SPECIAL DELIVERY

Celebrities add a glamorous edge to adopting children from developing countries, but the challenges can be daunting for both the parents and the kids, writes *Mike Safe*.

Lynelle Beveridge grew up caught between two countries and cultures. Her real name was Vong Ung Thanh, but she hated everything about being Asian. "I hated looking at myself in the mirror. I hated photographs and always thought I stood out like the proverbial sore thumb," says the woman who grew up in Gippsland in southeastern Victoria.

In the pictures from those early days, it's all perfect: the pretty little Vietnamese girl smiles at the camera; in the background the Anglo-Aussies who have become her loving family. There's no hint of divided loyalties or confusion and, in a way, there weren't any. "When you're adopted, it's almost like you take on the identity you're given, so much so that you throw out the identity you were born with," says Beveridge.

It's taken her more than 30 years to recognise and deal with the emotional and cultural complications of what is known as inter-country adoption – the adoption of children from troubled regions or developing nations.

In that time many thousands of children – from Asia, South America and Africa in particular – have been adopted by Australians. There have been 6000 recorded since comprehensive statistics started here in the late 1980s. Each one of those stories is different, but they all challenge common ideas about families, race and culture. For the children – and their parents – such adoption is on one hand very personal and yet, because of the obvious ethnic differences, extremely public. These families are satisfying profound needs, but the question remains – does it work for the kids?

SEPARATED FROM HER BIRTH MOTHER, BEVERIDGE WAS spirited away from her war-torn Vietnam, and brought to Australia when she was only six months old. It was 1973 and she was among the first Vietnamese children brought here as the battle between north and south raged on. In April 1975, as communist northern troops closed on the southern capital, Saigon, the plight of such children was graphically illustrated when more than 3000 babies were plucked from orphanages and taken overseas. These included almost 300 who were flown to Australia in "Operation Baby Lift".

Beveridge's adoptive parents were Don, a Gippsland dairy farmer, and Merilyn, a teacher. As a couple who would later work as missionaries in Asia, they had been shocked by the 1972 photograph of the "napalm girl", nine-year-old Kim Phuc, as she and others in her family fled across a bomb-blackened landscape. The photo of the burnt, traumatised child became one of the war's most memorable images, winning the World Press Photo Award. "My mother saw that and went, 'Oh my God' – she wanted to help," remembers Beveridge. "And thanks to that girl, here I am."

And, thanks again, her tumultuous journey has finally had a happy resolution. She now has a newborn child of her own and so, in the most personal way, her story has come full circle. There's a peace she hasn't known before, an understanding of her often-conflicting 33 years.

