

Open Page

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25th Anniversary

Raising Awareness

by Shari Levine, OA&FS Executive Director



This year marks the 25th Anniversary of **Open Adoption & Family Services** (OA&FS). When we were founded in 1985, open adoption was a new concept, and the negative impact of closed adoption practices was just beginning to be understood and publicly discussed.

As the pioneers of open adoption in the northwest, we are proud of the impact our 1,000+ adoptions have had on open adoption practices nationwide. Since the children we placed decades ago are now adults with a strong and confident voice, we receive continual confirmation from them that open adoption works!

Despite our resounding success, most people throughout the US remain unfamiliar with the benefits of open adoption and don't realize how much adoption has changed. To celebrate our 25th anniversary, we're launching an **Open Adoption Awareness Campaign**. We will be asking open adoptees, birthparents and adoptive parents to share what their open adoption means to them and how children benefit from relationships with their birthparents.

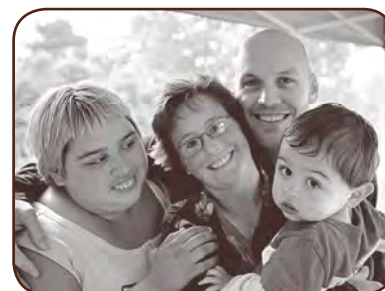
Our goal is to address our culture's misconceptions of adoption by painting it in a more progressive and realistic light. We will create a series of short video clips on different aspects of our open adoption program. These first-person narrated stories will be published as 2-5 minute long videos on the OA&FS Web site,



Above: OA&FS 25th Anniversary Picnic, Eugene. Photo by Amanda Reed.

an OA&FS **Youtube.com** channel and other online venues. They will also be distributed, with additional content, on a DVD designed for our professional outreach contacts. Each of these videos will capture the agency's progressive philosophy. With compelling footage captured while creating the videos, OA&FS will produce one or two short 15-30 second public service announcements (PSAs) about open adoption for use of public television and radio as well.

Join us in our efforts to let the public know what adoption can look like! By depicting heartfelt open adoption stories and describing our unique philosophy and services, together we can redefine our culture's beliefs about adoption. ■



Left: Families at the OA&FS 25th Anniversary Picnic, Seattle. Photos by Krista Baugham.

Agency Happenings

Hellos and Goodbyes

Goodbye from Susan



OA&FS Counselor
Susan Freeman

When I wrote a paper on the concept of open adoption at the **University of Oregon** in 1983, little did I know that adoption would become such a defining part of my life! For the last 10 years, I have been an OA&FS counselor in Southern Oregon.

Additionally, I have had the honor of living two open adoptions, with my son Ben (age 13), daughter Maggie (age 10) and their birthfamilies.

Open adoption has taught me so much. I have experienced so much growth, kindness and acceptance through the forming of my own family and through this work. I'm grateful to have been a small part of the open adoption journeys of other families and for the privilege to work with the absolutely amazing people on staff at OA&FS.

It is with a heavy heart that I bid adieu and begin a new challenge. Even as I leave, I look forward to continued involvement with the agency and know that my passion and my heart will always be with open adoption.

Hello from Irie



OA&FS Counselor
Irie Hoffman

My name is **Irie Hoffman** and I am absolutely thrilled to be the new counselor in the Eugene office of OA&FS.

I graduated in June from the **University of Oregon**, earning a Master's degree in Couples and Family Therapy. I could not be more excited to be a part of this agency! I am passionate about working with families and adoption is something that is very near and dear to my heart. I am looking forward to getting to know everyone and thank you for being so welcoming!

Goodbye from Satya



OA&FS Counselor
Satya Kline

In August, I will be leaving the agency to work for a child abuse prevention program.

I will still be contracted with the agency on a slightly less than part-time basis and remain certified to write homestudies for OA&FS.

It has been such an honor to work for this agency! For the past five years, I've been part of the Eugene office. I have received so many gifts from this work. I want to personally thank every client I have worked with and all the incredible staff. It has been an amazing journey that has touched me and changed me in very deep and meaningful ways. Thank you!

