

# Liz Peter

## Choosing Adoption

In October 2004, following three unsuccessful IVF treatments and one unsuccessful donor egg treatment and after much discussion, Darryn and I commenced the process to adopt an overseas child.

Although Darryn had some reservations about bonding with someone else's child, he suggested that we make an appointment with the adoption agency and at least make some enquiries.

The meeting was with the general manager the then Australians Aiding Children Adoption Agency, a privately run organisation commissioned by the Government. She asked us a number of questions to gain an insight into our background. She provided a brief overview of the adoption process, namely the costs involved, the time frames and a list of countries from which to choose.

A few weeks later Darryn suggested that we sign up for the orientation weekend, which was due to take place in February 2005.

The adoption process was broken into a number of stages, all of which had associated fees. Stage One incorporated the Expression and Registration of Interest to Adopt. I posted these forms in October 2004, along with a cheque for \$629 (of which \$379 went to the government adoption agency and \$250 to the private adoption agency).

In February 2005 we attended a weekend orientation session. This session formed part of Stage Two of the adoption process. These two days provided us with lots of information, including detailed adoption processes, the countries and their requirements and the pros and cons of adoption.

Following our initial meeting with the general manager, Darryn and I had short-listed two or three countries that appealed to us. However, the list of countries available and their requirements that were provided at the orientation session differed from the original list we had received, causing some confusion when trying to make our choices. Although the orientation weekend was extremely informative and revealing, it was also exhausting, both physically and emotionally.

Over the days following the orientation, Darryn and I discussed what we had learnt, what we had heard and how we felt. We both acknowledged that it was one of the most emotional experiences we had had to date, outside of realising infertility. It was also an opportunity to confirm that we wanted to adopt our family. Darryn and I also felt that the orientation weekend was one of the most illuminating experiences for parents to be and that a similar weekend should be offered to IVF patients and natural parents.

Having completed the orientation weekend and after much introspection, we both reached the same conclusions. I completed the necessary paperwork and made a formal application to adopt an overseas child. The fees for Stage Two were \$800 (\$500 for the government adoption agency and \$300 for the private adoption agency), which we included in our application. On the form we listed two or three countries of our choice, although we knew that we would have to select only one at the appropriate time in the process.

In mid February, we received a letter from the government adoption agency that oversaw the private adoption agency, advising us that the private agency was closing down and that all of our files would be forwarded to them. Their reasoning was to mainstream the processes. At the time we did not have any concerns about the transfer.

Given our uncertainties following the conflicting information we had received regarding the countries, I emailed the government adoption agency to seek some clarification, knowing that our file would eventually arrive there. On receipt of my email, a social worker telephoned me. She advised me that owing to political and bureaucratic reasons, the countries that we had chosen were no longer available, or were not within our reach. She suggested that Darryn and I meet with her to discuss our options further, and an appointment was made for the following Wednesday.

This was the beginning of what proved to be a difficult six months.

## Choosing A Country

As we sat waiting for our appointment that Wednesday morning, the social worker I had previously spoken with entered the waiting room. Although she was carrying our file and we were the only ones in the room, she did not know our names. We followed her to an interview room and sat down. During our discussions it became clear that she had not read our file, was unaware of where we were in the process, did not know which countries we had chosen and was not able to offer us any information, or direction.

She did advise us, however, that we were unable able to choose neither Ethiopia, our first country of choice, as Ethiopia only accepted practising religious parents, nor India, because the Indian government had broken its relationship with Australia following the transfer of the process to the government adoption agency. Thus, the only other countries available were Asian countries such as China, Taiwan and Hong Kong.

The social worker also confirmed that the adoption of Australian children was almost impossible, because as few as four children a year were available for adoption. Moreover, there was a waiting list of at least ten years.

The social worker suggested that we consider some of the countries that the interstate adoption agencies were dealing with and proposed that the government adoption agency would investigate and assist us where they could. This gave us some hope again. We started our research almost immediately and identified South American countries that some of the other agencies were adopting from.

In late March I telephoned the adoption agency to advise them of our new choice of country, being Chile, only to be told that Australia had stopped working with Chile, as their adoption processes was being questioned. So we started our research again.

In April I contacted the government adoption agency to discuss the possibility of adopting from Brazil, a country that one of the interstate agencies had previously adopted from, only to be told that Australia was no longer working with Brazil either. Once again, we started our research.

Also in the same month, we received a letter from the adoption agency advising that they had received our file from the private adoption agency and that we had been allocated a social worker who would undertake our family assessment report. In early May, our social worker made an appointment with both Darryn and me.

On the morning of the appointment, the social worker spoke to us for approximately two hours. She asked us questions about our life together and about our marriage. She also asked us why we wanted to adopt and what our goals for the future were, all the time making notes. She talked to us about our past IVF treatments and the donor egg treatment we were currently embarking on.

After a short break, she asked to speak with Darryn alone. For another two hours she asked him questions about his upbringing, schooling and home life. She asked questions about religion and discipline and his relationship with his father and mother, sister and me. She asked him whether he felt that I would make a good mother and how I handled stress. She did not quite ask him his shoe size, but she probably could have guessed given all of the information she had obtained.

The appointment commenced at 9 am, and by 1 pm she was wrapping up her interview with Darryn. As I took my seat to start my interview, the social worker advised me that she had had enough for the day and booked a time for the following Tuesday.

That Tuesday the social worker asked me similar questions to those she asked Darryn. She asked me about my childhood, about my feelings towards my parents and boyfriends and about my feelings in relation to the failure of the IVF treatment. She asked me to talk about moving from Australia to England at the age of thirteen, as well as about bad experiences in my life.

The social worker encouraged us to discuss all aspects of our life, and we found ourselves easily doing so. We were extremely honest, thinking that this would help us in our cause. However, we did not realise at the time that these revelations would, in fact, later cause us grief and bite us on the bum!

During our interviews we were asked about our country of choice, at which point we highlighted our dilemma. The social worker asked us why we had not chosen Ethiopia, which was our initial choice, and so we explained that we did not fit the religious criteria. On hearing this information, the social worker suggested that, as long as we both had Christian values such as truth, honesty, loyalty, love, sharing and caring, we should be able to adopt from Ethiopia. We felt optimistic about this possibility.

