



*"Help us make a difference in one child's life, and we change that child's world. Help us make a difference in many children's lives, and we change our world." - Joe DiDonato, The Orphan Foundation*

## New Trends In Adopting

Different Times are Producing Different Motivators

by Joe DiDonato

Co-Founder & Chairman of The Orphan Foundation

What makes a single mom struggling to start up a new business, adopt a hard-to-place, "special needs" child from another country? Why would a perfectly happy, healthy, and content family take on a Down syndrome child with heart complications, when the boy's own mother chose to give him up at 6 weeks of age? And why would a New York family rescue three frail and traumatized orphans from the ravages of Liberia's second civil war?

We asked ourselves these questions as our foundation's Board reviewed the grant requests from these families. When most people hear the term 'adoption,' we tend to think about couples faced with infertility, or couples who are trying to put their step-families together to strengthen their family bond. These first three grant requests to The Orphan Foundation bore no similarities to those stereotypical images.

### The Smith Case – California

Madeleine Smith, the first recipient of an adoption assistance grant from our Foundation, is a very interesting woman. She describes herself as having a big heart, with an even bigger pile of bills. When she found her way to our Foundation, she was in the process of adopting Dang Jian, a "special needs" child from China. The name she chose for the 4-year old boy is "Elijah." She describes Elijah as a wonderful child who loves to play outside, and is especially fond of toy cars. His fifth birthday will be in December, so she's planning a very big celebration when he arrives.

But that is only a small piece of the story. Dang Jian was placed in the "special needs" category by his China orphanage, and given to an adoption agency in Oregon to place. Dang Jian is missing his right ear, which is accompanied by marginal hearing on that side. Adding to that malady are various urinogenital and colorectal problems. These factors, along with his age, also put him in the "hard-to-place" category of adoptions. And what does that mean? He was given this one last chance to be adopted before he would be permanently institutionalized in China.

If China and the adoption world considered Elijah's problems as significantly daunting, why would a single mom struggling to grow a start-up music services business, step in to rescue him? Good question. But wait, there is still another page to this story.

Elijah will be Madeleine's third "special needs" child that she has adopted! And she also has a 22-year old college student son, Donovan. Madeleine's other adopted children include her 7-year old son Michael, from Bulgaria, and her 3-year old daughter Hana, from Guatemala. And just to make this random act of love more difficult on her, Madeleine decided she had to move from her 2-

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bedroom apartment to a 3-bedroom apartment to make sure that there was enough room for Elijah in his new home.

Madeleine discovered Dang Jian, when a friend emailed her that she saw Dang Jian's story on an adoption agency's website, and described his impending fate. Madeleine found out that someone had put up an anonymous donation to help offset part of the adoption expenses, and that started Madeleine's wheels in motion. With domestic adoptions averaging \$18,105 currently, and almost double that internationally, due to travel costs, document translations and other country specific requirements, this was the opening break she needed. This was her chance to give Elijah a home, and she'd worry about the rest of his living and medical needs when he was in her care.

Madeleine has since arranged for the UCLA Craniofacial Center to replace Elijah's missing ear. All she wanted from The Orphan Foundation was enough money to finish her legal paperwork with the State of California, get the legal documents translated into Chinese and certified, and have enough left over to pay her travel expenses to China to bring "Elijah" home.

When we asked her why she was doing this, she simply repeated what she said earlier – she has a big heart. The only anchor on that big heart seems to be that big pile of bills she's managed to build in the process. Our Board could not have agreed more, and voted unanimously to grant her the money.

#### **The Cancilla Case – California**

Mary and Warren Cancilla, along with daughter Annalise, seemed truly overjoyed about 6-week old Harrison's arrival. Harrison would be that new brother for Annalise, and the perfect one boy, one girl family would arrive in a small, quiet California town. However, this family portrait turns out to be a bit more unique than that. Harrison was born with Down syndrome, with the added rare heart complication called tetralogy of Fallot.

Mary, a sign language interpreter, told us that they had been on the Down Syndrome Association of Greater Cincinnati's waiting list for 2 years. This seemed hardly a "spur of the moment" decision. When the association called to tell the Cancilla's that Harrison's mother decided to give him up, and they were on the top of the list to receive a Downs syndrome child, they were overjoyed that their long wait was finally over.

What did they want from The Orphan Foundation? Just some financial help with their adoption costs so that they could free up some money for the medical needs that Harrison will be facing.

Another unanimous vote, and another unnoticed random act of love from just a regular kind of family who chose to love a very special boy.

#### **The Buckley Case – New York**

When we talked with Lorraine Buckley she told us all about the incidents that led up to their finding Arous, the brother of one of the two girls that they had already adopted from an orphanage in Liberia – an orphanage that had been overrun by soldiers during Liberia's deadly civil wars. A badly beaten orphanage director managed to save the children from harm, by convincing the soldiers that some of the children might be their own. The soldiers confiscated all of the orphans' food, but allowed the children to vacate the orphanage. The children walked for two



days in search of shelter, with at most, a handful of rice for each day of their journey. The UN came to their rescue, and stepped in to provide them with blankets and food. Eventually the orphanage reopened, but everything was completely destroyed, including the children's beds and toys.

