



Creating a Family

by Mary Ann McGann

National Adoption Day is November 18, 2006, nationaladoptionday.org, 202/572-2993

The photograph shows a boy in a collared shirt and khakis, sitting cross-legged and smiling warmly at the camera. In the blurb that accompanies the photo, you learn that his name is Hassan, that he is 13 years old and that he has been in foster care for quite some time. "The best thing about me is I share with other people," Hassan is quoted as saying. "I think I'd make someone a very good son." A simple plea of hope—a desperate cry for help.



Foster Care Adoptions

Hassan is one of about 400 children in New Jersey's foster care system, waiting on any given day for what they call a "forever family" to adopt them. They are children who may have been abused, neglected, or abandoned; who have bounced from foster home to foster home; who may have emotional and behavioral problems, or may be older and overlooked. Most of them wait at least 18 months to be adopted, and some never find a family.

"Most folks, when they think adoption, think infant adoption or international adoption," says Rose Zeltser of Children's Aid and Family Services, a private nonprofit agency in New Jersey. "They may be too frightened to come forward to learn about adopting an older child. They may think it takes a very special person to adopt an older child. No, it takes ordinary people with special hearts."

That's where the Heart Gallery of New Jersey comes in. As a project that launched just over a year ago, it is a compelling photographic portfolio of all the foster children legally available for adoption in New Jersey. The children's portraits, taken by talented volunteer photojournalists and portrait photographers, are on display at exhibits throughout the state and on the Heart Gallery's website (heartgallerynj.com). They exist only to motivate families to consider adopting those children who are typically considered the hardest to place.

"While there are challenges in adopting older children, there are rewards as well," says Zeltser. "Many children will not believe that someone would really want them as a forever child, so they will test that commitment. But we have found that once the child realizes that this is the family who will not give up on them, they begin to slowly trust that they can become a child again and this is their family. Once that occurs, they begin to grow in so many ways that it is gratifying for the parents to see the child emerge."

Families who adopt an older child, or a child with special needs, are eligible for state and federal financial subsidies and medical coverage until the child turns 18. Free counseling is also available for the child and/or the family.

There are, of course, other avenues and options for adoption in New Jersey. In addition to going through the state's foster care system, would-be parents can use a private agency to adopt an infant or child locally or from elsewhere in the United States, or from another country. They can also hire an adoption attorney to facilitate an "independent" or "private" adoption by identifying birth parents who will relinquish their parental rights when their baby is born. Or they can try to locate a potential birth mother on their own, through word of mouth or advertising, before connecting with an adoption agency licensed in New Jersey.

Private Adoptions

Grace Boehm and her husband, from Bernardsville, decided to adopt after many heartbreaking years of trying, and failing, to conceive. They only wanted a newborn. "Everything you read and hear is that it is impossible to adopt a newborn, and that it takes forever and it's outrageously expensive. But I made up my mind and was willing to take the time and the money and the risk," says Boehm, now the mother of two adopted sons, ages 7 and 5. (Adopting a healthy infant of any race through a private agency or attorney in the US can cost anywhere from several hundred dollars to \$30,000 or more, according to the National Adoption Center.)

As part of a private domestic adoption, "You actually advertise what you're looking for," says Danita Hall, adoptive parent coordinator for domestic adoptions at Adoption House in Princeton. That includes the creation of a "Dear Birth Mother" letter. "You explain your background, your beliefs, what you want to offer that child throughout life," she says.

So, the Boehms retained a private attorney and began advertising in newspapers in five states, ones where the adoption laws were most favorable to adoptive parents. They received several responses and came to an agreement with a birth mother in Illinois whose partner had already legally terminated his parental rights. As the baby's due date approached, the Boehms flew to Illinois for the birth of a child they fervently hoped would become their son.

But, in Illinois, a birth mother cannot relinquish her parental rights until 72 hours after the birth have passed. And then it happened—the nightmare that haunts every potential adoptive family. The birth mother changed her mind.

