

All in the family

Many of us dream of giving underprivileged children a better life, but who actually takes the plunge and adopts a child from another country and culture? Josephine Brouard investigates.

Patricia Hoyle and Amy Ruo Rong,
now 4, from China

SINGLE PARENT PATRICIA Hoyle, 46, laughs ruefully as she remembers what she went through to become a mother to adorable Amy Ruo Rong from China, now four and a half years old. Diagnosed with endometriosis at 35 and alone after a broken relationship, the Sydney-based writer and editor did a lot of soul-searching before deciding to fly solo as a parent.

After almost three years on the fertility treatment roller-coaster, an experience Patricia admits she would rather erase from her memory, the determined woman started to investigate adoption. "I never thought I stood a chance as a single woman but when I discovered adoption was possible, I was over the moon and wished I'd explored this option earlier. I was full of hope again and felt that at last I was on the right path," the happy mother smiles.

As it transpired, a gruelling assessment process meant the adoption took almost three years, but finally Patricia was able to travel to Guangzhou, China, to collect her daughter.

By now 43 years of age, Patricia remembers how overcome with emotion she was when 18-month-old Amy was first placed into her arms.

However, the wait wasn't quite over—eight nerve-fraying days of yet more paperwork ensued, and Patricia also had to learn to nurse her baby, who was sick with a fever at the time. Finally though, mother and daughter were able to fly home to Sydney, both their lives irrevocably changed. "Like the pangs of labour that fade from memory, everything I had been through to get Amy disappeared once we were together. I have never been happier or more fulfilled. Some people see me as some kind of 'saint' for rescuing a child, but for me it was simply about wanting to be a mother. Of course, like all mothers, I get tired and cranky sometimes and long for a Sunday lie-in!"

Much of Patricia and Amy's contentment as a family stems from the time they spend together. Patricia has sacrificed some material comforts in order to look after Amy full-time, mostly doing her freelance work when Amy is asleep, but says she has no

regrets whatsoever about her decision to curtail her lifestyle.

The doting mother would like her daughter to be proud of both her Chinese and Australian heritage. Both she and Amy enjoy their weekly visits from a Chinese-born university student, who teaches them aspects of Chinese language (Mandarin) and culture, as well as instructing Patricia in cooking authentic Chinese food.

Patricia says she has never tried to keep the fact of Amy's adoption from her daughter. "Frankly, one cannot keep it hidden, even if one wants to," Patricia points out. "Complete strangers often ask in front of Amy, 'is she yours?', or comment that she doesn't look like me."

China's adoption laws mean that Amy will never know who her birth parents were, but Patricia has helped her to make friends with children who were also adopted from China, some even from the very same orphanage. "I am sure that these friends, with their similar backgrounds, will be a great source of comfort to her in the future," Patricia reflects.

PHOTOGRAPHY: SAM MCADAM HAIR & MAKE-UP: DAVID NOVAK-PIPER



Patricia says Amy is passionate about ballet, and this ballerina costume is one of her favourites

Julia and Barry Rollings and their multi-cultural family

WHEN JULIA GORDON and Barry Rollings married, they combined their existing families – Barry's four teenagers Elizabeth, Carol, Megan and Damon, and Julia's young daughter Alix – and created a household full of love and laughter. But it wasn't long before the Rollings realised that five kids just wasn't enough for them – and daughter Briony was born shortly afterwards.

When Barry's children started to leave home, the nest began to feel a little empty, so Julia and Barry started to think about building a larger family. As they already had children of their own, adoption seemed the socially responsible option. "We thought, why create more children in the world when there are already so many who need us?"

"We love children and consider it a privilege to help them grow and watch them blossom. Our children are our priority and passion in life – and we get it all back ten times over."

explains Julia, who is now studying psychology part-time while also rearing her brood. The Rollings' set the adoption process in motion and after a long wait involving much paperwork, set out with their daughters Alix and Briony to collect Haden, a five-month-old orphan from South Korea.

"As we set off I wondered if holding Haden in my arms for the first time would be anything like holding my daughters after childbirth," Julia remembers. "In fact, it was just as poignant, if not more so, because it was clear how much Haden needed us. I would very much like to see fewer children in orphanages."

Julia says she and Barry were so convinced their decision to adopt had been the right one that upon their return home to Canberra they immediately started the process all over again. Three years later, Julia flew to Taiwan to pick up Joel, then two and a half years old. "The older children are when you adopt them, the greater their needs. Joel had been waiting some time for a family to love him."

After Haden and Joel, Barry and Julia adopted two brothers, Madhu and Sadan, in 1995 travelling together to India to pick up the two traumatised children born to poverty-stricken labourers. Neither boy had a written history – there were no birth certificates or baby photos and nobody knew how old they were – because neither was born in a hospital. Both were born in a hut their family had built themselves,

in a small village by a river.

