



A HEART FOR Family

By Maria Oldham

Chattanooga's Adoptive Families Share Their Stories of Hope & Healing



On any given day in Chattanooga—be it a cool fall afternoon or a sunny summer morning—you'll find dozens of families strolling along Walnut Street Bridge, picnicking along the waterfront, or playing in Coolidge Park. Anyone who has lived in, visited, or researched Chattanooga knows that it is a great place for kids to run, play, learn and grow. Here, we have a thriving city, abundant with family-friendly attractions and inhabited by a diverse group of people. But there is another integral part of this city's family appeal that many people don't know about: Chattanooga's flourishing adoption community.

Working within the expansive network of adoption agencies and programs in Chattanooga are families who are answering the call of 144 million children around the world needing a loving home. What follows are the stories of four couples who have embraced the adoption process, believing it to be a reflection of the heart of God. Through both domestic and international adoptions, their families are expanding in a very special way.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

Here are a few resources for those considering adoption or for those who want to donate to the cause.

Lookout for Orphans is a local nonprofit organization helping to encourage, educate and support families aiming to adopt. lookoutfororphans.com, (706) 820-1983

Both Hands is a foundation aiming to support widows, orphans and adoptive families by raising funds for orphans through volunteer projects for widows. bothhandsfoundation.org, (615) 969-7565

Bethany Christian Services provides adoption and foster care services, counseling and more.

bethany.org, 1-(800)-BETHANY

Half the Sky advocates for Chinese children in welfare institutions and connects adoptive families across the world.

halfthesky.org, (510) 525-3377

Lifesong for Orphans helps churches and families in the adoption funding process.

lifesongfororphans.org, (309) 747-3556

Holiday Jewelry



Ellie Easterly, daughter of Alan and Lee Easterly of Lookout Mountain, is modeling jewelry from SPARK, available exclusively at Jane's Fine Jewelry / Unique Gifts.

Perfect for the holiday season, are Ellie's 18 ct. white gold drop earrings – diamond Huggies with removable yellow cushion-cut sapphires surrounded by diamonds.

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PHOTOS BY ANNA LEONARD

"We have six kids eleven and under. It's crazy and loud, and we work together as a big, crazy loud team." Meet the Burke family, according to mom, Kelsey Burke. Kelsey and her husband David—director of The House, a college ministry at UTC—have quite a clan with their four biological children and their adopted twins.

After attending a seminar about the AIDS crisis in Africa at a Christian Leadership conference, David and Kelsey knew they had to do something. Although they already had a full house, they felt like there was a hole, and a child from Ethiopia was their fit. Then, after reading *There Is No Me Without You*—the story of Haregewoin Tefarra, an Ethiopian woman whose home had become a refuge for hundreds of children orphaned by AIDS—they decided to adopt more than one Ethiopian child. Why? Because they could.

Thus began the process of adopting Justice and Simone, twins now

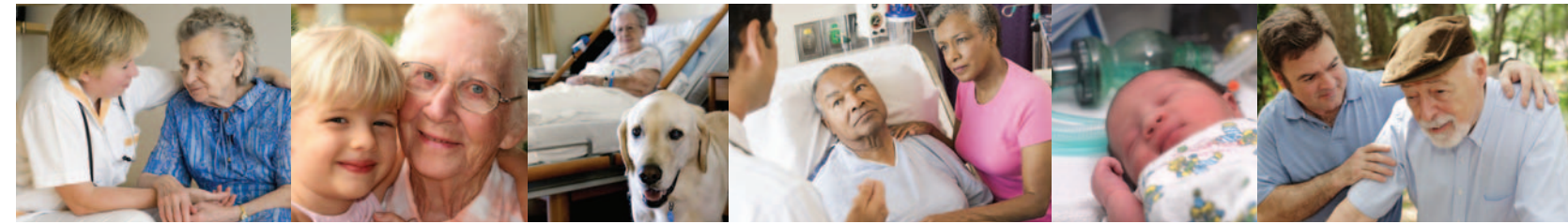
3 ½ years old. There was a lot of paperwork, a lot of fundraising, and some speed bumps along the way ("The flight back was horrendous!"), but the Burkes brought the twins home with the Signal Mountain community rallying around them.

While Justice and Simone have blended right into the family, the Burkes say the first moments weren't easy. "We knew we would be scary to them," Kelsey says. "Attachment is often difficult." However, the twins learned to receive and return love fairly quickly because of the care they received in their orphanage. "It doesn't happen overnight, but we've learned you must be willing to do the hard work and pursue their hearts," Kelsey says.



For David and Kelsey, adoption is a privilege—a way to bring wholeness to brokenness and loss. It is "a life changing commitment to loving and restoring the life of a child," and they couldn't be happier. Having a large adoptive family takes love, sacrifice and hard work, the Burkes say, but they love the daily reminder of what it means that God chose them to be in His family, and they want others to feel that too. "If Chattanooga is touted as this family-friendly community, then we need to bring more children into it."

30 for 30



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Your generosity will bless our mission.