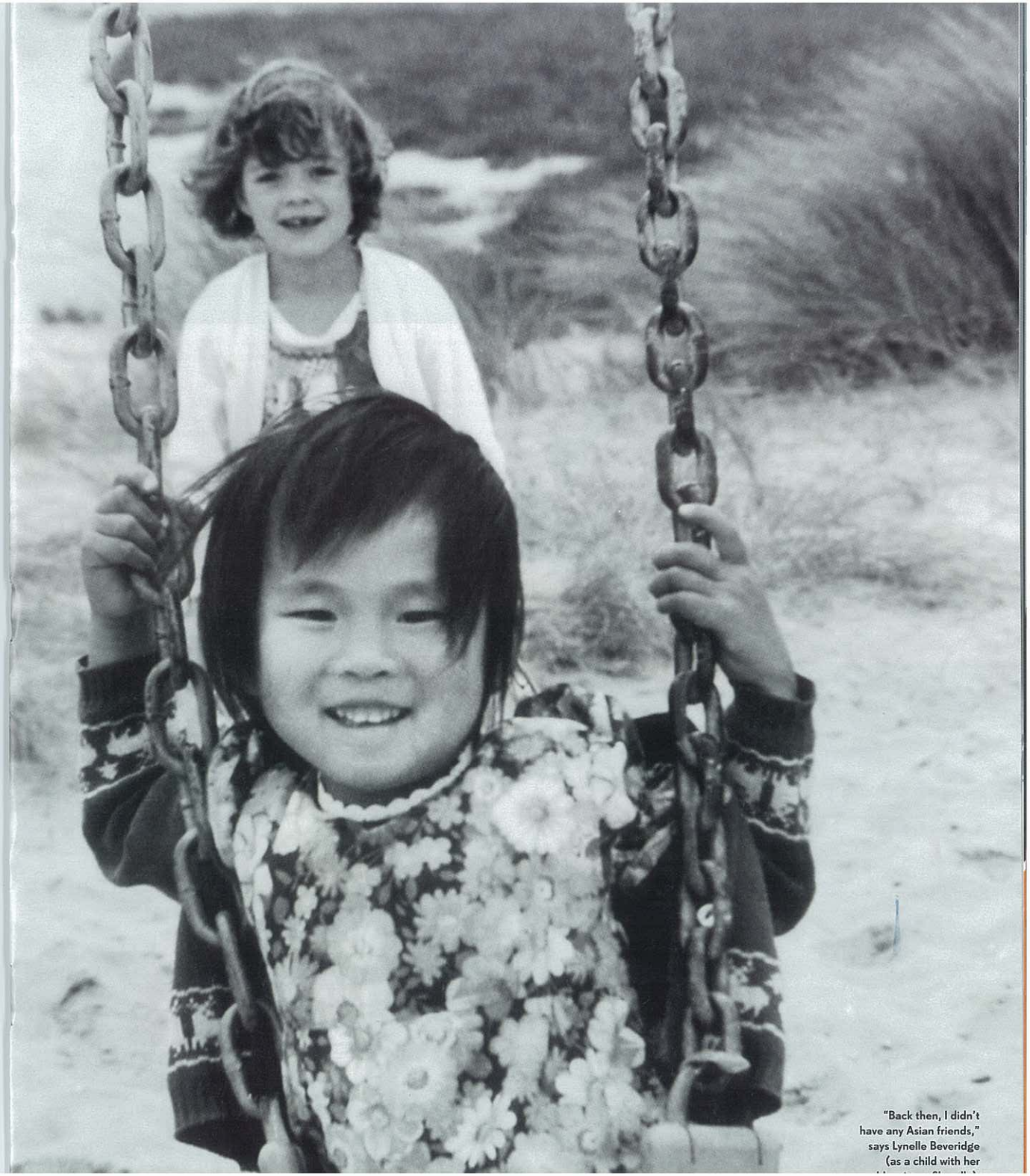
"I've reconciled a lot of that confusion and am proud of being Vietnamese and I have that pride to pass on to my son," she says, cradling a contentedly snoozing Ethan, born on Christmas Day last year in Sydney. "I'm very happy with my life now and with who I am."

Beveridge, who works for computing giant IBM, finds it ironic that she finally married a third-generation Chinese Australian, Anthony Long, a finance and information technology accountant. "Back then, I didn't have any Asian friends and I saw myself as one day having a white Aussie husband and a Eurasian child, but I guess I've been able to heal a lot of that by marrying and having a child who's fully Asian – and I'm proud of him and love him."

Beveridge still knows little about the circumstances of her adoption and even less about her birth mother. Her efforts in recent years to uncover more have been largely unproductive. Her parents know few details themselves, the adoption having been arranged privately through middlemen in Vietnam after money was paid into what turned out to be a French bank account. Her adoptive father simply went to Saigon, collected her and brought her to Australia. Her only official document was a passport in her Vietnamese name. There were no adoption papers, no birth certificate.

As the middle child of five – the others being her adoptive parents' birth children – the little Vietnamese girl found herself the only Asian in a rural Australian landscape. There was no thought of cultural sensitivities back then and the mindset, even with the best intentions, was that she was now a little Aussie and would grow up as such.

"I remember being scared of loud noises and having



"Back then, I didn't have any Asian friends," says Lynelle Beveridge (as a child with her

nightmares," Beveridge says. "My parents never thought that might have been because I had memories of the war, of bombs, of explosions. In utero, if your mother is highly anxious and living in a war zone where she and you might be killed, of course all those hormones would have been going through me, too. And I was a difficult child. I cried a lot, I ate a lot – heaps and heaps, as if I was starving. I link that back and think, well, probably my mother was starving and I was malnourished."

Then there was racism, name-calling and all that went with growing up a stranger in a strange land. "I remember riding my bike home from school and crying to mum, 'They're teasing me, saying I've got slanty eyes and a flat nose.' I grew up ashamed of that – yeah, it was hard." She remembers crying herself to sleep, wishing she knew who her biological mother was, a heartache she kept to herself.