"When my father left us at a railway station I was about eight, so I was old enough to remember everything," Madhu explains today in Australian-accented English. "I felt very sad when I thought about why my family abandoned me and I'd cry a lot. I also found it hard to look after my baby brother, who stopped speaking altogether when our parents left us."

After being abandoned by their father at the railway station, Madhu and Sadan were taken to a police station by concerned locals. From there, they were sent to live in a local orphanage, with about 300 other children, while attempts were made to locate their family. After several months, no one had

come forward to claim the boys, so they were both put up for adoption.

Julia says she loves her adopted children so much that her heart swells when she sees the progress they make. "When Barry and I attend Madhu and Sadan's graduation classes I am filled with wonderment. My daughters make me proud, too, but Madhu and Sadan have come from such a different place!"

Barry, a journalist and media consultant, is equally involved in the rearing of this extended family, joining Julia in her commitment to being there for children who need love. Together, they have fostered 22 Australian-born children and have also adopted a further two children from India, siblings Akil and Sabila, who were five and three years old respectively when adopted.

The Rollings believe in telling their adopted children everything they know about their individual backgrounds, and help them to stay in touch with their natural parents where possible. The children are also encouraged to visit their birth countries, and to learn as much as they can about their birth cultures. Sabila loves her Indian dancing classes and Haden attends a Korean language school.

"Have we any regrets? Never!" says Julia emphatically. "We love children and consider it a privilege to help them grow and watch them blossom. Our children are our priority and passion in life – and we get it all back ten times over."

Alix, now 23, and Briony, now 19, both say they are wholeheartedly supportive of their parents' choices. The two young women hope to adopt children of their own some day, continuing the Rollings family tradition of providing loving homes for children in need.

TIPS FOR ADOPTIVE PARENTS

- If you travel to another country to collect your child, collect as much information and memorabilia pertaining to the child's birth as you can. It will mean a lot to them later.
- Ensure your child has contact with other people in similar situations. The Inter-Country Adoptee Support Network (ICASN) services adoptees nationally. Go to www.icasn.org
- Make sure your child's birth culture is accessible to them right from the start. Don't force it on them, but try to cultivate some pride in their culture, and to make sure they know as much as possible about their background.
- Acknowledge and discuss the fact that your child looks different to the rest of the family.
- Be aware of your motives for adopting and how that translates during communication with your child. For example, infertile couples may unwittingly promote adoption as a last resort – "We couldn't conceive naturally and IVF failed, so we thought we'd adopt". Think about how your adopted child might feel on hearing this.
- Visit the Benevolent Society's Post Adoption Resource Centre website, www.bensoc.asn.au/parc for more information about adoptive parents and adopted children.
- Visit www.adoptioninformation.com for worldwide opportunities to adopt.
- For legal information regarding inter-country adoption, visit the website of the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, www.immi.gov.au/facts/36adopting.htm

Standing, left to right: Barry, Sabila (10), Briony (19) and Sadan (14). Seated: Julia, Alix (23) and Joel (16). On ground: Madhu (19), Haden (16) and Akil (12). In front: Goota, the golden retriever.

PHOTOGRAPHY: SAM McADAM HAIR & MAKE-UP: DAVID NOVAK-PIPER

Did you know?

Between 2003-2004, there were 502 adoptions in Australia, with 370 of these adoptions from overseas – the highest number of inter-country adoptions in 13 years.

In the same period, 30 per cent of children adopted from overseas were from China, 26 per cent were born in South Korea, 12 per cent in Ethiopia, and 11 per cent were from Thailand.

112 children were adopted from China in 2003-2004, compared to 46 in the 2002-2003 time period.

Information from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's *Child Welfare Series No.35 Report*

Stephen and Karen Pearson and Natalia, now 7, from Russia

WHEN TWO OF Karen Pearson's friends became pregnant at age 15 and Karen witnessed the ramifications – one friend undergoing the trauma of termination, the second becoming an unwed teenage mother – Karen made a pact with herself to one day adopt a child needing a family.

Fast-forward 16 years and the Auckland-based writer was 31 and happily married to Stephen with a baby boy, Joachim, when she was reminded of that teenage pact. "We went on holiday to Vietnam and saw dozens of orphaned street kids," Karen recalls. "I became fixated upon adopting right away."

Leaving no time to waste, Karen started investigating adoption on her return from holiday and came into contact with a non-profit agency which arranged Russian

adoptions. "The agency checked me out thoroughly and displayed an overriding concern for the children rather than for the adoptive parents," says Karen. "We decided to go with them."

After two years of preparation, paperwork and waiting, Karen and Stephen flew to Severodvinsk, a town just below the Arctic Circle, to adopt the little girl who'd been found for them. Natalia, almost three years old, had a partial cleft palate and showed typical learning and developmental delays from her early years in an institution. "It was apparent she'd never run before; her muscle tone was poor. Also, her skin was sallow and her hair thin from poor nutrition."