Dr. Jon & Sarah Risley

Jon and Sarah Risley have made that journey of a thousand miles several times over, and it has been one of loss, learning and love.

The journey started in 2008, when the couple went through a Bible study on Amos about helping orphans and widows. It wasn't long until they realized they were on the same page about adoption. "We wanted to give out of the outrageous plenty that God has given us," says Sarah. In 2008, Jon and Sarah took that first single step: they decided they were ready to adopt a healthy little girl from Kazakhstan as part of a blind adoption.

As with most adoptive parents, the Risleys soon discovered that the road ahead was not going to be an easy one. After months of preparation, including piles of paperwork, hours of prayer and some doubtful minds ("Mom, why do you need more kids?"), the couple trav-

"THE *journey* OF A THOUSAND MILES BEGINS WITH A SINGLE STEP."

-LAO TZU

eled to Kazakhstan to meet the newest member of their already-large family.

However there was a different plan at work. When the Risleys returned home to Lookout Mountain from Kazakhstan, they brought home with them not one, but two new daughters—their sweet little girls, Elyse, then 5, and Laura Ann, then 4. Elyse and Laura Ann were sisters, and they both had special needs.

In the years to follow, Elyse and Laura Ann would face dozens of doctor's appointments and would require much special attention. Sarah admits that they had a difficult time at first. "The fallout in my heart wasn't all that pretty in the

early stages," she says. However, in the days and years to follow, the Risleys found their hearts transformed. Over time, Jon and Sarah and their five biological children have grown with Elyse and Laura Ann—overcoming barriers of age and language—to become a happy, loving and giving family.

This fall, the Risleys will add two more to their ever-expanding family. Two young boys from China, both with special needs, will soon have a wonderful place to call home. The Risleys' advice to those considering adoption? "It's a hard journey, but it's a wonderful, beautiful one, too," Sarah says.

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Troy & Sarah Duble



work. All they had left to do was to pray and continue to ask God if adoption was the right path for their family. The couple knew the process would take years—“Probably two years to never,” according to Mr. Jennings—so they had plenty of time.

Four days later, the Dubles got a call that a boy had been born at Erlanger and needed a home. Sarah was in disbelief and Troy was overwhelmed, but when they asked their kids what they thought, there was no more doubt. Kyra, then 9, said matter of factly: “Well, I’ve been praying about this a long time.”

The family meshed immediately. “It seems so natural now,” says Troy. “It’s hard to imagine our family without Drew.” Though the Dubles believe everyone should think hard about the decision to adopt, they both say it’s “an incredible journey” which will “strengthen one’s faith.”

For Troy and Sarah Duble, the road to adoption was paved slowly over the years. Troy’s biological father left when he was an infant, and when his mother remarried, her husband adopted Troy and loved him as his own. With that act, Troy learned the true meaning of the scripture verse: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Now on the other side of the equation, Troy and Sarah have realized that adoption is as much of a blessing to the parents as it is to the child.

A year before they adopted now 4-year-old Drew, Sarah began feeling that adoption was showing up all around her. She started to wonder if God was telling her something. The couple called two of Troy’s closest friends for advice, and got a further nudge in that direction. In fact, when they asked their friends, Jon and Andrew (after whom their son is now named) what they should do, Jon’s reply was, “It seems like God is knocking on the door. Do you want him to knock it down?”

So the Dubles found local adoption lawyer Mike Jennings, and after about a year, they turned in their initial paper-



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John & Pamela Block



“A FAMILY IS BORN OF YOUR *heart*,
NOT OF YOUR BLOOD.”

-PAMELA BLOCK

John & Pamela Block

The first meeting between John and Pamela Block and their adopted daughter Anna plays out like a scene from a movie: a little girl waits in a Chinese orphanage on Christmas Eve for a family she fears may never come. When they arrive on Christmas Day, hours late due to travel delays, she runs tearfully into the arms of her long-awaited mother and father. It was a day that, for Pamela, once seemed impossible.

As a single mother in her 20s, Pamela thought she might never realize her dream of adopting. But when she met John later in life and learned that Chinese adoption programs actually

prefer older couples for stability, she grew determined. From months of paperwork to struggles with airport security to finding the very best doctors, Pamela and John fought for their two little girls every step of the way. They brought home 14-month-old Lily (who has a heart condition) in May 2008, and 4-and-a-half-year-old Anna (who was born with a rare condition called bladder exstrophy) in December 2009. The two girls instantly connected.

Now, after several surgeries, lots of sisterly bonding, and a cross-country move from Seattle, the Blocks are happy and thriving in their new Chattanooga commu-

nity. “I think adoption is the most amazing way to grow a family,” Pamela says.

Along the way, John and Pamela say they’ve learned patience and made a lot of life changes in order to give Lily and Anna a happy, healthy upbringing. What is their family like now? In a word: joyous. The Blocks describe their home as “loud with life”; they love the joy and energy they feel within their home. The girls laugh and play, and continue to love, dream, create, and grow strong. For those considering adoption, Pamela suggests doing your homework, but also says, “It is the most beautiful thing you can do for another human being.”



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