pact's point of view
serving adopted children of color

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All of Nathan's Family

By Pamela, Barbara, Suzanne & John

Pamela, Birth Mother

I take pride in being comfortable with my own Africanness. As I continue to develop that comfortableness in my life, I will continue to school Nathan, my birth son, as the occasions arise in his life (and they will arise) that call for him to have a strong ethnic identity. As an African American birth mother, I feel it is important for him to know his African American heritage.

I take my son to African American events (Black Expo, Black Cowboys parade, the African Flea Market). I also expose him to African American styles of dress, hair cuts, liberation colors, African cloth.

Nathan is exposed to African American idioms — what some people call street slang or black English. Many times, African American people sound different from the mainstream when we express ourselves, and that difference is a source of pride to me. We sometimes look at pictures of ourselves in photo albums and talk about them. I hope to always be there for my son as he grows to be a proud young African Warrior.

Barbara, Birth Grandmother

It is important to me that Nathan and I have frequent visits and spend time together in everyday kinds of situations. In our family, all the other grandchildren come over. I take them places that I think are important for the development of their racial identity.

I am constantly making sure that Nathan sees himself in a number of different settings and that he has the tools to deal with the uncomfortableness in his familiar settings. He spends time with his biological family at least once a week, or more when schedules permit. Those visits are spent with family who speak in ways different from his adoptive family. He plays with his cousins and interacts with the whole family. We don't put on any airs when he visits. We make sure he hears certain words or phases that are specific to African American people. We want him to be in touch with celebrating his Africanness. We choose books that have Black representation. He attends African-based festivals, and we take him to areas or towns and cities where he sees African American people as well as other people of color enjoying themselves together. It is important to me that Nathan hears Black music and that he watches Black TV; sometimes even the stereotypical stuff ain't too bad. It has become a form of ritual for me to grease him up with lotion when he comes over, or to take him to the barber shop. We talk about Africanness in a positive way, and we talk about how hard it is to be Black in the predominantly White area both we and his adoptive family live in. He hears us talk about the difficulty of being Black in America. We show him a side of life that is different from his adoptive family. Because the African American experience in America is very different from the Euro-American experience, I will continue to encourage him to celebrate his African self, because it is time for African people to celebrate and love themselves. I will continue to talk with Nathan's adoptive parents with as much truth as I think they can handle without becoming too downtrodden. 99.9% of what African Americans experience is hard for Euro-Americans to hear or believe. The fact that his adoptive parents and family love him and are receptive to his need to have a positive African identity is comforting to me. His adoptive parents are supportive and willing to call their family and friends on their biases. I'm hoping they will be willing to take on more battles than we might with their White friends and family. Nathan knows we love his little African self. and he does too.

Suzanne, Adoptive Mother

Open adoption for us has created a local extended family with birth mother, brother, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins and second cousins whom we have grown to consider family. We share much of what most extended families share: joys and celebrations, frustrations and concerns, illness and health. We celebrate holidays, seasons, weddings and festivals. Members of Nathan's birth family travel weekly, often several times each week, to the predominately African American community fifty miles away to shop, eat, attend lectures and festivals, hear music and visit the flea market. We have been fortunate to have been able to tag along and to begin to make our own forays on other occasions.

At home, John and I have African and Mexican art, decor, and a growing music collection. We love jazz and play Afro Cuban percussion. Nathan's brother Aaron plays the saxophone. We also have an extensive collection of books for both children and adults. I enjoy collecting books for Nathan, including many of the powerful writings of the Black Power movement of the sixties. Of course right now he would rather read about fictional super heroes, and I have been known to conveniently tint the skin color of more than one superman. As a mother, I find myself wanting to protect and buffer him from what I feel is a harsh reality. As a Caucasian woman, I feel I can't pretend to know what he will experience within a few short years. To deal with my growing sense of frustration and concern, I look for our family to become more active politically and in the

community now that Nathan is getting a little older. I hope that, through this, we can expand our family circle into the circles of other families of color with like concerns.

We feel his time with his birth family and his time spent surrounded by other African Americans is critical in helping him negotiate life as a young African American. As an extended family, we engage in long discussions about racism. I get angry as I hear of each new incident of discrimination for the family in job settings, housing or financial institutions, or in the community. I worry for Nathan. It is sometimes a struggle to stay sensitive without finding myself feeling uncomfortable, confused, naive, angry or anxious that I won't say something stupid or even racist. It is difficult to not feel in "control" and to realize that even in my most sincere efforts I am operating from my life-long perspective of White privilege and dominant culture. I have become increasingly and painfully more aware of the concept of "White privilege." As Caucasian Americans, we maintain the assumption that life in a mainstream culture extends to everyone, when in reality we are the privileged majority who can live, work or travel anywhere at any time without fear of being denied or harassed solely on the basis of our skin color and free from constant awareness of external limitations, expectations and stereotypes. It is as if "American" is synonymous with '"Dominant Culture" and "institutional racism." Trying to stay open to African American experience is a continual challenge as I attempt to steer clear of my own denial, assumptions, tokenism, and privileged "answers." I try to face my own deep-seated racism, my fears, anxieties, stereotypes and judgments, my sense of entitlement. Putting ourselves in situations of being in the racial minority serves a threefold purpose: we get a glimpse of what it is like constantly for our child; our child gets to experience positive mirroring and a sense of belonging; and we are enriched as a family.

John, Adoptive Father

From the beginning, I understood and agreed with the importance of an open adoption for our African American son, Nathan. I have come to believe that our relationship with Nathan's birth family is the single most important resource in facilitating his racial identity. In spending time together, we have had the opportunity to learn from Nathan's birth family, who have grown to feel like our family, what it means to be African American in our predominately White community.

When Nathan was a baby, I began listening to his birth family's experiences of discrimination. I found it incomprehensible. I felt sad and angry. As the weeks and the years passed, however, without relief from their protests of racism, I became critical and began to explain their descriptions of discrimination as internalized oppression, as if their expectations of racism in some way set them up to be discriminated against. I began nodding my head, in a White privileged sort of way, thinking it couldn't be that bad.

Then I began reading *Emerge*, an African American newsmagazine whose monthly arrival to our home I had previously ignored. When I read *It Makes You Wanna Holle*r, by Nathan McCall, I began to question some of my assumptions. After reading *Living With Racism: The Black Middle Class Experience*, by Feagen and Sikes, I knew that my son's birth family's experiences of discrimination were the rule and not the exception. As I read about assaults, threats of violence, racist epithets, hate stares, harassment by White police officers and the cumulative impact of these acts of racism on all people of African American descent, I realize that it was me, not my son's birth family, that had a problem accepting reality. I have come to learn that my critical and patronizing stance was my way of protecting myself from truly understanding the magnitude of my own racism and that of my community at large. It makes me feel ashamed, sad and scared to sit with my own racism. In coming to this realization, I have begun to understand just how deeply embedded are the stereotypes and prejudicial feelings towards people of dark skin color.

Now, I am able to set time aside to take my son to the mall or the flea market every other weekend and enjoy myself. Exposing Nathan to the African American music, children's literature, theater, film, playgrounds, sights, smells, sounds and the infinite variety of sizes, shapes and styles of people of his own color seems so important for all of us. My awareness of all of this would be so much paler had we not had the patience, acceptance and support of Nathan's birth family.