


9-12-2018

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Recommended Citation

Weinstein, Mark D., "Adoption Story Comes Full Circle as Student Starts College" (2018). *News Releases*. 754.
https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/news_releases/754

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
September 12, 2018

CONTACT: Mark D. Weinstein
Executive Director of Public Relations
[937-766-8800](tel:937-766-8800) (o)
[937-532-6885](tel:937-532-6885) (m)
Mweinstein@cedarville.edu
@cedarvillenews

Adoption Story Comes Full Circle as Student Starts College

CEDARVILLE, OHIO -- It took more than an acceptance letter to bring freshman Justin Ben to Cedarville University as part of the university's largest freshman class in school history. His story is one of divine intervention.

When Kristen Ben walked onto the cornfield-hemmed campus of Cedarville University as a new student in 2000, across the globe in an Albanian orphanage, a 2-year-old boy named Gabriel was learning to walk. Neither could have guessed how their lives would intersect.

Kristen joined a missions team of Cedarville students in Vlorë, Albania, in June 2001. During the three-week missions trip, she felt God tugging her heart toward adoption.

This tug was an answered prayer for her parents, Tom and Sandi Ben, of Springboro, Ohio. "We had prayed for Kristen that the Lord would break her heart about adoption and work in missions, which God did," Tom Ben explained, "but he broke our hearts too."

When Kristen returned home, she began to convince her parents, then in their mid-50s, to adopt. "Adoption was not something we had anticipated," Tom explained, "but the Lord started working in our hearts about the idea of making a change in our life plans."

The Bens prayed through August, and by September they were filling out paperwork with an adoption agency. In December, just before Christmas, they were notified that a 21/2-year-old boy named Gabriel was ready to be adopted. On May 1, 2002, nine months after Kristen returned from Albania, Justin Gabriel Ben came home to his new family.

In spite of the age gap, Kristen and Justin have a close relationship, Kristen often alternating between the role of sister and mother. Kristen, now married to Cedarville sweetheart Todd Kocher, is a mother of three, and she never lost her heart for adoption. Their youngest son, Zaine, was adopted from the Democratic Republic of Congo. The kids think their uncle Justin is wonderful, and he loves them dearly.

When Justin graduated from high school in 2018, he had a number of college options, but he decided to return where his story, in a way, started — Cedarville University. "This is full circle for Justin and his journey," says Tom Ben, "and yet it feels like our whole family has been wrapped around the Cedarville touch."

If the lives of the Ben family have been touched by Cedarville University, they have been touched because that was God's plan.

“In my role I come across a half-dozen to a dozen stories like this every year,” says Dr. Scott Van Loo, Cedarville’s vice president for enrollment management, “but it moves me every time I think of it to see how God works through our missions trips, how he works through our students and how he works through the parents of our students.”

“You can’t explain it other than by God.”

The Bens would agree. “If God nudges a certain way, listen,” says Sandi Ben, “because it will be the place where you’re going to have the most joy. Not the most perfection, but the most fulfillment and the most peace.”

Located in southwest Ohio, Cedarville University is an accredited, Christ-centered, Baptist institution with an enrollment of 3,963 undergraduate, graduate, and online students in more than 150 areas of study. Founded in 1887, Cedarville is recognized nationally for its authentic Christian community, rigorous academic programs, strong graduation and retention rates, accredited professional and health science offerings, and leading student satisfaction ratings. For more information about the University, visit www.cedarville.edu.