Pact

Family Stories

Focus on highlighting our Pact adoptive families and their individual adoption journeys. From bringing home a child, to ongoing parenting issues, to openness in adoption, these stories will introduce you to other families that began just like yours who are now forever touched by adoption.

Enjoy!
Biological parents aren’t required to be interviewed, get a background check, provide financial statements, have their home inspected, or attend parenting classes before they can bring a child home. Jumping through all these hoops and more is a familiar ritual for adoptive parents. However, frustrating as it can sometimes be, there are definite benefits to “the wait,” as Wyleen and Jamil McCrary discovered.

A young African American couple living in the Northwest, Wyleen and Jamil were referred to Pact by relatives in the Bay Area. When they first contacted Pact, they were advised to delay their adoption plans because Jamil, who serves in the military, was about to be deployed to Iraq. Pact staff pointed out that it would be unfair for Jamil to miss out on the chance to be there from the first moments of their child’s life.

Once Jamil was safely home, he and Wyleen became clients and were in regular phone and email contact with Pact staff. Despite their geographical distance, they felt a strong connection to the folks at Pact—“they were always accessible, we knew we weren’t just numbers to them.” The McCrays were also put in contact with a former Pact client in their area, a pastor who shared suggestions for staying calm and focused during the waiting period.

One of the things that became clear to Wyleen was that the wait for adoptive parents is equivalent to a pregnancy (a concept eloquently articulated in Launching A Baby’s
Adoption by Patricia Irwin Johnston. They were “expecting” a child and now was the time to prepare. They shopped for baby clothes and thought about baby names. They also used the time to educate themselves about adoption. They watched adoption stories on TV, did internet research, read books, and attended workshops. During this period they came to terms with the fact that loss is an inherent part of adoption, even infant adoption. They thought about the nine months their child would spend growing inside his or her birth mother, listening to her voice. Aware that all this would be lost at birth, they prepared to be especially focused on bonding and attachment.

Contemplating all sides of the adoption triad had a dramatic impact on Jamil. He grew up with minimal contact with his own father. The absence of the man he sometimes called “the sperm donor” filled him with anger and resentment. During the adoption preparation process, he became ready to forgive his father and build a relationship with him as an adult. Reflecting the depth of this new connection, he and Wyleen even changed their last name to that of the man he now calls “Dad.”

Just about exactly nine months after the process began, Wyleen and Jamil got the call from Pact—they had been matched with a birth mother who was due in two weeks. They spoke with her over the phone, and met in person at the hospital when their son Jamil Junior was born. Jamil exults that he was the first to hold him, saying “it was me and him from the jump!”

Open adoption is another issue that Wyleen and Jamil have studied and come to terms with. When they first heard about it, it made them nervous, but as they learned more, the benefits for their child became obvious—access to family history, medical records, answers to questions. Reading Dear Birthmother, Thank You for Our Baby (Silber & Speedlin) was particularly eye-opening. They began to think of birth parents with compassion, rather than fear. Having embraced the open adoption approach, they now maintain contact with their son’s birth mother and grandmother, and hope to arrange visits in the future. Their own family has been supportive—as Wyleen put in, “To my mother, the birth family is just more family. She asks me how they are doing.”

Once they got Jamil Jr. home, Wyleen and Jamil acted on everything they had learned as they prepared. Everyone wanted to come see the new baby, but they limited visitors to immediate family. “We have an extended church family, and they were pretty mad at us, but we made them wait a month!” They organized their life around making sure Jamil Jr. was comfortable with his new parents and his new environment. For the first few months, they used “tag-team” parenting so that one of them was always home whenever the other went out.

Deeply religious people, the McCrarys praise God every day for their son, who is thriving. They began the adoption process filled with anxiety and doubt, but through careful preparation they found their way to knowledge, confidence, and joy. Congratulations, Wyleen, Jamil, and Jamil Jr!

UPDATE: In 2011, Wyleen and Jamil adopted their second son Jayden through Pact, they are loving being parents to their 2 boys!!
Annette Carnegie is a self-described “spreadsheet person.” Once she identifies a goal, she works toward it methodically, doing extensive research and weighing her options. She brought these skills to bear when she decided to become a single mother through adoption, an experience that was both dream-fulfilling and eye-opening.

