

Internationally Born, Indiana Raised

Segment 3

Transcript

Announcer: This is Internationally Born—Indiana Raised. I'm John Gibson. Many international adoption experts emphasize the importance of raising adopted children in homes that foster cultural awareness of the child's birth country. They urge parents to incorporate the country's holidays, customs, and cuisine into their lives. Many parents begin their adoption fully intending to follow that advice, but some abandon their efforts because they don't have access to resources, the kids lose interest, or the demands of raising children leave little time for cultural activities in the family's routine. Other families manage to find opportunities that encourage cultural pride in their children. Erin Gibson reports.

EG: It's Saturday morning, and Jimmy Yu is pacing in front of a group of children—15 girls and two boys. They're sitting on the floor with their legs folded and their eyes following his every move. This is the second meeting of the weekly Chinese School organized by a group of parents who have adopted from China. The hour-long classes are held each Saturday at Families Through International Adoption in Evansville.

Yu, a veterinarian from Taiwan, is teaching the children the basics of the Mandarin language.

***Jimmy Yu:** A lot of parents told us they have a need for their kids to learn the Chinese culture, Chinese language, and heritage. There are a lot of Chinese children and families here, and they are getting to a point where they have a really good time here, however, they have lost contact with things from China.*

Yu reviews the five tones of standard Mandarin and then reads the children a book called "What Can My Nose Do?" which teaches the Mandarin words for the parts of the body. When he's finished, the children split into two groups.

Everyone under age six stays with Yu, while the older children make their way upstairs where another teacher is playing a CD. Dong Mei passes out the lyrics to the song and asks the kids to repeat each of the lines after her. Before long, they're all singing together.

***Dong Mei:** You guys did a great job.*

Mei also incorporates games into her weekly lessons. She tells the children to choose a partner and then begins reviewing the rules.

Mei: Do you still remember that game? Can you say it in Chinese? What's this?

She holds up a fist. Then she extends two of her fingers to form a "V." Finally, she extends all of her fingers and holds out her flattened palm. The children pair off and begin playing a simple game of "Rock, Scissors, Paper" in Mandarin.

Mei says she's happy to see so many Chinese children enjoying a good life in America, and she's especially glad that the children are willing to learn.

Mei: They're pretty good—much better than what [I imagined]. At the beginning I thought they might reject Chinese culture—they [wouldn't] want to learn. But when we learned together I found that they are very interested.

The Chinese School is one of a few organized cultural experiences available to international adoptees in southwestern Indiana. The region has a strong German heritage, which is reflected in its food, architecture, festivals, and the names of its residents. Scan through a phone book and you'll find thousands of Schmidts, Neimeiers, Weinzapfels, Dewigs, and Goebels.

The largest city in the area is Evansville, which lies along the horseshoe bend in the Ohio River. The city, with its population of 120-thousand, is the economic and entertainment center of Vanderburgh County and for many of the surrounding rural communities. The 2000 Census reflects that 89-percent of Vanderburgh County residents are white, eight-and-a-half percent are African American, one-percent Hispanic, and one-percent Asian. Only four-percent of the population speaks a second language.

Although, statistically the area is not very culturally diverse, it may be the children of international adoption that are inserting a cultural vibrance to their communities. Just mention the topic of international adoption in a group of people, and it seems everyone has a story of a friend or family member who has adopted from another country.

Each family formed through international adoption finds different ways of honoring the culture of their child's native country. Lydia Fowler says when she and Anthony adopted Molly from Guatemala, they learned as much as they could about the country, and even attempted to learn Spanish.

Lydia Fowler: *We decided we'll start our own Guatemalan support group, and we were very active—at first. We were all waiting for our babies to come home. That's kind of dissolved a little bit. We try to get together once a year.*

Lydia says they never found any Guatemalan holidays they wanted to celebrate with Molly, but they do celebrate her “Gotcha Day”—the day they met her for the first time.

Lydia: *We always give her a gift from Guatemala so we have a gift for her until she's 18 years old.*

EG: *Did you buy those while you were in Guatemala?*

Lydia: *Yes. We did. In two days we were shopping like crazy trying to find things we think may grow with her.*

Nick and Laura Bender, who brought their daughter home from China last summer, don't know how much they'll incorporate Chinese culture into their lives.

