

Name: Brian Jay Nelson
Birth name: Noh Jin Sup
Birth year: 1972
Arrival year: 1973
Date of death: February 7, 1998
Country of origin: South Korea



Our beloved son, Brian, came home to us from Holt Children's Services in Seoul when he was only 4 months old. Because he had such difficulty walking as a toddler, we sought medical help and were devastated when he was diagnosed with muscular dystrophy. We were also grateful that his illness hadn't been detected in Korea, for if it had, he would have been classified as unadoptable.

We were blessed with Brian's presence with us for 25 years. He was such an exceptional person. Brian was blessed with a multitude of friends who loved him and were inspired by him. When his friends were faced with adversity, whether it was a concerning medical diagnosis, a career disappointment, or problems far less serious than these, it was Brian's counsel they sought. When the "tragedy" was of a frivolous nature, he never took their pain lightly, even though their problem paled against the adversity he faced daily.

Brian never complained about the hand he had been dealt; in fact, he sometimes made light of it. He had an uncommonly clever wit, and a droll sense of humor that occasionally bordered on the macabre. For example, as a teenager, he would use a wheelchair when he went to the mall with his friends, even though he could still walk a little. The wheelchair enabled them to get from place to place more quickly. When they got to a store, he would get out of the chair at the entrance and walk into store on foot. In getting out of the chair, he always drew a curious crowd. Upon arising, he would spread his arms wide, turn to the staring crowd and exclaim, "IT'S A MIRACLE!"

Near the end of life he was hospitalized and attached to a multitude of tubes. When his aunt and uncle arrived at his hospital room to visit him, his aunt said, “Well, Brian, there you are with your drip,” to which he replied, “And there you are with yours.”

While attending an outdoor rock concert, he fell from his wheelchair when his friends were attempting to negotiate a steep hill. The fall resulted in a broken leg. When the ER doc told him his leg was broken, he replied with alarm, “Oh my God, will I ever walk again?”



Brian lived his life to the fullest. Throughout his high school and college years, he was a class and student body leader and participated in many worthwhile ventures. The YMCA Youth in Government programs, rich with young people who care about national and global responsible citizenship, were especially important to him. He made many of his life-long friends (no pun intended—a bit of Brian humor) through these programs. He also refused to allow his disability to thwart his recreational and social life, hosting gatherings, enjoying fine dining evenings out, soaking up the cultural offerings of the Twin Cities, and taking cross-country trips with his friends.

Megan Rye's unique and beautiful work is first and foremost a testament to the gift of international adoption. To his family, however, it also a lovely remembrance of Brian.

Brian's parents, Andrine and Roger Nelson

Name: Cory Myhran (Thysell)
Birth name: Kim, Myung Ae
Birth year: January 1975
Arrival year: May 1975
Country of origin: South Korea



My dad always told me that I was, "Norwegian by proxy." I remember eating lutefisk, rice pudding, and lefsa for Christmas, but also, waiting patiently for the Swedish meatballs, which were my favorite. I remember him telling me that when I was a baby, someone looked into the stroller and said, "She's cute. Does she speak Chinese?" He rolled his eyes and said in an irritated voice, "No, she's a baby. She says, goo-goo, gaga!" My dad always had my back, supported me in everything I did, and was so proud of me. When I'd visit him in the nursing home after his stroke, he'd loudly and proudly tell the staff, "This is my daughter." I miss my dad every day and am so thankful that he and my mom chose me to be their daughter.

Cory is a speech-language pathologist who lives with her husband and two daughters in Minnesota.

Name: Elizabeth Jacobson
Birth name: Wang Ting
Birth year: 1994
Arrival year: 1995
Country of origin: China



Recently, while I was babysitting, a young girl asked me about my parents. I explained that I was adopted, and what that meant. It was not that eloquent, but I said how when I was a baby my parents could not care for me. I also said how my mother decided she wanted to be a parent, and that we found each other (or I guess, she found me). And her response was that it was sad. She was sad I did not live with my mom or dad. But, I did. I lived with my mom, it was just different.

That I think, is one of the complicated things about adoption. It is sad, and at the same time it is not. Like most people we become a product of our circumstances, and adoption is just part of that. While I may not have lived with my biological parents because I am adopted, I see things more clearly. I see that family is often more than biological relationships, or two parents and two children. I see that cultural identity is layered, and changes. And I see that people are many more things than their hair, or skin, or the shape of their eyes.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth is currently living in Minneapolis and attending law school.