Remembering Annette Baran

In the late 1970s, California social worker **Annette Baran** realized adoption practices could be improved after witnessing the powerful and positive connection made between a birthmother and the adoptive parents she had chosen to raise her child. She saw that these members of the adoption triad could create a strong relationship based on their love of the child. Annette began advocating for openness in adoption and access to adoption records for adoptees seeking their original birth certificates.

Annette and other early advocates of open adoption worked tirelessly to bring to light the problems caused by closed adoption practices and shared their firsthand experiences of how open adoption could work. A generation later, most adoptions strive to maintain a level of openness. "We are grateful to Annette Baran and the other early advocates of open adoption for making significant changes in the way adoption is practiced," said OA&FS Executive Director **Shari Levine**, who met Annette at a conference. "She was a passionate and feisty woman who dedicated her career to making adoptions healthier for all parties."

Annette died July 11, 2010, at the age of 83. Her friends and family have set up a Web site commemorating her, at **www.annettebaran.com**. To share a memory of her, please e-mail: **abaranmemories@gmail.com**. ■

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1-800-772-1115 or **info@openadopt.org**

Board Member Profile



OA&FS Board Member
and Open Adoptee
April Vanderkamp

Meet April Vanderkamp

OA&FS proudly welcomes University of Portland nursing student **April Vanderkamp** to the Board of Directors.

She brings to the board her experience as an open adoptee, as 21 years ago, her birthparents **Liza** and **Stan** planned her adoption with her adoptive parents **Lynn** and **Ken**. April is finishing her last year in the nursing program at the **University of Portland**. After earning her degree, she plans to become a pediatric nurse.

What is your experience of open adoption?

“On the one hand, it’s just my life. On the other, I think about how exceptional the experience was. Some adoptees I know from closed adoptions feel like they were “given away,” but with open adoption I never felt that sense of abandonment. My parents and my birthparents always talked to each other and I was raised in that environment. It was clear to me how much they cared about each other. With open adoption, you never have to deny where you came from and you are given the opportunity to embrace that connection.”

What challenges do adopted kids face that openness helps to address?

“Having an open adoption allows the child to ask “Why was I adopted?” from all sides of their family. I know why my parents and birthparents chose adoption and I can ask them about it anytime I want. I’ve learned it takes a lot of strength to plan an open adoption. I know my birthmom didn’t plan the adoption because she didn’t care about me. She did it because she did care about me, but she couldn’t care for me.”

What would you like people to learn about open adoption?

“People are surprised that I’ve known my birthmom all of my life. People think that adoption is the way it was 50 years ago. But it’s actually changed so much!

Some people think a birthparent is someone who “gives up” a child and they think of adoptive parents as people who “take” a child and push the birthparents away. I hope people learn: it doesn’t have to be that way.

I’ve had this awesome experience. My parents say to my birthparents, “Come over for birthdays, for Christmas” -- and my birthparents want to be there. A real family is created by people you care about and who care about you.” ■

Pregnancy Options Dialogue: Portland

by **Katie Niemeyer, OA&FS Counselor**

A woman sits in my office, wondering aloud what she will feel like tomorrow. Today she is pregnant and weighing the decision to have an abortion, plan an adoption, or prepare for motherhood. How will each of these options affect tomorrow, and the next day, and the next?

At OA&FS, we believe every woman deserves a safe and supportive space to explore her pregnancy options and the resources available to her. Our commitment to advocating for unbiased options counseling inspired the creation of the **Pregnancy Options Dialogue**, a training



workshop that aims to strengthen the ability of professionals to talk comfortably with women and couples about abortion, adoption and parenting. In 2009, OA&FS partnered with **Backline, Planned Parenthood of the Great Northwest** and the **Center for Health Training** to offer this training in Seattle.

We are honored to host this year’s event on Oct. 22, in Portland, Ore., along with **Adoption Access Network, Backline, Center for Health Training** and **Planned Parenthood Columbia Willamette**. Learn more about this exciting event online at: www.pregnancyoptionsdialogue.org. ■

Birthmother Retreat

A day of sharing, support, activity and relaxation

by **Courtney Gray, OA&FS Counselor**

This past year has been an exciting year for OA&FS! In May, we held our **10th Annual Birthmothers' Retreat** for women who've placed through our agency. As we report on another year's successful retreat, it's nice to take a look back at how this annual Saturday of sharing, support, activity and relaxation all began.

