



# Open Page

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## Preparing for Transracial Adoption...

### *A Lifelong Journey*

At OA&FS, we continually reassess and improve our programs. Our most recent efforts have been dedicated to identifying ways to better support our clients as they prepare to become transracial families. This was a timely endeavor since we have seen an increase in the number of children we have placed in transracial open adoptions. After seeking input from adoptive parents, birthparents and adopted children regarding their experiences living in transracial adoptions, we formed a committee tasked with expanding our knowledge and our understanding of racial identity. The committee reviewed books, movies, blogs and articles to share with adoptive families as they prepare for a transracial adoption. Our goal was to offer adoptive parents the resources, guidance and support necessary to assist their child as they navigate a predominately white world (in the northwest), as a child of color. We also wanted to support adoptive families as they processed and prepared to become a "transracial family." We prepared a packet of information and questions for adoptive families considering transracial adoptions; the material is meant to stimulate dialogue within their family and with their counselor. Adoptive parents will have an additional meeting with their counselor to discuss their thoughts and feelings, and to introduce them to resources that are available.

The goal of this new process is to improve awareness of issues around transracial adoption and to provide a safe place for parents to talk about race. We hope to prepare adoptive parents for the time when their child will ask, "Why did you adopt a child of color?"

All open adoptions are transcultural. Birth families and adoptive families inevitably have different family values, traditions and communication styles. Adopting a child of another race creates a unique and added level of complexity to open adoption. Parents who are planning to adopt a child of another race can begin the lifelong process of "transracializing their family" right from the start.

#### **As an adoptive parent you can:**

- Show pride in your child's heritage by choosing names that reflect the ethnicity of your child. Take into consideration the name the birthparent might prefer.
- Participate in the culture of the race of the child you hope to adopt. Familiarize yourself with holidays, food, books and music. This is a wonderful way to enrich your life and deepen your exposure to another culture.
- Make new friends! Be sure the people you encounter in your daily life (friends, service providers, professionals, health care providers, etc.) are from a variety of ethnic backgrounds.
- Make sure your child is not always in the minority. This may affect where you choose to live, what organizations you belong to, what churches you attend, where you send your child for day care, or what community events you participate in.
- Feel empowered to advocate for your child. Issues of race affect the entire family, not just the adoptee. Avoid sentiments like, "I'm sure he didn't mean to say that." Instead try questions like, "Why do you think he said that?" or "How did it make you feel when he said that?"
- Be aware that the world your child encounters when he is with you is different from the world he will encounter on his own. Help your child to be confident, proud of their ethnicity, and prepared to encounter racism.

There are many resources for those families who adopt transracially including organizations like Adoption Mosaic, PACT, parent support groups, adoptive parent mentors, and specially trained adoption counselors. (See page 6 for a detailed list of resources.) Most importantly, please remember that OA&FS is always here to support you.

# Agency Happenings

## *The Pregnancy Options Dialogue*

In 2007, OA&FS, along with our partner **Backline**, hosted the *Adoption Dialogue*. Attended by over 60 pro-choice health-care professionals, political activists, counselors, abortion providers, and adoption professionals, the *Adoption Dialogue* was an incredibly successful event that made a lasting impact on the way professionals think and talk about adoption and OA&FS.

Continuing the conversation, we are pleased to announce we will be hosting the *Pregnancy Options Dialogue* with our partners **Backline, Planned Parenthood of the Great Northwest, and Center for Health Training**. This event, geared to professionals who serve women facing unplanned pregnancies, will be held on October 23, 2009 in Seattle, Washington.

Learn more at [www.pregnancyoptionsdialogue.org](http://www.pregnancyoptionsdialogue.org).



## *Rolling Out Our Re-branding*

Have you seen our new look? This summer's 2009 Open Page marks the completion of our re-branding with our new logo and new web site. In addition, all of our stationery and brochures are up to date with our new look!

## *Portland Families! Save the Date!*

Portland Families please save the date for the Winter 2009 Holiday Party. We are excited to announce the party will be held at The Portland Children's Museum on Thursday, December 3rd from 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. (No fee! All fun!) Please join us and make this an event to remember!