"[The baby] was born on a Wednesday, they were discharged from the hospital on a Friday," recounts Boehm. "Then she said, 'I can't go through with this.' We came home without him."

The birth mother's change of heart was short-lived, however, and within a few days, she had decided she couldn't properly parent her newborn. She terminated her parental rights and the Boehms became the new parents of a baby boy. The couple followed a similar, albeit smoother, process when adopting their second son two years later.



International Adoptions

More than 20,000 children from other countries are adopted each year by American couples, according to the New Jersey Adoption Resource Clearing House (NJ ARCH). For those who want to adopt an infant, an inter-country adoption may be a feasible alternative to domestic adoption. But the process can be complex, paperwork-intensive, and expensive," writes NJ ARCH in its handbook, "How to Adopt in New Jersey: A Roadmap to Family Building." (The handbook is available at the website njarch.org.) International adoption can cost between \$10,000 and \$20,000 in fees, excluding travel and living expenses in the foreign country. And it takes anywhere from one to three years to complete the process, which includes a home study and approval by the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS).

The home study—mandatory for any type of adoption—often makes adoptive parents worry that their homes and their lives will be examined with a fine-tooth comb. And while a social worker must ensure that the home is safe and that the prospective parents are who they say they are, much of the home-study process is about making sure the family understands what it is embarking upon.

"It's really geared toward preparing families and educating families," says Rose Aquavia, New Jersey Coordinator of International Adoptions for Spence-Chapin, a not-for-profit adoption agency in Summit. "We look at culture, race, effects of orphanage life. We talk about medical issues and development issues . . . how to talk about adoption to the child and how to talk to the outside world. [For example,] someone might say something about how the child looks different from you."

Dana Fried, a resource development coordinator for NJ ARCH, says she and her husband decided to adopt internationally for a number of reasons. "I was older and had a [biological] daughter already. In domestic adoptions, many times the birth mother chooses you. You could wait quite a long time. Because I was getting older, I didn't want to wait," she explains.

But embassy bombings and flooding in Central America complicated the adoption of her son from Guatemala seven years ago. "We got the referral when he was 4 months old, but we didn't get him until he was 13 months," says Fried. "That's a very long time."

Still, she says, it was worth the wait. Her son, now a third-grader, is thriving. And, Fried—who also serves on the executive committee of the nonprofit advocacy group Concerned Parents for Adoption (CPFA) in Whippany—says anyone trying to adopt should seek out a support group like CPFA.

“Number one, it’s great for you as an adult because you meet with people who have the same background, who are going through the same thing as you are. Number two, it’s a great thing for the kids. [My son] gets very excited about the social events. Eighty-five percent of the kids in the room are adopted. The message is: he’s not alone.”

Special Needs Adoptions

Mosetta Berry, of Maplewood, says she was “40 years old and hadn’t met Mr. Right yet” when she decided to attend an adoption orientation three years ago at Spence-Chapin. “When I went into this, I went into it wanting a child. I didn’t care black, white, boy, girl,” she says. But, as a single mother, Berry knew she needed to be realistic about just what she could handle. So when her social worker called about a baby boy in the special needs program, whose biological family had a history of bipolar disorder, she paused. But after much thought, research, and discussions with doctors, she decided to adopt him.

“When you give birth to a child, you don’t know what will come up, and you deal with it. If anything were to come up with my son, I would just have to deal with it,” she says.

A year later, Berry adopted another newborn boy who had experienced tremors shortly after birth. “Sometimes I look at them and I still cannot believe that I have them,” she says. “It’s been absolutely wonderful, a blessing and a dream.”

The wait for an infant or child with special needs can be much shorter than for other adoptions. And, according to the National Adoption Center, under both state and federal assistance programs, adoptive parents of children with special needs are eligible for a one-time payment of non-recurring adoption expenses, such as reasonable and necessary adoption fees, court costs, attorney fees, and other expenses.

Do it, Do it, Do it

That’s Berry’s advice to anyone considering any type of adoption. “I tell everyone my story,” she says. “So many women who, for whatever reason, can’t have children, come to me. I tell them I would do it again.”