Annette was working as an attorney at a high-powered law firm in San Francisco when she decided she was ready to become a mother. She herself was adopted by members of her extended family in Jamaica, so adoption was a familiar option. As an adopted person, she wanted to work with an organization that treated all members of the adoption triad with respect. As a person of color, she wanted to work with an organization that did active outreach to people of color as potential adoptive parents. Her research led her to Pact, where she felt the staff prepared her for adoption with thoughtful, provocative questions and the right mix of support and self-sufficiency.

After completing her paperwork, homestudy, and “Dear Birth Mother” letter, Annette settled in for the wait, which stretched over many months. During support group meetings, she bonded with another single mother anxiously awaiting a match—then watched enviously as her new friend showed up with a baby in her arms. Suddenly, while she was in the midst of a trial, she got the call. She had been matched with a little boy, born
a week earlier and living in foster care in Chicago. His birth mother had asked an agency there to find him an adoptive family—her only stipulation was that the parent(s) be African American.

Annette frantically gathered baby gear while working with Pact to figure out how to shoehorn her travel to Illinois into her non-negotiable trial schedule. When Annette arrived in Chicago, she was amazed to find that the local agency was entirely staffed by African Americans—but they had no African American adoptive parents as clients.

Within just a couple of days, Annette was headed home with her son Daniel in her arms. She was grateful that he had been cared for by an experienced, loving foster mother. Annette did not meet Daniel’s birth mother, but six months later the birth mother sent her a letter, and they have been in contact ever since, communicating via letters, emails, and a few phone calls. Daniel’s birth mother has since finished college and is now pursuing a master’s degree in early childhood education. Annette has been able to ask Daniel’s birth mother questions about her family medical history and get her expert advice on Daniel’s developmental progress.

An only child herself, Annette always wanted to have more one than child. By the time Daniel was three, she was in spreadsheet mode again, planning how she could manage work and childcare with two kids. She began searching for a less high-pressure job, and contacted Pact again. Just months after her file was activated, while negotiating a new job, she got word that she had been matched with a baby who was due to be born within days.

This time both birth parents were involved. They were quite clear that they were seeking an open adoption with a family of color, and had grown frustrated with the agency they were working with, who kept matching them with white families and/or families of color who wanted a closed adoption. Finally they contacted Pact themselves, who connected them with Annette.

Within days, she was on the red-eye to Florida, where she was able to witness the birth of her son Eli. Ten days later, the two of them returned to San Francisco, where soon Daniel was proclaiming, “Thank you for getting my baby brother, I love him so much!”

Eli’s birth parents want to maintain regular communication, and Annette has worked with them to establish realistic expectations. She sends them letters and pictures, and together they are deciding when a visit will happen. She understands that their pressing need for contact stems in part from their experience in a system that was not respectful of their needs and left them feeling powerless.

When asked if she worried about the economic inequity between her and her children’s birth parents, Annette made clear that because her own family has struggled with poverty, she is experienced in setting boundaries about what kind of support she can or cannot provide—a perspective shared by many African Americans who have risen from impoverished backgrounds and worked hard to achieve professional success and financial security.

Annette and her boys have settled into a busy, happy life. Annette gets help with childcare from a nanny and babysitter, and Daniel is now attending preschool (as well as swimming, soccer, and karate lessons). Because the African American population in San Francisco is relatively small, and her family is not nearby, Annette has joined Jack and Jill to make sure her sons have regular opportunities to interact with other African American children. She says she does not “flog” their identities as African Americans or as adoptees, but rather makes both a natural part of life.

Annette acknowledges that despite all her planning and preparation, some aspects of parenthood emerged unexpectedly. As she says, “People come to you…a community develops around your child.” To any woman who is considering single motherhood, she says, “It is an incredibly enriching experience…you have so much to offer!”
Michelle and Ed came to Pact in May of 2007 at the end of an exhaustive search around the San Francisco Bay Area for adoption services that focus on African American children. Having met later in life, they spent the early years of their marriage getting to know each other better and traveling around the globe for business and pleasure, while pursuing dynamic careers in marketing and engineering. They reached the decision that adoption was right for them and were anxious to begin the process. In a few short months, they completed the preparation process and asked Pact to begin their search.

On October 28, 2007, a newborn boy, who they had the opportunity to name Edward Jr., entered their lives and their hearts. They now firmly believe what many had told them about the moment when you finally adopt: the baby you are joined with is the one who was meant for you. There were a series of coincidences that made them believe it was fate. Edward Jr. was born in Georgia, the same state where Michelle’s two sisters live. She and Ed had already planned a vacation there when they found out that they had been matched with this newborn boy. They had hoped for a boy because they both know how important strong African American men are to the world today.

