

Pact Family Stories

Juantia, Lucas & LuzMari: Latino Culture



For Lucas and Juanita culture permeated every aspect of the process of adopting their daughter LuzMari. To understand the choices this family made, they remind us that we must see them through the lens of their cultural experience as an Afro-Puerto Rican and a Mexican-American—a Mestizo family whose every decision is influenced by their broader experience as Latinos. Here are some of the ways that culture played a role in their adoption process.

Choosing an adoption agency

Lucas and Juanita believe that the ways they represent their cultures and races will matter to their child and they know it mattered to their daughter's birth mother Lena. "Race is socially defined and has no biological meaning," explains Juanita. "We understand this and the many related complexities within the Latino community including colorism. As ethnically identified Latinos, we carry cultural beliefs, practices and traditions forward within our family. From the beginning of the adoption process we were attracted to agencies that had direct contact with birth mothers who were themselves Latina. Also, very importantly we were looking for an organization with a staff who got it—for us this meant the automatic elimination of agencies who said things like 'we are all human' or 'we are open to everyone, we

don't care about race.'" As Juanita describes it, "When assessing for cultural competence it is easier to identify the lack of it than to define the presence of it. Like air, when it isn't there it feels like you can't breathe."

Preference for a Latina/o child

Even though they thought about adopting a child of a different race or ethnicity, Lucas' s own experience as an Afro-Puerto Rican informed their decision to consider very carefully the concept of colorism and the importance of cultural connection. There are Latino children in this country in need of a family, and not so many Latino adoptive families who use the formal adoption systems. So it made sense to Lucas and Juanita to respond to the needs of these children by making themselves available to a child of their own cultural and racial groups.

As an adoptee, Lucas has lived with all the unknowns and uncertainties that derive from decisions made on his behalf but without his permission or involvement. As a visibly black Latino in the U.S., his life has been complicated by racist attitudes that come at him not only from the white community but also from within the Latino and Black communities. He brings a special affinity for LuzMari because of their shared experience—the lived question of "who am I really?" that both adoptees and Afro-Latinos in the U.S. are always trying to answer.

Juanita and Lucas were moved by the set of coincidences that put them together with LuzMari's birth mother Lena. Lena and Lucas, Puerto Ricans of European and African descent respectively, and Juanita, of Mexican and Irish heritage, together embody the diversity of Latinos, a people who understand themselves in a spiritual as well as a historical context. This belief in a spiritually-connected past has been reinforced for Lena, Lucas, and Juanita by their experience of adopting, because everything came together in a way that all three of them feel was meant to be.

Talking with the expectant birth mother

Before LuzMari was born, Lucas, Juanita and Lena connected culturally and linguistically through just two phone conversations. All three of them felt the connection, and their understanding of it was deep and meaningful in a way that was difficult for the mostly Anglo adoption professionals around them to understand. They trusted each other's sincerity and commitment beyond what others might have considered sensible or safe because the understanding between them went beyond language. Lucas and Juanita explain it in terms of a phrase that Lena said to them over and over: "Yo me conozco" ("I know myself"). Lucas and Juanita understood and trusted Lena's certainty because of the uniquely Caribbean cultural context of that expression. They tell a story that illustrates their own heartfelt certainty. The nurses at the hospital where LuzMari was born told Lucas and Juanita how surprised they were to see them running into the nursery so excitedly and expectantly, free of the typical hesitancy so many pre-adoptive parents experience. "It never even occurred to us that we might need to be tentative. We just knew this was our daughter."

Choosing names

Perhaps LuzMari's name says more about the connection between the two families than anything. Juanita likes unique names, while Lucas likes traditional names that are culturally rooted. Both families have a lot of Marias and Marys. Lucas's birth mother was LuzMaria and Juanita's grandmother was Mary Louise. Together they came up with the name LuzMari, which they liked but held out to see if it fit the baby once she was born. When Lucas and Juanita met Lena face-to-face for the first time, after the birth of the baby, she asked them what name they had chosen. She wanted to put the same name on the first birth certificate to match the second, amended birth certificate so her baby would have a sense of unity. When they told her the name they were considering, Lena exclaimed that her grandmother who raised her is named Luz. It was decided—that was the name that was meant to be.

"There are forces that brought our families together. Fate," says Lucas, "I believe there are circumstances we don't always understand, there are no such things as accidents and when we embrace fate, we embrace our destiny and our strength."

Juanita and Lucas recommend reading the work of Isabel Allende and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, or renting the film "The Milagro Beanfield War," to get a sense of this uniquely Latino perspective.