

Internationally Born, Indiana Raised
Segment 1
Transcript

Announcer: This is Internationally Born—Indiana Raised, an exploration of international adoption in southwestern Indiana...produced in conjunction with WSIU Public Radio in Carbondale, Illinois. I'm John Gibson. Ahead on the program, why some parents choose international adoption over domestic adoption...

Paul Mlinar: *People who came up with the idea of open adoption—shared adoption—did so with a good heart but insanely naïve mentality.*

We'll meet four-year-old Molly Fowler as she waits for her new baby sister to arrive from China...

Molly Fowler: *They said that mommy and daddy are coming home because Maggie's gonna come home today! It's gonna be so exciting.*

And the issue of culture in homes of children adopted from other countries...

Nick Bender: *I think it's that important she knows she's an American.*

Laura Bender: *Well I just want her to be proud of where she came from.*

That's coming up on Internationally Born— Indiana Raised.

Announcer: In 1990, six-percent of adoptions in the United States were foreign adoptions. In 2000, they accounted for nearly 14-percent of adoptions. Producer Erin Gibson discovered that international adoption's increasing popularity could be a result of the public's poor image of domestic adoption.

EG: People who adopt usually tell a similar story. After months or years of unsuccessful pregnancy attempts a couple tries a variety of expensive fertility treatments, and if those treatments fail, they turn to adoption. As they begin researching their options, they face another big decision—should they adopt domestically or internationally? More and more frequently, couples are choosing the route of international adoption.

Between 1990 and 2000, the number of international adoptions increased by 150-percent. In 2005, more than 22-thousand foreign-born children were adopted by parents in the U.S.

People who adopt internationally offer various reasons for doing so, but many of them have a common thread...as you can hear beginning with Nancy Bach of Evansville.

Nancy Bach: *[We] did a lot of research into both domestic and international adoption. Unfortunately, I think the way the government and the rules are in this country it's just harder to adopt domestically. A lot of it's [that] you're on a waiting list for years, you may never get a child, a lot of times the biological mother wants to have communication with the child, and all of that becomes very difficult*

Lydia Fowler: *We had considered domestic adoption for awhile and the waiting was going to be at that time...what five? Three to ten years? It was up to ten years I believe.*

Laura Bender: *I think we both knew we wanted to do international adoption because you see so much of the moms coming back for their kids years later, and we knew we didn't want to do that.*

Karen Oursler: *We did check out domestic adoptions, but we were told, truthfully, that at our age because*

we're in our 40s to wait that long, it's just better for you to consider international adoptions because its very stressful domestically, the wait is a lot longer, and its not as guaranteed as going internationally.

That was Nancy Bach, Lydia Fowler, Laura Bender, and Karen Oursler. They all adopted children from abroad, in part, because domestic adoption posed risks they weren't willing to take. How legitimate are their fears and why are they such commonly held beliefs?

One explanation is that fictional depictions of domestic adoption have reinforced negative attitudes about the process. When a movie or TV show involves an adoption story line, you can expect to see a climactic scene featuring a birth mother dramatically tearing her baby from the arms of its heartbroken...and hysterical adoptive mother.

These dramatic stories may seem to be the product of overly imaginative Hollywood writers, but they may have been inspired, in part, by real world events. In the mid 90s, two highly publicized court decisions had the adoption community...and much of the country... reeling. In the "Baby Richard" case, the Illinois Supreme Court ruled that a four-year-old, who had been adopted as an infant, be returned to his biological father. In Michigan, a judge ruled that two-year-old "Baby Jessica" be taken from her adopted parents and returned to her birth parents. Even though these cases are rare, they spawned a flurry of adoption reform laws across the country.

Around the same time as Baby Richard and Baby Jessica, Paul and Claudia Mlinar of Wadesville, Indiana, were going through an adoption drama of their own. Paul, an air traffic controller, and Claudia, a paralegal, had struggled with infertility throughout their marriage and decided that if they had children, they would adopt. They considered becoming foster parents, but had never taken the steps to apply for an adoption. They were living in a small apartment waiting for their new house to be built when they got a pivotal phone call from an attorney friend.

Paul Mlinar: *'Paul I've got baby due in two weeks. Are you guys interested?'* Uh, we haven't decided to adopt, but how long do I have to decide? *'You got two days.'* Call you back. That was it. We had two days to decide yes or no. We decided yes. Two weeks later Luke was born.

The birth mother relinquished her parental rights immediately, but the birth father did not. Luke was declared a ward of the state, and Paul and Claudia became his legal guardians.

Paul: *Then the bad times started...*

Claudia Mlinar: *Three months almost to the day that he came home she walked into our attorney's office and said 'I want my baby back.'* The nightmare started...it was like a black cloud followed us from then.