Michelle and Ed had dreams of what connecting with their baby would be like before they saw and held him for the first time. The arrival of Edward Jr. has resulted in even more changes in their life than they anticipated. Michelle spent time over her three-month family leave thinking long and hard about her future. She came to the decision that she wanted to take a year off from work and pursue a new, more flexible career path.
This came as a shock to friends and family, as Michelle had begun the process with the full intention of returning to her demanding position at a Silicon Valley tech company. Perhaps none of us can understand the deep well of care and concern that is uncovered when we fall in love with our children until we have experienced it ourselves.

As they adjust to parenthood, Michelle and Ed find themselves rethinking some of their assumptions about how their lives as a family will move forward. Suddenly issues of advocacy and belonging take on a new meaning. Looking around their South Bay neighborhood, they realize that the advocacy role they will need to take on Eddie’s behalf is going to be more important than they had originally anticipated.

As an African American couple, they have always felt comfortable in their predominantly white neighborhood, but now that they see things through Eddie’s eyes, they find themselves worrying more about the impact this will have on his everyday encounters with other children. They worry about the schools in their upper-middle-class neighborhood and wonder whether Eddie will feel comfortable with the other children and families he will be exposed to there, because he is Black and because he is adopted. Michelle and Ed are coming to understand that their definition of what makes a school good can no longer be simply about academic ratings, but must also include support for different kinds of family formation as well as ethnic and cultural representation and validation.

Ed Sr. gets comments from family and friends about how much Eddie Junior looks like him. While he and Michelle are delighted that Eddie fits in so well with them, they never want him to feel ashamed or sad because of his adoption. They are realizing that they want to be proactive in ensuring his connections to other families and friends who share his experiences in the world. They are enjoying their participation in Pact’s support groups for Adoptive Parents of Color and other mothers’ groups in their area.

Michelle is thrilled to be embarking on her new identity as Mommy and finding ways to change their world so that all three of them can feel comfortable and strong within their family, proud of who they are and the way they have become a family. Ed Senior has just started his own three-month bonding leave. We congratulate all of them as they evolve as a family.
Growing up biracial in San Francisco, with a Chinese mother and a white father, Stefanie knew what it was like to feel different, to navigate the mixture of two races and two cultures. When she became pregnant with a child whose biological father was African American, and decided to make an adoption plan, she knew she wanted her child to have a multiracial family, parents who would understand her child's multiracial reality. She didn’t want her child to feel isolated or alone. She also knew that she wanted to maintain contact with her child and be a part of her life.

When Stefanie started contacting adoption agencies, they told her there was no way they could find an adoptive family that would meet all her expectations. Looking back on the experience, her advice to expectant mothers is clear: “Don’t let anyone tell you that what you want is impossible. People of all races suffer from infertility. And if you want an open adoption, you deserve one.” And she admonishes prospective adoptive parents: “Be honest about how open you are truly willing to be, and make sure your social worker is being honest about it as well.”

By the time Stefanie connected with Pact, just a few weeks before her baby was due, she had a very definite wish list. She really wanted to find an interracial couple, but was open to considering a couple that had already adopted transracially. She wanted them to be educated, stable professionals. And she wanted an open adoption. Contrary to what she had been told previously, Pact was able to present her with the profiles of a number of interracial professional families seeking open adoption. They did exist after all!

Meanwhile, in Los Angeles, Susan and David had just begun to explore the possibility of forming their family through adoption. They had started talking to friends and acquaintances who had adopted, and Susan had recently attended an adoption fair. Then, on the day after Father’s Day, they got a call from some close friends who had adopted through Pact: “You’re not
going to believe this—Pact is looking for a family exactly like you!” Susan’s parents are Japanese and African American, and David’s are African American, with some Irish branches on the family tree. Pact was doing outreach, looking for families that would meet Stefanie’s requirements as closely as possible, and the Pact family network led them to Susan and David.

Because Susan and David were at such an early point in the process, they had to complete the infamous mountain of adoption paperwork in record time before their profile could be presented to Stefanie. But at last they were cleared to email a letter. Then things began to move really fast.

