

# **Adoption Milestones**

## **By Susan Seum-keum Cox**

Throughout our lives, there are milestones that measure meaningful events or happenings. For those of us who are adopted, there are some added moments.

One of those moments occurred in my life this past summer when I entered my fourth decade! In celebration of this event, I decided to take back my Korean name. This was not a decision I came to quickly or easily. I thought a great deal about why I was considering such a change. One of the reasons for its significance for me is that ten or even five years ago I would not have seriously considered this change as an option. What it clearly confirms for me is that adoption is forever ... and it is a process. How each adopted person reacts or responds to life experiences is often related to other issues and influences in their life.

When I was adopted from Korea in 1956, I was four years old. My parents and I were pioneers to this process of becoming a family through inter-country adoption. There were no books or newsletters about adopting a child from another country. No parent support groups or other resources. WE were all learning, while at the same time, the process was being observed by a cynical public.

In the three and a half decades since, it has become clear that inter-country adoption works, that children of one race and culture can be loved and cherished by parents of another. Additionally, during those same years, we've learned some things.

While it is the birthright of every child to have a family, every child is also entitled to acknowledge the ethnicity to which he or she is born. When a family adopts a child from another country, they must embrace not only the child, but the child's ethnicity and culture. I am not encouraging families to go to extremes in immersing themselves and their child in his or her birth culture. After all, an adopted child will need to feel the security of being a part of the adoptive family, and extreme attempts to make them hang on to their old life will not seem balanced. Rather, I believe parents should acknowledge the significance of the child's birth culture and show genuine respect and honest appreciation for it. All children react individually, and of course, adopted children are no exception. They will demonstrate a wide range of responses to adoption issues. What parents can do is affirm and encourage their child to feel good about themselves and their birth heritage.

Things have changed over the years: for example, it is now common to retain part or all of an adopted child's birth name upon adoption. Such a decision is an important recognition that each child comes to the family with a previous identity, and that identity is part of the child forever, whether it is acknowledged or not.

For me, that acknowledgment has come more recently. Becoming "Susan" Soon Keum at forty is, in many ways, more significant to me because I chose it for myself.