options: hire a private adoption attorney or contract with an adoption agency.

With an agency adoption, parents must not only be certified by the state to adopt, they must also meet the particular requirements of the agency, says Quidort. Factors that may be considered include the age of the parents, the length of time the parents have been married and how many children already are living in

the home. Private adoption may become the only option for parents who wish to adopt but are excluded by agency requirements.

A significant distinction between the two lies in the consent documentation, according to Phoenix attorney Kathryn Pidgeon. In Arizona, the birth mother has 72 hours after birth to give her consent to the adoption. Once she has signed the legal papers, consent is irrevocable. When a birth mother signs consent in an agency placement, she grants legal custody of her baby directly to the agency. That allows agencies to call the adoptive family with a match *after* the baby has been born and the consent documents have been signed.

An agency adoption can minimize the risks that a birth mother will change her mind. “The agency sometimes can insulate the adoptive parents from the real roller coaster of the process,” says Pidgeon. “The agency can then say to the family, ‘The paperwork is all done. Would you like to adopt this baby?’”

Another difference lies in costs. Agencies,

both domestic and international, generally incorporate all costs within a fixed fee, so parents know the dollar amount ahead of time. Sometimes, the fee can be based on the income of the family.

In a private placement, “the adoptive family has to pre-commit to the birth mother,” says Pidgeon. Adoptive parents pay the costs of the pregnancy (within guidelines set by the court), which may include the birth mother’s living expenses, counseling costs, attorney fees for both parties and even transportation costs for pre-natal visits. If the birth mother is not covered by medical insurance (rare in our state because of the Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System) adoptive parents may end up paying these costs as well.

A private adoption can allow more contact between the adoptive parents and the birth mother, with varied results.

Adoptive parents may be selected by a birth mother long before the baby is born. Pidgeon instructs her clients to fashion a “Dear Birthmother” letter to introduce

themselves. The samples she has archived resemble pages carefully crafted by scrapbook artists, incorporating gentle, heartfelt words and family pictures onto a background of lovely papers and patterns that resonate with the personalities of the prospective families.

"It is a very hands-on process," says Pidgeon, who has helped nearly 1,000 families adopt over the past 18 years. "(Adoptive parents) generally meet the birth mother. Often they even go to doctor's appointments."

One advantage of private adoption is that, after the birth, the baby can leave the hospital right away with the adoptive parents. But the birth mother still has 72 hours to change her mind. And when that happens, the results can be heartbreaking for the adoptive family.

Finding a birthmother

For Larry and Kathy Furlong of Paradise Valley, finding interested birthmothers was the easy part. But meeting with them was awkward, supporting them expensive and getting dumped by a few of them immeasurably painful.

The Furlongs supported their first birth-mother financially for several months, paying her rent, utilities and other expenses within the allowable limits set by the court. Then, she told them she was on heroin. She needed to get away for a while to find some help. She disappeared. They never saw her – or their money – again.

A few months later, they were chosen again, this time by an expectant mother who was incarcerated. The Furlongs supported her for a while, too. They even visited her in jail – until she decided she could garner more financial support from an adoptive



Larry, Harrison (2) and Kathy Furlong of Paradise Valley.

family from another state, where the expense arrangements differ.

The Furlongs finally connected with an expectant mom who had three other children and wanted to place her baby with them. Because she did not have a vehicle, the Furlongs drove to her trailer home in a rural area on the outskirts of Phoenix to take her to the doctor for pre-natal visits. Larry says that he and Kathy "got to know her kids very well. It was a pretty tight relationship."

But as time passed, the situation began to feel strange. The mother didn't explain to her other children that a baby was on the way.

"The mother told her other three that she was sick and had something growing in her belly," says Larry. "The kid that was 2½... that was one thing. But the oldest was 8. These kids knew what was going on. But,

of course, we respected her wishes."

Toward the end of the pregnancy, the Furlongs became concerned. "She just had that very guilty look on her face; it made us very uncomfortable," says Larry. "We knew in our heart of hearts that she was really having some strong reservations." After an easy birth, Larry drove the birth mother home from the hospital. The baby, a healthy girl, went home with the Furlongs.

But as the 72-hour period to reconsider drew near, the birth mother called the Furlongs to deliver the news. "I can't do this," she said. "I want my baby back."

It's still hard for Larry to get the words out. He pauses for a breath. "So we drove the baby back to the attorney's office. And that was when I said, 'I don't know if I want to do this anymore.'" The tears well up in his eyes. "It was very hard."

What if she changes her mind?