Stefanie still recounts the chronology with a sense of awe. On July 2, 2009, she read Susan and David’s letter. On July 3, she spoke with them on the phone for about an hour. The next day, they flew up to the Bay Area to meet her in person. And the day after that, she went into labor. She remembers calling Susan and saying, “My water just broke—are you ready to be parents?”

“It was a shotgun wedding,” says Stefanie, “but it felt right. I joke that my daughter chose her parents—as soon as I met them, she was ready to come out!” Susan and David, who were back in LA when they got the news, rushed out to get baby equipment and supplies. Stefanie had specified in her birth plan that she wanted to deliver the baby with only her own family and friends present, and spend a few days in the hospital before relinquishing her child. As she puts it, “I was ending my motherhood on my own terms.”

When Susan and David arrived, Stefanie said to her baby, “Here are your parents.” When the time came for them to leave, she handed the girl she had named Sofia to Susan and David in a ritual she had carefully planned to give herself a sense of closure amidst the pain of separation.

When Susan and David were researching adoption, they talked to parents who had pursued both open and closed adoptions, and Susan felt from the beginning that an open adoption was right for them. She wanted her child to know her own story, to know where she came from. David at first worried that a child in an open adoption might feel confused—until he thought about his own family, which, as he puts it, “looks like a crazy quilt.” He remembered all the half-siblings, all the cousins and aunts and uncles who may or may not have been connected by blood, and realized that families come in all shapes and sizes. His fear faded away. Any remaining anxiety he may have felt was allayed by meeting Stefanie and her family and seeing how clearly they had Sophia’s best interests at heart.

Not long after Susan and David returned home with Sophia (they kept the name that Stefanie had chosen but decided on a different spelling), they began speaking with Stefanie frequently by phone, and making arrangements for her first visit to LA. Some friends and family worried that it was too soon, but it didn’t feel too soon to them. Within a few months, Stefanie flew down to spend time at their home, an experience that she remembers as both “joyous and painful.” Susan and David tried to make sure that Stefanie and Sophia had time alone together. Susan says, “I thought I might feel territorial, but I never did.” David adds, “We feel very lucky to have Stefanie in our lives—she took her role of bringing a life into the world so seriously, and she genuinely loves and cares for Sophia. That’s the starting point of all our interactions.”

Sophia is now two years old, and all the relationships continue to evolve. Sophia is about to enter pre-school, and Stefanie is entering graduate school. A regular pattern has emerged, with one visit to LA and one visit to San Francisco each year. Susan and David have enjoyed getting to know Stefanie’s extended family. Stefanie says she feels a deep bond with Sophia, but at the same time is clear “I am not a mom anymore.” This summer she wrote in a Mother’s Day/Father’s Day card to Susan and David, “I’m so happy that you are doing for her what I can’t—you are the dedicated parents she deserves.” She sees herself as there to support them, not to interfere. She has also built relationships with other birth mothers, which she says has helped her feel “less alone, more calm and grounded.”

Stefanie, Susan and David all recognize that their relationship will continue to grow and change over time, and that as Sophia matures she will play an increasingly active role in it. There are always new permutations of open adoption to explore: how to talk to Sophia about her birth family between visits, how to honor the many cultures in her birth and adoptive families, how (or whether) to discuss adoption with acquaintances who assume that Sophia is Susan and David’s biological child. David summed it up, “How do we adults absorb the complexity of this human relationship so it is seamless and positive for our child, so she can have a healthy sense of self? Our starting point is candor, and educating ourselves. It’s all part of the phenomenal journey of parenting.”

Stefanie, Susan, David and Sophia have indeed embarked on a lifelong journey together. With open hearts and open minds, they are obviously headed in the right direction.
**Pact Family Stories**

**Long-Distance Pact Story - The McMullens**

Amanda and Quentin McMullen live in Rhode Island, where Amanda was born and raised. She jokes that to a Rhode Islander, any place that takes more than ten minutes to reach is considered “far away.” So it took a tremendous leap of faith for them to decide to work with Pact, based on the opposite coast in Oakland, CA. But the more they explored their options, the clearer it became that Pact was right for them.

After confronting infertility and choosing to pursue adoption, Amanda and Quentin had to figure out what was most important to them. Amanda wanted the experience of raising a child from infancy. Quentin, who is biracial, wanted a child with whom he could share the racial experience of “balancing between two worlds, two cultures.” They both wanted to know as much as possible about the child they adopted and didn’t want their child to grow up disconnected from the value of their birth heritage. It became clear that domestic open adoption was the best way to create the family they wanted.