However, a quick call to the adoption agency on the Wednesday again dashed our hopes: something that was becoming a familiar feeling. Once again, we started our research knowing that without a country of choice, the social worker was unable to complete our family assessment report.

In late May, early June I again rang the adoption agency, this time with some desperation about our search for a country. During the telephone conversation the male social worker asked why we had not chosen India as a country. I again explained that we had been advised that India was not available, at which point he advised me that the agencies had rebuilt their relationship. As soon as I heard that, I advised the social worker that our country of choice was India and I requested that the agency proceed with our family assessment report.

Although we had now confirmed our country, we could not help but feel frustrated given that, up until this date, we had not received any clear information, direction, or support. Furthermore, despite our obvious difficulties, continual requests for assistance and that India had been one of our initial choices, no one at the adoption agency had cared enough, or thought it important to advise us that India was again available. I had only found out by accident.

### **Family Assessment Report**

Some time had passed since the social workers visit in early May and we still hadn't received our home visit report, so on Monday 4 July 2005 I telephoned the agency to confirm the report's status. The female social worker suggested that there had been a minor delay and that we should receive the report within the next week, or two. Two weeks passed and still no report. During my second call I was again advised that there had been some delays but that we should receive the report soon.

Concerned that time was passing and that the agency did not seem concerned about the delays, I began to telephone the agency every two weeks and kept this up throughout August and September. With each telephone call, I was handballed to another social worker and provided with another set of excuses. Each telephone call wore me down and slowly my emotional strength weakened. My hope of being able to adopt a child was waning.

In early September, during yet another telephone call and another set of excuses, I finally broke down and the tears flowed. Whilst the social worker I was speaking with appreciated our frustrations, she too could only suggest that she would follow up the status of the report.

Finally, on 17 September, a family assessment report arrived in the post, but our hopes were again dashed as we read through the startling inaccuracies. The social worker who had visited our home twice and spent many hours with us both had made several mistakes with names, dates and locations. She had also written that I was troubled and that Darryn and I had been abused by our fathers. She wrote that my mother was employed full time and that my sister was married. The suburbs where Darryn's sister and my sister lived were wrong. It was almost as if the social worker had accidentally merged our family assessment report with that of someone else.

The following day I emailed the adoption agency advising them of the errors and requesting that the report be corrected. It took another two weeks before we received an amended report. Although there were still errors that had not been corrected, we were feeling desperate and so chose to accept them.

### **Rejected as Suitable Parents**

A week later we received a letter from the adoption agency advising that, as it had been more than twelve months since we had first applied to the adoption process, they required another medical report for us both. These reports were provided within a couple of days.

I received a telephone call at work from the director of the adoption agency on Monday 21 November. He asked if I was able to talk privately, which I was. He then proceeded to tell me that our adoption application had been rejected, because they felt that I was not stable enough to be a parent. I was speechless. I felt so desolate that I burst into tears, but then, quickly, I realised that I had to compose myself.

Darryn and I had successfully run two building companies for seven years. I had worked full time in other employment for five of those years. On one hand we were successfully building peoples' dream homes, employed staff and tradespeople and on the other had completed four unsuccessful IVF treatments, not to mention the day-to-day stresses any marriage experiences, along with the continual incompetence of the bureaucratic process regarding adoption. And having never actually met me, the adoption agency dared suggest that I was not stable and that I could not handle stress.

Once I regained my composure I requested a meeting, which was booked for 1 pm on the following Wednesday with the agency's director and manager. Darryn and I presented at the meeting not knowing what lay ahead. During the following two and a half hours we discussed our difficulties and our frustrations with the countries that we had chosen, the barriers we were continually confronted with, the lack of support and the long, unnecessary time frames. I felt that I needed to prove to the agency that I was actually really quite stable and very sensible and believed that the decision they had made from purely reading our reports, not from meeting with us, had been an incorrect judgement.

At one point, the manager asked us why we had chosen to adopt an overseas child and also whether we would be interested in adopting an Australian child. Although we were keen on India, we expressed that we would also be interested in an Australian child; however, we had been led to believe that there was at least a ten-year waiting list. The manager confirmed that that was correct ... so why did she ask the questions?

At the end of the meeting, the director and the manager conferred and determined that the judgement about instability had clearly been incorrect. Neither had any objections to us adopting.

On 22 November we received the initial letter (dated 21 November) advising of the agency's rejection of our application. On 2 December we received a letter dated 21 November advising that we had (finally) received approval to adopt.

Although the approval letter stated that our family assessment report was included, we did not actually receive this until the week of 20 December. Having read the report and recognising that it still contained errors, but obviously concerned with further delays, we again chose to live with those errors.

The feeling of approval was indescribable, but it included relief, excitement and hope. We were now able to start the adoption process.

### **Preparing Our Dossier for India**

To enable us to proceed with the adoption process and progress through Stage Three, we had to pay \$4,171, which we paid on Friday 9 December 2005. The week of 20 December, we received our document dossier for India ... this time with an incorrect spelling of Darryn's name.

In order to complete the dossier we needed to provide twenty-nine documents, each copied four times. The list of documents we had to provide included copies of our birth and marriage certificates; coloured copies of our passports; medical declarations; HIV clearances; a letter from our IVF doctor; financial declarations; bank references and copies of the previous two months bank statements; the last three years of tax assessments and Australian Taxation Office returns; three references; proof of property ownership; police credit checks; and photographs of our home, specific rooms, the garden and us. We also had to complete declarations provided by the adoption agency stating, for example, that I agreed to give up work once the child arrived, that we agreed to educate the child, that we would reimburse the Indian government, that we agreed to five years' worth of reviews and that we agreed to be the guardian of the child. Each of the documents and the copies (that is 29 x 4 = 116 documents) had to be signed and certified as true and correct by a Justice of the Peace.

Although some of the documents were easy to obtain, documents such as my police credit check, which was requested on 11 January 2006, took eight weeks to arrive. As soon as we had received all of the documents, we booked our appointment with the local Justice of the Peace. We all thought that it would take approximately an hour or so to do the signing. It actually took three and a half hours.