## *Now is the Time to Adopt!*

Open Adoption & Family Services had a very busy year in 2008. We completed 57 adoptions, provided pregnancy options counseling to more than 250 pregnant women and their partners, educated over 2,500 professionals about our services, and have forged collaborative relationships with social workers at the Oregon Department of Human Services. Since we completed so many adoptions last year, we are actively expanding our pool of prospective adoptive parents. 2009 has proven to be just as busy, so now is an excellent time to begin the adoption process! **Please help us spread the news! Tell your friends and family interested in adoption to call 1-800-772-1115.**

## *Welcome Jess!*

We are pleased to announce the addition of Jessica Gibson, M.S.W., to our Portland team of counselors. With six years of experience in the field of family services and a special interest in women's reproductive rights, she brings a balanced, compassionate perspective to the field of adoption. We are thrilled that Jess is fluent in Spanish, having spent seven years living in Chile. She is particularly excited about reaching out to the local Latino community to provide an empowering option for Latina women and their families. Jess is honored to walk alongside birthparents and adoptive parents at such a momentous time in their lives, and she looks forward to growing with them in love and knowledge.



## *Missing us?*

Many of our communications are now being sent by email. Please send your current email address to [updatemyemail@openadopt.org](mailto:updatemyemail@openadopt.org).

## *Please Support OA&FS*

Like all nonprofit organizations, OA&FS depends on donors to expand and fulfill its mission. There are many ways to support OA&FS with gifts of all sizes.

**Donations by cash, check or credit card**—always welcome and always needed.

**Automatic Deduction**—Make a pledge to OA&FS, in the increments and timing of your choice, payable by automatic deductions from your bank account or credit card.

**Endowment Fund**—OA&FS accepts gifts of cash, stock, property or other appreciated assets. OA&FS has established a \$25,000 endowment fund with Oregon Community Foundation. Assets are invested by OCF, and OA&FS receives distributions from the interest generated by the fund twice a year.

**Planned gifts**—Make a bequest to the agency through your will or other estate-planning method, and we'll welcome you into OA&FS' Family Legacy program.

For more information please contact Development Director, Kim Heavener, at 1-800-772-1115. *Thank you for your support!*

**OA&FS is a charitable organization under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. Contributions are tax-deductible to the extent allowed by law.**

# Interview With Claire

Claire was adopted through OA&FS in 1992. In this interview, she answers our questions about her experience as a transracial adoptee.



## 1. How old are you?

I am 17 years old.

## 2. Are any of your peers adopted or in a multi-racial family or both?

I have one friend who was adopted as well, in a multi-racial family. Her name is Abby and she is Korean and her parents are Caucasian. She is in a closed adoption.

## 3. When do you remember noticing that you looked different than your parents? Did you talk to them about this? How did they respond?

I can't remember when I first realized I looked different from my parents because I was so little. My parents were always willing to talk to me and my sister about our differences. It was never very hard for me to be a different race than my parents. I think it helped that my birthmother is Caucasian. My mom made a birth book for me and one for my twin sister Adria. The books had pictures of my birthmother and birthfather as well as other pictures that told the story of our birth. I remember looking at the picture of my very dark birth father, Michael, and just feeling so connected to him because my skin looked a lot like his.

## 4. What specific things have your parents done to support your ethnic background? Do you wish you were more or less connected to a culture similar to that of your birthfamily?

I live on a small island across from Seattle. The island did not have any opportunities to connect me to my ethnic background because there were not many African-Americans on the island. My parents would take Adria and me to the Seattle Center on Martin Luther King's birthday. I remember being so happy to see people that looked like me. My parents also read us lots of books about our African-American culture. My mom would often take us to visit her African-American friends and we could talk to them about our ethnic background. When I started middle school, (6th grade), I started to want to learn more about my African-American culture. It is something that I wish I had more experience with. I don't have any African-American friends on the island so it is really hard to feel connected

to my ethnic background. I really wish I knew my birth father because I think that would really help me feel more connected, and besides I just really want to know him.

## 5. Do you experience the world differently than your parents due to your race?

I definitely don't view the world differently than my parents due to my race. We have really similar views and our differing views don't coincide with our racial differences.

## 6. In your childhood, do you remember a time when racial issues were particularly intense?

In first grade, I remember getting in a fight with my best friend because I had just learned about slavery. I told her that she was a slave owner and she got really mad at me. I was so young and didn't understand slavery very well. It was a little intense just because it was my first time learning about slavery and I thought all my Caucasian friends were bad. That only lasted a week. I often experience discomfort when I am in my American Studies class in school. We talk a lot about race and sometimes students are so general in what they are saying. It really hurts my feelings when they say something about the African-American race when they are totally generalizing. Once, this boy in my class, who is very sheltered, said that he thought "all African-Americans want is pity from the Whites." I was really offended, but I didn't say anything because I thought I would cry. I really wish I had said something though because it was so offensive. I just wish I had asked him "have I ever asked you to pity me?" I would have liked to have seen the look on his face. People can be really rude because they just don't realize that I am there. Adria and I are two of four African-Americans in our junior class. I can understand how our friends forget to be sensitive about what they say about our race because they just are used to being around all their Caucasian friends. It hurts sometimes though.