As they attended adoption conferences and classes, they began to notice that whenever the topic was children of color, Pact was invariably mentioned. They went to one workshop on the subject where all the materials came from Pact. Still, California seemed impossibly far away. They began to work with an agency in the Midwest, but the agency wasn’t really set up to work with out-of-towners. They decided to contact Pact.

From the beginning, Amanda recalls, “we could tell we were a Pact family.” After completing an
initial questionnaire, they had a two-hour phone conversation with Pact staff, who clearly laid out the steps of how they would work with Pact long-distance. Quentin and Amanda were struck not only by the thoughtful way the matching would work, but by the insightful questions they were asked. For instance, Quentin says, “I told them I am a slow, deliberate decision-maker. They pointed out that sometimes adoption decisions need to be made very quickly, so I needed to think about how I would handle that.”

And so Quentin and Amanda’s bicoastal adoption journey began. Their home study and adoption preparation classes were completed in Rhode Island. Meanwhile, they worked closely with Pact to put together their “dear expectant parent ” packet. They read books from a Pact-recommended list. Pact staff provided coaching on how to explain open adoption to their own families.

Shortly after their file was activated, the call came from Pact: they had been matched with a biracial girl who had been born one month earlier. As much as Quentin and Amanda had been anticipating this moment, they were stunned by the news. So much for careful, deliberate planning—their baby was already here! Soon a hundred pages of medical records were spewing from the fax machine at Amanda’s office. When a page appeared showing the baby’s footprints, she began to sob.

Hurricane Ivan hit just as they were preparing to fly to Mississippi to meet their daughter, delaying their arrival by a week. When things finally got back to normal, Pact helped Quentin and Amanda explain the concept of open adoption to the birth mother’s agency, who considered their desire to meet the woman “an interesting experiment.”

In what they describe as a “surreal moment,” Quentin and Amanda finally met their daughter Zoe in an Olive Garden parking lot, where she was handed to them by her foster mother. Then they went inside and met Zoe’s birth mother and grandmother. They talked for hours and took lots of pictures. The grandmother said, “I thought this would be sad, but this has been a really, really happy day.” As she was leaving, Zoe’s birth mother turned to Amanda and said, “You are her mother. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.”

After Zoe turned two, Quentin and Amanda began seeking a second child. Following a yearlong wait, Pact called to let them know they had been matched with a woman in Florida who was seven and half months pregnant. They were about to leave for a vacation in Florida, so they were able to visit the expectant mother and father. Just a few weeks later, they got a second call: the baby was arriving early! They rushed back and were able to hold their son twelve hours after he was born. As all his parents gathered around, the conversation turned to choosing a name. When Quentin and Amanda suggested Cameron Matthew, his birth mother’s face lit up: she loved the name Cameron and Matthew is her brother’s name. Of all the people to whom they told the story of Cameron’s naming, they feel it was Pact staff who best understood the importance of this moment.

Zoe is now five and Cameron is almost two. Amanda says, “Pact continues to be a part of our lives.” She and Quentin have gotten advice from Pact on how to navigate communications with their children’s birth parents; what to do when crises arise in the birth families’ lives; what to tell their first child during the process of adopting a second; and how to answer their children’s questions as they get older. This Rhode Island Pact family has yet to travel to California or meet any of the Pact staff in person, but one day, they say, “we really want to come to Pact Camp!”
Dakota Brown and Julia Jackson have been together for six and a half years and trying to have a baby for five of those years. With help from Pact, they recently brought home their newborn adopted son, Seneca. Filled with relief—and some disbelief—that they have finally become parents, they sat down with Pact to discuss their journey and what the future holds.

As well as being an attorney, Julia is a practicing artist, and she has used her performances to explore her pain over the loss of control she felt in her attempts to become a parent. Ranging from failed in vitro fertilization (using donor sperm) to becoming a foster parent only to find herself and her partner rejected as “not being the best choice after all” for a little boy they were planning to adopt, each attempt to become a mother seemed to resonate with her other experiences of not fitting anyone’s “ideal.” Julia says, “As a biracial lesbian I have spent my life not quite fitting into other people’s expectations and not feeling like I have had a place where I could be authentically myself. Sometimes I get exhausted from the experience of showing up.”