In 2000, Executive Director **Shari Levine** attended an adoption conference in Michigan and learned about a "Lifegivers Festival" put on by birthmom **Brenda Romanchik**. After Brenda placed her child in an open adoption in 1984, she immediately noticed the need for a stronger community network of birthparents. Inspired by what she heard at the conference, Shari invited Brenda to Portland to train the staff and lead OA&FS' first Lifegivers Festival. "I felt it was important to honor the unique experience of birthmoms in open adoption," Shari explained. "The event was so well-received, the agency has made an ongoing commitment to making it available to birthmoms every year."

Ten years later, the Lifegivers Festival has transitioned into the annual Birthmothers' Retreat. It is still the most popular OA&FS event for birthparents. The original intention of offering birthmoms "a safe and nurturing environment to share their stories," as well as a place to "gain connection and support as they process their individual open adoption experiences," in combination with the time and energy of dedicated staff and numerous donations have created a wonderful and well-attended event each year.

This year's event was no exception. On May 22, over 20 women convened bright and early at **Kennedy School** (McMenamins) in Portland, Ore. As people arrived, they enjoyed coffee and light refreshments. There was a somewhat quiet and nervous energy in the room as women greeted their counselors or introduced themselves to the people beside them. When the day officially began, everyone was asked to write down answers to a few questions about their birthparent experience onto strips of paper. As women



Group Sharing Activity, Birthmother Retreat 2010

around the circle in the room shared their adoption stories, the energy changed. The birthmothers began to connect with one another, often offering supportive comments or advice, nods, hugs, tears, laughter, and more sharing. By the time our "warm-up activity" was finished, much of the days goals of sharing, support, and activity had already been achieved!

We then met in small groups, where women discussed more about their open adoption, their current relationship with their child and their child's adoptive parents. The women shared both what they appreciate and what they wish were different. They offered advice, support, and encouragement to one another in their small groups. Connections were made not only as birthmothers, but also as women, girlfriends, wives, employees and parents.

After lunch the room suddenly transformed into what looked like a combination preschool classroom and craft fair. Magazines, scrapbook paper, stamps, markers, pens, scissors, glue and bags were scattered about. Women gathered around tables talking, laughing, and working on their own crafts project. Many attendees made mini-scrapbooks based on a tutorial given by Eugene Counselor **Jan Jamieson**. Others made cards, keepsake boxes, or beaded jewelry. Looking around the room, you could see deeper conversations evolving, photos being shared, and new friends being made.

Two massage therapists who generously made their services available at the event, gave massages to anyone who wanted one during craft time.



Arts and crafts activity

...continued on Page 5

A big thank you goes out to our hard-working massage therapists **Joleen Wampler** of Hood River, and **Sue Ferreira** of Portland, Ore.

Each woman who attended the retreat left with a nurturing gift of some kind. Birthmothers received items like beach towels, massage gift certificates, salon mani-pedi gift certificates, pampering soap products, flowers, and chocolates, just to name a few donations. So many adoptive parents and community members donated money or gift basket items. We are truly grateful for the outpouring of support!

At the end of the day, the group again came together to reflect upon the day, the



OA&FS Birthmothers Stopping for Dinner After the Retreat

connections made and to say good-byes.

After the retreat, one birthmom wrote, “First I want to say thank you. This is exactly what I needed – it was wonderful.” Another shared, “It’s nice to know there are other people out there in the same situation that you can talk to anytime.” A third said the retreat was important, “to know you’re not alone in this journey.” Another said that she went to the retreat, “for support,” and added “I try to go to as many activities as I can through OA&FS [because it helps] me to process my adoption around people who are going through the same thing.”

Whatever their reason for coming, we hope that the birthmothers who attended this year’s Birthmothers’ Retreat left feeling relaxed, supported, and appreciated. We look forward to next year’s event! ■



Beading at the 2010 Birthmother Retreat

Thank You!! Birthmothers’ Retreat Donors

Lori Aoki and Skyler Stone
 Margaret and Greg Kaduchak
 Ernest Coffey and Will Hamp
 Sharon Fridrick and Steve Shapiro
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 Susan Fichtner
 Maria Villegas
 Katelyn Berry
 Jodi Bernstein
 Lori Maas

Volunteer Spotlight

A Birthmom Shares Her Wisdom

by Jodi Bernstein, OA&FS Counselor



Birthmother Carrie Garrett,
An OA&FS Volunteer

Carrie Garrett planned an open adoption for her son Cameron 16 years ago. Since then Carrie has stayed very involved with OA&FS. She has riveted scores of prospective adoptive parents with the story of her adoption and her experience as a birthmother at over 30 OA&FS seminars.

