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Special Blessings

Two Thrivent Financial families discover the twists, turns and joys of adoption.

By Denise Schipani

William and Mary Ellen O'Doherty spent years enduring the pain and frustration of fertility treatments before they decided to try a different approach to building their family. They turned to adoption, contacting an adoption attorney in California, where they lived at the time. Then they got to work. "We sent about 1,500 resume-type fliers—pictures of the two of us and our dog, along with information about our family—to doctors and clinics," recalls Mary Ellen.



For many families, the adoption process is long; theirs was lightning fast. Within a month, the couple—he's a financial representative for Thrivent Financial for Lutherans in River Vale, New Jersey, and she's a public school math teacher—got a call from an obstetrician. The doctor had a patient who, late in her pregnancy, wanted to give her child up for adoption. "That was in July, she was due in September, and we set a date to meet her in August," says Mary Ellen.

But the baby had a different idea. The birth mom went into labor four weeks early, prompting the O'Dohertys to drive to a tiny hospital in the middle of the blazing California desert before they'd even had a chance to meet the birth mom. What could have felt awkward or ended painfully instead created a unique bond between the two families. When the hospital nurse asked the O'Dohertys for the baby's clothes, Mary Ellen had to admit: "We had nothing." A stop at a baby store later, they had their daughter, Ashlee Anissa, outfitted with everything from a bassinet to bottles. "It was insta-family," says William.

Mary Ellen and William are hardly alone in becoming adoptive parents. According to the Child Welfare League of America, 234,348 children were adopted in the U.S. between 1989 and 2005. Of that number, 22,710 were international placements, and the countries adopted from vary widely. According to the U.S. Department of State, in 2008 adoptions from Guatemala were the most numerous. Previously, the leader was China. However, adoption rules change frequently country by country, as regulations and red tape shift; guidelines can vary state by state, as well.

After the O'Dohertys moved to New Jersey—two years after they'd adopted Ashlee and most of the baby stuff was packed away—they got a call from their attorney back in California. A young pregnant woman wished to have her child adopted. The hitch was that she wanted someone who had lived in Europe and spoke multiple languages. William, raised in Belgium and multilingual, was the only client in the attorney's database to fit the bill. Would they like to adopt a son? And could they decide right away?

The answer was a resounding—and fast—yes. "We felt the good Lord put the opportunity in front of us to give this child a chance," says William. They dropped off Ashlee with her grandparents, took a 6 a.m. flight the next day to Los Angeles, and met the birth mom, her parents and their baby boy. They named him Nicholas Trevor Duncan on that whirlwind day.

Once again, the family was blessed with a loving, supportive adoption. "It's been a positive experience," Mary Ellen says. "It feels like it was meant to be."

The Good Lord's Gift

Other adoptive parents take different but equally miraculous paths to find their kids. Back in high school health class, Lorie Molen wrote a paper outlining her future life. Someday, she wrote, she



wanted a Jeep Grand Cherokee and four children—almost two of them adopted. "It was something I always figured I'd do," says Molen, who now lives with her husband, Steve, who works for Thrivent Financial, her son, Joseph, and their adopted twin daughters in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina.



The girls, Katelyn and Stephanie, born in Guatemala, are now thriving 6-year-olds. Lorie and Steve's adoption journey began in 2003, when they were 35 years old. From the beginning, international adoption appealed to them. "We thought of adoption as an adventure and wanted to fully embrace the idea of family through a new culture," says Lorie. Guatemala was chosen after they reviewed the adoption process of several countries. "I liked that the children available for adoption there were in foster homes and not orphanages," says Lorie.

The girls who would later become Stephanie Ann and Katelyn Marie Molen were placed for adoption by their birth mother when they were 6 months old. The couple's adoption agency caseworker sent photos and two short videos. Would the Molens be willing to take on two children at once? "We knew right away that we would," says Steve. "We viewed it as God's work, and we would be blessed with two right away." That moment, adds Lorie, was when she became the girls' mother. The rest—months of waiting and mountains of paperwork—was mere details.

Finally, when the girls were 16 months old, the Molens flew to Guatemala City to meet their daughters. Two became four in an instant. Though toddlers, the babies were unable to crawl or walk because they were preemies and malnourished. "I mentally prepared myself on the way home to the U.S. for potential special needs," says Lorie. "It was a miracle that after just three months of good food, good sleep and lots of love, they were walking across the room," says Lorie. "Now they are happy, bouncy, squiggly kindergartners." Lorie feels her life's journey is complete.

Denise Schipani has written for American Baby, Parents, Woman's Day, Women's Health and Real Simple. She lives in Huntington, New York, with her husband and two sons.

Learn More

Get educated about adoption. There are several websites that can help you learn more about the adoption process:

- [Lutheran Social Services](#)
- [Lutheran Adoption Services](#)
- [Lutheran Adoption and Foster Care Alliance](#)
- [Adoption.com](#)

Read More

- [Is Adoption Right for Us?](#)
- [Adoption Action List](#)

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