Name: Emily
Birth name: Li Yi (李一)
Birth year: 1995
Arrival year: 1996
Country of origin: China



I grew up knowing I was adopted. It was a natural, simple idea because my mom was also adopted. I remember being very young, asking to hear my story over and over again. “The China story,” as my two year old self would refer to it as, was the story of when my parents and I first met. It was told most often when my mom would take me to my room for bed, and it became a sort of bedtime story. We would both be lying down, and I would eagerly await my favorite part, which was her describing how she packed several pacifiers to bring to China. I spat out one after another, and after each one, my mom would make a funny “spitting” noise. Finally, I found the one that was just right, and I was content.

Of course I wonder about my biological family all the time. Given China’s former One Child Policy, I suspect that I have an older sibling. Alternatively, if I was the first born, I could have been given up because they were hoping to have a boy. I wonder if they are in the same small village in which I was born. I wonder what my life would have been like, had they decided to keep me. Quite honestly, I am not sure that I would still be alive. I had frequent ear infections and when I was two years old, I had a kidney infection.

The only information that my biological family provided was a note pinned to me saying my date of birth. At eight days old, I was left on a man's doorstep in a small farming village. We have heard that this 30-40 year old young man who cared for me for a few days supposedly wanted to keep me, but the older women in his town did not think he could care for a newborn girl as a single man. I wish that my biological family and those who cared for me could know that I am happy, healthy, and grateful for the tough decision that they made in giving me up. Not only that, but I am proud to say that I am excelling; I have travelled far and wide, lived in five different cities, and I am soon to begin my masters degree.

If I could share any insight into adoption, it would be this: I believe we need to change the ways in which adoption is discussed. It should not be seen as the "last resort" because one cannot get pregnant. In film and media, it makes me sad every time a woman is portrayed crying because she cannot get pregnant. It makes me feel like adoption is a second choice. Adoption should also not be done because the future parents want to "help needy children." A biological relation should not be referred to as one's "real" family, and there is no such thing as a "normal family."

My own adoptive family has made it clear: adoption was always their first choice in how they wanted to create a family. I hope to see others replacing the current discourse to a more educated, compassionate, and respectful language surrounding adoption. Family is not blood. Family is family, those who care for, love, and support you endlessly.

Emily and her puppy are moving to Ann Arbor, where she will begin her MSW, Master of Social Work, at the University of Michigan.

Name: Glenn Dorin Rye Dworsky
Birth name: Dorin
Birth year: 1992
Arrival date: March 16, 1996
Country of origin: Romania



What I remember, or feel like I remember, is the idea of white cribs. Two or three kids sharing a rusty white crib. I don't remember specific children, but I remember their presence and feel like there was more than just myself in the crib. I also remember silhouettes of nurses, or caregivers, being in the room.

I love tea, and remember drinking a lot of tea, as a kid in Romania. This is one positive that I still enjoy. Oatmeal I don't enjoy, I think I had so much of it in Romania. I'd only eat oatmeal if I were starving. I remember the idea and concept of portioning in the orphanage, this is what we were given and that was it. I remember being hungry.

After coming home to America, I grew up with lots of healthy food. There was always dinner for me, before or after swim practice. And there was always a snack at home after school. My mom knew that was important, and she always had that ready for me.

But I still struggled with being hungry. It was so scary and uncomfortable being hungry. At school they had a before school meal program for kids who didn't have enough at home. At school I'd always eat this meal, even though I had just eaten breakfast at home. At one point the school called my parents to see if I were being fed. And soon after, I just stopped doing it. Even today I still have the feeling you never know when your next meal is coming from.

My first memory in America is getting off the plane. I don't remember the journey, but knew I was excited on the plane. My mom recounts the story of introducing me to family at the airport.

“Regarding Glenn's name, we didn't tell anyone ahead of time that we were naming him after grandpa. When Glenn and I got off the plane, Rafi and I introduced him to everyone as Glenn Dorin Rye Dworsky. We wanted to keep his Romanian name and also to honor grandpa. Glenn has always been proud to share grandpa's name.”

Aunt Debby and Uncle Joe brought a car seat to the airport. When we left, on the way home we went through a tunnel (maybe the Lowry), and there were orange lights, it was in the dark.



At the Minneapolis St Paul airport.

The first thing we did at home, was introduce me to my bedroom. There was zero doubt in my mind what was happening. I knew I was going to a comfortable good place.

I saw my Dad in pictures in Romania, but did not meet him until we arrived at the Minneapolis airport. My mom made the journey to Romania by herself. A bear was given to me in Romania, from Aunt Karen. My mom brought it and gave it to me. It was a huge comfort all through growing up.

The first night in America, I remember walking into my bedroom, and there was a real kids bed. It was red, and had a Mickey Mouse blanket. The bed had a side rail, and it was very comforting knowing it was my bed. The room was very empty, it had a nightstand and a dresser, both white. There were Duplo Legos in the room waiting for me. I remember sitting down with my mom and dad playing with them that first week.

