

Internationally Born, Indiana Raised

Segment 2

Transcript

Announcer: Welcome back to Internationally Born—Indiana Raised. I'm John Gibson. During the past 50 years, international adoption in the United States has grown in waves as thousands of children have been orphaned in the wake of major political uprisings, wars, population control policies, and enduring famines. Erin Gibson discovered that Evansville, Indiana, is one of the many American communities with a rich history of opening its homes to international adoptees.

EG: The first tide of immigrant orphans in the U.S. were Korean infants and toddlers abandoned during the Korean War. Many of these children were fathered by American soldiers and deserted by their Korean mothers out of fear that as Amer-Asians they would be shunned. In the mid-1950s, the news of overflowing Korean orphanages captured the attention of Harry and Bertha Holt of Oregon. They traveled to Korea, adopted eight children, and soon began arranging adoptions of Korean War orphans throughout the United States. Harry Holt died in 1964, and Bertha—or Grandma Holt—carried on their mission, which grew into a major international adoption organization.

Sonya Lawton was one of the first children adopted through the Holt Agency by an Evansville family. When her father, Chester Grove, returned from serving in the Korean War, he told his wife, Velma, about the Korean orphans he'd seen. The couple had a 20-year-old son at the time, and had been considering adopting more children. They submitted an application to Holt, and in July 1958, four-month-old Sonya Jae was on a journey to her new home.

***Sonya Lawton:** My mom had to go to Portland Oregon to get me so she took my grandma with her. They rode a train and they flew. When the plane [arrived] she said they called out your name, and they had everyone in a little basket.*

A photo featured in an Evansville newspaper shows Velma Grove bottle-feeding a frail infant with lean arms and legs and a head of thick black hair. The newspaper reported that Sonya weighed between 7 and 10

pounds at four-months old. Once they nursed Sonya back to health, the Groves decided to again add to their family. In December 1959, they brought home another Korean baby girl adopted through the Holt Agency.

Sonya: When they went to get Darla I do remember going out to the airport with my dad and my mom getting on the plane and I remember waving at her and seeing her get on the plane. My grandma took me home and I stayed with her. She was raising my cousin at the time, and I remember Larry telling me 'Don't worry she'll be back.'

Sonya Lawton is sitting in her home near the Evansville Airport scanning through a newspaper article dated February 28, 1960—the day after her mother arrived home from Oregon with her sister, Darla.

Sonya: Here's one I've not seen.

A black and white photo shows a smiling woman holding a child dressed in a winter coat and hat, who is leaning over a blanketed baby in the arms of a man with thick dark glasses and an overcoat.

Sonya: They named her Carla and then the doctor called her Carl so Mom changed it to Carla. She said she wasn't going to call her Carl.

When Sonya was five-years-old, her parents took her and Darla to the Vanderburgh County Courthouse where they officially became citizens of the United States.

Sonya: Of course everybody dressed in red white and blue, and I remember they gave us all a little flag and I walked over to the window to set my flag in the window to let the breeze blow on it, and mom's dragging me away because they had no screens and we were on the second floor [and her mom was thinking] 'oh good I'm going to lose one I just got!' I remember that much about it.

The Groves family became friends with two other Evansville families that adopted children from Korea. Sonya still sees one of those childhood friends because they both work for Mead Johnson Nutritionals, a major Evansville employer.

Sonya and Darla attended Stringtown Elementary, where they were the only Koreans—and the only non-whites—in the school. When Sonya and her sister were growing up, the conventional wisdom was to raise international adoptees as Americans. Unlike today, there was no special effort to incorporate Korean culture

into their home or learn about their Korean roots. The only connections Sonya and Darla had to Korea were the handful of other Korean adoptees...and an annual trip they made to northern Indiana.

Sonya: They used to have a picnic up in Lafayette for all of the adoptees, and we called it the Lafayette Picnic. We would go up there every year and the Yates' would go and the Wesleys would go. I don't remember a whole lot about it other than they had these little rubber shoes from Korea they would bring every year and we would get a pair every year. That's really the only thing I remember about going. In the mid 80s, they had a picnic up in Indianapolis for adoptees and Bertha Holt was coming, so we actually got to meet Bertha.

The Groves family lived in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, for a few years, but when Sonya was 14 her father died and her mom moved the family back to Evansville.

In 1976, she graduated from Central High School, started working at Mead Johnson, and soon married her high school sweetheart. They now have two adult daughters.

Sonya says she has very little interest in tracing her heritage other than to find some record of her family's medical history, but she says that kind of search would be fruitless.

Sonya: My sister and I are both half American but there's not way you can trace any of that--those records are probably gone, burned, whatever. They made up names for us. Louise Whang—that's the name they gave me. My sister's was Tina Kim. Kim is like Smith over here, you know.