Additionally, she has generously mentored several women as they moved through their own process of deciding if open adoption was the right choice. Offering her compassion, understanding and support, Carrie has even come to the hospital to talk with a birthmom right after she gave birth. In our conversation, Carrie explained that she doesn't consider what she does for the agency to be "volunteering." She said, "I am part of OA&FS, and it just feels right to be involved. I love it."

JB: Tell us a bit about yourself and your current life.

Carrie: I teach 4th grade. I have been teaching for 10 years. It is super challenging, but I really enjoy it. I have a three-year old daughter, Ellery and a five-month old son Nolan. I love to spend time playing with the kids at parks or at the beach. I go to the skateboard parks with my 13 year-old stepdaughter Haley. I also am into gardening. I like to read when I get a chance, but with two children it's not often!

JB: Why do you continue to be involved with OA&FS?

CG: It's fun for me to talk to people about adoption. It's nice to have an interested audience. There is no manual about how it's going to go. It's good to challenge people's misconceptions about adoption. Also, there aren't a whole lot of places where I feel comfortable sharing my story and I love to talk about my family.

JB: Can you outline your adoption story?

CG: I was 18 and didn't know I was pregnant until I was five months along. I came home from college and told my mom. My mom mentioned adoption, but at that time, the only concept I had of adoption was giving away my baby and never seeing him again.

Thank You, Carrie!

We could not complete the work without you!
If you would like to volunteer, contact info@openadopt.org.

Then my doctor told me about OA&FS. I met with a counselor at the agency and started thinking about what being a mom would look like, especially without the baby's father in the picture. I compared that to what open adoption would look like. The birth father thought it was a good idea but neither of us were sure.

Ron and Margaret agreed to meet with us even though we were not sure that we wanted to plan an open adoption yet. We continued to meet and Margaret was in the room when my son, Cameron, was delivered. I was very emotional. The counselor decided that I was too upset to make a decision right then, so the baby went to a foster home. I visited him every day and allowed Ron, Margaret and their three-year old son to visit him, too.

While I was struggling with my decision, Ron and Margaret called and said, "We want you to know that we love you and whatever you decide is fine. We will support you in whatever decision you make."

This was so great to hear. I thought about things and realized that if I parented, I would be doing it alone. I made a list of things I wanted my baby to have and realized I could only offer love consistently. Three days after Cameron's birth, his birthfather and I talked and after a long conversation, I called Margaret and told her, "You have a new baby."

At the placement ceremony, Ron and Margaret brought their son and he sang "The Barney Song." Then I went away to school but we would see each other often, whenever I was passing through their town. When Cameron was 18 months, Ron and Margaret moved across the state to Spokane. The visits became fewer but I still saw him about two times a year.

Right before Cameron was five, Ron's job was relocated to Georgia. I was devastated. Still we kept in close contact. They came to visit about once a year and I have been back there twice. Now that Cameron is older, he calls, texts and uses Facebook whenever he wants to talk to me. I will go to his high school graduation in two years.

JB: Meanwhile, a lot has happened since then, hasn't it?

CG: Yes, I graduated from college and got married. Ron, Margaret and Cameron came out for the

...continued on Page 7

wedding. I danced with Cameron at the reception and we included him in our formal wedding pictures. He made me a scrapbook with places for the wedding pictures. They stayed after the ceremony and helped clean up. We met them for dinner the next day.

JB: A lot of women are unsure about how to bring up their adoption story with new people in their lives. How did you handle this with your husband?

CG: I told him right away, the first time we went out. We were with another friend, who asked me about Cameron. My husband, then boyfriend, asked if that was my brother and I said, "No, it's my son." I knew he had a lot of life experience of his own and wouldn't be the type to judge. He didn't really get the concept of openness at first but got it over time. Cameron was seven when he first met my husband. He didn't have any problems with it and they get along great.

JB: How was it when you told Cameron that you were pregnant with your daughter?