The following Thursday we met with the adoption agency to undertake our dossier interview. During our two-hour meeting we went through the dossier, signed the odd document or two that we had missed, and handed the dossier over. We briefly discussed with the social worker some of the difficulties we had experienced. She was extremely sympathetic and apologised on behalf of the agency. She also raised some concerns regarding the information we had received over the past twelve months, including the fact that India had not broken its relationship with Australia and had never been "off" the program. Furthermore, South American countries had never been an option for the government adoption agency, and she was surprised that we had been told that they were. She was also bewildered by the way our approval process had been undertaken.

The social worker also confirmed several things that we already knew. For example, India had one of the longest waiting periods for allocation; the Indian process was still being refined; and Indian children were some of the more "affected" children. However, none of this information deterred us.

Once the dossier had left our hands, the adoption agency added their documents before forwarding it to the public notary. The public notary combined twenty-nine documents (and the four copies) into five single documents, before stamping and sealing each document. The process allowed for two documents to be sent to India, two to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and one to be retained by the adoption agency. This process cost \$380: \$220 for the public notary's legal fees, \$80 for the application to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in Australia and \$80 for the application to the Consulate General of India.

However, our dossier was not forwarded immediately.

### **Concerns with the Indian Program**

In late March, Darryn received a telephone call from the adoption agency advising that the director had recently returned from a trip to India. During that visit, the agency had identified another thirteen orphanages that they were currently investigating and building relationships with for possible future adoptions.

We were given an option of either forwarding our dossier to the existing orphanage, or to wait until relationships with some of the new orphanages had been developed. We chose to wait. After much discussion, Darryn and I felt that a minimal delay now may provide us with more opportunity to adopt a child, and possibly in a shorter time frame. That was Tuesday, 12 March 2006.

We received a letter from the adoption agency on 18 April advising us that our dossier had been certified by the public notary, sent to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and forwarded to the Preet Mandir Indian orphanage for the next step of the process. Whilst we were obviously excited, we were also a bit puzzled, as there was no mention of the alternative orphanages, the outcome of the relationship building, or why our file was sent to Preet Mandir. Our first thoughts were "why were we again made to wait, given the outcome?" If we had known our dossier would end up at Preet Mandir, we would have just requested it in the previous telephone call. Shortly after that, on the last Wednesday of April 2006, we received a letter inviting us to an information night with an official of Preet Mandir orphanage the following Monday. As we were keen to hear the official speak, we rescheduled our appointments to ensure that we could attend.

At the venue twenty other couples were also waiting. The director of the adoption agency and a small, older Indian gentleman stood at the front of the room. Although the room was not large, the open window to a city main road at peak hour and the constantly boiling urn made it difficult to hear.

The session commenced at 6.30 pm and was over by 7.45 pm, despite the fact that two speakers were scheduled. The Indian man began to explain the Indian adoption process, but he spoke quietly and mumbled, making it difficult to understand him. He talked for a good forty minutes, chuckling to himself a couple of times, while his audience stared blankly at him. The Indian gentleman then asked for questions, of which he received two: "how long does allocation take once our files arrive in India" and "how are parent-to-child matches undertaken?" Each response took at least twenty minutes, mumbling an answer that neither addressed the question nor answered it.

During the session the Indian man did say that although South Australia adopted more Indian children than any other region, countries such as America, Norway and Sweden provided project donations: something Australia did not do. Therefore India's relationship with those countries was stronger. Translated, we understood that to mean that Australia did not give donations and so we were lower down on the pecking order.

And the other piece of information gleaned was that no one really knew how long the allocation process took. That was taken from a twenty-minute mumble in which the Indian suggested "four months", followed by a quick response by the director of adoption, pointing out that some couples had already been waiting for over two years.

The director of the adoption agency also advised that although they had recently discovered thirteen or so alternative orphanages, a review of those orphanages had identified some problems, namely that some of the orphanages required donations greater than Australia was prepared to pay, some had existing longstanding relationships with other countries, and some did not have appropriate processes, or healthy children. On that information, relationships had not been established. In summary, we were really disappointed, because the session was so unprofessional and such a waste of time.

Two and a half weeks after the information session, I received a telephone call from the adoption agency's Indian program social worker "just to touch base and ask our thoughts on the small Indian gentleman's presentation". She suggested that there had been some misunderstandings in relation to the length of time for allocation. I acknowledged that we fully understood, following our own experiences, the information we had received at the previous session that it was a two-year-plus process. The social worker did not confirm this time frame, or deny it. She then asked whether we would be interested in having our dossier sent to one of the alternative orphanages that had recently been identified in India.

Politely, but assertively, I explained to the Indian program social worker that Darryn and I both felt that the information session was futile. I raised, with all due respect, of course, the contradictions relating to the alternative orphanages that we had received in the earlier telephone conversation and our letter of 18 April.

The social worker explained that the adoption agency had had a meeting shortly after she had spoken with Darryn and that it had been agreed that it would be more appropriate to forward all of the dossiers for India to Preet Mandir. It was then the intention to review possible alternative orphanages and forward new dossiers.

She then asked how we would feel if she forwarded our file to one of the alternative orphanages. Although slightly perplexed by the question, given everything we had recently been led to believe, I stated that we would be more than happy to do anything that would increase our chances of becoming a parent. The social worker promised to keep us up to date and advised that if we ever had any questions, or just wanted to talk, that we could contact her.

On the last Wednesday of May, a concerned friend emailed us a link to an article titled "The Adoption Nightmare". The article was written by a journalist in Pune, India for a magazine called *The Hindu*. The article described the experiences of a Singaporean couple who, on arriving at the orphanage to collect their six-month old daughter as part of the pre-adoption care, were met by the head of the Preet Mandir adoption agency. During his initial discussions and before they had met with the child, the manager asked them, in a straightforward manner, how much they would be donating to the orphanage. When they suggested that all they could afford was US\$2,000, he promptly advised them that that would not be enough and encouraged them to donate more.

The article went on to talk about other similar requests for more money, as well as the poor condition of the children. The article explained that J Bhasin, head of Preet Mandir (the same Indian man that we had listened to at the information night), denied the allegations.

I forwarded the email, linking the article, to the Indian program social worker. I also expressed our lack of confidence in the Indian adoption program, particularly Mr Bhasin, only to receive a polite, non-committal response suggesting that we will continue to see such articles, but we should disregard them, as the media are inclined to be misleading.