“Being the mother of a black son—my black father’s first grandson—it feels good. I used to question myself. Am I black enough to be his mother? Am I woman enough to be his mother? Now that seems irrelevant. Meeting and spending time getting to know Seneca’s birth mother was a validation of our shared experience and how that will be important for Seneca…”

“I was talking to my dad,” Julia laughs, “and he was excited and asking what Seneca looks like. ‘Darker than OJ, maybe not Wesley Snipes, probably Donavan McNabb,’ I said, and we both laughed and understood what it means to each of us and to Seneca. I watch him getting darker every day and I am pleased and comfortable with how happy that makes me, even while I find it interesting to watch how different people respond not just to him but to his ever more visible blackness, which says something about who they are.”

Before Seneca’s birth, Dakota wrote about her own fears in her poem Not From My Body (on next page). Now she feels less intimidated and more able to say “yes, I am your mother” rather than questioning her role or ability. “You begin with your best-laid plans and then it happens and you find yourself having to defend your space, defend your family…. and everything else goes out the window.”

“So as the white mother of a black son, does my son have more value? Do I have less? Am I still afraid about how to maneuver this? Of course. I know that I will have to defend it, my whiteness, my gayness, my adoptive parent-ness. Is today a day I am willing to educate others or just say “you are irrelevant” and remove them from our life? I feel like he is my kid. Before I was worried about how I would handle it, now I am over that and it is about handling it. I was afraid that the magic might not be there, now I know it is. Ultimately, this is it, he is it. The rest will need to be dealt with. I no longer have time for worrying about other people’s issues, it is all about him.”
At the hospital where Seneca was born, Julia and Dakota saw how race and class inflected their child’s birth. The staff at the hospital was all white, while the client population was mostly people of color, many of whom are indigent. The staff perceived Julia as educated, and Dakota as white, so “they would answer our questions when we had questions about Seneca’s health, but they were hostile towards the indigent mom who they thought was uneducated. We watched as they would respond to her differently, like she was being ‘uppity’ for asking questions about her sick baby.” At one point the head nurse mentioned that the birth rate in Arizona (where Seneca was born) was going down. Julia asked her why. “Oh I know why,” she expounded, “the crackdown on immigration…” She had no understanding of how racist and classist she was being. “We found ourselves silenced,” explains Dakota, “feeling afraid to take her on because of her role in caring for our own son and also recognizing this as only a small example of what our life as a family holds.”

There is a song by Sweet Honey In The Rock that Dakota found herself thinking about:

*We who believe in freedom cannot rest
We who believe in freedom cannot rest
until it comes
Until the killing of black men, black mothers’ sons
Is as important as the killing of white men, white mothers’ sons
We who believe in freedom cannot rest*

There will be many battles to come. But Dakota and Julia realize that they each bring strength and experience from the struggles they have already faced, and that will give them the tools to help Seneca fight his battles as well. The journey to find each other was a long one, but now Dakota, Julia, and Seneca are together and joyfully celebrating their new life as a family.

*Dakota Brown wrote this poem in August 2008, before she and her partner Julia became parents to Seneca, their beautiful African American son, who was born and placed with them for adoption at the end of November 2008.*

---

**Not From My Body**

*By Dakota Brown*

**Before I hold you**
I will be told by Others
We don’t even know

I am too white to be your mother
Black women white women
Tell me in a tall voice
Do you know, you are white

I am reminded at a table
We will be different
I am reminded in a letter
I must be aware
I will be different

I am too white to be your mother

Am I too white to hold you
Am I too white to know, you
On the first day of the first time,
You do everything

I can’t wait for you to do everything

Son, inside my body,
I feel the weight of your Every small breath
Brown baby, my baby
Soft small breath, soft small

Breathe
Afraid you will grow up
And tell me
I am too white to be your mother
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’ 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.
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.

Kristen, 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.
Desiree Alexander and Leif Jenssen radiate confidence and optimism, but they are the first to warn that adopting a child doesn’t make you an adoption expert. “Remember,” Leif jokes, “You don’t know jack. Even if you think you do, you really don’t. Every adoption is different, every child is different.” Their adoption journey has been a continuous learning experience, both painful and joyous.

