

The McLaughlin Family's Adoption Story

"Wow, you guys are so cool."

"We're proud of you."

"That's wonderful news!"

"More people should be like you."

"Are you nuts?"

"Why not have your own?"

"Are you sure?"

"These are messed up kids that will end up killing you in your sleep!"

These were the words and reactions we experienced when we announced we were looking to adopt an older child from U.S. foster care. Our experience thus far has been as varied as those initial reactions!

We had been married for almost 15 years when we embarked on our adoption quest. Truth is, since about the age of 14, I had always known that someday I wanted to adopt an older child. Only problem was I had never shared that idea with my husband and when I finally did his response was, "Why don't we just have a biological child?" That was always an option, but it didn't come to be. As a couple we were not upset by this. It just solidified in my mind that this was God's way to show us that we were predestined to adopt; God had plans for us.

My husband was not totally onboard with the idea. We were older, career driven and had worked hard and enjoyed our quiet home life. Sensing my sincerity, Richard agreed to be open to the idea of at least finding out more about foster care adoption.

We attended our first informational meeting at Adoptions Together in December 2005. It was very educational and it provided us with a better idea of what would be in store for us should we decide to continue. After making sure this was something Richard would be okay with and after exploring other adoption options, we came to the conclusion that Adoptions Together would be our best resource to pursue.

Our mandatory adoption training was held at the Silver Spring office in late spring/early summer of 2006. I was pleasantly surprised by my husband's commitment to the training. Neither of us missed any classes despite our varied schedules and the inconvenience of the Silver Spring office from our residence.

Our instructor, Erica, was very knowledgeable and kept things lively for us. She presented ideas that most of the students hadn't considered. In many ways it was an eye opener, and I think all of us came out of the training with the realization that fairy tale adoptions don't exist and adoption is not for the faint of heart. Adoption is a very daunting challenge, it will test you on many levels but for those that do it, the rewards do come eventually.

Our training class was comprised of folks from all walks of life, yet our common denominator, that desire to adopt an older child, brought us together. The cohesiveness of the class became more obvious as time went by. Many of us are still in contact with each other today. We are all at various stages of adoption. Some further along in the process than others. We encourage each other via phone and emails. We often send email updates on our progress. We don't sugar coat things. We tell it like it is - the good, the bad and the ugly. Those who have not yet had a child placed with them tell us that hearing about their classmates experiences helps them mentally to prepare for what awaits them.

Once our adoption training was completed and all our inspections, fingerprints, background checks, etc., were done, we got to meet our Social Worker, Tammy Spengler. Tammy visited with us together as well as separately and she talked to our references. She did a very thorough job on our Home Study, but as we lived it, it seemed like an agonizingly long time! She told us her report would be completed in about three months, and in fact, she was done within that time. However, despite being told not to search the internet for children, we did anyway! Of course, all the kids we just knew would be great for our family were already placed by the time we were truly eligible to officially begin our search.

By the beginning of October 2006 we finally had a completed and approved home study. We could now officially surf the net for our child or children. Before so doing, Richard and I agreed on some basics. We had certain parameters to work within. We had to decide to what extent we would be able to handle certain emotional, developmental and physical challenges. We agreed we would take up to two siblings between the age of 3 and 11 and we were willing to accept certain issues and not willing to accept others.

For the most part, I was the chief searcher. After awhile it seemed like I knew every face of every child who met our criteria. I quickly became disillusioned when none of the children's caseworkers would get back with me when I would click, via the computer, or leave phone messages. Weren't we good enough? Were there so many other more qualified prospective parents that we were being overlooked? I wasn't sure what was going on but when I did get word from a child's caseworker to forward our home study Adoptions Together was prompt to do so.

Feast or famine seemed to be the game for us. Or perhaps I should say famine and then feast! After weeks of no luck, all of a sudden I began getting phone calls from case workers. They were calling me! We weren't so bad after all! For whatever reason, we seemed to be at the top of everyone's list. We started getting more in depth case studies of children. It was apparent that some would not be suitable for us once we delved further into their histories. Others seemed like they would be just perfect.

All of a sudden, we were the top choice for three different boys. How to decide? This didn't seem fair. This was too hard. Of the three, we got down to our top two choices. It seemed so callous. How could we choose one over the other? We were torn between a 5 year old boy and a 9 year old boy.

To help us decide, Adoptions Together set up phone conferences with representatives of each prospective boy. We got to speak to the boys' current foster parents, listen to the boys' case workers, psychologists, attorneys etc. We could ask any questions we wanted. Richard and I had little to say. All this was new to us. Fortunately, Carol Edelstein and Tammy Spengler were there with us and they had lots of pertinent questions.

We found these conferences to be very insightful. Everyone was very honest about the boys. No one tried to hide any character flaws or personal issues. The boys' representatives had the boys' best interest at heart. They wanted us to know everything possible. They didn't want to hide anything. They wanted our best informed decision.

After both of the conferences, it still was not apparent which boy we should select. I asked if we could take both, but we were told that was against the rules! It was harder not selecting one of the boys than it was selecting the other. Finally, my husband and I decided we would privately write down on a piece of paper the name of the boy we were leaning toward selecting and then exchange papers. As it turned out, we each selected the 9 year old. At least we were in sync with our selection. Still, it was hard saying no to the other boy. To this day I still think about the other boy and I wonder whether he ever got placed.