Finally, on the first Friday of July 2006, we received a letter from the adoption agency advising us that the Preet Mandir Indian adoption program had collapsed as a result of corruption and child trafficking. The letter made reference to a CNN television news article on 19 June 2006 that had caused the South Australian adoption agency to review the Indian program. Incredibly, fifty days had passed since we had first raised our concerns with the adoption agency. The letter asked that all enquires to the agency be made by email only, as opposed to by telephone. What an insult. In a closing paragraph, the agency advised that it was currently reviewing alternative adoption agencies within India and that it would inform us of the outcome of that review as soon as the information was at hand.

I was home alone standing in my lounge room when I read the letter. The pain and devastation was almost crippling. I sat down and read and reread the letter, before letting go. Somehow I found the strength to pull myself together and start writing my email to the agency. I expressed our pain and our anger at finding ourselves at this point.

Not only had the agency deceived us, but also it had chosen not to support us by asking us to send all of our enquiries by email. Moreover, they had allowed us all to receive the news on the Friday, leaving us the weekend to dwell on the information, and they had dangled the "extra adoption agencies" carrot.

After a couple of hours I pulled myself together one more time and commenced a second, more constructive, email. This time I requested that someone call me. I asked for information on possible alternative countries and, although we had been advised on several occasions that Australia had a ten-year waiting list for Australian-born adoptive children, I requested that we be added to that waiting list and that someone call me from that area of the agency.

By 2pm on Monday I still had not received a telephone call from anyone. Surely the adoption agency would have prioritised the issue. So I wrote a third, more assertive email. My choice of words in this particular email finally created a response. Ten minutes after pressing "send", the Indian program social worker telephoned me "just to see how we were coping".

### **Australian Born Child Program and Thailand Program**

In my telephone conversation with the social worker, I enquired into alternative adoption programs and she advised that she should talk to another intercountry adoption social worker, as well as the Australian Born Children (ABC) social worker and have them both call me to have a chat. She also said that she would send some information in relation to alternative programs, and that she herself would call me back by Wednesday to let me know the outcome of her discussions.

Wednesday passed, as did Friday and the following Monday. No telephone calls, no emails and no information in the post, nothing! On the following Wednesday I telephoned the adoption agency and was put through to the Thai program social worker. I spoke with her, at some length, about our thoughts on Thailand and I was comforted by her response. The Indian program social worker had not spoken with her at all!

The following day I again rang the adoption agency and asked to speak with the ABC social worker; but she was on leave until the following Monday. The girl I spoke with was most helpful, and again I felt that maybe not all was lost just yet. I left a message for the ABC social worker to call me when she returned.

The ABC social worker rang on Tuesday, and we had a good talk about the Australian Born Children adoption program. I asked her some questions and she provided me with lots of information. I explained that although we had twice been told that the ABC program had a ten-year waiting list, we were prepared to undertake the process, given the time we had already lost in the overseas adoption program. When I mentioned this, the ABC social worker asked me where I got my information from. She was quite surprised when I advised her that, on both occasions, a social worker within the adoption agency had provided the information.

Whilst the ABC social worker advised that the information I had received was actually incorrect, she did confirm that there was a long waiting list and that there were no guarantees of adoption. She explained that in South Australia there were only one to three Australian-born children adopted every year. Furthermore, birth parents and families chose the adoptive parents and that in some cases they can request to maintain contact. The social worker invited us to the annual information session that was to be held in early September. We were lucky that the timing of my telephone call was right and that we were available to attend.

On the following Monday, I again rang and left a message for the Thai program social worker. On Tuesday 8 August (2006), having still not received a return telephone call, I wrote a letter to the social worker, advising her of our intentions; that is, we wished to apply to adopt a Thai child and that we wished for our file to remain in India in the interim period. Given the many problems we had encountered, we wanted to ensure that we had as many options available to us as possible.

Having still not received a return telephone call, or a response to my letter, I again rang the Thai program social worker on the following Monday, and again on the Wednesday, each time leaving a message. My more assertive message on Wednesday resulted in the Thai program social worker returning my call within the hour.

The social worker confirmed that she had received our letter and that she was in the process of putting together a dossier for us to make our application to Thailand. She explained that although we did not have to re-attend the orientation session, we would need to redo a dossier and pay the appropriate fees for Thailand.

On 7 September, we attended the Australian Born Children orientation session. It was identical in format to the overseas adoption program session we had attended, except this one was compacted into two hours, as opposed to two days.

The session explained the nature of the children on the ABC program. It explained the possible involvement of family, where family existed, and it touched on some of the emotional issues associated with an Australian-born child. One thing that was highlighted was the lack of Australian-born children and the unknown time frames. For example, at the time of our session there were twelve couples on the waiting list, with only one child being available for adoption in 2006. In addition, that child had not yet been guaranteed as available for adoption, as the mother was still undecided about giving up the child. The previous year, in 2005, only two children had become available for adoption, with one of those two being adopted by family.

Coincidentally, the orientation session was run by both the ABC social worker and the Thai program social worker. At the end of the session, we collected our application forms for the ABC program and our dossier for Thailand.

Within two or three weeks we were also able to post off our applications for the ABC program, along with our Stage One registration fee of \$405. It was late September.

In October we received a request for the additional fees for our Thai dossier, which this time was only \$223: \$157 for the public notary's legal fees, \$43 for the application to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in Australia and \$23 for the application to the Thailand Consulate.

On Friday 10 November 2006 we received a letter (dated 6 November) thanking us for our attendance at the ABC adoption workshop. However, as the "program is only a small program, there was not a need for a great number of families on the register. With this in mind, our application and registration was not required and would therefore be filed until such time as the program was reviewed, time frame unknown."

There was a minor positive, though. On 15 November we received a letter advising us that our dossier had been processed by the adoption agency and the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, and that it had been sent to Thailand for allocation.

### **More Police Checks**

On 12 July, the Thai program social worker sent an email advising that she had received correspondence from the Thailand Child Adoption Centre requesting some additional information. The Thailand Child Adoption Centre had asked for a copy of our national police checks, as our current ones had expired (they only last twelve months).