I had a hard time falling asleep at first, but we got into a routine with books and songs. I always went to my mom in the night. My mom's side of the bed was the farthest side away from their bedroom entrance.

The first interaction with my Dad was going into Faribault grocery shopping. We were in the old Mitsubishi, and I was confused. It was the first time my mom, Susan, wasn't there. I was a little unsure in the car. Having the first trip outside of the house with just my Dad, was a new experience.

I was adopted at four years old and did not know English. Thinking where I am now is amazing, to be completely fluent.

However the challenges of learning and socializing in school, were hard, and has affected me lifelong. The English language was a challenge to understand at first. How to formulate a sentence in writing, and comprehend what I'm reading. I'd get Ranger Rick, from Grandma and Grandpa, and look forward to each month, being able to look at pictures and do the different activities. Growing up I loved to look at catalogues, because they were visual. I didn't know how to read, so I learned from pictures more easily. I also worked on my writing, with parents and a tutor. My dad was a good typist. Even now, I'll ask him to proof read something. I'm now more confident in my writing.

I feel like a lottery winner. Being adopted by two Minnesota parents, who gave me everything I could ever want as a child, and even to this day. I know there are plenty of kids, that haven't had these opportunities and privileges.

I know how lucky you and I are, and all the kids in this project are. Audrey and I talk about this. Having kids or adopting. I think it would be really cool to adopt ourselves, as well as possibly have a biological child. I meet foster and adopted kids all the time. Everyone reacts differently, some people do really well and really appreciate what they have. Others have a "poor me" mentality, they can't escape.

I'm most grateful to know I don't have to ever struggle, or worry I don't have a family that cares.

Glenn and his wife Audrey recently bought a home and live in St. Louis Park, Minnesota with their dog Lucy and cat Penny. Glenn works as a project manager and enjoys spending free time coaching youth swimming on the weekends.

Name: Jessica Ko Eun Wille
Birth name: Choi, Ko Eun
Birth year: 1999
Arrival year: 2000
Country of origin: Korea



Adoption is a very hard subject to talk about. Not knowing who your family is, if you have brothers and sisters, if your birth parents ever married, is a very hard thing to deal with. It's like not knowing the other half of your life. To me, being adopted is kind of like the movies. Sometimes it's in color. Sometimes it's in black and white.

Jessica

Name: Kathy
Birth name: Marcia
Birth year: 1957
Adoption year: 1957
Country of origin: United States



ADOPTION: A single word that has changed my life twice.

I was adopted in 1957 at the age of 6 weeks. My parents were very open about my adoption, which was fairly progressive for the times. I always knew I was adopted and it was treated as a positive thing. In second grade there was a family tree project, and I remember the teacher taking me aside asking, “are you okay with the class knowing you were adopted?” I was stunned it would ever need to be a secret, something hidden from the rest of the class. It was my first encounter where there was concern that being adopted was questionable.

I grew up feeling blessed. My mom was a skilled seamstress. I have fond memories of waking up to handmade doll clothes at the end of my bed. I had a stable full of plastic horses. She made saddles for them out of felt and decorated them with embroidery floss. She taught me how to needlepoint, and I still have my first project: two horses holding a flower.

Of course I was curious about my history. We all assumed my birthmother had been in difficult circumstances. As a child, I suspected my birth mother worried, and I wished I could have thanked her and let her know that I was okay. I prayed for her on my birthdays. Eventually I would also pray with Emily, for her birth parents.

My records were sealed until I turned 50. When I requested my file, Social Services sent me a redacted copy. I was able to glean enough information to track down my birthmother. Social Services prepared me for the possibility that she may not want to be found and made the initial contact for me.

My birthmother was over the moon to hear from me. When we met, in a Minneapolis airport hallway, I was finally able to convey my feelings of gratitude. My birthmother's story is only hers to tell, but it is heartbreaking.



The most astonishing surprise for me is how much we look alike. People have always commented on my very dark brown eyes. Suddenly I was looking into the same brown eyes. We stay in touch, but the couple who raised me are my mom and dad.

When my birthmother was in Minnesota, I was very moved when she wanted to visit my parents' graves as a way of saying thank you. We went to Lakewood Cemetery together. At the gravesite she said, "thank you for doing a good job of raising my child."

I was really touched by this, and it reminded me of an adoption talk I had attended. A Korean adoptee had tracked down her birthmother. This girl and her mom flew from the United States to Korea. The birthmother was filled with shame and had never told anyone about giving up her child. When they met up at the hotel, the first thing the birth mother did, before even hugging her teenage child, was fall on her hands and knees at the feet of the adoptive mom and thank her.

ADOPTION: I became a mother through adoption in 1996. My husband and I adopted our daughter from China. This journey has been the most beautiful, emotional, and fulfilling part of my life. I feel as though I have come full circle.