The impact of bringing home Natalia was enormous for Karen, Stephen and Joachim, Natalia's elder sibling by two months. "It was pretty rocky," says Karen, dramatically understating the initial fraught months. "Natalia showed signs of attachment disorder, making it hard for her to trust or bond with us. Also, she couldn't communicate because of her cleft palate, so that made her frustrated."

Karen says her adoption network helped her to overcome her concerns about not immediately falling in love with Natalia. "A very wise woman who is also an adoptive mum explained to me that it was unrealistic to expect myself to love her – I was doing a job. Of course, while I was doing the job I grew to love her. And now," Karen smiles, "I couldn't live without her."

Karen and Stephen say nurturing Natalia was initially so all-consuming that a plan to have another (biological) child was shelved. Four years later Natalia, now seven, has been transformed. "She's smart, feisty, active and athletic! She's also affectionate with both people and animals and loves learning," Karen says proudly. And after two operations and two years of speech therapy, Natalia's speech is on a par with her classmates'.

The blossoming little girl knows she's adopted and Karen says she will help Natalia to trace her natural parents if she wants to, although no one is sure if the Russian authorities will be able to assist.

"When people want to adopt I say, 'make sure you have optimism and realism in equal measure'," Karen says as she hugs her beloved daughter. "Adoption is often viewed as a fairytale, but it's much more complex than 'saving a child'. For me, it was the hardest – and the best – thing I've ever done."



The family is engrossed by *Pigtails the Pirate*, by New Zealand author David Elliott.



Natalia adores Bronx, the family's pet schnauzer,

"Adoption is often viewed as a fairytale, but it's much more complex than 'saving a child'. For me, it was the hardest – and the best – thing I've ever done."

PHOTOGRAPHY: ANDREW LEHMANN HAIR & MAKE-UP: CLAUDIA RODRIGUEZ

Merv and Terry Wengdal and Natasha, now 14, from Romania

TRAVEL AGENT TERRY Wengdal always wanted a child of her own – ‘what woman wouldn’t?’ she asks rhetorically – but nearing the age of 40 and after almost a dozen failed IVF attempts, the Sydney-based businesswoman began to despair that her dream would never be realised. Terry’s husband Merv understood her need to have children; he had four of his own from a previous marriage.

“Then I heard about an opportunity in Romania and had to move fast,” recalls Terry, now 54, who says she made the necessary inquiries at the time, prepared all the paperwork required, gathered up her savings and left for Romania on the first available flight. She was accompanied by

her brother-in-law Tony, a lawyer, who was to prove invaluable in the ensuing weeks in helping Terry finally cuddle the daughter she dreamed of for so many years.

“The adoption process was all rather clandestine,” Terry remembers. “We waited around for days with ‘brokers’ calling to offer us boys and every time I refused. I wanted a girl.” Finally, Terry and Tony were woken in the middle of the night with the news they’d been waiting for – a baby girl had been found for them. They travelled to a grim one-bedroom apartment on the outskirts of Bucharest, where money exchanged hands and a three-week-old infant was bundled into Terry’s arms.

“I checked that she had all her fingers

and toes and that she was okay,” remembers Terry. “We demanded an AIDS test, so they drew blood from the mother right in front of us and then we left. I threw away the nappy and the Coca-Cola bottle they had given me, but I’ve always kept the romper suit. That’s all Natasha, as I named her, was given at birth.”

A hectic couple of weeks ensued, with court appearances and flights to Frankfurt and New Zealand to finalise Natasha’s citizenship and Australian visa, then finally Terry was able to bring her precious child home to Australia.

Terry remembers Natasha as being a darling baby from the moment she first held the dark-haired, blue-eyed infant in her arms. As to where those olive-skinned features come from, the family still knows very little. Terry was told that Natasha’s father was a gypsy musician; that partly explains Natasha’s talent for music. However, Merv is also musical and actively encourages his daughter.

Natasha, now 14, sits on the living room floor and listens patiently as her mother recounts her adoption story. She’s heard it many times before – from the moment she could understand, her adoptive parents have told her everything they know about how she came to grow up in Australia. One day, the three of them plan to travel together to the Romanian town where Natasha’s birth parents came from, but Natasha says there’s absolutely no hurry to get there.

“I love the family I’m with now and I just don’t feel the need to meet someone I’ve never known,” she says firmly. “Also, I think my birth mother was rather slack to give me up like she did. Sometimes I do wonder, ‘what if?’, and I think about how I could have had such a different life. I might not even be alive!”

Natasha’s smile lights up her beautiful face. “I’m just grateful that I have the life I have and I say to other children who are adopted, appreciate the family you have now. Your family would not have adopted you if they hadn’t wanted you. My only complaint,” Natasha pauses, “is that I would like a sister!”

Terry’s heard that refrain before from her daughter and she looks unruffled. “Forget it, my girl, I’m too old and my pockets aren’t deep enough!” She grins at Natasha, and Natasha grins back.

x
x
x



Natasha says she couldn't be happier with her adoptive family