On 16 July, the Thai program social worker telephoned me to see if we had received our police checks. I explained to her that we had applied but that they took anywhere up to six weeks. I am not sure if she understood what I was saying, as on the following Wednesday she emailed me asking whether we had received our police checks yet. Both Darryn and I found this odd. After so much lack of communication, there now appeared to be a rush for our police checks. Because of their apparent urgency, both were express posted on Friday 3 August 2007. However, in their normal non-communicative manner, that was the last we heard until I made a telephone call on Wednesday 29 August, only to be told that there was no new information and that it had just been a matter of process.

### **Hard Reality of the Australian Born Program**

We received a letter from the ABC program on 22 August advising us that in order for us to move to the next stage of the program, we had to attend a compulsory two-day workshop on Saturday 20 October 2007. I was flabbergasted, to say the least, following all of the information we had been given about the program.

On Saturday 20 October, which happened to be a 36 degree day in a building with no air-conditioning, we attended the full-day workshop, along with six other couples. The workshop was similar to that of the overseas program we attended and was informative and interesting.

As the day drew to a close, I could not fight off the question any longer that had been itching me all day. So I asked the question: "I understand that there are already twelve couples on the waiting list and, on average, only one child a year that is adopted. So, what happens for us here today now?" There was a long pause before the coordinator of the workshop (who also happened to be the newly appointed Senior Manager of the Adoption and Family Information Section) quickly proceeded to launch into a bunch of facts, stating "that although it was only one last year and one the year before, the year before that there was four ... although three of which went to relatives ...".

After several minutes of waffle, he did say that since many of the couples had been on the list for several years and had different requirements - for example, they wanted only babies, were specific about a girl, or boy, and were getting older themselves - the agency had decided to review the list, with a view to adding and/or removing couples as they thought necessary. Although all of us in the room were still aware of the long, hard road ahead in the Australian Born Children program, he did give us hope ... which turned out to be short lived.

Darryn and I, and I am sure six other couples, received a letter from the adoption agency on 6 November stating that "on the day of the workshop, we indicated that we would be reviewing the register of prospective adoptive parents for local adoption in the next couple of weeks. As we explained on the day, the local program is a small program and there is not a need for a great number of families on the register. Bearing that in mind [sic] we have decided to review the register at a time later in the year". In other words, "we do not intend to review the register at all, but want to be seen as if we are doing something in the event of the local upcoming elections!"

Although not at all surprised, Darryn and I were once again hurt and gutted. Hurt that a government agency could play with our emotions by providing false hope when they knew dam well that there was none. But that was not the end of it.

On Monday 3 December 2007 we received a letter from the ABC adoption program. "I am pleased to invite you to lodge a formal application to have your names placed on the Prospective Adopters' Register to adopt an Australian-born child". After all of the yes, no, yes, no, yes, no of the past few years, and more so, weeks, we could now be placed on the ABC register? Although Darryn and I were now really now confused, I posted our formal application, our "Getting to Know You" resume and our \$411 application fee on 14 December.

We originally commenced the adoption process in October 2004. By this time, we now officially had our files for adoption in three countries. Although the program in India had collapsed, it was very slowly rebuilding; however, our file status was unknown. Our Thailand file had been there for thirteen months, and now we had applied in Australia with up to a ten-year wait. Twelve couples were on the Australian register ... maybe thirteen, or more with us, with one child a year adopted. We were determined not to give up.

### **An Allocation From Thailand**

The time of the telephone call was exactly 5.56 pm on Tuesday 29 January 2008!

It was 5.56 pm when I rang Darryn to find out what time he would be home for tea. His first sharp words to me were "you did not answer your phone!" I checked my mobile and realised that I had missed two calls five minutes earlier. I am not sure how I did not hear my mobile ring.

Darryn's next words were "sit down, I need to tell you something". I joked about and said just tell me, but he was serious. I had visions of our newly renovated home's ceiling collapsing, or a fire burning down the home altogether ... some tragedy, but I was not ready for what Darryn did tell me. His next words were "we are going to Thailand and it's a boy!"

The adoption agency had called Darryn only ten minutes earlier, to advise him. Our usual Thai social worker was on leave, and so another social worker had picked up our file. Whilst they had only received the news of our allocation on the Friday before, the new social worker was surprised to hear that we had not been informed that our file was actually being reviewed by the Thai adoption agency.

The social worker told Darryn that, owing to policy, she was unable to tell us much more over the telephone and that we would need to meet with

her personally. Darryn had arranged an appointment for 4 pm the next day, being the Wednesday. Technically, the social worker was not even meant to tell us the sex of the child until we met with her, but she had told Darryn that it was a boy.

Finally, we sat in the interview room with the social worker who had made the telephone call to Darryn, the day earlier. The social worker gave us all of the details. It was a boy, who was turning five in February. He had been abandoned since birth, with his mother relinquishing all rights in October 2007. The social worker then asked us how we felt.

Initially, we were both silent, mostly from the shock that we were really hearing the information and that it was not a dream. Then, almost instantaneously, we both answered "we are very happy with the news and are interested in proceeding". The social worker appeared to be concerned that we would not accept him for his age, but this did not even enter our minds. Once we had provided our acceptance, the social worker then gave us the child's brief history paper, his medical records and three photographs.

We knew, without the need to discuss it, that this was our new son, but we were not allowed to sign anything at this point. Government policy stated that we were not able to accept the allocation for twenty-four hours. So we signed to say that we had collected the information, and we booked a second appointment for 11 am on Thursday.

Although both Darryn and myself had made the same decisions on receiving all of the information, we did talk about it all the way back to work, all the way home and all night. We were both ecstatic about the news: in shock, but ecstatic.

We were at the adoption agency at 11 am on the dot. While sitting in the waiting room, the senior manager, whom we had met at the ABC program workshop in October, joined us. He said that technically he was meant to wait until after we had completed our appointment before speaking with us, but he was keen to know what we had decided. He was genuine in his approach and in his concern for us. We both beamed and said "yes". The senior manager's excitement and happiness for us was clear, and again, his emotion was genuine. He acknowledged the difficulties we had experienced to reach this point and how hard we had worked.

Our appointment lasted approximately forty minutes, in which time we formalised the acceptance of our new son. We were provided with both a letter of instruction in relation to the things we needed to complete prior to travel and copies of the forms we had just signed.

