

International adoptions require preparation, plenty of patience

Fifteen-year-old Chino resident Chandra Morris is a typical California teenager. With long black hair and big dark eyes, Chandra is a beautiful girl who is excited about her driver's permit, school, friends and church activities. She is an honor student at Don Lugo High School, where she maintains a 4.08 GPA.

One would never guess that Chandra's life began much differently in faraway India.

At birth, Chandra weighed 1 pound, 10 ounces and was nursed to health by volunteers at the International Mission of Hope. When she was 3 months old, she weighed 4 pounds, 6 ounces and was adopted by Bret and Susan Morris. During her first two years of life, Chandra was hooked up to a breathing monitor because of apnea, a periodic cessation of breathing. By age 2, she had outgrown the malady and was in perfect health.

"She's our miracle baby," said Susan, a homemaker and licensed vocational nurse. Susan and Bret, a sales representative, also adopted 10-year-old Andrew from Mexico and 5-year-old Amber from this country. All of the children were adopted as infants and all of them are healthy, well-adjusted and typical American kids.

Bret and Susan were unable to have children and considered international adoption because the waiting period is shorter than it is for domestic adoptions.

"It was a lot easier," Susan said. "They didn't have as many restrictions on everything and the wait was a lot less. You didn't have the risk of the parent coming back."

The Morriszes, who are white, were open to adopting a child of any race or ethnic background.

"For us, a child was a gift of God," Susan said. "It did not matter to us what nationality or what race they were. A blended family was fine with us."



Veronica James
CLOSE TO HOME

Each adoption was different for Bret and Susan, but adopting Andrew from Mexico was by far the most complicated and the most expensive. Susan's perseverance and past experience as an adoption agency employee paid off in the long run.

"You have to be persistent," she said. "You have to really, really want it."

Susan made weekly trips to Mexico to visit Andrew and take diapers and money to his foster family. She also camped out at the consulate, had her documents transcribed and her home study translated into Spanish. After two months, her efforts resulted in the adoption of Andrew.

"Emotionally, it was hard because I had seen him, but I had to leave him down there," she recalled.

While in Mexico, Bret and Susan met 10 other families who were trying to adopt children, but none of them were able to get a child home legally.

"It's very, very hard to legally adopt from Mexico," she said. "I wouldn't recommend it."

High fees from Mexican lawyers and the ineffectiveness of their now-defunct San Diego adoption agency pushed the Morris' adoption bill beyond \$20,000, compared with about \$5,000 for their other two adoptions.

Susan advises those who are considering international adoption to do their homework.

"You have to be very leery and check your adoption source to make sure it's a legitimate agency," she said.

She also recommends patience and preparation.

"Have the time and money available to do it when you start the process," she said.

"You can get a call to travel to another country."

Kathleen Berk, who adopted a little girl from Russia and was featured in last week's column, offers additional advice and encouragement.

"Hang in there and go for it no matter how difficult it looks," she said. "I would say not to be discouraged. Talk to other people and get the support of those who've gone through it."

Cathy Moore, a La Verne resident who contacted me after last week's column, was pleased with the process of adopting her daughter from Russia in 1999 through Nightlight International Adoptions in Fullerton. Cathy's adoption took nine months, including delays and holiday breaks. For interested readers, Cathy provided the Web site address of her adoption agency, now called Nightlight Christian Adoptions: www.toadoptkids.org

Another site that Cathy found helpful is the APR (Adoptive Parents-Russia) mailing list at www.eeadopt.org, used by prospective parents to post their travels to Russia for adoption purposes. In addition, Cathy was able to get useful information about adoption agencies by surfing the Web.

Cathy advises families to do some serious soul-searching before adopting to determine what medical or emotional needs they can handle in an adopted child.

Diane Cooley's specialty is helping potential adoptive parents do just that. Cooley is a licensed clinical social worker in private practice in Claremont. She specializes in children and adoption and screens clients wanting to adopt through Bal Jagat, a Chatsworth-based intercountry adoption agency.

"My goal is to assist the family in identifying and building on strengths and shoring up any weaknesses so that potential problems will be minimized," said Cooley, who also offers post-placement supervision and counseling.

"Most families whose hearts are big enough to parent a child born abroad are quality people," she added. "Children are very needy, especially children who have been abused, neglected or institutionalized."

Cooley recommends addressing problems before the teen years and suggests the book, "Adopting the Hurt Child" by Gregory C. Kack and Regin M. Kupecky, Plim Press 1998. When counseling is needed, she said she believes it should come from an adoption specialist who understands "the dynamics of adoption and the special needs of these children."

Bal Jagat recently hosted a 15-year reunion for families who have adopted through the agency.

"The kids I've seen placed through Bal Jagat are the most gorgeous, incredible kids," Cooley said. "You hear all the horror stories about international adoption, but the kids I've seen are happy, healthy and well-adjusted — just incredible."

• **VERONICA JAMES** writes about family issues for Inland Valley Our Times. She can be reached at veronicajames@mindspring.com