A hearing was set, but the Mlinars decided not to attend the court hearing because they had never met the biological mother, and didn't want to meet her for the first time in court. Instead, they sat for four hours inside their car on a nearby parking lot waiting to hear from their attorney.

Claudia: *At the hearing she changed her mind again and said 'I want to give him up.'* But the judge talked her into pursuing it.

The judge granted the birth mother a weekly visit with Luke, who was five months old at the time.

Claudia: *So then we had to decide where do we want the visitation? How do we want the visitation? And I'm a paralegal so I unfortunately knew too much and I was like if he's wanting visitation, he's thinking he's going to go with her. I was convinced that we were going to lose him.*

Paul and Claudia took a risk and asked if the visitation could be in their home, hoping that the biological mother would give up her legal challenge if she saw Luke in a safe, loving, two-parent home. The visits began in April 1997. They were awkward and emotional. The birth mother would bring a different person with her to each visit—usually someone from her family or the biological father's family. In the meantime, a second court hearing was approaching, and Claudia and Paul began dealing with the possibility that they might lose custody of Luke.

Claudia: *We went and got pictures taken because that was the only time we would get a family picture*

Paul and Claudia also took their first...and possibly last...vacation as a family.

Claudia: *We were up at my mom's in North Dakota just saying 'this is our baby.' That's the first time that most of my family saw him, and we thought the only time. We got a call from our attorney while we were there, and he said 'She wants to deal.'*

The biological mother was ready to allow the adoption to proceed in return for permanent visitation...including some overnight visits...with Luke. After some negotiating, they settled on monthly, supervised visits. The adoption was finalized in August 1997, when Luke was 10-months-old, but Paul and Claudia had to adjust to the new reality of being separated from Luke during his six-hour visitation with his biological mother every month.

During one of those visits, Claudia was called to the emergency room to give permission for an X-Ray of Luke's arm. She learned that the birth mother had taken Luke to a shopping mall without the court-appointed supervisor. He got away from her for a second, and when she grabbed his arm, she thought she hurt him. Fortunately, Luke was not seriously injured—he had a case of what is commonly called “nurse's elbow”—but from that point on his monthly visits took place in a set location.

Then one day, the visits stopped. The biological mother called Claudia to say she wasn't going to visit Luke anymore because it was too emotional for her. She sent a few letters, but they too stopped. Luke was two-years-old.

Paul and Claudia Mlinar live in a rural subdivision along a wooded, winding road in Posey County. As Claudia prepares dinner, Luke is playing a game in the living room, the dog is pacing around the dining room, and Paul is telling me about a trip he and a friend took to Alaska when Luke was a year old.

Paul: *We were on a trail...saw some cubs ahead of us. By the time I saw the bear she was in a full charge 20 feet away. We had no warning whatsoever. She tagged me in the shoulder. I covered up.*

EG: *How's the friend?*

Paul: *He was fine. He was hiding behind a tree.*

Paul's injury required a few stitches, but he says the pain doesn't even compare to the pain of almost losing Luke.

Paul: *Between the experience we went through with his stuff and my experience with the grizzly bear, I'd take the bear any day. Any time you want be to go, bring on the bear.*

When the family is ready to sit down to eat, a girl with shiny, straight black hair emerges from another room. Her name is Olivia, and Paul and Claudia adopted her from China. They began considering a second adoption when Luke was three. Claudia was ready to adopt again...and was even willing to do it domestically, but Paul wouldn't hear of it.

Claudia: *Then the clincher was friends of ours brought home a girl from China...through FTIA. They brought her home...took her to the church visiting. Paul saw her and his heart melted.*

Claudia says the domestic and international adoption experiences were as different as night and day but she would go through it all again for Luke. And all these years later, she and Paul still have very different opinions about domestic adoption.

Claudia: *We went into it thinking closed. I think it's completely different when you're going into it knowing its open.*

Paul: *It's still a bad idea though.*

Claudia: *It can happen because I've heard of situations that it has worked, but in our case it definitely didn't because it started out in conflict.*

Paul: *The risks far outweigh the potential gains. The thought of a blended family is a very nice thought. It's insanely naïve.*

Adoption experts say the Mlinars' situation is an exception to the domestic adoption experience...and not the rule. Claudia herself describes their adoption as—quote—
“a little gray.”

Tim Hubert, a practicing adoption attorney in Evansville, says the majority of domestic adoptions are happily concluded...but he understands the fears of potential adoptive parents.

Tim Hubert: *What's the possibility of the birth mother coming back? There's always that possibility, and when you adopt in state verses out of the country or out of the state, the chances are greater that [the birth mother] can find you and identify you.*

Just because it's easier for a birth mother to locate her child, doesn't mean it's likely to happen. Hubert has participated in hundreds of adoptions and none of them concluded as dramatically as the Mlinars or Baby Richard cases. He says the first step in a successful domestic adoption is finding an experienced adoption attorney.