“If they really believe they want to become parents, and want to go through the roller coaster of adoption, they will become parents. But they must be flexible and open,” advises Sheila Muster, director of adoption services at Jewish Family Services of Metro-West, in Florham Park. “You have to believe you’re doing the right thing,” advises Grace Boehm. “You have to have the best lawyer, the best agency, and you have to be confident in the decisions you’re making.”

“Adoption is a leap of faith,” notes Dana Fried. But despite the nail-biting uncertainties, the euphoria mixed with disappointment, the paperwork, and what seems like an interminable wait, the minute you hold that baby in your arms or see that child walk into your home, adoptive parents say, you realize it was a leap worth taking.

New Jersey's 25th Annual "Let's Talk Adoption" Conference

Saturday, November 4, 2006 at Rutgers University, Piscataway

Keynote speaker Debbie Riley is the author of *Beneath the Mask: Understanding Adopted Teens*

The conference features 36 workshops on: how to adopt; types of adoption; parenting issues; adoptee issues; school issues, and more

Coordinated by Concerned Persons for Adoption, cpfanj.org, 908/273-5694

Adoption Organizations and Websites

National Adoption Center
adopt.org, 800/TO-ADOPT

New Jersey Adoption Resource Clearing House
njarch.org, 973/763-2041

Concerned Persons for Adoption
cpfanj.org, 908/273-5694

Adoptive Families (magazine)
adoptivefamilies.com, 646/366-0830

Heart Gallery of New Jersey
heartgallerynj.com, 800/99-ADOPT

The Ten Steps to Domestic Adoption

1. **Learn about adoption.** Look for books and magazines about adoption. Attend adoptive parents' support groups and conferences. Send for agencies' brochures and attend their orientation sessions.
2. **Select an agency.** You must work with an agency in the state where you live. Contact several to ask about the type of children they place, any fees, how they assess and prepare families, and how long it will take. Talk to another parent who has used the agency. You do not need an attorney at this point, but you may want to check whether the agency is licensed by your state to provide adoption services.
3. **Complete a home study.** A home study is a series of meetings between you and an agency social worker. It is the approval process for adoption and prepares you for parenting. You will need documents such as: a birth certificate, marriage license, child abuse clearance, and personal references. At least one meeting will be at your home.
4. **Search for a child.** You begin the search for a child, teenager, or a sibling group when your home study is complete. Your agency will have children in its care or your worker will search by networking with other child-placing agencies. You can also be active in the search by [checking the various websites of adoption organizations].
5. **Exchange information with child's agency.** Each time you locate a child who seems like the

right match to all parties involved, your worker and the child's worker exchange information. Your home study is sent. If the child's worker is interested in your family, you may receive a profile on the child. This step of the process can take some time and calls for patience and persistence.

6. Learn that you have been selected for a child. You and several other families may be considered at the same time. The child's worker makes the final decision on which family can best meet the child's needs. When you are selected, more confidential information is shared, so that you can be sure this is the child for you. If the child's parental rights are not legally terminated, it will be done at this time.

7. Meet and visit with the child. The first meeting with the child is followed by several visits over a few weeks or months. If the child lives in another state, the child's agency will work with you to arrange for at least one or two visits. Paperwork, such as the Interstate Compact or adoption assistance agreement, is completed.

8. Receive a placement. The placement date is when the child comes to live in your home. Your agency will visit and work with you for several months in post-placement supervision. During this time you file a legal intent-to-adopt petition.

9. Finalize your adoption. Your child or teenager becomes a legal part of your family when you attend a court session where a judge finalizes your adoption. You will receive an amended birth certificate and a certificate of adoption.

10. Life as an adoptive family. Adoption doesn't end after finalization. You will continue to learn about adoptive parenting. Talk with your child and others about adoption, find support and services for your child's needs, and connect with other adoptive parents.

--Source: National Adoption Center

Mary Ann McGann, from Warren, is a frequent contributor to **family**.