

Adoptive parents blend races, cultures

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(J. Michael Short/Special to the Express-News)

Rob Jackson (left) holds adoptive son, Davis McMahan, as wife Maggie McMahan reads to biological son, Patrick McMahan, 2.

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With all the media brouhaha over Madonna's adoption of a 13-month-old boy from Malawi, and before that Angelina Jolie's adoption of little Zahara from Ethiopia, one would think adopting across cultural and racial lines is a new phenomenon spurred by big-hearted — or perhaps publicity-minded — celebrities.

But the truth is people in the United States have been adopting children from other countries since after World War II, and the practice has seen explosive growth since the '90s. Spurred by a host of reasons, more and more adoptive parents in America are negotiating the sometimes-fraught terrain of what it means to raise a child from a different country or ethnic group.

The numbers are astounding. Foreign adoptions represented a trickle

Orphan Visas

Immigrant visas issued to orphans coming to the United States in 2005:

China: 7,906

Russia: 4,639

Guatemala: 3,783

South Korea: 1,630

Almost 90 percent of internationally adopted children are younger than 5 years old; nearly half are infants.

In 2005 alone, 22,278 children from foreign countries received visas to come to the United States for adoption. In 1990, only about 7,000 children received these visas.

in the overall adoption picture in the '70s and '80s, then started to grow in the '90s, with media reports of abandoned children in China and Russia, say experts. Things have continued to mushroom; in 2005 alone, almost 23,000 visas were granted to children from a handful of foreign nations to travel here to find permanent homes.

For such families, the goal of raising happy, healthy kids in a hectic world is further complicated not just by the issue of adoption but the added layer of blending two races in one family.

"Families that are Caucasian, and most adoptive parents are, who think racism is gone are quickly reminded that it is not as they walk through this experience with their children," says Rebecca Leaming Hackworth, director of social services for Dillon International Inc., an adoption agency. She's also the adoptive mother of two daughters from Haiti, now grown.

"Families that are successful will truly embrace that child's culture and grow in the knowledge of it," she says. "The family must become Chinese American or Korean American. I'm no longer part of an American family; we're a Haitian-American family. It changes the family's entire identity."

For John Shaffer, 52, and Connie Hooper, 53, adopting from Korea in the '80s after Hooper experienced trouble conceiving simply felt like the right and natural thing to do. This came after four fruitless years waiting for a domestic adoption.

"It wasn't important to either of us that our children look like us," says Shaffer, an investment broker. "We appreciated the diversity that someone from a different culture might add to our family. We saw it as an interesting twist."

All three of their children — daughter Alex, 18, Josh, 16, and Jacob, 15 (who is Alex's biological sibling) — were adopted as babies from foster care. The parents have made a concerted effort to immerse them in Korean culture through books, toys, language, music and cooking. The three have attended a four-day Korean culture camp in Tulsa, Okla., since they were 5 years old, and teen camps as they've grown up. The family has even made a group trip to Korea, where Alex and Jacob were able to meet their birth parents.

"It was an interesting experience to have, but I don't think I'd do it again," recalls Alex of meeting her birth mother. "It just wasn't that informative. They spoke in Korean, and we could barely understand."

Steeping their family in Korean culture "has been the most enriching experience of our lives," says Hooper, an associate school psychologist. "When you adopt internationally you owe it to the child to get to know their culture, to learn about it, to make it part of your life. To not do so is inexcusable."

But all the immersion in the world hasn't totally inoculated their kids from the stings and slurs that go along with not being part of the dominant race in America. The family routinely draws curious stares when they go out to public places.

"You think you're just the average family until you leave the house," says Shaffer.

They've had to put up with a host of "ignorant" questions, such as who are the children's "real" parents. ("We fed them and changed their diapers and dealt with the teen years," says Shaffer. "We feel like their 'real' parents.") Equally frustrating are the comments that suggest they adopted their kids out of some sense of charity. In fact, they "waited in line" for their brood, they say.

Josh, who like his siblings says he didn't even realize he was racially different from his parents until he got

Sources: U.S. State Department; Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute; Child Welfare Information Gateway

On the Web

For a Website on international adoption: www.childwelfare.gov and click on "adoption"

a little older, finds it annoying when people venture to point it out.