From the moment when I first saw Emily's photo, she was mine. I was in the hallway of Children's Home Society with our social worker, expected to pick up our referral package to bring home to share with my husband. Instead, I immediately ripped the envelope open and that was it. I looked into her brown eyes and felt as if she could see into my soul. I said, "I will take her." The social worker asked if I wanted to talk it over with my husband, and I said, "I don't need to" because she was instantly my daughter. I didn't even look at the medical information - it didn't matter.

Most families celebrate "Gotcha Day" as the first time they meet their child. For me it was that simple moment in the hallway. My husband celebrates Gotcha Day as the first time he held her.

Four weeks later, we traveled to China to pick her up. We initially flew into Hong Kong. From Hong Kong to Hangzhou, we were delayed on the tarmac for 6-8 hours. China and Taiwan were engaged in "saber rattling," and this military conflict made our arrival time 10 pm. Once at the hotel we were taken to our rooms, and then called out to the hallway. Emily had been sitting in a room all day waiting for us. Kids were bundled up, as the orphanages had no heat. The caregivers kept all the clothes on the children, even though the hotel was warm. An official placed Emily in my arms, once again in a hallway. She looked at me with a serious expression. My husband dissolved into tears. I felt as though I could not breathe. We were a family.

Back in our room we unwrapped Emily, taking off all the layers, to find a very petite baby. I put my emotions aside and went into caretaking mode. She was sick, so they translated how much amoxicillin to shake into her milk. I felt helpless. We weren't even instructed to properly measure the medicine. Years later, it turned out she was allergic to it.

We were in China with Emily for seven days. We ran around, boiling water to mix with formula for bottles, went through ceremonies with the town mayor, and took oaths where we promised to care for our child. We each got a panda. We still have it. I really trusted Children's Home Society to handle all these official steps, and I just dealt with taking care of Emily. We became a family over this week and watched other people become families.

We then flew to Guangzhou to get a visa and passport for Emily. We sat down with a US government worker, who had a set of questions for us. "Are you sure you want to do this?" Which was the most ridiculous question ever. After all the classes, travel, paperwork, preparation, and finally meeting their child, who would then change their minds?

The moment we had wheels up, I felt relief no one could take her away. I cannot fathom my life without her. I also cannot fathom her life had she not been adopted. I pray for her birth family that they may somehow know she is safe and loved.

I am her mom.

Kathy lives in Minnesota where she and her husband have loved watching Emily grow up.

Name: Katie Sundberg van der Linden

Birth name: Kim Myeong Sook

Birth year: 1987

Arrival year: 1987

Country of origin: South Korea



I was raised surrounded by white. The blanket of snow that covers suburban Minnesota during much of the year provided the perfect backdrop for long afternoons of sledding and engineering igloos. Christmases were celebrated with beige Swedish meatballs, and mounds of silky mashed potatoes. I coveted the shade of bleached blonde hair that nearly every cheerleader possessed, some more naturally than others. Even Jesus, the homeboy adorning the t-shirts of my high school church youth group, was white. Everywhere I looked, my world was white. My parents are white, my husband is white, almost all of my friends in the United States are white.

But I am not white.

My parents spent my entire childhood trying to get me to embrace my Korean heritage, at first to my delight, and in adolescence, much to my embarrassment. But despite a happy and loving home and community, I tried for many years - decades, really - attempting to dull my differences. I fell in love with kimchi at Korean culture camp - later traded for tennis camp - but the vibrant red, spicy pungent Korean staple quickly disappeared from my school lunchbox when a friend told me it smelled "gross" and was "weird." (Funny that my friend now loves kimchi. I guess it took kimchi appearing on every hipster taco truck's fusion menu to get past that weird smell.)

I began to regret not participating in “normal” extracurriculars, like gymnastics and ballet, as I entered middle school. My Korean dance fans, adorned with neon feathers and bold flowers, were tucked away in my closet beside the rainbow of Taekwondo belts and trophies I had earned throughout the years. I happily traded my beautiful childhood hanboks with dreams of the puffy white dresses that were worn by the girls selected for Homecoming Court. Slowly, I allowed my surroundings to leach me of my color and vibrancy until I blended in as well as I could.

But when you are not truly white, all of the boxed hair colors and Abercrombie & Fitch tank tops in the world do not protect you from the people with closed hearts. They do not protect you from never finding the right color crayon to draw yourself with during art class. They do not protect you from the well-meaning but insensitive adults who tell you how lucky you are to have been adopted, how blessed you are to get to live in America. They do not protect you from peers who ask if you know your “real” parents, or relatives who lament that all Asians look the same before awkwardly remembering you are in their midst. They do not protect your pride when the women at the makeup counter, time after time, butcher your eye makeup because you do not have an eyelid crease to guide them. They do not protect your confidence when it is suggested during freshman year that you only got into all of the colleges you applied to because of affirmative action. They do not protect your heart from splintering a little bit when a friend makes a joke about “the f*cking Asians,” and follows it with, “oh, I can say that, right? Because you’re not really Asian.”

