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Going the Extra Smile

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My mom and dad are not normal. They had three of us biologically and then froze. They couldn’t imagine their lives were now on a locked trajectory. As blessed as they were to have three priceless children, they found themselves in a midlife crisis at age 25, trying to figure out why on earth they were here otherwise. The clear answer came amidst the fog.

Mom said God put her on earth to be a mother.
Dad said God put him on earth to make her happy.
So, together, they embarked on their adventure — their calling.
SEVEN-YEAR-OLD FOSTER PARENT

Mom sat me down when I was 7 years old and told me, “We are going to be foster parents.”

I responded, “You mean, you and Dad are going to be foster parents … I’m 7.” She said, “People who need love don’t care how old you are.”

In the following seven years, we fostered 36 children. And when I say “we,” I mean I was a foster parent, too. Diapers, walks around the neighborhood, meal times, and caretaking … I was in. I could change a diaper at 8 years old like a soldier field-stripped a weapon.

Some kids stayed in our home for two weeks, some for two months, and a few stayed for two years.

Waking up in the morning, I never knew who was going to be at the breakfast table. Or worse, who wouldn’t be there that morning.

It was beautiful and brutal and chaotic. We were homeschooled, so mom taught us all how to wrangle the human spirit.

Every child we fostered had some type of special need, and some who needed full-time care. At 8 years old, I learned how to adjust oxygen flow and change tanks and how to feed a child through a stomach feeding tube.

It was wild and painful and beautiful and chaotic. Did I mention that it was chaotic?

After our 36th child was moved from our home, my mom said, “Enough!” We needed permanence for our home, these kids, and our family. So we embarked on the second chapter of our family calling, to adopt. Over the next 10 years, we adopted eight kids from six different countries.

Our family grew fast and beautifully.

Never simple.

Never easy.

Always worth it.
FOUR PIVOTAL CONVERSATIONS

When I turned 17, I enrolled at Cedarville University and moved into Brock Hall as a freshman. In my four years at Cedarville, I had four pivotal conversations that changed my life.

From my conversations with Professor Edward Spencer, I learned that ancient literature holds the secrets to the future.

From my conversations with Professor Jeff Cook, I learned that my longing to live in a city was a spiritual one and was not to be ignored.

From Dr. Bill Brown, I learned that my angst about an issue in the world should always be interpreted as an invitation to do something.

And from Paul Isaacs, my Resident Director at Brock, I learned that I'm not good at following the rules.

Shortly after I moved to Los Angeles, I launched AdoptTogether.org with my dad. Discovering that finances were the number one reason people did not adopt inspired us to create a solution.

In the past six years, AdoptTogether.org has helped 4,300 families raise more than $14,000,000 to bring their children home.

When we were about to celebrate our five millionth dollar raised, I suggested we do it on World Adoption Day!

Sure enough, there was no such thing as World Adoption Day. So, I thought … let’s start one. Worldadoptionday.org and #worldadoptionday and the smiley face on the hand were born.

I called the United Nations and asked them to help. They suggested I wait a few years and follow their processes. I declined the invitation to follow the official process and called my friends in Los Angeles who I knew could help me: a supermodel named Jessica Stam; a film producer and adoptive dad named Mike Tollin (Radio, Varsity Blues, ESPN’s 30 for 30, One Tree Hill, Smallville); Scott Harrison, the founder of an amazing nonprofit named charity: water; Kim Brown, the chairman of one of the country’s top adoption agencies.

We were off to the races. Forbes picked it up. Huffington Post joined us. TNT’s Inside the NBA did a shout out. Shaq posted a smiley face. Tom Arnold posted a picture.

Among all the press and posts, I wanted to engage the world in a conversation about celebration. Adoption, at its core, is a story of loss. A loss of a parent, a relationship, a home, sometimes a life. It begins with loss and pain.

For too long, adoption has been marked as the “painful story,” the one that “explains so much” (think Thor and his “adopted” brother). My grandfather was adopted in 1929, and his parents never told him for fear he would act differently or be treated differently. It was time to talk about adoption as an event to be celebrated.

STORY OF A SMILE

American commercial artist Harvey Ball created the smiley face some 50 years ago. A smile as a simple reminder to raise morale and to remember that life, moment to moment, is always good. That being alive is a gift.

I wanted to brand World Adoption Day with a smile. I wanted to give adoption, adoptees, adoptive families, birth mothers, and birth fathers one day to celebrate that being alive is a gift. No matter what has happened, the redemption story is here.

So now, four years later, here we are.

Dozens of countries and hundreds of thousands of posts and millions of likes later …

We have a day.
A day to celebrate the gift of redemption.
A day to celebrate the power of family.
A day to remember that family, really, is everything.

In my time at Cedarville, I remember wondering how I would make an impact from a quiet town in Ohio.

I loved going to school near my family, and my time at Cedarville was riddled with adventure, education, life lessons, and longtime friends.

But I never realized how powerful a difference can be made from your living room. No matter how broad your reach and no matter how wide your influence, the most powerful space is family.

As 2018 begins, we continue to invite the world to celebrate a #worldadoptionday, and we continue to believe that there is a family for every child.

Hank Fortener ’03 is co-founder, with his dad, Charles, of AdoptTogether.org, and the founder and creative force behind World Adoption Day.