"Ever since I came to America at 6 months, I've only known one set of parents, and that's my Mom and Dad," he says. "I feel like these are my actual parents. It's never really occurred to me that I have birth parents out there because I have really integrated into this culture and with my parents. I just wish people could understand that."

He attends a large, racially diverse high school, but even there he's experienced taunts — usually delivered in a joking manner — about his ethnicity. "I can't get through the day without some stereotypical comment," he says.

His mother takes these affronts personally.

"It makes you want to hurt someone," she says. But Hooper and her spouse do what the experts recommend: They talk about these issues with their kids. They don't bury their heads in the sand.



(Tom Reel/Express-News)

Linda and Kit Werlein of Kerrville and their adopted daughter, Kendra.

The prospect of racial struggles hasn't daunted the flow of folks willing to adopt cross-culturally and transracially, an increase that experts attribute to a number of factors. A main one is a dramatic reduction in the number of healthy white infants available for adoption in this country, a result not only of the increased use of birth control and abortion but also the lessening of the stigma of out-of-wedlock childrearing. It's estimated around 25,000 newborns are available for adoption each year in the United States, with around one million Americans seeking to adopt.

"There's also the perception that children overseas are less damaged than those in the U.S. public foster care system, who usually have experienced abuse and neglect," says Hollee McGinnis, policy and operations director for the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute in New York, who is herself a Korean-American adoptee.

Another perception, she says, is that adopting overseas means less wait (although that varies by country) and

a greater chance for closed adoption — the latter meaning that birth parents have no role in the child's life, an arrangement preferred by some adoptive parents. (In the United States, the trend has been increasingly toward open adoption, with the birth parents choosing the adoptive parents.)

Costs for overseas adoption vary widely by country, and can range up to \$30,000 or more — comparable to domestic adoption. Virtually all children come from developing countries that struggle with war, poverty or social upheaval.

Adoption experts say people considering international or transracial adoption should ask themselves a host of questions before proceeding: How open are you, really, to another race? What "baggage" do you have about race? Would you consider marrying someone of a different ethnicity? How would your extended family feel about receiving a child of a different race? How open is the community in which you live? Would you move to a more accepting environment? Are you willing to surround your child with adult role models from their ethnic group?

"With the proper tools and education, race doesn't have to be an insurmountable factor in a child's life, but can simply become a part of who they are," says Melanie Chung-Sherman, 29, director of adoptions for Texas for Dillon International Inc., and also a Korean adoptee. She says growing up in a home with German roots that also embraced her ethnic heritage made her a stronger person, one able to "meld" her two identities into a well-rounded whole.

"I'm more insightful about other cultures and those who choose to immigrate here," she says.

For Kit and Linda Werlein of Kerrville, being surrounded by a supportive community of friends and family eased their decision to adopt from Guatemala where they found their now 1-year-old daughter, Kendra, a mocha-colored sprite with a mop of jet-black hair and a flirtatious smile. The Werleins are older parents — he's 62, she's 57 — who decided to adopt a year into their marriage two years ago. (They dated for 12 years before that; she was a widow and he was a longtime bachelor.)

"Our options were limited because of our age," says Kit, a retiree who is now involved in high-level philanthropic work. "Birth mothers (in the United States) would look at us and say we were too old."

They picked Guatemala, they say, because it was the sole country that didn't have an upper age limit and because they could choose the child's sex. They selected Kendra's picture off their computer when she was 6 weeks old. It didn't matter one whit to them about her different ethnicity.

"I so desperately wanted a baby I would have been happy with a purple baby," says Linda, CEO of Hill Country Community Mental Health and Mental Retardation Center.

Even though Kerrville overall is "pretty white and pretty elderly," says Linda, they feel the growing demographic of South Texas, with its burgeoning Hispanic population, will only facilitate their rearing of a child with brown skin.

"We have a lot of Hispanic friends and there is absolutely no issue with us involving ethnicity or culture or skin color," says Kit. "Basically what we thought would be an issue has turned out to be a nonissue."

Even his 97-year-old mother, who balked at transracial adoption, has embraced Kendra, who was feted with no less than four baby showers when she arrived home. The couple say they will strive to teach her about her culture as she grows; already her baby sitters speak only Spanish to her. And Kendra loves to dance to the mariachi music they play for her in her antiques-filled nursery.