## 7. Recently you have taken on the role as spokeswoman for OA&FS, sharing your insight about transracial adoption. How did that come about?

About four years ago, my sister was on an adoptee teen panel at the OA&FS 20th Anniversary event. After that, I really wanted to become involved but I didn't feel like I was brave enough to speak in front of people. This year, in my American Studies class, I wrote a research paper on open versus closed adoption. I became really interested in the world of adoption. I sent OA&FS my paper and they contacted me for this interview! Also, I got a call about talking on an OA&FS panel in Seattle for couples interested in transracial adoption. I just decided that I would do it, even though I was shy. It turned out to be great and I really liked being able to help couples decide if they wanted to

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# Lifegivers

## An Annual Retreat for Birthmothers

### Eugene

By Katie Niemeyer,  
Portland Counselor

As a counselor, one of my roles is to support birthmothers before and after they have placed their child in an open adoption. Common counseling topics include grief and loss, transitioning to the role of being a birthmother, and developing a healthy relationship with their child's adoptive family. I am honored to be in a position to support birthmothers and witness their phenomenal strength and compassion, and this year I participated in our annual Lifegivers retreat, an event dedicated to honoring birthmothers.

As we piled into the van to drive from Portland to Eugene, the four women I was driving to the retreat were quietly introducing themselves. One of them said, "Sorry, this is all really new for me." "Me too," and "Me too," were the responses. All of them had placed their children through OA&FS within the last six months, and once they established their common ground they began sharing their stories, experiences and emotions.

We arrived at the Lifegivers Retreat in Eugene early, so we were put to work hanging posters around the room; each poster had a quote for birthmothers submitted by adoptive families. As one woman taped up a poster, she read it aloud, sighed, and said, "That's beautiful." The signs were meant to be anonymous, but coincidentally, she picked up the quote her adoptive family sent in. I quietly told her it was from them and tears came to her eyes. Once all the posters were hung, more women began trickling in - most people were timid at first, scanning the room to see the faces of other women who have placed their children in open adoptions. For many, this was the first time they had met other birthmothers. To begin the event, we sat in a large circle and everyone introduced themselves: name, child's name, and child's birth date. The most recent placement had been two weeks prior to the retreat, and the longest was nearly 24 years ago. This incredible range of experience created a rich and accepting environment for the women to talk about their adoption journey.



Eugene Lifegivers Retreat  
May 30th, 2009

At different points during the large group discussion, some of the women began to cry. During these moments, the air filled with incredible empathy and compassion as they passed the tissue boxes from one side of the circle to the other. They shared words of wisdom, empowered one another to be honest with their child's adoptive family, and

encouraged one another to live life fully.

We broke into small groups and the women shared pictures of their child and the adoptive family; some had pictures of their child's birthfather and birth grandparents. They shared stories of what's working in their open adoption relationship as well as struggles they have had. The depth of the conversations were truly moving.

The Lifegivers Retreat also included time for fun, pampering and eating great food. We spent the afternoon at Brush Fire, a pottery workshop where everyone selected a piece of pottery to paint. Everyone sat together painting, talking, laughing, and taking breaks to get a chair massage or eat salad and pizza. We ended the day by raffling off some wonderful, donated gifts, including local soap products, cheeses, flowers, and gift certificates.

As we drove home, the Portland crew was exhausted, but bonded, as if they had been friends for a long time. As counselors, we were inspired by the opportunity to be in the presence of such beautiful, insightful, loving individuals.

“ I found it incredibly moving and feel honored to have been there. I have never had the opportunity to do this before - in fact, I cannot even think of meeting another open adoption birthmom. There are things I think only another birthmom really knows. ”

Liane, Birthmother of David Tilchen  
(OA&FS Boardmember), age 24.

## Seattle

By Jodi Bernstein, Seattle Counselor

On May 30th OA&FS counselors hosted two concurrent Lifegivers' events, one in Eugene and, the first one ever, in Seattle. For years we have hosted a day to nurture and honor birthmothers. Traditionally this event has been held in Portland or Eugene. This year we were fortunate to be able to add a Seattle Lifegivers day, allowing birthmothers who live in the Seattle area to more easily attend.

