

# Rethinking Adoption: In Our Own Words

## **WE ARE NOT ALL ORPHANS WE OFTEN HAVE FAMILY THAT WE ARE SEPARATED FROM FOR VARIOUS REASONS**

### **AIMEE ADOPTED FROM TAIWAN AT 4 MONTHS OLD**

Aimee: Am I an orphan in terms of "Annie" the musical? Well, I love to sing, but that's probably the only thing I've got in common with Annie. I believe I was... Three or four-months-old, and my understanding is that my biological parents, they separated, which resulted in me being given away.

### **MESERET ADOPTED FROM ETHIOPIA AT 14 YEARS OLD**

Meseret: I was an orphan at the age of nine. My mom died from TB, underlying cause was HIV/AIDS. And my dad died a month after, also with malaria and underlying AIDS.

### **JONAS ADOPTED FROM HAITI AT 6 YEARS OLD**

Jonas: I absolutely wasn't an orphan because I had my mom and my dad and we had a loving family.

### **KIMBERLEY ADOPTED FROM SOUTH KOREA AT 4 MONTHS OLD**

Kimberley: So I was given up for adoption because my biological parents were not married, so it says illegitimate on the papers.

### **JAMES ADOPTED FROM COLOMBIA AT 1 YEAR OLD**

James: Recently in January this year, I reconnected with my biological mother. And unfortunately, the true circumstances of my adoption were that my biological mother had me at 19 weeks premature. I was quite an ill baby, and so she was in the hospital with me for some time. But then unfortunately, my biological father passed away. She left, she took care of her business, she took care of my older brothers and sisters, and then when she came back to pick me up, they told her that we no longer have your son, he's been put up for adoption.

## **WE THINK DEEPLY ABOUT OUR ORIGINS THESE REMAIN A SIGNIFICANT PART OF OUR LIVES**

Kimberley: I know that on my birthday, I don't really wanna celebrate it. It was a day when my biological mother had to give me up or in her mind thought she had to give me up. So there's a lot of grief. Grief of a mother giving up a baby. Grief for not knowing what my life would be like.

Aimee: For myself, I have this memory. My earliest... My earliest memory is of crying for my mother who never returned.

Kimberley: One of the biggest complexities with adoption and being adopted is that our trauma is our adoption. And that's happened for many of us as babies or young children. And so when you're that age, you don't have the ability to process things. You don't have the ability to cognitively understand what's happening.

James: I was with her for nine months in her belly. I was with her for a few weeks, a few months after I was born, she held me. And I think when you look at the primal injury and the primal wound that causes, it's utterly devastating.

## **MICHELLE ADOPTED FROM SOUTH KOREA AT 4 MONTHS OLD**

Michelle: The way you're left without answers and how that really does impact you and everything about you, even as an adult, yes, I can function to a degree, but there's still... I'm still very much crippled by the child adoptee inside of me, which can't make sense of a lot of things or the world.

Meseret: Being adopted at 14-years-old meant that I had a lot of memories from back home. So I remember my biological parents, they passed away when I was nine years old, within a month difference. This idea of forgetting or leaving things behind was difficult because that meant I had to really suppress the emotions and the traumatic past. So it forced me to just live in the present, but it created this lonely place where the two worlds can't come together.

## **BEING ADOPTED HAS A SIGNIFICANT AND COMPLEX IMPACT ON US**

### **BENJAMIN ADOPTED FROM BRAZIL AT 13 MONTHS OLD**

Benjamin: You have to almost manufacture what you feel your adoptive parents want. And if your own flesh and blood can give you away, who's to say these parents that have adopted you wouldn't, if they found some reason, they didn't want you anymore.

Meseret: It was a lot of friction at early stages of my adoption. I really struggled to find that, trusting them and actually allowing them to take care of me or even my siblings.

### **CHAMILA ADOPTED FROM SRI LANKA AT 4 YEARS OLD**

Chamila: It was hard going through school, being bullied for being different and not being able to get people to understand and explaining to them what... Why you were different.

Jonas: I did not fit in or feel comfortable in Australian society. I did not... Absolutely did not fit in or feel comfortable or loved in my adoptive family. So I was very uncomfortable and I was a scared human being.

Chamila: At a very young age, I started... Well, I didn't start. I experienced abuse. And it was from a family member. So I've experienced abuse from... a fair few members of my family. And no I never felt safe.

## **BEING TOLD WE SHOULD BE 'GRATEFUL' OR 'LUCKY' IS INSENSITIVE OUR LIFE AFTER ADOPTION IS 'DIFFERENT' NOT 'BETTER'**

Kimberley: So people often say, wow, you're so lucky. Look at the great life you've had. And I agree. Yeah, I am lucky. I'm fortunate and I'm having a great life. However, that gratitude can feel heavy at times because it's a debt that we can never repay.

Jonas: I'm a grownup now and I feel very lucky to live in Australia 'cause this is a great country that affords us a very good quality of life. But I did not feel lucky as a child. I've felt even worse when I was told I should be grateful and that I'm lucky.