Hubert: *People are too willing I think to hire an attorney they've had for a traffic accident, a small criminal case, or a divorce to help them with an adoption. They really need to find somebody that's competent and has had some experiences in this area.*

Hubert says every adoption should involve at least two attorneys...one for the adoptive parents and one for the birth mother.

Hubert: *They have to have their own legal counsel so when the birth mother has made her decision we can say she has been represented by independent legal counsel and that she clearly understood what she was doing, it was totally voluntary and she was not under any undue influence or duress. That's what we want. And that's why we go to great pains to make sure she's entitled to counseling...that's unwed mother or psychological counseling and also legal counseling.*

When Hubert represents a birth mother, he warns her that once she relinquishes her parental rights, her chances of reversing the decision are slim...and if she asks him to challenge the adoption...he will refuse to represent her. Hubert says he is perplexed by the cases in which judges have ruled in favor of a biological parent who challenged an adoption.

Hubert: *For a judge to make those kinds of decision about a child's life, which is so short anyway, to me that does not take into consideration the best interests of the child.*

Birth parent issues aren't the only concern when adopting domestically. Many people wanting to adopt are intimidated by the waiting lists and the indefinite time it will take to be matched with a child. Couples who wait to have a family may be in their 30s before they discover they can't have children. They're told it could be years before they can find a baby to adopt in the states, and many couples aren't willing to wait that long...especially when they can complete an international adoption within one or two years.

International adoption is not without its own set of drawbacks. First and foremost is the cost. Adopting outside the U.S. will cost you at least as much as a new mid-size car, and at most a modest luxury car. These costs include travel expenses and the fees charged by foreign governments, the U-S State Department, adoption agencies, and the courts.

Critics of international adoption say these large amounts of money—and the bureaucracy of adoption—can easily lead to corruption...and in extreme cases...to child trafficking or baby selling.

Whether a couple adopts internationally or domestically, the adoptions themselves are the means to the same end...creating families by matching parents who want children with children who need parents. There is no doubt that an adoptive mother of an internationally born child experiences the same love and devotion as an adoptive mother of a domestically born baby. And good adoptive parents love their children as deeply as parents raising their biological children.

Anthony and Lydia Fowler of Evansville are the proud parents of Molly, a joyful four-year-old who loves to talk. After struggling a few years with infertility, the couple decided to adopt.

Lydia Fowler: *My sister's two children are adopted internationally, so it was kind of an easy decision...well as easy as that decision can be to make to go that direction.*

Lydia was told a domestic adoption would take up to ten years, so she ruled it out and began exploring the process of international adoption.

Lydia: When we were still contemplating what we really needed to do, we had a...a...

Molly Fowler: A very special friend.

Lydia: That's exactly right!

Lydia's eyes widen as she hears Molly finishing her sentence, because she didn't know Molly had ever heard the story she's telling. Lydia, with Molly's help, explains that a family friend helped them pay for the adoption.

Lydia: They gave us a monetary gift which was totally unexpected and very much appreciated and just really touched our hearts. We felt that kind of led us...

Anthony: ...that was the definitely the right thing we should've been doing at the time

Lydia: ...and led us toward an international adoption because it made it much more affordable for us...

Molly: for me...

Lydia: ...for you. (laughs)

The Fowlers hoped for a Chinese adoption, but because Anthony was under 30 they were not eligible to adopt from China. So, they submitted an application to adopt from Guatemala, and in November 2002, the couple traveled to the country to retrieve their four-month-old daughter.

Lydia: They clicked instantly

Anthony: I was the first one to get her and just automatically she was my daughter.

But Anthony says Molly had a hard time adjusting to her new family at first.

Anthony: The first 24 hours were rough. A lot of crying...alot of screaming.

Lydia: From the baby (laughs)

Anthony: That was her time to adjust. She's now being taken care of by two complete strangers that look like nothing like any she'd ever seen...had never heard voices like we spoke. I'm sure she was quite shocked and scared.

Anthony was the only one that could comfort Molly, and Lydia wondered how long it would take for her to bond with her new daughter.

Lydia: By the next morning I'd fed her several times by then, and I remember laying her on the bed and talking to her and she reached up and touched my face. I was like 'oh.' It still makes me cry.

Announcer: You're listening to Internationally Born—Indiana Raised, produced in cooperation with WSIU Public Radio in Carbondale, Illinois. In a moment, the story of an Evansville woman adopted from Korea in 1958...the recollections of an attorney who helped dozens of families adopt from Brazil...and a joyful homecoming for the Fowlers at the end of a six-thousand mile journey to bring Molly a baby sister.