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Living

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Birth mother selects parents for her baby

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FOR PHIL AND SHERYL Johnston, big-eyed, perfectly formed baby Amanda is their miracle, a gift from God.

Other first-time parents feel the same way, but the Johnstons' wonder goes a little deeper. Amanda is adopted.

After 12 years of marriage, half of them spent trying to have a baby of their own, the Aptos couple decided to try adoption. They opened the Yellow Pages, saw the listing for Children's Home Society and called.

That was in June, 1986. They brought Amanda home ten months later.

"When we went to Children's Home Society, we were getting in line, basically," said Phil, 33. "We were going on a whim figuring it would be five years. Some people told us it would take 10."

The Johnstons believe the key to their success in adopting quickly was their willingness to try open adoption.

"If you're not going to accept open adoption," Phil said, "you're not going to get a child."



the child to CHS and had been given 24 hours to reconsider her decision.

They said good-bye to the birth mother, trading addresses and phone numbers and telling her she was welcome to call or write any time.

A nurse then brought Amanda into the room. They recalled how big her eyes were even then.

It was love at first sight.

Since that time, Amanda's birth mother has been in touch with the Johnstons twice. She sent a Mother's Day card to Sheryl and a Father's Day card to Phil. The Johnstons have written her and will soon send pictures of Amanda's christening.

They're not sure just how often they'll communicate with her in the future — probably on birthdays and at Christmas — but they don't regret their decision to try open adoption.

"You don't want any secrets," Phil said. "If a child finds out there's been secrets in the family then they don't trust you. They wonder what else you've been hiding."

Sheryl added, "It's not

would take 10.”
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KATHLEEN SILBER, a director for CHS and co-author of “Dear Birthmother,” explained in a phone interview from her San Jose office that open adoption is a fairly new practice. It began in the late 1970s and has become more common in the last three to four years.

Through open adoption, a pregnant woman chooses the parents to whom her child will go. The adoptive parents and birth parents determine a level of continuing communication acceptable to both.

Some use the adoption agency as a go-between, sending letters and photos there and avoiding direct contact. Others exchange addresses and phone numbers. Some even visit in person.

“Even now, people are shocked by the concept,” Silber said. “The general public still thinks adoption needs to be secret because that’s the way it’s always been.”

The move toward open adoption came about, Silber said, in response to curious adult adoptees and parents who, in giving up their children, gave up their peace of mind.

“Birth parents never forget about their children,” Silber said. “It’s hard to live with not knowing.”

In the mid-1970s, adult adoptees “came out of the closet,” Silber said. It coincided with the nation’s Alex Haley-inspired obsession with “roots.”

“It wasn’t enough just to be loved,” she said. “They needed to know their roots.”

She emphasized that adult adoptees were generally concerned with heritage and questions about the circumstances surrounding their births; they weren’t looking for another set of parents.

Silber believes adoptive parents also win with open adoption.

Not only do they have answers for their adopted children, they also know they have been chosen by the birth parents.

“It makes them feel more entitled,” Silber said.

THE JOHNSTONS’ friends thought they were crazy to meet Amanda’s mother.

“It doesn’t mean they’re going to come knocking at your door or drive by your



Kurt Ellison

Open adoption was for Phil and Sheryl Johnston, shown with baby Amanda.

house,” said Sheryl, 32. “They just want to know what the child looks like and how she’s doing.”

The Johnstons were chosen by Amanda’s biological mother, a Riverside woman, through a profile and photos compiled during an intensive eight-month home study. She wanted a fairly young mother and father for her child. She later told the Johnstons she liked them because they were outgoing, active and religious.

Financial stability was also a factor. Phil is a salesman with Amfac Electric in Santa Cruz. Sheryl works part-time as a bookkeeper.

When asked about meeting the birth mother, Sheryl looked at her husband and sighed.

“That was pretty wild,” he said.

“She would go from laughing into crying real hard and into laughing again,” Sheryl said. “She was grieving at that time and she needed to.”

A social worker was present at the meeting. She encouraged the young woman to tell the Johnstons why she chose them.

At that point, the Johnstons had not yet seen the baby and still had time to change their minds about the adoption.

The birth mother had already relinquished

but they don’t regret their decision to try open adoption.

“You don’t want any secrets,” Phil said. “If a child finds out there’s been secrets in the family then they don’t trust you. They wonder what else you’ve been hiding.”

Sheryl added, “It’s not something to be feared. I think it’s the way things always should have been.”

CHRISTI knew about open adoption when she became pregnant with her second child. Her first child, Jonathan, was six months old at the time.

She had intended to put Jonathan up for adoption, but couldn’t go through with it. When she became pregnant again, there was no question in her mind that adoption was her best option.

“I couldn’t take care of another baby by myself, emotionally, financially or any way else,” the slender 21-year-old woman said.

Christi contacted Valerie Sudduth, the social worker who runs the Soquel office of CHS, and told her she wanted to place her second baby with an adoptive couple.

“At first I wasn’t real sure about how involved I wanted to be,” she said in regard to choosing the couple. “But then I realized the more I knew then, it wouldn’t be weird later on.”

Christi chose a couple who already had an adopted son. She thought he resembled Jonathan. The father was balding a little — just like Jonathan’s father, with whom she is still in contact.

She wanted a Christian couple, she said, and people who lived out of the area. She didn’t want to run into them in the grocery store.

For anyone in her shoes, she recommends two things — say hello to the adoptive parents and goodbye to the baby.

“It was hard,” she said of meeting her second son’s adoptive family. “But I’m glad I did it. It made me realize what kind of family they really are. Pictures — they only tell so much.”

As for saying goodbye to a child, she said, “I think it’s real important for anyone who’s planning on giving a baby up for adoption to hold them and see them and say your last goodbyes.”

If her son wants to meet her later on, she is willing. For now, she and his adoptive parents communicate through CHS. She doesn’t know their last name or address and they don’t know hers.

There’s one thing she does know.

“It seems,” she said, “like they’re going to make sure he knows I didn’t just give him up because I didn’t love him.”