

Keeping In Touch

by Carmen Rodriguez

Four years ago, my then-husband and I helped his sister Eliana place her child for adoption. She asked us to choose the adoptive family and we found a wonderful couple. Eliana met the adoptive parents too and felt very good about them. Since the adoptive parents spoke no Spanish and she spoke no English, I was the translator for most of their interactions.

After baby Cassandra was born, she went home with her new family. Eliana's wishes, once she saw the baby was in a good home, were to go on with her life and for the time being at least to have no other contact with the baby or the adoptive parents. After completing the necessary interviews and documents, she moved back to the state where her parents and extended family live.

Since we had established a fond and friendly relationship with the adoptive parents during this process, we all agreed to keep in contact. For our son and the baby Cassandra, this would mean retaining their relationship as biological cousins.

During the first few months after the adoption, we visited frequently. When my husband and I separated about a year later, my son and I continued to visit. Sometimes we even celebrated holidays with Cassandra and her family. These visits, I believe, were comfortable occasions for all of us.

However, my son and I were then invited to and attended a large family reunion with Cassandra's adoptive family. My son felt lost with so many people he didn't know and clung to me. I also felt awkward. While everyone knew more or less who we were, our relationship to the family was not as well defined as that of brother, sister, aunt or cousin. We were "unfamiliar" in more than one sense. Everyone was friendly, but the comfortable and predictable interaction that existed within the family did not exist with us. I felt as if the adoption hung as an awkward and unspoken topic between us. After all, if it weren't for the adoption, my son and I wouldn't be there. Should we talk about it or ignore it? If we talked about it, should they ask about Eliana? If they did ask, what should I say? If she's not doing well, should I tell the truth or just smile and say she's fine? In such a conversational minefield, brief conversations about "safer" topics won out. When it was time for family pictures, there was one of all the brothers, one of all the grandchildren, one of Mom and Dad with George's family. My son and I didn't fit anywhere.

Since the reunion, we've opted for just getting together with the immediate family. Even that presents questions. We haven't seen each other for over a year. We speak on the phone, talk about getting together. Why haven't we done it? Is it that Cassandra is now a settled part of her adoptive family? Are her adoption and the people involved in it no longer at the top of the list? I wonder if I am a reminder of something they want to forget. Are my son and I undeniable evidence that Cassandra is adopted, that she has another "family"? Do we make them think that she is not 100% theirs? Do we remind them of Eliana and her pain in relinquishing Cassandra? Do they feel obligated to ask me how she is, even though they really don't want to know? Do they wonder if she has mixed feelings about the adoption? Since I helped choose them, maybe they feel judged as parents, perhaps as Caucasian parents of a Latina child. I don't know the answer to any of these questions. I don't feel it is my place to ask. I try to remain accessible but not intrusive, available but not pushy.

All of these things factor into our relationship. Sometimes I feel that I should just let the relationship lapse. Yet I feel that my son and I have an important role, at least for Cassandra, if not now, then maybe later. We knew her birth mother and the factors that led her to choose adoption.

Cassandra is Latina in appearance and resembles my son. My son and I are a link not only with Cassandra's biological heritage but with her ethnic and cultural heritage as well. Cassandra is now an integral part of her adoptive family, but she is also something more. I think that she will want that link with where she came from. Then again, there are adopted adults I know who have, or at least say they have, no desire to look for, meet or know about their biological family. Will we be an intrusion on Cassandra's psyche, a reminder that she is "different" or an affirmation of her identity not only as a member of her adoptive family, but as a part of another family and culture?

So many questions. To me it is uncharted territory. I must try to be flexible, ready to change as conditions change, and most importantly, to trust my instincts.

Carmen is the birth aunt by marriage of Cassandra.