In her late teens Beveridge moved to Sydney to study and found the cosmopolitan, big-city environment easier. In 1999, she set up the internet-based Inter-Country Adoptee Support Network, which now links 200 adoptees brought to Australia from a variety of countries plus a similar number overseas. "We find the benefit comes from being able to relate to one another's experiences. When someone says, 'Yes, I understand,' you know they really do."

In 2000, Beveridge returned to Vietnam, shedding tears as the plane flew in. Her most profound moment came while bike-riding in the Mekong Delta, where she struck up a broken English conversation with an elderly woman, telling her the circumstances which had brought her back.

"Then she said to me, 'You've missed out on so much.' It was the first time anyone had captured the essence of where I was coming from. It came from the other side. In Australia, people always said, 'Oh, you're so lucky', and talked about the positives, but they didn't recognise what had also been lost – your culture, your history, who you are."

"I saw myself as one day having a white Aussie husband," says Lynelle Beveridge (left, with husband, Anthony Long, a third-generation Chinese-Australian, and their son, Ethan; far right, as a baby with her adoptive family in Gippsland).

While her adoptee network doesn't take a position for or against adoption, Beveridge's personal belief is that it's better for children to stay in their country of origin if proper support is available.

Still, she's forever thankful for what her own adoption has brought her. "I'm hugely grateful for my life and what my parents have given me and the chances I've had compared to what I would have had in Vietnam. I would never say we shouldn't have these adoptions because that would be like saying my life shouldn't have happened like this."

Hindsight is wonderful, of course, and, like her parents – who now work with International Children's Care, a non-profit organisation that sets up orphanages and schools, principally in Asia – she wishes everyone concerned understood back then what they do now. "Mum and Dad know it would have been good to incorporate a lot of the culture [from Vietnam]. Having now lived in Asia and coming to love it, they've come full circle in a way, too."

BEV SCOTT KNOWS THE GOOD, BAD AND everything in between that comes with overseas adoption. If granted one wish, it would be to ease the pain of the kids involved. "I would love to do that and help them come to terms with their lives, to have a magic wand and take away their pain."

Scott is no mere sentimentalist. She and her husband, Ashley, both special education teachers from Sydney, are like many adoptive parents in that they couldn't have children of their own. After two years of failed IVF treatment, they took the overseas adoption route – four times for four sons. Khym, now 19, was adopted, aged four months, from Korea; Harrison, 12, and Alexander, 10, were adopted from Colombia, aged 5 and 6 respectively. Jesse, the Scotts' second son, their first from Colombia, had been adopted as an infant only to die, aged six, in May 1998.

An energetic, loving little boy when brought to Australia, Jesse started suffering periods of listlessness, dehydration and vomiting, but the cause proved

AILEEN BERRY // MELBOURNE

with daughter Ella (5), adopted from China

The day will come when Aileen Berry must explain what she calls the "A word" to her daughter, Ella. "And I'm not looking forward to that," says the Melbourne journalist, publisher and single mum who adopted Ella from China in late 2002. "We'll tackle it when we get to it. But she's not ready for it yet."

The "A word" is abandonment – the issue that all Chinese children, overwhelmingly girls, put up for overseas adoption must face eventually. With its one child policy, Berry points out that the world's most populous country has no formal process for relinquishment of a child and abandonment is illegal. Therefore, infants who are given up for whatever reason are generally left in public places – at orphanage gates, outside banks or police stations – where they will be found quickly. Some are left with notes, giving the barest details. Ella, for example, was born on the day she was found abandoned in Nanning, the capital of Guangxi province in southern China – and that's about as much of her background as Berry can ever hope to know.

"My assumption is that as a girl she was unable to be raised by her birth family for whatever reason – cultural, social, political, financial. I'll never know and I must say I find that very challenging," she says. "But then again, it's not my reality – it's hers. She may find it hard to deal with; she may find it easy."

When she first brought Ella home, Berry often found herself reflecting on the little girl's birth parents. "As we settled into life here, I couldn't stop thinking about them and what they'd missed and what they continued to miss. I used to cry just looking at her asleep in her bed at night because I kept thinking how awful is it that those people have had to miss out on this amazing little girl ... I still feel if I could just find them to tell them she's good, really, really good."

