

Pact Family Stories

What Sophia Needed: Open Hearts, Open Minds



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.