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PARENTING

With Open Adoption, a New Kind of Family

By [MICHAEL WINERIP](#)

SOUTH ORANGE, N.J.

IN 2001, when she got pregnant, Moriah Dailer was 19, unmarried and a college dropout working as a waitress in Wheeling, W.Va. She considered abortion, but didn't have the money, and her parents wouldn't pay. "They weren't anti-abortion," she said. "It was more, 'You planted your garden, you have to live in it.' "

She and the baby's father, Camren Weigand, 20, talked about marrying, but it didn't seem like a great idea. "We were spending the nine months together," she said, "but we weren't necessarily boyfriend and girlfriend. We were not in a good place to raise a child properly. He blamed me for selfishly wanting to give the baby away and keep on partying. But that's not what it was about. I wanted to make sure I didn't screw up another kid."

Two years earlier, Mr. Weigand fathered a child with another young woman, and the State of Indiana had taken custody of that baby. "It was a terrible feeling of guilt, having it happen a second time," Mr. Weigand said.

Ms. Dailer researched adoption online and interviewed four couples. "None clicked," she said. "Our conversations were awkward and choppy and didn't flow." She wanted an open adoption — in which contact between birth parents and child continues after an adoption is finalized — but these couples didn't view it as she did. "They said they'd send

pictures once or twice a year and the baby would know my name, but me and the child wouldn't have a relationship. I wanted to be a part of its life though I wasn't in a good place to raise it."

Then her older sister passed on a letter from a New Jersey couple looking to adopt. Liane Thatcher and Kerry Keane had been married seven years and were in their 40s. He was a violin maker and works for Christie's auction house as its senior musical instrument specialist; she had a graduate degree and manages an artist's studio. The letter described their interests — music, reading, canoeing, fly fishing, birding. And their quirks: She's a [vegetarian](#); he's a duck hunter. It was decorated with 10 pictures of them with their nieces and nephews.

They printed 400 copies and asked people to pass them on. A friend Mr. Keane hadn't seen in 20 years gave it to a fellow birder in West Virginia, who turned out to be the older sister of Moriah Dailer.

"It was very thoughtfully written," Ms. Dailer said. "And I liked the pictures around the border." Camren Weigand was not so sure about the couple in the photographs. "They looked a little old to me," he said. But they hit it off from the first phone call. The New Jersey couple wanted an open adoption. "We believe secrecy in life is not a good thing," Ms. Thatcher said. "This should be about what's best for the child, and we think it's important that children know where they come from historically and genetically."

While there are no national statistics, open adoption is increasingly common, according to Harold Grotevant, a [University of Minnesota](#) professor who is one of the leading experts in the field. He's been doing research with 35 adoption agencies for the last two decades and says there has been a clear-cut swing from confidential to open adoptions. Susan Caughman, editor of *Adoptive Families* magazine, started an Ask the Experts column last year on open adoption, which, she says, now gets more queries than any other column at the magazine.

When it was time for Ms. Dailer to give birth, the baby's father as well as the adoptive parents were there in the delivery room. The adoptive parents selected a half-dozen names then let the birth parents make the final choice. Phelan Daniel Thatcher-Keane, 7 pounds, 9 ounces, was born Sept. 29, 2001. The adoptive parents were free to leave West Virginia within a few days, but stayed a week and a half. "We sat around and told stories and got to know each other," Ms. Dailer said.

Since then, the birth parents, their parents and friends have visited Phelan a dozen times. Their level of contact is not typical. More common, said Ms. Caughman, is an exchange of letters and photographs.

On one visit to South Orange, six of Phelan's relatives and their friends stayed at the Thatcher-Keane home: the birth mother, birth mother's dad, birth mother's fiancé, fiancé's mother, and two of the birth mother's and fiancé's college friends. They know it sounds strange to outsiders, they know it might not work if people get too territorial or possessive, but it has worked for them. They believe by being open, they will avoid problems that can come when grown children go hunting their birth parents.

"It's worked because we're all determined to do what's best for Phelan," Ms. Thatcher said. "You gradually get to like each other and trust each other. Moriah's never crossed an inappropriate boundary by trying to correct our parenting." Each visit, she's thanked them for the job they're doing with Phelan.

While it's hard for outsiders to keep everyone straight, Phelan, now 6, seems to have a firm grasp on what's going on. Looking at pictures with a visitor, he says: "That's Moriah. She's my birth mother. Camren, he's my birth father. And that's me with Mom and Dad. And that's Granny Carmen" — his birth father's mother. For Phelan, it's meant more cousins and grandparents to play with.

Despite the openness, giving up a child still tore at the birth parents. Ms. Dailer went through therapy and says it took two years before she

stopped feeling like she was 60. She returned to Berea College in Kentucky to finish her degree and sometimes heard harsh comments from younger students. “No. 1, ‘How could you give up your baby?’ No. 2, ‘What makes you think you’re not screwing up by letting him know he has two moms and two dads?’ ”

In 2004 she began a serious romantic relationship; in 2005, Phelan was with her on stage when she got her Berea diploma; in 2007, he was the ring bearer when she married. She and her husband, Ben Kahn, live in Washington State, where she works painting and varnishing boats.

Mr. Weigand, the birth father, continues to move around, working now as a farm laborer in Hawaii. “It took six to eight months to stop feeling sorry for myself,” he said. “My dad hasn’t talked to me since the adoption.”

But he says: “I really grew to love Kerry and Liane. It was like an aunt and uncle I never had. And Phelan’s not gone. He has a bigger family; he’s got love coming from everywhere. He’s got a great life — a lot’s going on in New Jersey.”

Nor does the story end there. Last year, Mr. Weigand’s sister, Sarah Brewer, of Clayton, Ind., unexpectedly became pregnant. She is 29, has four children ages 2 to 11, is in the midst of a divorce and is going back to school to become a medical assistant. As Phelan’s aunt, she knew about his open adoption. At family gatherings, she’d met Ms. Thatcher and Mr. Keane.

On Dec. 1, 2007 in Danville, Ind., Mrs. Brewer gave birth to a 7 pound, 5 ounce girl and handed her over to Ms. Thatcher and Mr. Keane for adoption: Tallulah Maria Thatcher-Keane. On paper it keeps getting more complicated. Phelan and Tallulah are brother and sister, as well as cousins. But in person, it just seems like family. Within a few days, papers were signed, but the New Jersey family did not go home. They hung around another week and a half, and everyone had time to tell their stories and get to know one another.



Nancy Wegard for The New York Times

TIES Kerry Keane and his wife, Liane Thatcher, with their children, Phelan, 6, and Tallulah, 2 ½ months, at home in New Jersey recently.



Phelan and his birth mother, Moriah Dailer.

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