Berry concedes the stringent assessment process she was put through before being allowed to adopt has helped her handle such emotional moments. And with any problems that arise – and they do – to judge whether they are child problems or adoption problems. "Ella told me the other night if I made her eat her dinner she was going to find a boyfriend and live with him. Seeing that she's five years old, I don't think that's got anything to do with her being adopted but it's got a lot to do with her being a gutsy little girl."

Berry laughs and adds, "We'll clash, I know it. In fact, we do clash, but in a way all families do. But I still look at her every day and cannot believe that another country gave her to me."

KYLIE MELINDA SMITH; COURTESY OF LYNELLE BEVERIDGE; JULIAN KINGMA

difficult to diagnose. As his bad moments became more frequent, he needed regular hospitalisation. Finally, he was diagnosed as having a fatal genetic brain condition, adrenoleukodystrophy, or ALD, a one-in-250,000 chance and the disease described in the film *Lorenzo's Oil*.

On Jesse's death, the Scotts and other adoptive families who had supported them throughout established the Jesse Scott Fund to assist the orphanage in Cali, Colombia's third-biggest city, from where he had been adopted. So far, this has helped build a new classroom and dormitory.

And the Scotts decided to adopt again – not once but twice, with Harrison and then Alexander. But these were young boys, not babies, as first Khym and then Jesse had been on adoption. They already had impressions of a not-so-nice world and the difficult hands life could deal. "You're asking a huge question of them," says Scott. "They were not thinking what they might do tomorrow. They were thinking in terms of, there's a piece of bread and they were going to eat it. It was subsistence, hand-to-mouth, but we were prepared to take that on because every child deserves a family."

Somewhere along the way, says Scott, an adoptee must come to terms with his or her reality. "All these kids have to deal with the basic premise that, for whatever reason, somebody abandoned them, somebody gave them away." This is a daunting task for both child and adoptive parents. "Anybody who thinks they're going to have a clear run, who thinks this is going to be all sweetness and light, well, sorry.

"But I can truly say they're all worth it. Your world broadens enormously, as do your experiences, and you learn about what you previously had not even considered. The culture of survival is something we don't understand in Australia. We think we're poor if we don't have the latest TV. We don't know what it means to wonder where the next meal is coming from."

Author and television broadcaster Basia Bonkowski wrote a book, *Jesse's World*, about the experiences of Australians, including the Scotts and herself, who had adopted from overseas. She and her husband, film director Kimble Rendall, have two children – Billy, 13, who was adopted from Colombia when he was 20 months, and Camille, eight, who was adopted from Thailand when she was 17 months.

As in any family, it's a matter of being aware of when children need to talk about their circumstances, she says. It's not something to be pushed on them. "Sometimes I can sense when they're going through something. Children, especially little girls, have a preconceived notion that a family is a mummy and daddy with a nice house. Some of them ask how come Camille isn't with her mummy and daddy in Thailand who should be living in that nice house. It's quite innocent – kids are not to understand at that age. So you try to pre-empt by explaining that families are all sorts – some people don't have mummies, daddies or whatever. You've got to equip them to handle it. But the one thing I say about these kids is that they're survivors. They've got that in them, an innate ability if you like."

Bonkowski reasons that it always comes back to telling them the truth. "So right from day one it was all about our circumstances. I've actually had people say to me, which was extraordinary, 'Have you told the children they're adopted?' I say back to them: 'Look at us [parents of European origins] and look at them [children of Colombian and Thai origins] – how could I not tell them?'" She laughs and adds, "It's pretty bloody obvious."

PETER EVE

Glenn & Kate Drogemuller // Darwin

with sons Max (7) and Miki (5), adopted from Ethiopia

When Miki Drogemuller came home from school and told his mum, Kate, that one of the white girls in his class had called him a "blackfella", she wondered if this was going to turn into a problem. "Blackfella" is a term the local indigenous community uses to describe its own, and Miki, adopted like his older brother, Max, from Ethiopia, is just that – black.

When Miki came home over the next few days and told Kate that the little girl was still calling him a blackfella, she considered going to the school. But, after all, weren't these only five-year-olds? "So I asked him, 'What's it about being called a blackfella that upsets you?' And he replied, 'I don't know what fella means.'" Kate can now laugh at what had been her own preconception. "My reaction had been he must be getting upset by the black part of it, but he didn't care about that – it's the fella bit that he didn't get."