About five years ago, this Bay Area couple began exploring adoption, without ruling out the possibility of a successful pregnancy. After a three-month wait, Pact called them about an African American boy who had just been born. The next day they met the birth mother and brought home their son Xavier. Just weeks earlier they were attending Pact workshops, watching with wonder the parents who arrived with newly-adopted babies—now suddenly they were one of those families. They were nervous and ecstatic to become parents overnight. Since then their contact with Xavier’s birth mother has been sporadic, but they are amazed and grateful that she always tries to call them on Mother’s and Father’s Day and never fails to emphasize that adoption was “the right decision.”

Desiree and Leif, who are both white, are keenly aware of the complexities of creating a transracial family. Since Xavier’s birth, they have “given more weight” to spending time with the people of color within their diverse circle of friends. Desiree says, “I want my children to see people who look like them every day.” When choosing a preschool for Xavier, their highest priority was to find one with both African American children and teachers. Pact Family Camp provided them with an environment where they could discuss race, adoption, and parenting with other transracial adoptive parents—and gave Xavier a chance to meet other children with families like his. Desiree also enjoyed getting to know the young camp counselors, most of whom are African American. Listening to their experiences gave her a window into her children’s futures.
When Xavier was two, Desiree and Leif were ready for a second child—and Desiree hoped it would be a girl. This time, adoption was the only option they pursued. They felt it best for both their children to join the family the same way, and to share the same racial identity. Soon they got a call about a girl who had just been born in Southern California, and a few days later they were once again home with a newborn. The birth mother’s social worker assured them that the final paperwork would be completed shortly. Then, ten days after they had returned home, they got the call from Pact—the birth mother had decided not to relinquish her child. At their request, someone came to pick up “Baby Girl” as she slept and they never saw her again.

Desiree likens the experience to an unwanted break-up or divorce: “you want the person back but you can’t have them.” She didn’t feel angry at the birth mother, but did feel anguish that she would never know how things turned out for the child she was prepared to love as her daughter.

Despite the pain, Desiree and Leif were determined to try again as soon as possible. Hoping to speed the process, they contacted an old friend who is an adoption attorney. Soon they were dealing with a bewildering array of direct contacts from somewhat shady adoption professionals. In one case, they realized that legal trickery was being used to coerce a reluctant birth mother into relinquishing her child. They both agreed, “We are desperate to become parents again, but not at the cost of ‘stealing’ the baby of someone who is ready and able to parent.” They were grateful to Pact for helping them identify and walk away this and other highly unethical situation.

Finally they were matched with a woman in Tennessee who was due to give birth in ninety days—an agonizingly long wait for them. Visiting her, they felt an instant rapport. They were warmly welcomed by her extended family (a humbling experience, Desiree points out, since it was clear the family could have raised the child: “that’s why I hate it when someone says my children are ‘lucky’ to have been adopted”). While filled with trepidation that the birth mother would change her mind, they were reassured by how decisive she was.

The birth father was out of the picture and she was certain that adoption was the right choice. At last they got the call: their second son had been born. They flew out immediately. Then the birth father re-surfaced, creating new uncertainty. The birth mother turned to Desiree as a confidante, trying to figure out what she should do. Desiree describes “trying to be a grown up” for this young woman, telling the birth mother that she needed to decide what was best for the baby and whatever she chose was okay. It was hard, but even when Desiree felt she could no longer cope with the stress, she never lost sight of the incredible complexity that is adoption—pain and joy wrapped together.

In the end, the birth mother decided to follow through on her adoption plan, and Desiree, Leif, and Xavier welcomed little Hollis into their family—a baby boy who looked as if he could be Xavier’s biological sibling. The brothers have a wonderful relationship, making Desiree glad they ended up with two boys.

The learning process doesn’t end with placement. Desiree and Leif have struggled to figure out their role in the tumultuous life of Xavier’s birth mother. The preschool they so carefully selected turned out not to be the best fit. Desiree was proud of the frequency with which she discussed adoption with Xavier, until a therapist told her to ease up a little. Hollis’s birth mother wanted an intense level of contact at first, and Leif sometimes had to play a mediating role to respond to her needs while also protecting Desiree’s need to focus on and attach with her new son. Now, a year later, the relationship feels healthily balanced and a reunion visit is being planned.

In adoption parlance, Desiree, Leif, Xavier, and Hollis will always be a “visible” family, their racial differences catching the eye of even the most casual observer. What is visible to the more careful observer is the deep love and devotion that binds this family together, forged from their willingness to embrace the pain along with the joy of adoption. Desiree and Leif are still optimists, smiling when they say that the journey to date has changed their lives in ways they never could have anticipated.