In 1984, David Miller was practicing commercial law and raising four children with his wife, Candy. One evening, the couple was watching a TV news story about the Ethiopian famine and the orphans it was leaving behind.

David Miller: She looked at me and she said, 'Could you adopt one of those little kids?' And I said, 'Sure probably.' And that was kind of the end of that conversation.

Or so he thought. Several months later, Candy called David at work and asked him to take her out to dinner. He thought she was going to hit him up for a new dining room suite or something of the sort, but the topic of conversation took him by complete surprise.

Miller: We were having some wine, and she said ‘I would like for us to adopt a child from Mexico.’ And after retrieving my wine glass from almost spilling, because there had been no conversation about this, I said, ‘What have you been doing?’

It turns out that Candy Miller had been calling all over the world investigating their options for adopting a child—and ran up a sizeable phone bill doing so.

Her fortune changed when she met a woman who had adopted a child from Mexico through an attorney in Los Angeles. Once David was satisfied with the attorney’s credentials, the Millers submitted an application for an infant and were told it could be months before they heard anything. Within days they received a call informing them of the birth of a baby boy who was orphaned.

Miller: It was three days after he was born. It was no more than a week—probably less than a week—after we had the conversation

The Millers learned their baby would be staying in a foster home in Juarez, Mexico. Two weeks later, as fortune would have it, David Miller was sent on a business trip to El Paso, Texas, across the border from Juarez. Not wanting to pass up the opportunity to meet their son, David and Candy both took the trip. David says the foster family lived in a nice house and had two children of their own.

Miller: And in one bedroom in this house they had four baby beds, and in those four baby beds there were eight children—one on each end of each baby bed. They took us over to the child that had been identified to us. We knew what his name was going to be—Layne. That’s the first moment we saw him.

The visit was a short one. Once they returned to the States, Candy called the attorney’s office almost every day to pester him about the adoption. They had completed the necessary paperwork, and Candy was eager to bring her baby home—and in March 1985, she did.

On July 4th, an Evansville newspaper featured a story on the Millers’ adoption.

Miller: From that day on I started receiving telephone calls from literally all over the Midwest [] asking me if I could help them do that. What I had to tell them was not only could I not help them, but the attorney we had in

LA could not help them either because, as far as I know Layne Miller is the last properly adopted and papered child to get out of Mexico before Mexico changed all of their regulations.

One of the calls David received was from an Evansville minister asking for help adopting a child from Brazil. The process had hit several snags, and David thought he could help, so he and Candy traveled to Rio de Janeiro not knowing how much the trip would change the course of their lives...and the lives of others.

In Brazil, the Millers heard about an American missionary living in Recife (Rih-see-fee) who often found abandoned babies on his doorstep. David called the man, whose name was Robert Wellman, and received an invitation to visit his home.

Miller: We went around Recife and he showed me an orphanage or two were he was having to take these babies and it was really a sad situation. I said, 'If I do the American side, will you do this side?' By the time I left we had the whole system set up.

David Miller spread the word that he was looking for a couple wanting to adopt from Brazil. He received about 15 volunteers, but he only did one to start. It was the first of about 60 adoptions that he arranged from 1986 to 1993.

When Layne turned five, the Millers adopted again. This time it was a little girl they named Sage. She was one of the last babies adopted before Brazil changed its adoption regulations and began requiring adopting couples to stay in the country for several weeks rather than a few days.

Miller: I think that's done in an effort to prevent foreigners from adopting because many of these countries consider it to be an embarrassment that their children are adopted away to other countries, but it's too bad because there are so many.

Keith Wallace: As we go through the presentation, please feel free to ask a question...

Today, many people in southwestern Indiana who are interested in international adoption begin their journey at a seminar like this one at Families Thru International Adoption—a non-profit international adoption agency headquartered in Evansville. The man at the front of the room is F-T-I-A founder and Executive Director Keith Wallace.

Wallace: *Can everyone hear me in the back?*

In the early 90s, Wallace taught law at Peking University in Beijing, China, where he fell in love with the country and its people—especially the children—many of whom were being orphaned as a result of China’s strict one-child policy. When he returned to the U.S., he began spreading the word that he was looking for adoptive parents to match up with Chinese orphans. He was already an experienced domestic adoption attorney, and started arranging international adoptions as a way to maintain contact with China. In 1995, Wallace obtained an Indiana child placement agency license and started Families Thru International Adoption. Within two years the agency placed nearly 120 Chinese born children with area families. The growth didn’t stop there. F-T-I-A is now licensed in six states, arranges adoptions from six countries, and has placed more than 25-hundred children with new families.