A landmark 2002 study on adoption explored public perceptions, opinions, attitudes and concerns about adoption. There was good news and bad news. The study, jointly sponsored by the Dave Thomas Foundation (late founder of Wendy's International, Inc. and himself an adopted child) and the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, showed that attitudes toward adoption are on the upswing. But one very striking finding shines a light on a very big public misconception. The most common fear among Americans about adoption is that the birth parents might try to regain a child once an adoption is finalized. And although the risk exists in every adoption, it is something that rarely happens, according to the findings.

National Adoption Day

Saturday Nov. 18 is National Adoption Day, a collective national effort to raise awareness of the 118,000 children in foster care waiting to find permanent, loving families. For the last six years, National Adoption Day has made the dreams of thousands of children come true by working with courts, judges, attorneys, and advocates in 45 states to finalize adoptions and find permanent, loving homes for children in foster care.

In Maricopa County, organizers expect to see more than 140 adoptions finalized that day. It's an opportunity for anyone thinking of building a family through adoption to observe real matches made between parents and their newly adopted children. Formal proceedings will be followed by entertainment (including a visit from the Phoenix Suns Gorilla) and a professional photographer will capture images of the new families. The local event is

being underwritten by the Fore Adoption Foundation created by professional golfer Kirk Triplett and his wife, Cathi, of Scottsdale.

The event runs from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. at the Juvenile Court Center, 3131 W. Durango Ave. Volunteers are needed. For more information, contact Kathryn Pidgeon at 602-522-8700 or Skp3@aol.com.

For more information about National Adoption Day, visit nationaladoptionday.org/2006/index.asp.

A Picnic for Adoptive Families

Arizona Adoptive Families, a social and educational group run by adoptive and foster parents is hosting a National Adoption Month Picnic on Saturday, Nov. 11. See our What's Up calendar (page 56) for details.

The fear stems largely from the occasional dramatic stories that garner intense media focus, says Marc Kellenberger of Arizona's Children Association (the oldest licensed adoption agency in Arizona). Unfortunately, that spotlight on the actions of a few significantly affects public opinion. In most adoptions, he says, "before a child is placed, all relationships have been severed."

Pidgeon, who worked with the Furlongs during their search, will never forget the day they had to return the baby girl they had awaited. "I had to take the baby out of Larry's arms," she recalls. "It doesn't happen very often. But when it does, it is painful and it's horrible and gut wrenching. But you have to have faith that there is another child out there for you."

Laws vary from state to state, but Pidgeon considers Arizona laws to be solid – and fair – both for the adoptive parents and for the birth mother. "The revocability period is 72 hours after birth. As long as you work with a reputable attorney or agency you have nothing to fear. I did an adoption with (parents in) Virginia just a couple of years ago. They have a 90-day revocability period in Virginia. Now, those are the stories that make the national news."

In some states, the birth mother can sign revocation papers before the birth, or right at birth, says Pidgeon. "But I think the 72 hours is perfect. It isn't until the birth mother holds that baby and sees that baby that she recognizes what she is doing. She needs time to recover from that to make sure this is what she wants to do."

Pidgeon equates the 72-hour waiting period for the adoptive parents to the pains of labor and delivery. "It is very painful to see the birth mother grieving over the loss of this child. It is very hard for the adoptive parents to sit in the room and watch that, but they have to...because then they understand and appreciate the gift. It is a really powerful thing to watch."

The Furlongs decided they just couldn't bear to take on another birth mother. Shortly before their certification was about to expire, they made plans to fly to another state to pursue a surrogate mother arrangement. But a few days before they were to leave, Pidgeon received a call from a social worker at a local hospital. A healthy, 10-pound baby boy had just been born. The mother showed up at the hospital, delivered her child and was ready to place him. A social worker reached Pidgeon, who happened to be in her office even though it was a holiday. Within hours, the Furlongs headed to the hospital and met the birth mother. They hit it off immediately. This time, Kathy Furlong took the baby home to a

good friend's home to spare Larry some of the pain that 72-hour period can bring.

But this time, it was meant to be. The 72 hours ticked by, and Harrison Furlong came home with his parents to stay. It had taken five years to find him. Larry estimates they spent close to \$50,000 supporting the birth mothers who didn't work out. But in the end, their son's adoption cost practically nothing. At least in dollars. They say it was worth every single bit of time – and all of the pain. The process of adoption "isn't for the faint of heart," says Kathy. "But I truly believe if it is meant to be...then it will happen."

Intercountry adoption

The persisting fear that she could lose a child to a birth mother's change of heart was one reason Amy Vogelson of Phoenix decided to seek an intercountry adoption. "I want the security of knowing that there is no parent who is going to come and take this child," she says.