Now what was the connection and motivation that moved the Buckley's to adopt these two young girls in the first place? Lorraine's dad was doing some volunteer work to build a home for an old Air Force buddy, who had later turned to missionary work. While swapping time with other contractors to save his buddy money, Lorraine's father met yet another missionary family in the area. That family had already adopted one of the children from that Liberian orphanage, by the name of George. George had been spared from the attack on the orphanage by being in the US on tour with the Liberian Boy's Choir. It took a year for George to get up enough courage to ask the missionary family to try to find his sister, who was also living in that orphanage. The family was in shock. They never even knew he had a sister! The family agreed immediately, found his sister Mala, and brought her to the States.

When the Buckley's went to visit Lorraine's parents during the December holidays of 2004, they also met the other missionary family, and the reunited siblings, George and Mala. The plight of these children thrust them into motion. Mala asked the Buckley's if they would help find her two roommates from the orphanage, Patience and Naomi. The Buckley's not only found them, but by October 2005, the girls were on their way here to their new home with the Buckley's in New York.

As fate would have it, when Lorraine's father and husband went to pick-up the girls, Naomi's parents brought her brother Abrous to the Liberian orphanage when they came to see Naomi off. Abrous' parents asked that the Buckley's take Abrous as well as his sister Naomi. It wasn't safe for any of them in Liberia, and the parents were not only living in abject poverty, their situation was made even worse by Abrous' father being severely injured in a work accident. But in that first round of adoptions, the Buckley's only succeeded in bringing the 7 and 9 year old girls back to New York. Abrous had already been relinquished to the orphanage, but he was on a waiting list to get in, and of course there was the mound of official paperwork required, and all the money that had yet to be raised. Imagine that - on a waiting list to get into an orphanage!

When they brought the two girls home to New York, Abrous returned home with his parents to wait for an opening at the orphanage. Luck finally prevailed, and at the end of August, Abrous was one of 100-plus children admitted to the orphanage. The Buckley family immediately went into motion trying to raise the money they needed to rescue Abrous, and once again, they reentered the adoption process. Nearly 14 months later, in December of 2006, their documents were finally clear to send to Liberia, and the monies were almost all in place to cover the country fees and other adoption costs. As of July 2007, they are still waiting for word on the case, and final passport clearance. The Buckley's are hoping that the adoption petition is either in the Liberian courts or will be there very soon.

What did they want from The Orphan Foundation? Financial help to complete the adoption. The families were all asked to go through the same United States adoption agency, which resulted in additional processing fees of \$1,800. The Buckley's were now running out of sources to tap for quick financial help, and were becoming more anxious and desperate in the eleventh hour of Abrous'

rescue. Another unanimous vote from the Board, and another lost child in the world was sent a lifeline.

These were definitely not the stories that we expected to see in our first three grant requests. Where was that stereotypical family that was starving for a child of their own, but left barren by some cruel twist of biological fate? Where was that known connection between the parties that used adoption to solidify a new marriage and family? These weren't childless parents looking to fill an empty space in their heart, or stepparents coming in to secure the bonds of their new family. These were a whole new breed of parents, with a whole new agenda and view of life.



Our 12-person Board looked at each other in astonishment. We just couldn't get our heads around this left-turn in our world views. We were seeing entirely different passions at play, complete with an unfaltering commitment to see the long arduous adoption process through to the end, so that they could then begin on the really hard part of all this – raising children with some very special needs. We told all three of these families that they are the real heroes out there. Forget Superwoman, Batman, and Spiderman. Meet Madeleine, the Cancilla's, and the Buckley's. These are the kind of quiet heroes we pass on the streets each day, and had no clue that they even existed. They're made of the same mettle as those courageous people, who rush into burning buildings to save children, rescue a fallen soldier from enemy fire, or run down a thief who snatched an old woman's purse. And then they want to quietly disappear behind their private lives, shying away from the cameras and lights of a press eager to exploit their bravery and courage. These families don't even seem to know what all the fuss is about. Wouldn't all of us do the same?

Perhaps it was that small quote, nearly hidden at the top of our home page that led them to us:

*"We ask that you not judge our success in terms of "bottom lines." Instead, we ask to be measured by the number of "lifelines" we extend to the homeless children of this world."*

Perhaps we were never alone in our mission to find these children a family to love them, to cherish their worth, and to give them hope. Either way, bear witness to the birth of a whole new breed of family. Meet the new "tutelaries of hope," the real guardians of our world's children. They know no bigotry, no deception, nor bias of thought that would ever prevent them from the simple act of loving a child that would otherwise be lost to the world. We think this is a bright and shining light in the distant skies, and we choose to call that light "hope ascending."

*Author's Footnote: The semi-official orphan count is now estimated at 143 million children around the world. UNICEF estimates that there are another 20 million children in the "displaced children" category. These are the child victims of armed conflict and human rights violations. If we considered these combined categories of children as a nation, their population would rank them as the 7<sup>th</sup> largest country in the world. Please help us by donating your time or money to our mission to find these children a home, and equally important, by discussing adoption in your circle of family and friends. Currently, we are run by an all-volunteer force of dedicated people, which means 100% of your donations will go to help families adopt.*

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