It took leaving the Midwest to embrace vibrancy of color in my world again. Slowly, new cultures provided me with a ceaseless rainbow of perspective as I chased new horizons. Swirls of fluorescent pink embroidered into textiles by Hmong women in the villages of Vietnam. Beaded blue and orange and yellow necklaces around the necks of nomadic Maasai as they walked through the foothills of Mount Kilimanjaro. Deep eggplant hued hijabs draped over the heads of women in Indonesia. Intricate dot mosaics painted by Indigenous Australians in colors that represent the sun and the dusty red expanse of the outback. Finally, hair as dark as mine on women in Fiji and El Salvador. Someday, I hope to return to Korea to finally wholly reclaim the heritage I tried so hard to abandon over the years. It has taken decades, but I have finally learned to appreciate that the vastness and diversity of color - of our skin, of our stories, of our lives - are what bring beautiful texture and richness to life.

Katie

Katie has recently relocated to San Diego with her husband after living and traveling abroad for the past nine years.

Name: Lee Patricia-Sander Okubo
Birth name: Park Do Ri
Birth year: 1968
Arrival year: 1972
Country of origin: South Korea



When I was adopted, it was in the winter, and very cold in Minnesota. Every night I would take all of my clothes I had brought with me and put everything on. From Korea I came with layers and layers of clothes. A whole legacy of hand me down garments from the orphanage. An undershirt, a long sleeved shirt, a cotton sweater, a wool sweater, long johns, pants, and woolen pants for the final outside layer. I was three years old, but the size of a one year old. They were really tiny clothes.

At three I was potty-trained, could dress myself, and bathe myself. In orphanage terms, I was an older kid, and had helped take care of the younger ones.

I would stand out in the porch of our old Victorian house. It was an open porch, with no screens. Each night, all bundled up, and with all my little possessions, I'd wail in Korean at the top of my lungs, over and over, "I'm waiting for my grandfather, he is coming, flying in, to pick me up," I kept pointing to the sky, saying bihaeng-gi (the Korean word for airplane) waiting for him to arrive. I would cry and cry, "I want to do to a faraway place." I did this relentlessly, night after night at all hours, exhausting my parents.

I did this for several months. Within two months I went from speaking exclusively Korean to only English. When I switched over to English this nighttime ritual ended.

My adoption file mentions I was abandoned and found on April 22, 1969 at the Sung Dong police station. It was fifty years ago TODAY. I was brought to the hospital and then the orphanage. My age was approximated at 5 months old, thus my given birthdate of November 22, 1989.

I was one of the health and cute babies, and went to a good foster family, with very engaged grandparent aged, foster parents. I was in and out of hospital, and therefore spent a year longer in Korea, prior to adoption. I arrived on January 5th, 1972, through Children's Home Society and Holt adoption agencies.

I came with a rattle that said *baby* and a baby blanket. My mom from Minnesota, tried to send a care package to the orphanage. I think that was why there was a little blanket and hat. In 1972, the world was a bigger place across the ocean. It almost felt like it was the time of sending a telegram.



When I came off of the airplane I had huge fistfuls of swizzle sticks. Another adoptee was on the plane with me. She on five. We sang all across the ocean, and walked off the plane together. The flight attendants told my adoptive parents, "she sang and entertained us all across the ocean." And I still love karaoke today.

Growing up my parents, celebrated my arrival, we called it Korea day. Even now we eat Korean food and call each other on this date.

I took the 23 and Me DNA test about three years ago and found over 500 relatives in the database. I am 95% Korean, 4% Japanese, and 1% Chinese. Like many adoptees, prior to receiving the DNA results, I had always wondered if I was mixed race. I knew I was mostly Korean, but also thought I might be part Caucasian.

Through 23 and Me, I was able to connect to a half nephew, whose family was from old inner Seoul, north of the river. That meant I was related to his mother's side of the family. This is as close as I've ever gotten to knowing my origins. That little bit of knowledge gives me a glimmer of hope that I can one day reconnect with my birth family.

I want to let my birth family know I am here, that I had a solid childhood with a good family, and have led a charmed life in many respects. They can ease their minds knowing they made the right decision to give me a chance to find a loving family that could provide a wonderful home, education, and a world of opportunities.

The long ago nightly ritual of singing in Korean and waiting to be taken home on an airplane, had actually been suppressed from my memory for most of my life. I got hurt playing tennis, and had PTSD over it. I couldn't play tennis, and went to a hypnotist to be put under, and talk about my fear of tennis.