Vogelson, of Phoenix, figures she's around 16th on the list for her baby girl from Vietnam. Vogelson, a director at Southwest Behavior Health Services, mulled over the decision to become a parent for years. "I always wanted to be married first," she says, "but that didn't happen." She made the decision to adopt while on a beach vacation with her sister and some very close friends. Shortly after she returned, she began working with Marianne Adams, director of the Arizona branch of Children's Hope International, to start the process.

Adams offers information sessions to walk families through the process of adopting children from China, Vietnam, Kazakhstan, Russia and Columbia. Each country requires different information from prospective parents; often it is far more extensive than what is required for a domestic adoption. For example, China requires an HIV test and an in-depth accounting of personal debts and assets. Russia, according to Adams, will not place a child with a parent who has survived cancer or has any sort of criminal record, no matter how many years ago.

Among the many requirements Vogelson

faced were three sets of fingerprints, five letters of reference and the daunting task of writing a 10-page autobiography, which became part of the dossier required by most foreign adoption applicants. "You go through a lot of hoops," she says.

Vogelson says the autobiography itself took about a month to finish. "I wanted it to reflect my values, my family, my education and my service to the community," she says. But the process is intimidating. You can't help but think very carefully about what you say, and how you say it, she says. "You don't want to throw out any red flags."

The reason children become available for adoption in any particular country varies. Because of population controls and a cultural preference for male offspring, China is known for an abundance of available females. Children of mixed race born to unwed mothers in Kazakhstan are stigmatized; they're almost never placed in their own country. Sibling groups seem to be more available in Columbia. Details surrounding each particular country can

change depending on regulations, availability and social climate. Some countries allow single-parent adoptions, some don't. Some allow single women to adopt, but not single men. It's complicated. How can parents settle on the country that will be the best fit for their family?

Updated information about policies and availability in each country can be found on the U.S. State Department website (travel.state.gov/family/adoption/adoption_485.html). Message boards and chat rooms help families share their experiences while they wait as well as after they've brought their child home. Many families form mini cultural communities to help them learn more about a particular country while they wait and to nurture the ethnicity of the child they eventually bring home.

Because Adams and her husband adopted two children from outside of the U.S., she feels a particular kinship with those waiting and searching. For her, guiding families through the tangled process to find their children

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“The process of adoption ‘isn’t for the faint of heart...’”

Learn more at raisingarizonakids.com

Find out more about the specific costs of adoption and browse a list of resources for prospective adoptive families. Also, read a first-person story from a birth mother and learn about new Sesame Street episodes airing this month that focus on adoption.

in search of our little girl

by Nina LaRue

photograph by Dan Vermillion



Kylie LaRue (7 months), of Scottsdale, gets a kiss from her dad, Ron.

Our official start was May 4, 2001...but much thought and prayer had gone on during the months leading up to this important “beginning.”

Early that year, when one of the local TV stations that promotes adoptions hosted a call-in program, I called to request an information packet. Within the packet was information about an orientation meeting. My husband Ron and I attended the May 4 meeting and decided to take the next steps: finding an agency and beginning the certification process. We signed an agreement, filled out paperwork, took the required classes and tests, got medical clearances and fingerprint evaluations. We went through the home-study process. On Sept. 6, 2001 we were officially certified as legally available and acceptable to adopt. Then we waited.

Almost three-and-a-half years later, in February 2005, we were introduced by a friend to a caseworker at Arizona’s Children Association. We decided to switch to that agency (you can only be committed to one at a time) when we heard that it had an average wait time of four to six months.

On March 1, 2006 our caseworker called us. Hesitantly, she told us that a Safe Haven baby girl might be available. She said to stay by my phone the next afternoon.

My mind was racing. We definitely wanted a baby but figured it wouldn’t even be a remote possibility. We were ready for whatever child/children we would be chosen to love. I tried to prepare myself to be pleasant if our caseworker called back with bad news...to be quietly, graciously crushed.

The next morning I had a couple of appointments. I made it through them but

couldn’t stay focused. I got home by 1:15 p.m. and watched the phone and the clock until, at 2:15, the phone rang. The caller I.D. showed it was a “state” number. Quivering, I answered the phone and tried to sound calm. It was our caseworker. I prepared for the worst.

“How are you?” she asked.

“Fine, how are you?” I replied.

“Are you sitting down?”

I was, braced for disappointment.

“So, have you picked out a girl name, yet?”