CG: Cameron was 13 when I became pregnant with my daughter. First, I talked to Margaret about it to see what she thought. I was nervous about Cameron's reaction. His mom said he would be excited, so she put him on the phone, and he was! He couldn't wait to see my daughter and was the same with my son. When he visited this past May, he was great with the kids

JB: What do you like about mentoring other birthmoms?

CG: I really enjoy it. Since I have been through it, I am there to listen. When I was going through it, I didn't have anyone to talk to and it would have helped me. I tell people that they can make it, that it will get easier, and that even though it may feel like it, it's not the end of the world, it's a new beginning.

I can reassure them that it is perfectly normal to cry, even years later. It is ok to be sad and that it is ok to get angry at the birth father. I also tell them that they made the very best decision that they could at the time and that even though it hurts, that doesn't mean that it was not the right thing to do.

JB: Looking back on your decision, what are your thoughts?

CG: I was pretty depressed afterwards, but I know it was the best thing for me to do at the time. It was hard because I knew I was responsible enough to be a good mom if I chose that path. It's hard to know how things would have turned

out, but I feel good about how they are.

JB: Do you have any advice for adoptive parents?

Keep the lines of communication open, even if the birthparents have shut it down. Eventually, they will want to be a part of it again. Don't give up on them. Birthparents love their children as much as adoptive parents do. Do not be frightened of that. Likewise, don't be frightened that the child loves their birthparents. They know that the adoptive parents are the parents: the bond between birthparents and their children will always be there. The more the merrier! I would also want them to make sure that the birthparents know they are in control while they are at the hospital. If the adoptive parents are there, they should let the birthparents lead the way and use language that lets the birthparents know that. For example, Ron and Margaret always referred to Cameron as "Carrie's baby." The birthmother is so emotional, so if she needs to spend time with the baby, honor that.

JB: What do you think of the portrayal of adoption in the media and popular entertainment?

CG: I wish it would be more thorough and more realistic. The media seems to always tell stories of birthparents coming back years later for the baby, finding some legal loophole, and tearing the baby from his/her family. This is not accurate. There is not a lot of knowledge of how open adoption works and media could help with that. Birthparents should never be shamed for choosing adoption.

I want people to know that there are challenges and that birthparents have strong emotions, but that it can be a great thing for all involved. I thought the movie Juno made an attempt to at least address adoption as a choice for teen pregnancy, but it was cheesy and didn't show Juno having very many feelings.

JB: How do you think planning Cameron's open adoption has impacted who you are today?

CG: I grew up a lot faster. I realized that what people my age worried about, what I had been worrying about, was not very meaningful. It also motivated me to work much harder. I wanted Cameron to see that I achieved the goals I had set out for myself when I chose open adoption. I wanted him to see I didn't just become a slacker. I have become a more compassionate person. I became much less likely to judge another person. The open adoption has been a positive journey in my life that is a continual source of pride. ■



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OA&FS Joins the Adoption Access Network

by **Amy M. Echo-Hawk, OA&FS**
Development and Marketing Director

The newly formed **Adoption Access Network** (AAN) selected OA&FS as one of the first members to join their national coalition of pro-choice adoption agencies.

Corinna Lohser of **Spence-Chapin Adoption Services** and **Cristina Page**, author and reproductive rights advocate, founded the AAN to raise awareness of adoption as a reproductive choice. The network will offer training for healthcare and socialwork professionals to enhance their abilities to discuss adoption choices with their clients. Additionally, it will create a referral network of adoption agencies that offer an established high level of quality services.

AAN selected OA&FS to be part of

ADOPTION
ACCESS
NETWORK

expanding women's reproductive choices

this referral network because we:

- are a proponent of reproductive choice
- follow a model that actively supports birthmother autonomy, choice and participation
- offer birthparents a diverse pool of prospective adoptive families to choose from
- and provide lifelong access to post-placement adoption counseling for birth and adoptive families.

The AAN is a co-sponsor of the **Pregnancy Options Dialogue**, to be held this October in Portland, Ore. ■

Early Registration Extended

The Early Registration deadline to attend the **Pregnancy Options Dialogue** at a discounted rate has been extended until October 4. A limited number of training spaces are available so register today at: www.pregnancyoptionsdialogue.org.