

## Adoption Stories: Fact and Fiction

By CHERI RAE — July 23, 2009

“For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption.”—Romans 5:16

It’s a big week for adoption advocates—across the nation and right here in Santa Barbara. Tomorrow afternoon, movie theatres across the country will screen the R-rated horror show, “Orphan.” It’s one of those awful modern-day takes on “The Bad Seed,” that perpetuates dangerously misguided myths about adoption and offends the sensibilities of anyone with any knowledge whatsoever about the blessings—and inherent difficulties—of adoption.

The movie’s original tag line was “It must be hard to love an adopted child as much as your own,” which raised the hackles of enlightened individuals who are particularly concerned about such insensitive portrayals of such a delicate subject. A group called Orphans Deserve Better pressured Warner Bros. to reconsider—and the studio not only apologized, but changed the line to “There’s something wrong with Esther.”

Perhaps movie-goers will ignore this summer fare, or scoff at its premise because they know better. Maybe they’ll view it as an exercise in time-wasting, cheap thrills and scary moments forgotten once the credits roll and the lights go on. After all, adoption is no longer shrouded in the kind of secrecy it was a generation ago; it’s more public, more celebrated, more accepted—by the glitterati who proudly show off their multi-cultural chosen children—as well as regular folks down the street who retrieved their daughter from China; the schoolmates from India, Guatemala or Romania; the children lovingly delivered to their adoptive parents by birthmothers unable to care for them, but making a choice for a good chance at life. These are the adoption love stories and happy endings.

But no screenwriter’s fictional tale of adoption-gone-wrong could possibly be more horrific than the real-life drama conjured up in a fancy mansion in Montecito and perpetrated on uncounted, unsuspecting would-be adoptive parents from coast to coast. Orson Mozes dreamed up and carried out his adoption scam for years under the auspices of the Adoption International Program. He swindled good and decent people who simply wanted to provide a loving home and family for a child in need. He shattered their dreams, destroyed their finances and broke their hearts in his failure to deliver the children as promised.

Mozes skipped town with a half-million dollars in his pocket when he was charged with 62 felony cases of Theft by False Pretense, bilking some 59 well-meaning would-be parents to the tune of \$800,000. He lived on the lam, using false names and fake IDs; he ended up on “America’s Most Wanted,” and when he was finally apprehended in Florida late last year, he was extradited to California to stand trial in Santa Barbara.

Earlier this month, in a plea bargain agreement, Mozes plead guilty to 17 of the cases; this afternoon’s proceedings in Superior Court will include sentencing for those crimes, as well as a distribution hearing to determine whether or not to compensate his ex-wife for her claims for spousal and child support, and how to financially compensate his victims for his crimes. And he still faces another 17 civil suits filed in the State of Pennsylvania.

Several years ago, I attended an orientation session hosted by Mozes in a swank meeting room at the Coral Casino. He was charming, persuasive and cocky in his assurances that he could easily procure adoptive children in Eastern European countries for motivated individuals—whatever their age or situation—with enough money for a deposit; the funds for a trip and an extended stay in an unfamiliar culture; and the additional cash for whatever else would be required.

He had smooth answers for every tentative question; reassurances that their hearts’ desires would be reached when they signed on the dotted line and paid the fees. When a member of the audience asked why there were so many adoptable children in these countries, Mozes responded with an unforgettable comment: He asserted that mothers in Eastern Europe didn’t care as much about their babies as we do in America, and they never had second thoughts about relinquishing their parental rights.

The disrespectful attitude conveyed by this so-called adoption professional who exhibited such callous disregard for the process and the people he preyed upon shocked, offended and disgusted anyone who heard him clearly. But those who heard what they wanted to hear ignored what didn’t ring true. The scam run by Mozes was as old as the hills—he took advantage of decent people in their emotional vulnerability, their desperation, and their misplaced trust in his fancy trappings and glib assurances. What sounded too good to be true turned out to be too awful to imagine.

But truth, justice and the American way have finally caught up with him. He will spend a few years in jail to contemplate his misdeeds and how to make amends for the unimaginable hurt he has caused in the lives of so many.

Many of his victims have managed to re-group, rebuild their lives and restore trust in their lives after suffering devastating losses—some even managed to adopt successfully. Whatever happens to Mozes, he cannot hurt them again.

And in that Courthouse, where today’s hearing will put Mozes behind bars, hope remains in the countless stories of families made official over the years in the halls of justice—including my own—and many more to come.

Just this week I met little Max, a darling two-month old who at birth was placed in the welcoming arms of his adoptive parents by his loving birthmother. They are over the moon with happiness—and Max appears completely content. With the completion of all the adoptive parents' necessary paperwork and permissions; inspections and investigations; background checks, examinations of their character, values and parenting, the three of them will soon appear before the judge in Superior Court; the happy couple will be declared a legal family, and the spirit of adoption will triumph once more.