Benjamin: These people flew all the way over to Brazil just to get me and they're doing all this stuff just for me. So I'll suck it up and just do what I've gotta do, which funnily enough, something that I carried all the way through to adulthood, to the point where I have "Forever Grateful" tattooed across my back. And it isn't until recently that I kind of really explored that of even the placement of it, the fact that you're kind of carrying that weight on your shoulders, literally of 'you should be grateful'.

Chamila: I always remember mom and dad saying, you know, 'you should be grateful' that you've been brought to Australia because if you hadn't been brought to Australia, you would have ended up either on the streets at the age of 12, 'cause I believe technically at the age of 12, you're classified too old to stay in the orphanage. And that I'd either be thrown on the streets or I'd become a servant.

Jonas: From a very young age in Australia, racism taught me that I was different and that above all, I was lesser than. I was lesser than every single white person that I come into contact with, to the point where I thought that I was just lesser than anybody.

James: From a Western sense, yeah, did have a lot of good opportunities in terms of healthcare, financial, education. But at the same time, I was also robbed of a lot of spiritual and cultural things. I often wonder if I had been raised with my people, I probably would have been a bit more spiritually fulfilled.

Meseret: I don't think it's better. I would say it's more different and it's very complex. And slowly, I started to become aware of that complexity and, I guess, the effect that comes with it.

Chamila: This whole thing about being grateful, it's not about making me feel good. It's about making the adoptive parent feel good because they think that they've done a service to society by getting a little foreign kid off the street.

### **THE DESIRE TO SEARCH VARIES THROUGHOUT OUR LIFE SEARCH AND REUNION IS COMPLEX**

Kimberley: I haven't started the search. I've started my journey of understanding my adoption. I've ordered my DNA test kit just to make sure I am Korean. I'll go to Korea and see what it feels like to be in my birth country. And then I'll think about whether I wanna start that process. It's something that I've definitely thought about.

Chamila: When I was younger, my parents often asked me whether I was interested in finding my biological parents. At the time, the way they had ingrained in me that my country was a third world country, it was not a very attractive, appealing idea to go back and search. But now, as an adult and having a child of my own, the need to find, I guess, my heritage, my culture, my roots is important because it always resonates with me that my mum said I spoke about siblings and I often wonder are there brothers and sisters that I could connect with? But I would have no idea where to even begin.

Jonas: Finding mum, of course, most amazing experience. I just wanted to find her. She didn't know why I wanted to find her. She couldn't understand because she'd just given up hope. When I got back with Mum, that connection, I instantly felt safe. I was 27-years-old, but I still instantly felt safe and comfortable.

Michelle: I thought about searching, I guess, when I turned 18. And that was a thought then, and I'd been through quite a lot, even at that stage, but then I think it came more into place once my daughter was born and then it was sort of cemented once I split from her father. There was just a lot of questions and I had suffered from a lot of mental health problems as well. And I guess looking at my daughter and as she got older and started to ask questions, it significantly worried me, especially our medical backgrounds, not having any information whatsoever. And yeah, it gets to the point where you look in the mirror and you're wondering whose face you're looking at.

James: Yeah, I've connected with my biological family. They have a lot less than I do, but they're very happy people. Every time I see them, they've got a smile on their face and they always appreciate the little things. When I talk to them and hang out with them, I feel spiritually nourished because we're not focused on the material things and the dollar value behind a bill, where we really focus on things like family connections, laughter, love.

Aimee: I didn't actively search for it, but it happened for me. It was never a fix. It was never a desire.

Kimberley: Sure, you may find your biological parents and reconnect and maybe even have a really healthy, positive relationship. But feeling whole as a person, as an adoptee, I think, is more about finding peace with your story and integrating the adoption as who you are, as who I am more than finding my biological parents.

### **ADOPTEES NEED SUPPORT AT VARIOUS STAGES OF OUR LIFE**

Michelle: I definitely think adoptees need extra support in many, many areas, especially within schools and the mental health industries. For me, adoption has never ever been seen or treated as a primary cause of any of my problems. When, in fact, I'd have to say, it's probably the root cause of all my problems.

Kimberley: You can support them by encouraging them to see a therapist or somebody who has experience working with adoptees. Because quite often, our stuff that comes up won't directly present as this comes from me being adopted.

Aimee: Honestly, I would say go and contact a lady called Lynelle who runs something called ICAV. Honestly, I hope you would. Because I think that you are an amazing resource. And the other thing I would actually say for support is jump online. I honestly wish that those groups which are now online were around when I was growing up, 'cause I think I wouldn't have felt so alone. And I think part of feeling validated is knowing that there are other people who have either A, unfortunately, experienced similar, or B, at least understand, they can associate. So that makes you feel validated in that way.

(Music)

## **KEY MESSAGES**

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**THE DESIRE TO SEARCH VARIES THROUGHOUT OUR LIFE**

**SEARCH AND REUNION IS COMPLEX**

**ADOPTees NEED SUPPORT AT VARIOUS STAGES OF OUR LIFE**

**THANK YOU TO ADOPTees:**

**AIMEE, BENJAMIN, CHAMILA, JAMES, JONAS, KIMBERLEY, MESERET & MICHELLE**

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