While planning the event I worried: Would anyone come? Would they like the activities? I soon found I needn't have worried; the day surpassed my greatest expectations. It was the birthmothers themselves who made it a success. Their warmth and courage, their wisdom and caring, infused the day with a rare sense of intimacy and connection. They were extraordinary. Some of their adoptions were very recent and others had planned their adoption years ago, but they had no trouble discovering common ground. They described the joys and sorrows, concerns and celebrations of their adoptions with love and awareness. They listened to one another carefully, with respect and understanding. They were generous and good hearted in their expressions of appreciation for this chance to be together. As a counselor, it was a privilege to be among the birthmothers who attend the event and to have access to the insights and wisdom they had to share with one another.

Seattle Lifegivers day was intimate, fun, and filled with heart. Participants and counselors alike ate wonderful food, made beaded bracelets, received chair massages, took a relaxing yoga class, and engaged in rich conversation. The day culminated with a visit from The Heartsparkle Players, a theater troupe that practices Playback Theater. In playback, audience members share stories from their lives and the actors improvise a short piece reflecting themes from that story. The stories that the women shared that evening were so courageous, so eloquently told and sensitively played back that we were all moved to tears.

Participants said that they loved meeting other birthmothers, and having a day to be honored and pampered. This birthmother's comment captures it well. "It meant a lot to me to be around women like me and to share our stories. It was beautiful, warm, inspiring and I am really looking forward to next year's retreat."



Seattle Lifegivers Retreat  
May 30th, 2009



“ It is so heartening to witness the support that birthmothers give each other and the healing that takes place at Lifegivers. We have literally seen birthmothers transform before our eyes – from someone who felt scared and unworthy to someone who feels empowered, courageous and able to receive and give support. Each woman at this event had something powerful and unique that they gave to the group. Together they created a safe, nurturing environment where they could have their strength and their grief mirrored back to them in a way that only another birthmother could do. Lifegivers is one of those few places where women are not judged for making a choice that they feel is in the best interest of their child. It is also one of the only places where others know how grueling that decision was. ”

Satya Kline, Eugene Counselor

### Lifegivers, In Kind Donors

12th Ave. Massage  
Adorned by the Sea  
Cindy and Helen Best  
Jodi Bernstein  
The Divine Cupcake  
Dutch Bros.  
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From the Earth Organics  
Paul and Kristin Ford  
Christine Gardner and  
Tamara McCarthy

The Hilton  
King Estate  
Lisa Koblenz  
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Mamma Rose Naturals  
Mezza Luna  
Neilson's Bakery  
Sharon Ogle  
Puget Sound Community  
College  
Scobie Puchtler  
See's Candies  
Starbucks  
Sweet Life  
Maria Villegas

Thank you!

# Words From Adoptive Parents

## Quotes From OA&FS Parents who Adopted Transracially

“Being the parent of a child who is of a different race than you will give you opportunities to learn and grow that you cannot now imagine.” **Terri, Adoptive Mom**

“Know that racism still exists in this world, and being the child of White parents will not protect your child of color from experiencing it. It will be part of your job as your child’s parent to help them see, understand, and deal with it. This may not be a job you can do alone however; you will probably need help from adults of color. Which brings me to my second piece of advice ~ create relationships where ever you can with adults, children, and families of color.”

**Mary-Pat, Adoptive Mom**



“Be ready to make your daily social world more diverse.”  
**Peter, Adoptive Dad**

“Be ready to learn to do hair, and/or understand and embrace cultural grooming importance.”  
**Michelle and Tom, Adoptive Parents**

“Be ready for questions from strangers.”  
**John, Adoptive Dad**

“Be comfortable with being ‘different’.”  
**Ellen, Adoptive Mom**

## Resources for Transracial Adoption

- **Adoption Mosaic** is a Portland based non-profit organization that provides educational resources and ongoing support to all those whose lives are influenced by adoption.  
See: [www.adoptionmosaic.org](http://www.adoptionmosaic.org)
- In Their Own Voices: Transracial Adoptees Tell Their Stories By Professor Rita J. Simon and Professor Rhonda M. Roorda, Columbia University Press, New York, 2002.
- Information Packet: Domestic Transracial Adoption By National Resource Center for Foster Care & Permanency Planning, 2002. Includes information on the challenges children face when they are adopted transracially and offers strategies for supporting families who have adopted a child from a different racial or ethnic background.  
Available online at: [www.hunter.cuny.edu](http://www.hunter.cuny.edu)
- Inside Transracial Adoption By Gail Steinberg and Beth Hall, Perspectives Press, 2000.
- **PACT, An Adoption Alliance**, provides the highest quality adoption services to children of color. Their goal is for every child to feel wanted, honored and loved, and to be a cherished member

of a strong family with proud connections to the rich cultural heritage that is his or her birthright.  
See: [www.pactadopt.org](http://www.pactadopt.org)

