Open adoption

Program allows mother, adoptive parents to remain in contact after adoption

Editor's Note: To protect her privacy, the birth mother in our story is called Michelle, not her real name. The adoptive parents asked that their last name not be used.

By LAURIE SMITH ANDERSON
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When Andrew was born, both of his mothers were in the room—his birth mother and his adoptive mother.

"Through the process of open adoption, we met (Michelle) when she was still pregnant," said Mary, Andrew's adoptive mother. "She was 15, unmarried and seven months pregnant. Once she decided to go through with it, she invited me into the delivery room and asked us if we would take the baby home from the hospital—even though the adoption would not be final for two weeks."

(Michelle's) mother picked her up early from school when she started having labor pains. Mary and her husband, Jimmy, met them at the hospital, where labor continued for 23 hours.

When Andrew was finally born, Mary and (Michelle's) mother were sitting together at (Michelle's) head. The doctor held up the baby boy, looked at Mary and said, "Here's your son."

"(Michelle) was watching me the whole time. I just started crying. Emily was crying and hugging me. It was a very emotional experience," Mary said.

Catholic Community Services is now in the fifth year of its Adoptive Parents Outreach Program, according to adoption caseworker Leslie Blackshear. Open adoption promotes communication between the birth and adopting parents without the secrecy that surrounds a traditional, closed adoption. (See related story for more details.)

"Jimmy and I were married for years and went through infertility treatment before we decided to try and adopt a baby," Mary said. "We opened the yellow pages and got information from three agencies. We chose CCS because it was nonprofit and we expected to wait a couple of years. But we were approved in April of 1992, and we got a call the next January that a birth mother had chosen us. We were petrified."

(Michelle) said she was scared too.

"I wanted to keep my baby initially. Adoption wasn't my first choice. I had other friends that got pregnant, and they kept their babies. But, the more I..."
I thought about it, the more I realized it was in the best interest of my child. And, when I met Mary and Jimmy, I knew for sure. They felt like family.

Her mother agreed. "I was having health problems; I had lost my job and my marriage was breaking up. Then we found out Michelle was pregnant. We had no other good options."

(Michelle) and her mother read through the resumes together and stopped when they got to Mary and Jimmy. "His autobiography really got to me," (Michelle) said. "He talked about wanting to take his kid fishing. And his relationship with Mary seemed really strong."

(Michelle) invited Mary into the delivery room with her and insisted they take Andrew home from the hospital. They have talked on a regular basis since and (Michelle) has pictures of Andrew, who bears a close resemblance to her. He has been told that he is adopted, although he doesn't yet know what that means.

In the future, if Andrew wants to meet his birth mother, Mary and Jimmy said it will be fine with them. "I would hope to be a part of Andrew's life," (Michelle) said, "but I've never regretted my decision. It was hard, but it was the right thing to do. It was best for him. I know that he is happy and well provided for."

An only child for two years now, Andrew will soon have two siblings. Both Mary and (Michelle) are now seven months pregnant; in fact, their due dates are only six days apart. (Michelle), now 18 and married, is looking forward to rearing this child. And Mary, who had been unable to get pregnant before she adopted Andrew, was surprised and delighted at the news that she was with child. Andrew's very excited. When asked where the new baby is, he pats Mary's abdomen and smiles.

Mother's Day is a special day at Andrew's house. Mary said she will think of (Michelle) on Mother's Day and will always be thankful for the selfless choice she made. "I just feel so grateful to her," Mary said. "I think open adoption was the deciding factor for her. Can you imagine giving up your baby and never knowing where that child was, how he was doing, if he was happy or if anything happened to him? Of course, she wants what's best for him."