Nick Bender: *I think it can be overdone. I think it's important that she knows she's an American. That's just the way I think it should be.*

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

Nick: *Yes.*

Laura: *And I don't want to force it on her and have it be who she is, but I want her to be proud of it.*

Joseph and Karen Oursler have adopted two children from Guatemala. Karen says when they go shopping they look for bananas, clothing, and other products from Guatemala.

Karen Oursler: *The people of Guatemala are our family now. This is who we are—we are part of Guatemala. We love the people there and have a big heart for all of them, and we want our children to know that.*

Attorney David Miller says some people get too wrapped up in the so-called cultural issues of raising an internationally adopted child. In 1996, he wrote an editorial for the Evansville Press that he titled “Cross-Cultural Adoptions Are Not.”

He says culture is not genetic—it's something that is learned. So if a child is adopted in infancy, there is no cultural gap between the child and the parent.

David Miller: *A three-week-old child lying in a crib in Juarez, Mexico has no culture. All he knows is that when gets hungry somebody needs to feed him, when he gets wet somebody needs to change him, and when he gets cold somebody needs to hold him. That's all he knows.*

Miller says his two internationally adopted children grew up surrounded by artifacts from their birth countries, and photos of their adoptions, but he says American culture is the only culture they have ever known.

Miller: *I think if the children aren't interested, and they don't express the interest first and you try to impose that on them, it gives them a tendency to question their identity. They are where they are and who they are and who they're with—that's they're identity. If you try to make them into something they're not just because they happen to be born in a different place, I think is a big mistake.*

Some people who were adopted during the early years of international adoption would argue that being raised without any knowledge of their heritage was a mistake. Sonya Lawton, who was adopted from Korea in 1958, says she doesn't understand it, but she's read about many Korean adoptees who are angry that they were raised purely as Americans.

Sonya Lawton: *For me it's such a foreign idea because when we came over here we just—and maybe that's my philosophy—this is my life. This is evidently where God wants me to be. I don't think a whole lot about it.*

Being one of the first Korean adoptees in Evansville is not Sonya's only connection to international adoption. In the mid-80s, her husband's sister and brother-in-law adopted from Korea through the Holt Agency—the same agency that her parents used in the late 50s. Megan Boatman grew up in Evansville, and has spent a lot of time with her Aunt Sonya.

Megan, who is a senior at Hanover College in southeastern Indiana, says even though her parents have always talked to her about being adopted she wasn't always comfortable with it.

Megan Boatman: *Once I was in elementary school it was a little harder for me to handle that—the fact that I was adopted—because for me all I wanted to do is fit in. I knew that I looked different, so that was one thing*

against me. I was made fun of. For some reason because I wanted to fit in so much it really bothered me. I remember going home all the time to my mom crying because I hated being made fun of.

Sonya: *You know to me it's a little—I don't want to say funny—to hear you talk that way, because there are so many more Asians in Evansville when you were growing up then when I was growing up.*

Sonya says she's surprised that Megan felt like such an outsider because when her niece was growing up, foreign adoptions were more common.

Sonya: *I hear this from people that have adopted from China—they talk about introducing them to the culture. But when I was growing up you didn't do that. I don't think I'm missing anything. That is so foreign to me, but I think for Megan it's a little more emphasized with her growing up and the culture she's grown up in than me.*

Megan is studying Cultural Anthropology and would like to work for the United Nations on human rights issues. She has already visited Guatemala and is going to China this spring, but she says someday she hopes to visit Korea with her mom.

Megan: *She's encouraged me to—through the Holt Adoption Agency—to find who my birth mom is and to do a search.*

Sonya: *she'd probably have better luck with that in this day and age because that was a wartime. For me, I have no desire to look because I'm sure it would be a fruitless effort to even try.*

Megan says she hopes that as time progresses more information will be available to foreign adoptees about their medical and personal histories.