While hypnotized, I was asked to, “Go back to the earliest memory I had.” I started crying. For the first time in my life, I remembered the fear and terror I felt at three years old. It was a deep fear, that I was being uprooted and alone, and scared. It was terrifying. I had never remembered this before.

Imagine as an adult, you are kidnapped and held hostage. You are taken from your country, put on a plane, and rehomed with complete strangers who you can't understand. Adoption at three years old is like this. I think I cried on the porch all those cold nights, because I felt it was my job to somehow go back to where I came from.

Lee

Lee told this story on Monday April, 22, 2019, exactly fifty years from the date she was found in Korea. Lee is currently living in Orlando, Florida with her family and is an avid tennis player.

Name: Se Kyung
Birth year: 1998
Arrival year: March 1999
Place of origin: Iksan, South Korea



Se Kyung was adopted at 6 months old from a foster home. She came home to live in Minnesota with her brother and parents. Her Korean name means quiet and shining.

Currently living in North Carolina and attending college at James Madison University.

Name: Lily Beth M. Taylor
Birth name: Ham, Yeong Mee
Birth year: 1987
Arrival year: 1987
Country of origin: South Korea



I still don't really (or fully) feel found.

Lily

Lily is currently living in Minneapolis with her two dogs.

Name: Meghann McLouth
Birth name: Lee Gyu Young
Birth year: 1997
Arrival year: Adopted at 5 and a half months in 1978
Country of origin: South Korea



It is difficult to articulate my feelings on adoption. I am thankful for the love I have from my adoptive family and the many wonderful and unique experiences, which have only been possible through adoption. I lived the quintessential “American dream,” consisting of traveling around the US with my family on vacations, and idyllic school aged summers hanging out with wonderful friends. I attended a great college in our nation’s capital, joined a sorority, and was even crowned homecoming queen. After college I worked for the federal government and have felt fulfilled personally and professionally. But there is also a part of me that is missing a piece of who I am. Part of me longs to belong in a more connected way to my Korean culture, versus the distinction of being a hyphenated American.

The US is a country divided. Currently, there are deep ideological political rifts, which have significant social implications. While our many divisions can make us stronger, exposing us to different points of view and honing our critical thinking, it also lends itself to “otherness.” Growing up, I often felt like “the other.” Sometimes it was as obvious as racial slurs on the playground, like “chink, slant eyes, and gook.” Other times it was condescending people, always adults, complimenting my English. This occurs too often to even recount. More than once, seemingly well-meaning people, assumed I was good at math. I was often asked where I was *really* from, and Minnesota was not an accepted answer.

I distinctly remember a time in college, where being “the other” escalated unpleasantly. An older gentleman was yelling at me, saying my mother didn’t teach me the sacrifices of the American troops. He said I was ungrateful that he had fought for my people and saved us from our own gook brothers. Society has constantly made it evident, in small and big ways, that I was not a “real American.”

While in college, I studied abroad in Seoul, Korea. Although I knew I was not a “real Korean,” I hoped to find a sense of belonging that was missing for me in the US. However, while in Korea, I realized I was more American than American citizens would ever give me credit for.

Now that I’m older, I feel confident with my identities as a Korean American, an adoptee, and a Minnesotan. There are still boxes for people to check and fit into, but I also am secure enough to break out of these narrow definitions.

I don’t know what my life would be like had I stayed with my biological mother in Korea. I do know that my life in the US has been blessed and beautiful, difficult and heartbreaking, and rich and precious.

Meghann

Meghann currently lives in Minneapolis and is an active volunteer for her adoption agency, Children's Home Society of Minnesota, and the University of Minnesota Adoption Medicine Clinic.

Name: Mel
Birth name: Wendy Araceli Moh-Yash
Birth date: October 7, 2004
Arrival date: July 2005
Country of origin: Guatemala



Name: Mackie
Birth name: Jackeline Michelle Moh-Yash
Birth date: July 23, 2007
Arrival date: August 2008
Country of origin: Guatemala



Mel and Mackie, with their adoptive mom Michele, share their adoption story with artist, Megan Rye. Mel and Mackie, unique among the adoptees in this project, share the same birthmother. This is the story of finding and meeting her.

Megan: What would you like to share about your history?

Mel: I was born in Guatemala. My foster mom Rosa, was in her 70's. I was one of her last foster children. She also had a four year old grandson.

Michele: Rosa's grandson considered Mel "his" baby. When we went to get Mel, it was a 3 hour goodbye at the adoption. Mel had been with Rosa from right after her birth for nine months.