I started to cry as she gave me the news we had waited so long to hear. I couldn’t think. I wrote down the important contact information as I tried to grasp what had just happened. *We get to meet our daughter later today...*

I called Ron, who was tied up in a meeting. I redialed for 45 minutes, about to burst with this incredible news! The boys were at school, so I had to wait to tell them. I couldn’t call my mom before telling Ron.

I tried to remember what girl names we had chosen more than five years ago. I love the name Kylie and we had always wanted Christine, after a lifelong friend who has had a huge impact in my life, as a middle name.

Finally, Ron was able to answer his phone. We agreed on a time later in the day when we could meet our new daughter. I asked him about “Kylie Christine.” He liked it.

Our three sons were beside themselves when they got home from school and heard the news. They couldn’t wait to meet their sister.

At 6 p.m., we met our Child Protective

Services worker at the hospital. She handed us our new little treasure...our perfect baby girl...and we got to hold her in our arms. Because Kylie was a Safe Haven baby, we would get no background information on her. No medical or ethnic background...nothing but whatever the various hospital tests and examinations would reveal. None of that mattered to us – Kylie could have had pink stripes and green spots and still would have been perfect to us. After a week more in the hospital, we had the privilege of bringing her home to be part of our family.

We are grateful to the amazing hospital staff, the incredible CPS workers and our invaluable agency caseworker. CPS has proven to be full of hardworking people who are there to intervene on behalf of children and families, as are the adoption agencies. Many impressive doctors and staff continue to monitor and evaluate Kylie. Since getting “the call,” we have received awesome support and could not ask for better care and attention.

Was this journey worth it? Along the way, we may have wondered. But each time we hold our daughter, our much sought-after daughter, we know beyond the shadow of a doubt that God’s timing is perfect. Our beautiful little girl has greatly exceeded all that we could ever have hoped for and we are forever grateful to all those who helped bring our family together. **rak**

Nina LaRue, of Scottsdale, is the mother of Parker (13), Jordan (12), Hunter (8) and Kylie (7 months).

EDITOR’S NOTE: Arizona is a “Safe Haven” state, meaning that desperate birth parents can leave their unharmed but unwanted newborns (72 hours or younger) at designated places – hospitals, fire stations, private welfare agencies, adoption agencies or churches – without facing criminal charges. For more information, visit the website of the Arizona Safe Baby Haven Coalition, a2zsafehaven.com.



The LaRue family (clockwise from top left): Parker (13), Ron, Hunter (8), Nina, Kylie, (7 months) and Jordan (12). Nina shares her family's adoption story on page 37.

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is more than just a career. "I feel like it is a mission for me," she says. "Something God has asked me to do."

Foster child placements

Recent years have seen a dramatic rise in the availability of infants and younger foster children ready to be adopted, possibly due to the increase in methamphetamine use among parents, according to Kellenberger.

And Pidgeon – who devotes part of her practice to finalizing adoptions of foster children and serves on the board of Arizona Friends of Foster Children – says she currently has close to 60 active cases of younger children who need families and whose ties to their parents already have been severed. "I would say the average age is 3," she says. "They are freed and waiting."

Debunking preconceived notions about kids in foster care is one goal of adoptive parents Kirk and Cathy Triplett.

"People think (the children) are in care because of what they've done," says Cathi. "But they are in care because of what their parents have done."

Cathi and Kirk, a professional golfer since 1985, work to raise awareness about the thousands of foster children waiting for families in Arizona by posting photos of waiting children at azfamily.com/areyoumyfamily, in partnership with Aid to Adoption of Special Kids. They also established the Fore Adoption Foundation (foreadoption.com) to help families overcome financial barriers posed by the adoption process and host fundraising golf tournaments to support the Dave Thomas Foundation (davethomas.com), which works to increase placements of foster children.

The decision to build a family through adoption can be daunting – whether it involves a journey halfway around the world or a short drive across town. Just like the infertility dance performed by many hopeful moms and dads, the choreography takes patience, time and determination. And no one, in either case, can tell you exactly how it will end.

"There are risks with your own biological children as well," says Cathi Triplett. "There are no guarantees."

But if you want to become parents, you can, says Kirk. "If you're willing to go out there and find them, they are there." **rak**

Share your adoption stories!

In researching and editing this story, we ran across dozens of heart-warming stories about adoption – many more than we could share within the pages of the magazine. We plan to post an ongoing collection of first-person adoption stories on our website as a both a resource and an affirmation for prospective and adoptive families. Send your stories to sandy@raisingarizonakids.com. We also welcome digital images.

Vicki Louk Balint, of Phoenix, is the mother of Cory (24), Frankie (19), Robert (15) and Emily Anne (14). Reach her at vicki@raisingarizonakids.com.