(Tom Reel/Express-News)

Connie Hooper and husband John Shaffer get with their kids (from left) Jacob, Alex and Joshua for Thanksgiving food preparation.

How Kendra will reconcile being raised in a different-race family is unknown, but the data is positive. Longitudinal studies show transracial adoptees tend to do just fine in their adoptive homes. Hackworth points to one study that compared biological children to same-race adopted kids to other-race adoptees. Around 80 percent of kids in *all* groups fared well; 10 percent of all three groups experienced moderate psychological problems, and 10 percent had significant problems.

"That's true of the general population," she says, "so it really supports the idea that when we parent there's a chance your kids will have challenges." For intercountry adoptees, another concern is their situation prior to placement — was it a loving foster care or a substandard orphanage? That background can play a large role in how they fare.

Hackworth and other experts say that a child's concern with being a different race than his or her parents will ebb and flow over time, with a critical passage coming during adolescence, an already combustible time when identity formation is so acute. The key for parents is to keep an open, free dialogue about race.

"(Being transracial) just adds another piece to the puzzle," says Hackworth. "The truth is these kids learn to be vanilla on the inside, because that's the dominant culture they were raised in, but the world always sees skin color first. So these kids have to go through an extra step. If it's done right, they can become bridge-builders with a good foundation in two cultures. If it's not done well, these kids can risk feeling lost in two worlds, the way missionary kids do when they come back to the States."

McGinnis is conducting the first large-scale survey of adult transracial adoptees on the topic of identity. So far she's found a real spectrum — adoptees who fervently embrace their ethnic heritage, adoptees who wholesale reject it, "with the vast majority doing something of a dance of identity ... That can be a confusing place to be, but there's also the power of connection there — that being between identities is in itself an identity."

Not all parents adopt their transracial children from other countries. Rob Jackson and Maggie McMahon, both 31, adopted 21/2-year-old Davis, who is African American, when he was just days old. Maggie had entrenched medical issues that prevented her from becoming pregnant; she and Rob long knew they would adopt. The decision to adopt a black or biracial child was also a conscious, deliberate choice.

"We saw this as an opportunity to open up a whole world that is closed to you if you're a single-race family," says McMahon, a health economics manager for a medical device company.

It took two years for them to find Davis. McMahon and Jackson were chosen by a black couple (with whom they now share an open adoption) who picked them out of a whole cohort of adoptive parents, including other black parents. The birth parents were college students with two children who simply couldn't afford to raise another. A bond was forged during a preliminary telephone call.

"I remember (the birth father) saying, 'Ya'll are a lot like us,'" says Jackson, a product manager for a computer company. "We go to church every Sunday, they go to church every Sunday. We like to hang out with friends on the weekend, not do anything spectacular, like them." He pauses for effect. "We're boring."

To everyone's great surprise, McMahon discovered she was pregnant during the same time they brought Davis into their home. Patrick will be 2 in January; the boys are typical brothers — jealous but protective of each other. The couple have purchased books on transracial parenting and black parenting and are determined to raise Davis with a strong respect for his racial identity — even if it means moving to another part of the city where he can attend a more ethnically diverse school than the one they're zoned for now.

Right now, they say, the issues are "hair and skin" — finding the right products for Davis. (Blacks have fewer oil glands, says McMahon.) But they know the terrain will grow more complicated as their adopted son grows up. McMahon admits she worries some about the future.

"Right now Davis is an adorable little boy and people see him as an adorable little boy," she says. "I wonder what day it will be when they start seeing him as a threatening black man. I'd like to think our culture isn't going to do that to him, but I think it will, and I can't protect him from that. I can't change everybody who will come into contact with him."

Their plan, she says, is to surround their family with supportive friends and family and black role models, acknowledging and respecting the reality that Davis is different but keeping things in perspective — "that the most important thing is that (Davis) is happy and healthy and loving and caring."

As it stands now, they're getting used to the public reactions — the second glances, the clerk who asked McMahon if she was "baby-sitting" Davis, the woman at the store who asked, when she had both sons in tow, "Which one is yours?" Then there were the black friends who straight out asked them if they thought they had "rescued" Davis. No, they said. This is about love, pure and simple.

They are prepared for the day when Davis asks why his skin is a different color than theirs. Because we have different mommies, they will tell him.

"The harder question is going to be, 'Why am I treated different?'" says McMahon.

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