As we left the meeting room, the social worker gave us both a big hug. We stepped outside, to be greeted by the senior adoptions officer, who had worked with us through the whole process, and the senior manager. They both embraced us and displayed genuine excitement and happiness for us. The senior adoptions officer also recognised our long journey, the disappointments we had experienced and the many hurdles we had overcome. She congratulated us on our strength and determination. As we all stood discussing our new son and the excitement of the moment, I again had to hold back the tears.

As we left the adoption agency offices and headed to the car, I jokingly said to Darryn that our file probably had "handle with care" written all over it, given the reception we had just received. Nevertheless, they were genuine in their comments and emotions and were probably just as relieved as we were that we had finally been successful.

### **Preparing The Welcome Album**

On Friday morning I started the paperwork trail. I collected a bank cheque for \$1,000, being the overseas adoption fees for the Thai adoption agency, and then I went to the Department of Immigration and Citizenship to pay the \$1,390 immigration fees. I downloaded from the internet the three necessary immigration forms and completed them over the weekend. They were considerably detailed, with one form having sixty questions in it.

It was suggested that we create a welcome album to send to Thailand that would be used to familiarise Samuel with his new family. Having spent a week carefully compiling photos and phrases in both Thai and English, I packaged up the welcome album, the teddy bear we had bought him, the completed forms and the bank cheque and couriered them to the adoption agency the following day.

Two years earlier, Darryn had taken a vow of silence. Given the emotional turmoil and all of the heartache and disappointments we had experienced, Darryn had decided to no longer talk about the adoption process, even to me and his family. Since then, I had continued to talk about the adoption process, completed all of the forms, spoken with the agency and followed up as necessary. Darryn only knew about the times and locations of the appointments, workshops and meetings we had to attend. Since receiving the news of Samuel's allocation to us, Darryn had not stopped talking. He told everyone he could, which was kind of funny. At work, where I had people ringing me to discuss accounts, product deliveries and new orders, they also congratulated us on our new son. Darryn had told everyone, he was so excited and so proud.

### **Terrible Medical News From Thailand**

Over the next few weeks, we heard very little from the adoption agency. The processes worked silently and slowly, or so we thought, and we tried to continue as normal while waiting for that telephone call telling us when we could travel.

On Tuesday 19 March 2008, at about 3.15 pm, I noticed an email from the Thai social worker. Thinking it was odd to receive an email and not a telephone call, I opened it, only to read that she needed to speak to me asap.

In the proceeding telephone conversation, the social worker advised me that Samuel had been for a blood test that day and that his liver appeared inflamed, which concerned the Australia Doctor. Subsequently, the Doctor has requested that Samuel have a Hepatitis C test tomorrow, being Thursday. The social worker needed to advise me she said, as it was going to cost us a further \$800.

I expressed that the cost was not a concern, but I queried why Samuel, as we understood, had passed all of his medicals and had hepatitis tests. The social worker again advised that they were concerned and suggested we prepare ourselves for the worst! She went on to say that once the test results have come back, the Australian Government will then make a decision as to whether Samuel is allowed to enter the country! If he is, we then need to make a decision as to whether we are prepared to accept a child with hepatitis.

The social worker advised me that she would know in the next two days. However, it was the Wednesday before the Easter long weekend, which meant the earliest she would be able to advise me was Tuesday of the following week. Although she suggested we await the test results before

making any decisions, her whole conversation sounded as if it had already been confirmed.

Why had they not done all of these tests prior to us being allocated Samuel, before giving us the photographs, before they allowed us the hope of a child and before they had us sign off on his life? All afternoon my head spun and I felt like shooting myself. Extreme, but honest.

On the Tuesday after the long weekend, I tried to resist the temptation of ringing early, but at 9.30 am I rang the adoption agency for any news. I was advised that the Thai social worker was out of the office until midday, and so I left a message for her to call me back. Having not heard anything, I rang again mid afternoon. Although I did not want to be annoying, we desperately needed to know the test results; however, she was still not available. At 4.30 pm I was just considering ringing again when she rang me.

The social worker advised me that there was no news as yet. She then suggested that we needed to prepare ourselves for the test results. Between our first telephone conversation and our second, the social worker had spoken to various organisations about living with Hepatitis C and she had contacted the Hepatitis Help Line. That, in itself, was heartbreaking. Without actually providing our names, she had spoken with counsellors and was making plans for us to receive counselling. She had also spoken with the Hepatitis Help Line again and offered me their details, which I declined to take at this point.

The social worker then stated, in a matter-of-fact way, that she was not even sure if Samuel had yet been sent for the much-needed test. Nor did she did know when this would happen, owing to the lack of resources within the Thai adoption agency. This was contradictory to what she had advised during our previous conversation and I could not believe what I was hearing. She did say that she would call me daily to check on us both, until we got a result and some more information. Of course, she did not call on the Wednesday: not that we were surprised.

Eight tortuous days had passed since we were initially informed about Samuel's health problems and six days since I was told the results would be due. The pain and the stress got the better of me, and so, on Thursday 27 March 2008 at 9.30 am, I again rang the adoption agency.

In my best assertive voice, I stated the time frame facts to the Thai social worker ... and then I lost control. Through tears and lots of sucking in to stop me from hyperventilating, I told her straight that what they had done to us, allocating, providing photographs, providing hope and then ripping it away, was brutally cruel. I told her that we must have upset someone in her agency five years ago because, for five years, her agency had kicked us in the teeth, and now they were laying the boot in once again. I was over holding back. I was over being polite and patient. The social worker began to get emotional herself and said she understood, but how could she? She had no idea. Fortunately, I was able to pull myself together and return to the strong, placid me that I had shown previously.

The social worker closed the conversation by advising that she would make some telephone calls and call me back with further information ... yeah right! Apparently she had received an email stating that the doctors in Sydney had asked for a "special" paediatric report, as there were some concerns that Samuel was more underweight than a normal adoptive child. She advised that the Sydney doctors could not approve him for entry into the country until they had received that report. She did, however, note that the email had not referred to Hepatitis C and that she had queried this. I made light of their concern about Samuel's weight, but she stated it was serious. She advised that she would forward me a copy of the email, and any more that she might receive, for my information.