Now that our child was selected, when do we get him? It was early January 2007 when we decided on Nick. We put together a family photo album and made a home video and sent them to Nick. These items were used by Nick's caseworker and counselors to broach the subject of being adopted. Nick got to see what we looked like. He got to see the house, his room, all the animals and the farm. We gave him a video tour of everything.

March 18, 2007 we finally got to meet Nick in person! He immediately presented himself as a challenge and quite frankly, my husband was ready to run back home without him! Nick was understandably anxious and scared, but he didn't want to admit it. Instead, he would argue about everything and he never hesitated to tell us that he didn't have listen to us. "You're not the boss of me!" was his favorite line. Nick was nine but he behaved like a spoiled toddler. This was hard to take, but we relied on our training from Adoptions Together and told ourselves this was 'normal'. This is normal.....right?

Trying to keep up with Nick was very tiring. Trying to stay one step ahead of his emotional games was difficult. He would like us one minute and hate us the next. For the first few weeks Nick challenged our authority on everything. He would explode at the dumbest of things. When angry or upset, which was most of the time; he would retreat to his bedroom, slam the door and hide under his bed or in his closet. Nick would not accept responsibility for any of his actions. He would not listen to anything we said. He would throw his food, yell at us, use inappropriate language and tell us he knew foster kids weren't allowed to be spanked! He would threaten to call the police and lie that we were beating him. He was a self proclaimed know it all.

I had taken a leave of absence from work so that I could hopefully bond with Nick and so that I could home school him through the end of the year. Nick was worried about having

to start a new school so late in the year. I had brief experience, a lifetime ago, with some teaching, but I found home schooling to be hard and fun at the same time. It was hard learning to be Nick's mom and his teacher at the same time. Nick didn't seem to have any trouble accepting my dual roles.

Despite Nick's attitude at times, he really liked home school. He was a challenge most of the time and he would throw his pencils, intentionally break his pencil points and at times he would cry and tell me he was stupid and then he would rip up his papers and textbooks. Sometimes he would just sit with his head down refusing to do any work. No matter what Nick dished out, I forced myself to try to remain calm, cool and collected. I was not going to let this kid see me rattled! I soon learned a masterful technique to get Nick to do his work. Nick loved our home school Physical Education! Nick was learning to ride our ponies and every day for PE I would give him some riding instructions and then we would take a trail ride through the woods. Whenever Nick was in school work shutdown mode, I would tell him we would be riding as soon as he got his work done. This worked every time!

Nick quickly learned that ponies didn't respond well to his tantrums and impulsiveness. I told him he had to learn to use 'pony talk' to communicate with his pony. After many exasperating riding sessions, Nick began to catch on and it was great to watch this transformation. He learned to be gentle but firm with the pony. Nick was becoming a decent rider and it did wonders for his self esteem!

Nick quickly learned that in our household all actions had consequences. He still tested us but each day got a little better. His big explosions became short lasting mini meltdowns. He was learning and beginning to trust us. After about 3 weeks, he began calling us Mom and Dad.

Things with Nick progressed nicely and then we shook things up a bit when I returned to work and Richard took a leave of absence to stay home full time for a couple months. Nick was now on summer vacation so school was not an issue. Nick tested Richard just like he had done to me, but Richard handled this in a much different way. Richard was getting more and more frustrated and at times was ready to pack Nick up and send him back. Richard missed his quiet unassuming lifestyle he once had. Despite the friction between the two, Nick worshipped the ground Richard walked on and idolized my husband's ability to repair things in "Manland". Manland is my husband's workshop; no girls allowed!

Throughout the summer Nick made friends with the neighbor boys and he learned how to accept limited responsibility. The first time he apologized for a previous behavior I knew there was hope. He truly felt bad for giving us attitude. We truly felt good that Nick was learning that his deeds affect others.

Today Nick appears happy. He is certainly not without issues, but at home we have little problem with him. He doesn't like everything we tell him but he complies with our rules and is respectful. He still mouths off and tests the waters at times, but he knows when he

has pushed things too far and he apologizes and accepts his punishments. Now, if we could just transfer his 'at home' behavior to the school setting! Nick still struggles with behavior issues at school; mainly his ADHD and impulsiveness gets in his way and he just talks too much and doesn't know when it is in his best interest to keep quiet!

Nick has enriched our lives in many ways. Being first time parents, it is great to have a child in the house who calls us Mom and Dad. He wants to be treated like a big kid at times and he argues he is not a baby, but most of the time he relishes all the attention we give him. It is funny how much he looks like us; even Nick notices our physical similarities. Nick tells us he wishes he was born to us. He hangs on every word we say and every action we do – even if we wish he didn't at times! We have overheard him saying and making expressions just as we do. Nick identifies himself as a McLaughlin, although he still talks about his past families. He identifies with our life and he includes himself as part owner of all of our property, be it the farm, animals, truck etc. This is OUR FARM he will say and he is right, all that we have is also his. It has been exciting, yet taxing, to watch Nick go from a stranger in our house to our son!

None of this would have been possible without the support the Adoptions Together staff. All have been great help and always willing to assist in anyway they can. Without Carol Edelstein and Tammy Spengler's experience, we would still be trying to figure out all the paperwork. Through Adoptions Together I set up counseling through adoption psychologist Louise Fleishman. Her help has been tremendous. I readily recognized that this was not my area of expertise and I would often defer to her suggestions on how to deal with Nick. Without fail, all her ideas worked! Louise and Tammy are always just a phone call or an email away! In addition to the great staff at Adoptions Together, we have been blessed to have great neighbors and friends and family that have helped us along the way. Thanks to all.