The Drogemullers, who came north from Adelaide after adopting Max in 2000, are now in the process of adopting a third Ethiopian child, this time hoping for a girl. Unlike many adoptive parents who feel intimidated by the stringent bureaucracy involved, Kate has nothing but praise for the Northern Territory Health and Community Services Department. "They're lovely people ... very pro-adoption."

Glenn, a radiologist, says the fact that Darwin is so multicultural – in many classrooms, non-European background kids are the majority – has helped Max and Miki settle in. There have been tough moments, but the result is two boisterous, outgoing boys and a family in every respect. "The thing that's not really surprised me but I'm aware of constantly is that I don't think I'd feel differently about a biological child as compared to the kids we've got," Glenn says. "I don't think I could love a child any more than I love these two."

Kate hates any suggestion that she and Glenn have somehow "saved" Max and Miki – a common grouch among adoptive parents. For them, the experience has been a two-way street – they have learnt as much as the boys.

"I feel like we took on half their culture and they took on half ours ... It's probably the best thing I've ever done, apart from marrying Glenn, of course."

LAST FINANCIAL YEAR, 421 CHILDREN WERE adopted overseas by Australians. The year before the number was 434, the highest on record. Since 1980-81, when there were 127 such adoptions, numbers have fluctuated but the trend recently has been a gradual rise, especially compared with the huge drop in the number of Australian children being adopted. As attitudes towards single parenting and birth control have liberalised, only 155 Australian children were adopted in 2005-06 compared with 9798 in 1971-72 and 1052 in 1991-92.

In 1998, overseas adoption was boosted when Australia signed the Hague Convention, a protocol that established legally binding standards for inter-country adoption. The majority of children coming to Australia are now from China, because of its one-child policy, followed by South Korea, Ethiopia, the Philippines, Thailand and India.

But behind the scenes there's contention and indeed heartache, particularly for those waiting to adopt. Their key gripe is the way Australian programs are managed. Each state and territory – that's eight of them – runs its own program through its welfare department and applies its own strict criteria, often leaving would-be parents believing they come at the bottom of departmental priorities, which focus on fostering and caring for local children.

A 2005 federal parliamentary inquiry into overseas adoption found the per capita rate in Australia was less than one-third of most comparable economies. Chaired by Liberal MP Bronwyn Bishop, it pinpointed a lack of government support for

adoption, be it local or overseas. Attitudes ranged from "indifference to hostility" with departments "generally under-resourced", leading to long queues and processing times.

The report blamed much of the problem on an "unsympathetic" policy that had traditionally focused on birth parents and a belief that children's biological links should be maintained above all else. "The term 'in the best interests of the child' seems to be used as a shield against any criticism of current adoption policy," said the report, which came down "unequivocally in support" of inter-country adoption.

Bishop says those embarking on overseas adoption need support – not only from the states but also the federal Government. "The attitude we got from many parents and would-be parents was relief that somebody at last understood what they had to go through."

But Ricky Brisson, mother of two adopted sons from South America – Steven, now 26, from Colombia, and Adam, 24, from Bolivia – remains sceptical about any real departmental improvement, certainly any fast improvement. As executive officer of Sydney-based Australian Families For Children and co-ordinator of AICAN, Australian Inter-Country Adoption Network, a national group of support networks, she has been a long-time critic of the system.

"A problem is that these bureaucracies change so regularly," Brisson says, taking aim at the federal Government, which she says has dumped overseas adoption responsibilities on the under-resourced states. "You deal with one person today but in three months it will be another. I've been involved for 25 years and in that time, I don't know, we've seen about 10 [NSW] ministers, a dozen directors-general."

Brisson is scathing of any priority to leave abandoned children in their home countries. "I've seen the orphanages and circumstances in which these kids live. I know the pros and cons about transplanting them from one culture to another, but as far as I'm concerned, when they [the children] have a daily routine of being left in a room with not one toy and no one looking after them or even to talk to, well, they're hardly learning about their country's culture."

From a Jewish background and a "family where everyone is a migrant", Brisson describes the "leave them in their homeland" principle as a "local Anglo view" that's no longer an issue. "It goes back to, 'Are we doing the right thing about the stolen generations?' Just think of the outcry after the Indonesian tsunami when people saw all those orphaned kids on TV. The phones ran hot. Everyone wanted to adopt them. But that's reality for thousands of kids around the world. It's got nothing to do with tsunamis – it's their lives every day.