Wallace says he is a big fan of adoption—foreign and domestic—and encourages people attending his informational workshops to explore both. He says potential adoptive parents should closely examine their motives for wanting to adopt internationally. He says just because you sympathize with the suffering, orphaned children you see on television, doesn’t mean you should adopt.

Wallace: *If you do something for someone you expect something back, and being a parent is a pretty selfless act until your children are a lot older. You’ve got to adopt because you want to parent. If you want to save a child, get out your checkbook, give me a check, and 100% will go overseas and we’ll take care of a lot of kids.*

Once you decide to pursue an international adoption, you must choose which country to adopt from. That decision will depend on your age, the age of child you want to adopt, how long you are willing to travel, and how much you can afford to pay for an adoption. For example, to adopt an infant from China you must be between 30 and 50 years old and travel to China for 12 to 15 days. The FTIA cost...roughly 16-thousand dollars. For comparison, a Guatemalan adoption, allows parents as young as 25 to adopt and the travel is only four to six days. The FTIA cost...27-thousand dollars.

The international adoption process happens in three phases—the dossier, the referral, and the travel approval.

A dossier involves filling out and gathering the necessary paperwork to submit to a foreign government, which includes a home study, approval from Citizen and Immigrations Services, and various documents including financial statements, health reports on both parents, birth and marriage certificates, and fingerprints, just to name a few.

Nick and Laura Bender of Cynthiana, Indiana, say preparing their dossier to send to China took longer than they expected.

Laura Bender: *Since he farms, we had all of this planned out. We were going to turn our dossier in just at the perfect time so we could get the referral in the winter...and we'd go in the winter.*

Nick Bender: *Well it didn't work out that way. We got it in as soon as we could.*

Laura says she thought they would travel to China in January 2006, but they didn't go until that summer.

Laura: *It's not a bad time for him.*

Nick: *We got past all the spring planting.*

Laura: *It's just funny how much control we thought we had over it.*

Adoptive parents wait months and sometimes over a year for a referral, which again varies from country to country. Laura Bender says when she received the referral call, she rushed to the agency, but the referral packet, which contained the name, photo, and medical history of her daughter, wasn't ready.

Laura: *I waited until about 4:30 and went back, and it was....*

Nick: *...emotional for you (laughs).*

Laura: *Yeah, it was.*

Nick: *Then she brought the stuff home and I saw it later. It's a pretty neat feeling to finally see the picture.*

EG: *Did you feel like that was your child?*

Laura: *Yes...gosh.*

That was in May 2006, and six weeks later the Benders flew to China to claim their daughter, Nicole Liu (Lee-you).

Anthony and Lydia Fowler, who were introduced earlier in the program, also left for China that day to complete their second international adoption. Although they were excited about their new baby, they were a little worried because they had decided to leave lively, four-year-old Molly behind during their two-week trip. Their only comfort was that Molly had plenty of grandparent time—one week with Lydia’s parents and the other with Anthony’s.

On the night the Benders, Fowlers, and two other couples are expected to return with their babies, more than a hundred people crowd into the small concourse at Evansville Regional Airport to welcome them home.

In the middle of the crowd is Molly wearing a red and white striped dress with neatly tied red bows in her hair, clutching a stuffed cow with bows identical to hers tied around its ears.

EG: Why are you here?

Molly Fowler: Because I’m here to see my mommy and daddy. They been to China.

EG: What are they doing in China?

Molly: They’re goin’ to Guatemala.

EG: Well you came from Guatemala, right?

Molly: Right.

EG: They went to China to do what?

Molly: To get Maggie.

EG: Who’s Maggie?

Fowler: Maggie’s my new baby sister.

Molly’s grandfather hands out American flags while the children prop up “Welcome Home” signs in the windows overlooking the runway and press their faces against the glass hoping to be the first to see the lights of an incoming aircraft against the night sky. Their vigil pays off just after 11:00.

Anonymous woman: There it is....look!

Molly’s cousins grab her shoulders and aim her gaze toward the plane just as the wheels touch down.

Anonymous kids: Come here, Molly! Do you see them? (Molly screams)

All the families close in on Gate 2 waiting to greet their loved ones and the new babies. Molly is front and center closely watching through the gate for her parents to appear.

Anonymous woman: I see them! I see them! I see them!

As Anthony, Lydia, and Maggie emerge from an escalator, Molly's grandmother can barely keep her from running to them before they clear the security gate. She finally breaks free and dives into the arms of her tearful parents.

It's a joyful reunion for the family and a loving welcome home for baby Maggie.

Anonymous woman: She smiled at Molly. Maggie smiled at you!

As family and friends gather around Lydia and the new baby, someone lifts Molly up so she can see her mom and introduce herself to Maggie.

Molly: You're my baby sister!