Guatemala randomly institutes checks within the adoption process to give birthmothers the chance to reclaim their babies. Mel's birthmother Hortencia, was contacted twice. Hortencia missed the first summons, and then did not show up to visit Mel at the second attempt. Mel's birthfather had left before the birth.

Mel: We wanted to take a chance to see if we could find our birth mom, Hortencia.

Megan: Was Mackie's adoption similar to Mel's?

Michele: When Mackie was given up, we requested foster mother Rosa again. Even though she was in her mid 70's she was happy to do it, but she had broken both her arm and leg, making it impossible. So Marta was Mackie's foster mom instead. Marta had a step daughter who spoke English and she currently lives in Virginia.

We visited Mackie at 3 months old. She was one of the last adoptees out of Guatemala. In January 1, 2008, Guatemala would not sign the Hague Treaty, so the Guatemalan adoption programs ended.

I remember once driving Mackie to pre-school, and she said, 'I miss Mama Hortencia,' I said that I understood and that was it. But then a few months later she said it again. Every few months she'd bring up Mama Hortencia.

Megan: Was it difficult to find Hortencia?

Michele: Our family hired a searcher. Hortencia had never moved from her original village, and in 2018 the searcher just knocked on her door, and there she was. A meeting was arranged.

Michele: Hortencia was around 39 and 41 at the times of Mel and Mackie's adoptions. If you were poor, they didn't keep track of your exact birthdate. Hortencia hadn't ever told her 3 other children, that Mel and Mackie existed. Her daughter Erika is 18 and her sons are 22 and 26.

We traveled to Antigua, Guatemala to meet Hortencia. Hortencia and her daughter Erika made the journey together. However Hortencia had only told her daughter Erika about Mel, not Mackie. Hortencia had to ask her husband's permission to travel, and he said only if you bring Erika.

We stayed at the El Convento hotel in Antigua Guatemala. We were all nervous and excited on the day we were going to meet Hortencia. I waited at the front door of the hotel for Suzi (our searcher), Hortencia, and Erika to drive up. The girls were in a sitting room just beyond the lobby. Mackie then decided she wanted to wait with me, But when Mackie saw the car drive up she was so excited she wanted to wait with me."



Mackie: I was so excited, I couldn't wait.

Michele: We all met. But Hortencia's daughter Erika was in shock and crying, so upset to suddenly learn two sisters existed, not just the one Hortencia had told her about.

Megan: I can't imagine why she wouldn't have told Erika about both girls, knowing she would immediately see both of them.

Mel: Erika was really shocked. I understand why she was upset, finding out about two siblings, when she was expecting one.

Michele: It's very strange, maybe she thought one sounded better than saying two were given up.

Mel and Mackie are fluent in Spanish. After we met in the lobby of the hotel and talked, we had lunch. After a while, Susie the searcher/interpreter, could see we were ok on our own and left.

Mel: At one point, Hortencia cried for 20 or 30 minutes, Mackie and I sat on each side of her. She stroked our hair and was so sweet to us.

Michele: Hortencia said she prayed every day for this to happen, but didn't think it ever actually would.

At dinner, Erika was a little better.

Mel: We had three necklaces made, that read *sisters forever* in Spanish on one side, and our first name initials on the other side."

Mel: The next day Erika embraced us warmly. We were all hugging and went shopping together. When it was time to say goodbye we walked to the corner, and called a tuk tuk, a mini taxi. We hugged them, they got in, and waved goodbye

Mackie: Seeing Mama Hortencia and Erika leave was really hard. We were standing at the corner, I remember hugging them. Everyone was crying, dad had on sunglasses, but he was crying.

Mel: After our visit, Hortencia told her sons about us, we don't know if the husband was told or not.

We communicated on Facebook and Whatsapp with Erika. Erika wanted to visit us in the United States. Before our visit, Erika had asked Hortencia, "Why didn't you put me up for adoption," after learning about her sister and the educational opportunities she had. Erika's school was only ½ day each Saturday.

Michele: We investigated how we could legally bring Erika here, but only being related to her America sisters wasn't enough.

Megan: Would you like to return to Guatemala again?

Mackie: I want to go back to Guatemala and eat the food again.

Mel: I want to meet my brothers someday. One is in the army, and the other has 2 kids. I want to maybe be a lawyer in immigration, and help Erika and others get here in a safer way. I kept asking her, "what's your plan, how will you get here." The last thing we heard, Erika let us know she wanted to come to the border. We don't know if she left her home, if she is at the border, or where she is now.

Megan: Is there anything else you'd like to share?

Mel: It's normal for me to be adopted. But sometimes it is more complicated, like when doing the family tree project at school. It was hard to know who to include, knowing people would ask me why I don't look like the people on my tree. When I was in first grade, I remember waiting until the last minute to make the tree because I had no idea what to do.