A copy of the emails arrived shortly after the telephone conversation. The exact words in the email the social worker had referred to were: *Sydney Doctor* "the child is Hep B neg and there is no apparent reason to request a Hep C testing on the information available." *Social worker response* "I have been given the impression that the child was being examined for a possible Hep C infection. Is this not correct?"

I could not believe what I was reading. To me, this was the positive news that I believed in. Darryn was still sceptical and the news actually made him angry, given the stress that we had just endured. The social worker had advised that it may be up to two weeks before we received the paediatric report and confirmation as to whether Samuel would receive entry into Australia. I remained positive thinking that this was now just a process.

On Monday 31 March 2008 the social worker advised me by phone, morning that the medical report for Samuel had arrived in Sydney and that, from the information she had received, he was OK and that there were no serious issues. The social worker was still cautious, advising that Samuel still needed to gain approval for entry into the country. As soon as she had news from Sydney, she would let us know. Although this could be anywhere up to two weeks, I knew inside that it was all going to be OK now.

On Wednesday 2 April 2008 I received an email that was sent to me stating "... that health assessment unit in Australia advised that the applicant, Master Chaiyaphop THONG, meets health requirements."

Straight away I rang the adoption agency to speak with the Thai social worker to confirm what I was reading was correct. The telephone was engaged and it took me a few minutes to get through. I just wanted to hear the news from her personally, as I could not believe that it was actually true.

### **Travelling To Thailand**

The Thai social worker advised that Samuel's visa may take from two to three weeks to be finalised. From there, it may take between two and three weeks to get a date for us to attend the Thai adoption agency in Bangkok to sign the undertaking of Samuel.

On Thursday 16 April 2008 at 2.40 pm I received a telephone call on my mobile from a withheld number. Whenever I received a telephone call with the caller ID withheld, my heart would start racing. Indeed, this telephone call had every right to start my heart racing.

The voice on the other end of the telephone was the section manager of the adoption agency. He advised me that the agency had received an email from Bangkok and that they had set travel dates for us. He advised me that the dates were either 23 April, or 14 May when we needed to present at the Bangkok Court of Adoption.

The 23 was the following Wednesday. It was almost impossible to reach Thailand by that date! But I was able to stay strong enough not to cry, to think rationally enough and to confirm our attendance on 14 May.

The section manager proceeded to tell me that our social worker had had a family crisis and was not at work, hence the telephone call from him



instead. He advised me that they had actually received the email two weeks prior, but had only just been able to access her emails. This meant that if they had accessed our social worker's emails two weeks earlier, we could have already been in Thailand and presented before the Bangkok Court of Adoption on 23 April!

First thing Monday morning we contacted the travel agents and made an appointment for later that afternoon.

The section manager rang me on Thursday 23 April to advise me that he had contacted the necessary agencies in Thailand and confirmed our travel dates. He had also posted to us the official paperwork that we needed to travel and return with Samuel. There was no other news.

We had scheduled an appointment with the adoption agency for Thursday morning, for our pre-travel meeting. However, I received a telephone call on the Tuesday from our Thai social worker advising me that she had training on that day and so we rescheduled to Wednesday afternoon.

On Wednesday morning I received an email from the social worker requesting confirmation that we could attend the orphanage to collect Samuel on 12 May 2008. This concerned me greatly, as we had been advised that we were required to be in Bangkok to collect Samuel on 7 May. We had booked our travel and accommodation around that date, which I confirmed in a responding email and requested urgent confirmation. I did not receive a response.

Our pre-travel meeting in the afternoon went for an hour and a half and was quite draining. The social worker confirmed our attendance at the orphanage for 8 May, which was better than 12 May but still not the original date we were given.

It was Friday 2 May 2008 and we were due to fly out of Adelaide at 7pm that night. At 3ish, the Thai social worker called me with information that she had forgotten to provide us in our meeting of the day before, such as the gift we were supposed to take for the Thai Orphanage social worker! And the contact name of the person in the Australian Embassy who we needed to meet to finalise Samuel's travel visa! Two more hours and she would not have been able to contact me!!!

### **Collecting Our Son in Thailand**

Darryn and I did not feel like eating breakfast that particular morning. Instead, we caught a taxi at 8.45 am to take us to the Thai social worker. We were scheduled to meet her at 9.30 am. Once we had located the correct building, we were shown to a room where we waited half an hour before she arrived.

On arrival, the Thai social worker introduced herself and provided us with a brief outline of the day's agenda. She then led us out of the building and into an awaiting taxi.

We travelled north of Bangkok to the Rangsit Home for Boys in Pathum-Thani Province. The taxi ride was relatively uneventful, but it gave us an opportunity to chat to the Thai social worker. We asked her lots of questions, some of which she was able to answer, such as "is Samuel aware that we are collecting him and taking him to Australia?" Although her answer was "yes, he is aware", it was not convincing. She was also little vague when we asked "how is Sam coping with the news he will be leaving?" Some questions, such as "has Samuel completed all of the required medical checkups?" she did not have any answers for and quickly moved past the subject.

We were surprised when the social worker apologised to us for the problems we had experienced with Samuel's medical records. She explained that the hospital that handled all of the medicals had mixed Samuel's file up with another sick child, who had Hepatitis C, confirming what we already suspected. She also confirmed that it took the Thai authorities some time to identify the mistake and rectify the problem. She suggested that since the hospital processed so many adoptive files at the same time, the files sometimes became confused. We were not shocked by this revelation but somewhat relieved that someone had actually admitted their mistake and been honest with us.

Rangsit Home for Boys was located on a large property, between five and ten acres. We were welcomed into the main blue administration building, which stood on its own at the front of the property. We were led into what appeared to be a board room containing a large oval table laden with fruit and water.

Almost straight away, they brought our new son into the room. It was such an amazing moment. Samuel appeared to recognise us immediately and came over to us. Even though he was somewhat awkward, he was smiling shyly. The Thai social worker spoke to him in Thai, explaining that we were his new Dad and Mum, and he, in turn, spoke to us in Thai. The Thai social worker handed us several photographs that had been taken of Samuel since October 2007, and so I saw the opportunity to use these as tools to gain his confidence. I sat him on my knee, and he seemed to relax a little as he chatted away telling me, in Thai, who was in the photographs.

Along with the new photos of Samuel, the Thai social worker handed us our welcome album that we had sent, and the teddy bear. We were especially pleased to receive both of these items, as we did not expect to get either of them back. I had even brought along a second identical teddy bear, just in case, but that remained in my bag.