"True, we need to educate the families, and they're a lot more aware now than 25 or 30 years ago. Yes, the kids need to know about their culture and, yes, to go back to their country if they feel so inclined."

No one is sure how many Australians are on lists to join programs or waiting to travel overseas to pick up children, but it's likely to be in the thousands, perhaps topping 4000. Gaylene Cooper, national president of AACASA, Australian African Children's Aid Support Association, estimates her group, which deals with Ethiopia, has about 120 listed. Only 30-40 Ethiopian children come here every year, sometimes fewer, so it means a long wait.

But she remains hopeful the Bishop report will produce momentum. "The departments are starting to realise that the families involved often know more than they do."

Cooper and her husband, Ted, a glazier in Launceston, have an Ethiopian-born daughter, Bonnie, now nine, whom they adopted and brought to Australia when she was six months old, as well as a biological son, Jordan, five. "From a young age, Bonnie was asking: 'Will I be white like you when I grow up?' We've always been open with her and that's how she deals with it, by talking about it."

The Coopers took her back to Ethiopia when she was eight and have since learnt that her birth mother who gave her up for adoption is HIV positive. They have helped the mother access drugs and medical care. "We've had to explain it to Bonnie, but she can't understand why we can't bring her out here."

These are the emotional dramas adoptive parents face. Cooper admits it's been difficult, more difficult than she and Ted had thought. "We went into this because we wanted to have children but [initially] couldn't. I'm honest about that. Some people say they want to help another but to be honest we didn't think about that too much. We were thinking of ourselves.

"But now we think differently and we're very glad we did what we did because we'd never have experienced what we have. It's taught us a lot and changed our lives and we've made wonderful friends both here and over there [Ethiopia]. We're very thankful."

Staff writer Mike Safe's most recent story was "Out there on his own" (March 24-25), about Australian middle-distance runner Craig Mottram.

"From a young age, Bonnie was asking: 'Will I be white like you when I grow up?' That's how she deals with it, by talking about it."

PHOTO: CANDY LARCOMBE

Lew Keipert & Pat Mickan // ADELAIDE

with biological daughter Sydney (10) and son Reuben (10), adopted from Ethiopia

She might have an impressive record as an athlete and coach, having represented Australia at two Olympics, but Pat Mickan readily admits to being given a severe workout by a little boy from Africa.

A basketball rep at the 1984 Los Angeles and 1988 Seoul games, and later coach of the Adelaide Ravens in the national netball league, Mickan and her partner, Lew Keipert, who has an optometry business in Adelaide's northern suburbs, adopted their son, Reuben, from Ethiopia when he was 3½. He's now 10.

They also have a biological daughter, Sydney, who's the same age as Reuben, and their ideal was that the two of them would grow up as siblings and playmates. But Mickan, who is also on the South Australian Premier's Council for Women, admits this didn't quite go to plan as she and Lew quickly found themselves outside their comfort zone. "It demanded all the resources I had as a mother and person and then more than I had because we had to have help – from social workers, education psychologists and the like.

"You have to try to see it through the eyes of the little boy Reuben was then. He was terribly dislocated and confused. So his reaction could suddenly become very physical and violent. It was his only outlet. He didn't know what was going to happen, even where he was, what the language was ... and so we needed help. It became parenting on the run."

Lew says they had a clear idea of what good parenting should be, but when they attempted to apply this to a disoriented and sometimes fearful child it didn't necessarily work. A bright spot was that Reuben was also an intelligent and alert boy who picked up English quickly.

They recall taking the children on a driving holiday along Victoria's Great Ocean Road. "He asked me, 'Mum, can I come too?' So there was that lack of permanency in his life, no realisation that this was forever, that we were his family for good."

As well, Sydney's requirements had been supplanted by Reuben's constant need of attention. "She'd suddenly lost her place in the family and so had to be reassured as well," says Pat. "So there were those elements – Reuben and Sydney's needs and defining their places in the family – and then there was the relationship between the two of them."

A blur of years and perseverance has seen it work out. Reuben now attends a nearby Montessori school where he is a class representative. "For all the challenges it's given us such richness," says Pat.