pact's point of view
serving adopted children of color

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Pact Family Stories

Zora's and Ezra's Families Connected by Blood ... and Love

Adopted people cherish something that non-adopted people take for granted—the opportunity to spend time with someone to whom they are biologically related. Understanding this has created a special bond between two families who both adopted through Pact.

Kristen Gardner always wanted a large family. She imagined she would give birth to several children and perhaps adopt several more. Starting in her twenties, she got pregnant multiple times, but never successfully. In her thirties, she found herself single, re-located to the Bay Area, and seriously considering adoption as her path to parenthood.

She researched a number of agencies—some of which struck her as placing too much emphasis on selling their own services—and met with a consultant to discuss various approaches to adoption. She came to realize she needed a mediator, a neutral third party who could ensure that the process was fair and ethical for everyone involved. Having already attended several Pact workshops, she decided that she trusted Pact to play this role.

Kristin became a Pact client in late 2008, and settled in for what she thought might be a lengthy wait, due to her single parent status. She tried to focus on her work, but by 2009 she was starting to feel impatient. Meanwhile, unbeknownst to her, a local expectant mother had chosen Kristin to adopt her child. However, because Suzanne had not yet completed all the selection paperwork, Kristin could not be notified. So it was that Kristin did not learn that her daughter had been born until twelve hours after it happened.

After getting the call from Pact, Kristin was elated but also extremely anxious as she approached the hospital. But once she entered Suzanne's room, the two of them hit it off immediately, and she felt an instantaneous bond with her baby girl. Kristin had brought along a list of possible baby names, and together she and Suzanne chose the name Zora.

Kristin is very grateful she got a chance to meet Suzanne, particularly because Zora strongly resembles her. Zora, now a sunny-spirited toddler, is generally

perceived as Asian—she is Vietnamese-American on her mother's side and African-American on her father's side. Looking for ways to reinforce Zora's racial identity, Kristin found a multicultural play group where most of the participating families are Asian. It's not in her immediate neighborhood, but she's happy to drive to the next town over so that they can participate—she appreciates the fact that in this environment, she is one of the few white women present. She is researching venues in which Zora can learn to speak Vietnamese—and in the meantime has found a caregiver who is teaching her Spanish. She continues to ponder how best to honor Zora's mixed racial heritage.

Some of the details of the adoption process are blurring in Kristin's memory—as she focuses on the daily joys and challenges of parenting an almost-two-year-old—but they are still fresh in the minds of Tania and Genilson DoCarmo. This globe-trotting couple met and married in Brazil (where Genilson was born), and their work for an international humanitarian organization has taken them to the UK and Cambodia. Several years ago they considered but did not pursue international adoption. Back in the States in 2009, and recovering from a failed pregnancy, Tania happened to see an announcement about families being sought for children of color in this country. Given Genilson's Afro-Brazilian heritage, this seemed like the perfect path for them.

Tania and Genilson chose to work with Pact because of Pact's emphasis on always serving the needs of children first. They eagerly signed up for as many seminars as possible. As they immersed themselves in the issues surrounding adoption, they overcame their initial apprehension about open adoption and made it goal. For Genilson, connecting to birth family came to seem like a natural extension of the sprawling, inclusive family in which he grew up in Brazil.

By mid-2010, they had set up an adoption blog and a nursery, but the room was full of unpacked boxes, and Tania was beginning to feel depressed by the wait. When she got an email asking her to phone Pact, she didn't think much of it—until she heard the words, "this is one of those calls!" She rushed to get Genilson on the line. That is when they learned that a baby boy had been born the day before, and the mother had chosen them as parents. After assuming for months that they would be parenting an African American child, they were surprised to learn that the child's mother was Vietnamese American. The thought flashed through Tania's mind, "We're going to have to come up with some new names—Mandela is not going to work!"

Tania and Genilson spoke with Suzanne by phone that afternoon—an admittedly awkward conversation. She invited them to visit her and the baby in the hospital the next day. They spent the night unpacking boxes and coming up with a new list of names. Arriving at the hospital felt almost dream-like—it was hard to believe that they were really, and suddenly, about to become parents. And then they were in the room, meeting their beautiful baby and his mother for the first time. They loved Suzanne's openness, her strength, her obvious love for her child. Together they chose the name Ezra.

Tania remembers the next day in vivid detail. When the relinquishment process was complete and Suzanne was ready to be discharged, the hospital seated her in a wheelchair and placed Ezra in her arms, and everyone left together. When they reached the parking lot, Suzanne wanted to put Ezra in his carseat. Fumbling with the brand-new equipment, she and Tania buckled him in together. Powerful emotions collided with everyday awkwardness. As soon as Tania got into her car, she began to sob, unable to believe she and Genilson were leaving with another woman's child. Yet she knew she had to drive away, if only because their car was blocking Suzanne's. Furiously blotting her tears, she managed to drive off.

When Tania and Genilson first learned about Ezra, they were told that he had an older sibling who had also been adopted, but it was hard for them to focus on that at the time. Once they were home with Ezra, Pact arranged an introduction between them and Kristin. The two families exchanged pictures and were amazed by how much Zora and Ezra resemble each other. When Ezra was about a month old, they arranged to meet near the doCarmos' home in Northern California, and have visited together several times since.

Kristen, Tania, and Genilson all agree it is a wonderful boon to be able to connect their kids. Whether or not they are able to maintain contact with Suzanne, their children will always have each other—each of them will have a face in their lives that "mirrors" their own. The doCarmos' work will be taking them back to Cambodia, which will make regular visits more difficult in the future, but Kristin takes comfort in the fact that Cambodia is close to Vietnam, so they may be able to combine a reunion with some exploration of cultural heritage.

The presence of siblings has also created challenges. While Kristen and the doCarmos are all candid about the fact that their children are adopted, they have been more guarded in talking about their siblings. The existence of a sibling close in age can provoke curiosity, and sometimes judgment, about the birth mother and her choices. Feeling protective of Suzanne, not to mention their children, Zora and Ezra's parents have chosen to discuss the siblings only with a few trusted friends and family members, and are learning how to deflect intrusive questions.

Kristin, Tania, and Genilson are demonstrating what openness in adoption is all about. Each of them has opened their heart, not just to their adopted child, but to their child's birth mother, their child's birth sibling, and the sibling's adoptive family. Openness, generosity, and love—it's a beautiful vision of family.