- Transracial and Transcultural Adoption By Child Welfare Information Gateway, 1994.  
Available online at: [www.childwelfare.gov](http://www.childwelfare.gov)

### Consider This...

1. In your own community of family, friends, etc., what is the level of diversity? How might you expand the diversity of your community?
2. Why do you want to adopt a child of a race different from your own? Think about this question in the context of how you’ll respond to your child when he or she asks you.
3. When your child goes to school, plays with friends, etc., how do you plan to prepare her for questions and comments from others regarding her race and ‘looking different’ than her family?

## Interview With Claire...continued from page 3

adopt someone of a different race. My story is definitely unique, as is everyone's, but I think that I have experienced a lot and I just love being involved in such an amazing program.

### 8. Is there a particular story you like to share to illustrate issues of transracial adoption?

I remember once when my best friend asked my sister if she wanted to hear a "black joke". My sister was like, "no way! Why would I want to hear something that makes fun of my race?" My friend said that she thought it would be fine because a black person told it to her. She didn't realize why my sister was so offended by that. I get that a lot. When we have "gangster day" at school, I am often offended because people just totally generalize the African-American race and think that because they dressed up as a gangster, they can say the word "nigger." I hate that day and I get so mad when I hear people use that word.

### 9. What advice would you give prospective adoptive parents who are considering creating a multi-racial family?

I think that if you are interested in a multi-racial adoption that you should have an ethnically diverse place to raise your kid(s). Vashon was a very safe place and I had a wonderful time. But now that I am older, it is really hard for me to find friends who are African-American. Being told from the get-go about my ethnic background was the best thing. I would have a completely different life if I didn't know all about African American history. It is hard to completely understand at a young age, but I am much happier that my parents told me about racial prejudices and such throughout my entire life.

Claire, with her sister, Adria, and friends



### By the Numbers..

Of the children who were adopted in the OA&FS fiscal year 2008-2009, 79% were Caucasian, 17% were mixed ethnicity, 2% were Hispanic and 2% were African American.

## A Transracially-Adopted Child's Bill of Rights

Adapted by Liza Steinberg Triggs from "A Bill of Rights for Mixed Folks," by Marilyn Dramé.

Reprinted from **PACT, An Adoption Alliance**  
([www.pactadopt.org](http://www.pactadopt.org))

- Every child is entitled to love and full membership in her family.
- Every child is entitled to have his culture embraced and valued.
- Every child is entitled to parents who know that this is a race conscious society.
- Every child is entitled to parents who know that she will experience life differently than they do.
- Every child is entitled to parents who are not looking to "save" him or to improve the world.
- Every child is entitled to parents who know that being in a family doesn't depend on "matching."
- Every child is entitled to parents who know that transracial adoption changes the family forever.
- Every child is entitled to be accepted by extended family members.
- Every child is entitled to parents who know that, if they are white, they benefit from racism.
- Every child is entitled to parents who know that they can't transmit the child's birth culture if it is not their own.
- Every child is entitled to have items at home that are made for and by people of his race.
- Every child is entitled to opportunities to make friends with people of her race or ethnicity.
- Every child is entitled to daily opportunities of positive experiences with his birth culture.
- Every child is entitled to build racial pride within her own home, school, and neighborhood.
- Every child is entitled to have many opportunities to connect with adults of the child's race.
- Every child is entitled to parents who accept, understand and empathize with her culture.
- Every child is entitled to learn survival, problem-solving, and coping skills in a context of racial pride.
- Every child is entitled to take pride in the development of a dual identity and a multicultural/multiracial perspective on life.
- Every child is entitled to find his multiculturalism to be an asset and to conclude, "I've got the best of both worlds."

# Kids' Corner

By Adrie, OA&FS Adoptee, age 10

By: Adrie

The Kids' Corner is a place where children of open adoption can share stories, poems and pictures.

Have something to share?  
Please send contributions to the Portland address  
ATTN: Kim  
or to kimh@openadopt.org.



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