Megan: *I just hope that the adoption agencies are giving out more information so then when those children become older and they have question of where they're from and who they were before they came here, those questions can be answered so they don't feel, I guess, as lost.*

Every summer, Families Thru International Adoption hosts a picnic for families who have adopted through the agency. Last year's Celebration of Children Reunion attracted about one-thousand people to the shelter houses and playgrounds of Forest Park in Noblesville, Indiana, about 30 miles north of Indianapolis.

At one end of the park is a playground full of Chinese children. They're climbing rope ladders, spinning on merry-go-rounds, and bobbing up and down on teeter-totters. At the center of the park is a similar playground...this one filled with blond haired, fair-skinned children adopted from Russia. And at the far end...another playground with scores of giggling Guatemalan children. As the day progresses, the children migrate across the park and the playgrounds becomes less distinct from one another.

As they run from playground to playground, many of them line up for a ride on the park's colorful carousel. The children climb aboard the plastic carousel horses while parents stand off to the side trying to capture a photo as the horses and carriages whisk their children around and around.

While some kids are enjoying the carousel, others are kicking around a soccer ball, eating hot dogs and hamburgers, and simply enjoying a warm summer day outside. The picnic is not only an opportunity for children to play, but for parents to socialize and for FTIA employees to catch up with the families they helped bring together.

Chris Huber is the Assistant Director of Programs at FTIA, and has overseen the adoptions of many children from Guatemala and Brazil. He says the reunion allows internationally adopted children to see that many other families are like their own.

***Chris Huber:** The really cool thing for them is seeing families that look like their family. If they live in a rural community, they may be the only international family there. They think, 'Everybody else looks like their mom and dad. Why don't I look like my mom and dad?' They come here and it's like, 'There's other families like me. There's other kids that look like I look like. It's really positive for them. It's about three years old [when] they start asking those kind of questions...really noticing the differences.*

Like many FTIA employees, Huber is also a parent of an internationally adopted child. He and his wife have three biological children and one child from Guatemala. He says incorporating a child's birth culture involves adopting a new family lifestyle.

Huber: *We really encourage them while they're in Guatemala to bring back as many things that they can give to their children--that they can use in their house—that reflect that they are an international family. Their life, their family, everything should reflect that mix of their family.*

He says that international attitude should also extend into a child's classroom.

Huber: *A lot of it is really going to depend on the parents. If there's nobody else around, you can still be the advocate for you child. You can volunteer, go to school, be the room mom, read a book about international adoption or share a story about Guatemala just to open that awareness to the kids.*

Huber says last year, he and his wife arranged a Guatemalan Independence Day celebration for his son's class. He says those kinds of activities help create awareness for the other children...but also for the teachers.

Huber: *One of the difficult things for adopted children are some of the projects they giving in school. Bring in a baby picture. My son was six when we adopted him. He lived in a tiny village in the middle of nowhere. There are no baby pictures. It's hard—it singles him out.*

As a band warms up for the picnic's afternoon entertainment, FTIA Director Keith Wallace takes a moment to reflect on the success of the day. He says there are so many more opportunities for internationally adopted children then there were for kids adopted from Korea in the 50s and 60s.

Keith Wallace: *There's a lot of Korean kids that grew up feeling like they were the only kid adopted or the only one that looked like them. You go to the mall today, go to a restaurant, or go to a school you see so many different colors of children. That's something I think is neat that unfortunately some of the Korean kids didn't have.*

Once a person adopts, all the talk about domestic verses international, whether to adopt from China, Russia, Guatemala, or elsewhere, and how much to incorporate a child's birth cultures seems to slowly fade to the background...

...because after all the decisions are made, all the money is spent, and all the waiting is over, there is the parenting...

Anonymous child: *Look at me dad. Look at me momma. (laughing) We goin' round!*

And that's what makes any adoption experience it worth it all.

For Internationally Born, Indiana Raised and WSIU Public Radio, I'm Erin Gibson.

Announcer: To listen to this program again, read a transcript, hear additional interviews, or contact the producer, visit our Web site at WSIU dot o-r-g. Internationally Born Indiana Raised was written and produced by Erin Gibson in conjunction with WSIU Public Radio in Carbondale, Illinois. I'm John Gibson.