Mel: I didn't have any pictures of my blood related family. But I finally came to the conclusion that I needed to represent my mom's family. Even though they didn't share the same blood and that they didn't look exactly like me, they were still my family and I loved that.

Besides the family tree, there were other things that came up regarding adoption. Slowly, almost everyone in my grade would come to know I was adopted from Guatemala. Kids constantly asked me questions, and would ask if my birth parents abandoned me because they didn't love me. I didn't think this was true. I always assumed they put me up for adoption because there was no way to provide a safe, and comforting home. It did make me question some things though.

Another time, my friend introduced me by saying: "Hi, this is my friend Mel and she is adopted from Guatemala and lives with different people." This bothered me a lot and I didn't want to be known only as the kid who's adopted. I do remember meeting nice students who would be curious about adoption and my story. They wouldn't be quick to assume things or judge me. They would only ask about what I know and would respectfully listen to what I say. It always seemed weird for me to talk about adoption because it was something so normal to me in my life, yet tons of kids didn't understand what I was talking about.

Mel is a freshman in high school and loves being on the swim team.

Mackie is in 6th grade and loves snowboarding and taking care of her puppy.

Birth year: 1990
Arrival year: 1991
Country of origin: Colombia



I chose to participate in this project to just show how powerful adoption is. It has changed my perspective on life and provided me with opportunities that I may have never received. "Although I didn't give you the gift of life, life gave me the gift of you" has always been a favorite quote of mine about adoption as it speaks volumes.

Now in her 20's, she is living in CA and enjoys the beaches and hiking.

Name: Tyler Christopher Woon Wilcox
Birth name: Woon Un Kyung
Country of origin: South Korea
Birth year: 1990
Arrival year: 1990



Growing up I don't remember talking about adoption. I was really social as a kid and made friends easily. There was never a time I felt impeded by being Korean American. Adoption didn't become an issue for me until my family took a trip to Korea when I was 15 years old.

When we were getting ready, Children's Home Society had a question on our form: Do you want to search for your biological family? I wasn't opposed to it, so we checked the "yes" box. We found out we could meet my birth parents. Uniquely to me, I met both my birth mother and birth father. They had been together when they had me, but were unmarried. Then they split up and I was placed for adoption. Then two or three years later they got back together and married.

We met at the adoption agency in Seoul. Through the interpreter we asked a lot of questions about medical history and my birth. They were clearly nervous, afraid I might be angry or hurt, and wanted to explain. They were respectful of the fact that I shouldn't feel the need to address them as mom and dad. My birth parents had a million questions about me and my life.

It was easy for me to meet and accept them because I had never needed this visit to feel "complete," as a person. It was supercool to see them, but I didn't have any big revelation because of it, except for one, they told me I had two brothers but they had left them at home in Busan.

We heard from my birth parents a few days later; they had told their boys about me, and wanted to get together. As it turns out, we had signed up to go to Busan

Korean age is different, the oldest child was 11 or 12, and the youngest probably 10. Both boys were super excited. They were jumping up and down, straining to see us on the bus, before we even got off. The oldest brother knew enough English to translate for us. These two little kids didn't leave my side the whole day. We went to the beach, the boys wrote my English name in the sand. It was strange, the oldest brother had the same interests as me. We both play basketball and the saxophone, and we looked the same too. I could see what it would have been like to grow up there.

My birthparents wanted to know if I needed anything, they wanted to get me a gift. I couldn't think of anything, so I said a watch. I got a watch, I wore it for a while. I don't know where it is now. I wish I still had it.

I saw my birth mom one last time. She came to Seoul to see us at the airport before we left. At the airport she said thank you to my parents. She seemed like she wanted to apologize. It was clear it was a big hurdle for both sides to have agreed to even meet. I think it helped my birth parents to know I was well cared for. I've been super lucky to have had a normal, privileged upbringing. I haven't had to face anything difficult. My parents did a fantastic job bringing me up.

When we said goodbye, everyone was super emotional, except me. The whole visit was tough for my sister Amy. Her birthmother had declined to meet her. I wish it had been the other way around. I wished she had been the one to meet her birth family. We kept in touch via email through the oldest brother. We got University of Minnesota sweatshirts and sent them to the boys.

We got a note and pictures from them about a year later announcing the birth of my third brother. I want to go back on vacation some day and reach out again and see them.

Tyler Wilcox

"Jung, Woon Kyung, Tyler's Korean name, means ring around the moon and stars. The first night he did not want to sleep, instead he sat in the bathroom sink looking in the mirror, smiling, laughing, and cooing at his reflection in the mirror."

Tyler's parents, Sue and Dwight, share a memory of his first night at home.

Tyler is living in the twin cities and working at the Best Buy corporate office.