At one point, the Thai social worker presented Darryn and myself with six documents "of undertaking" regarding our care for Samuel, which required our signature. Three of the documents were in English and three in Thai. Although we signed them all without hesitation, we hoped that the Thai documents contained the same information as the English version.

We spent half an hour or so becoming familiar with Samuel over fruit and photos, before commencing a tour of the boys' home. The Thai social worker joined us along with one of the senior administrative women.

The boys home itself was clean and tidy and the grounds were neat. Samuel's shoes were four sizes too big for him, but, apart from that, he was well dressed, as were the other boys. Each boy had his own bed and blanket, which was folded nicely at the end of the bed, but there were no pillows. There were a few toys visible, neatly stacked in a corner shelf and, although not as extensive as we would expect in Australia, there was some play equipment outside in the garden areas. So far, all of the things that we had been told by the Thai social worker in Australia were untrue.

Once we had completed the tour, we were sort of hurried back to the administration building, bundled into a taxi and sent on our way. The whole process in the boys' home had taken about an hour and a half.

Before leaving the boys home, we were asked to leave a message in the "guest book", describing what we thought of the boys' home and Samuel. I wrote "We have waited a long time for this very special moment. We are very lucky and would like to thank you for allowing us to take Chaiphaphop home with us. We thank you for taking good care of him and looking after him. We will love him and take good care of him. We are blessed and will love him forever. Thank you. Darryn and Liz Peter", as I choked back the tears.

We left the boys home with Samuel, our welcome album, his teddy bear, the clothes on his back and the (way too big) shoes on his feet.

### **Official Business**

On Thursday 15 May 2008 at 9 am Darryn, Samuel and I attended the Thai Adoption Board. Although we arrived on time, we were unsure exactly when our sitting was. We understood that there were some twenty couples before the board, and so it could have been a long day.

Not long after we arrived, we met the Thai social worker, who provided us with copies of Samuel's original Thai birth certificate, a translated (English) birth certificate, the House Agreement (that was signed by the boys home and agreed to our caring for him) and his newly issued Thai passport. She also gave some brief instructions on how to greet the board members and bow to them (and thank them in Thai) before we left the room.

We took a seat in the waiting area, which was in the building foyer and although undercover, was fully open to the elements. It was another extremely hot and humid day with a moody and grey sky. Fortunately we were the fourth in line and were called up at 10.30 am.

The adoption board room was relatively large. As the board members were already seated when we entered the room, we were shown to our seats opposite them. Three main board members sat behind tables, of which only one spoke English. In the row behind, another three members took notes as the hearing proceeded.

The board chair began to ask us a series of questions: Why did we choose Thailand as our country of adoption? Did we feel that we were beginning to bond with Samuel? Had Samuel been eating and sleeping OK? When nominating our age group, had we been specific about a five year old, and if not, how did we feel about a five year old? Had we chosen a school for Samuel? How did our family feel about us adopting a Thai child? Would we adopt again from Thailand and, if so, would we choose a boy, or girl next time?

Although we felt a bit nervous, the questions were relatively straight forward and easy to answer. Darryn answered most of the questions, with a little bit of input from me.

The chairperson then asked Samuel a series of questions in Thai, such as who was his father and who was his mother, what was the room like that he was staying in, what was the food like, did he want to go to Australia and was he happy with us?

Throughout the hearing, Samuel was very quiet. When it was his turn to speak he appeared shy. However, he identified Darryn as his father and me as his mother, which was quite a special moment even though his answer may have been because he thought that that's what the board members wanted to hear. When Samuel said that the room was good and the food was nice and that he was happy to go to Australia with us, Darryn and I both felt a sense of relief.

The chairperson again spoke to us, stating that Samuel was a very lucky boy to be adopted at his age. We expressed that we were equally lucky, but she went on to advise that as Samuel was an older child, his time in the system was nearing an end. She thanked us from the bottom of her heart and on behalf of the Thai people, which, again, was a strange feeling. She felt that Samuel was going to a good home and that she had no objections in signing the memorandum of agreement. We thanked the board members and were shown back to the waiting area. Soon after, the Thai social worker appeared with the signed memorandum of agreement.

Outside the building we made our way towards one of the taxis. I was already in the taxi and was settling Samuel, as Darryn was getting in. Just as Darryn was about to close the door, the Thai social worker hurried over to our taxi and, with an apology, asked us for 1,500 baht for Samuel's passport. She explained that with all of the official business, she had not had an opportunity to ask us earlier.

Her request caught us by surprise, as it was totally unexpected and we had not been advised of any further fees. Unfortunately, or fortunately as the case may be, Darryn only had 1,400 baht on him, of which we needed 200 for the taxi fare back to the hotel. Darryn explained our circumstances and gave her 1,200, which she accepted without complaint. We found it strange, too, that the Thai social worker neither objected to the shortfall, nor made any arrangements for us to forward the additional 300 baht. Given the circumstances in which the request for additional money came, we were concerned about its legitimacy. We made a mental note to follow this up with the Australian adoption agency on our return.

All of the official business had now been completed and we were free to return to Australia with our new son.

### **Officially Adopting Our Son**

Although we had collected Samuel in May 2008, the Thailand adoption program required that he remained a Ward of the State of South Australia, in our care, for the first twelve months. In other words, he was not officially adopted and remained a citizen of Thailand.

In May 2009, the Post Adoption Social Worker visited our home for the last time and prepared the final progress report that would be used to approve and formalise the adoption of our son.

Shortly after, in the post, we received a copy of our final progress report, along with a letter advising us that we had to attend the Adelaide Children's Court in July to finalise the adoption process, before attending the Thai Consulate in Canberra to file the adoption order.

The appointment at the Thai Consulate took all of fifteen minutes for us to hand deliver (as required) the adoption order, and sign two documents relinquishing Samuel's Thailand citizenship. While it meant flights and accommodation for the three of us and was inconvenient and costly, it also meant that Samuel was now our son and no one could ever take him away from us. Not that we would have allowed them to previously, but now it was official.

*Taken from the forthcoming book Searching For Our Angel: The Long Path to Inter-Country Adoption (A&A Book Publishing).*

