

Corinne McKisson: My name's Corinne McKisson. I'm fifty-four years old. I've lived in Seattle, Shoreline area, my whole life. The house that we live in now I've been at for twenty-one years. Their dad, my ex-husband, and I bought that house at a point in our marriage where we thought we probably were not going to get to be parents. We'd already had some of that typical journey that dead ends. We didn't think that we could afford to adopt. We really didn't pursue it any further for a while. There were a couple of years. We'd been married nineteen years when we finally made our travel to get Campbell. I was forty when she was born and almost forty-one when we brought her home in 2003.

My husband left in September of 2011. We'd been married twenty-three years. He had been making some different life choices that weren't conducive with our family. He decided to head out on his own. I think it's been a very different experience than what he imagined. He imagined he would have a separate but connected life and that nothing else in regards to parenting would change for him. Within the first year that he had moved out, he wasn't seeing the kids regularly anymore. He had a court order against him where he was required to have only supervised visitation, which he's really struggled with being able to coordinate.

They see him one, two, three times a year, usually at his sister's house. Aunt Mickey is wonderful at creating opportunities for people to get together. We usually spend Christmas and some other major holidays at either his sister or his brother's house. So fortunate that family loves me and my kids on both sides of our family, such incredible support through a lot of unexpected difficulties of the last several years. There's never been any question that I'm family, that they're family, that those kids belong to their aunts and uncles. Dad shows up, Dad doesn't show up, it's become very secondary to the family connection at this point. That's one of the things that makes me the most conflicted about being adoptive parents, the commitment that we made when we made the agreement to adopt. They're having a very different experience than what we had originally intended.

Jena Heath: I appreciate you sharing this very openly. I've interviewed a number of families and I know other families where divorce has been part of the equation after the children come home. There have been a couple of families where death of one parent has happened, where a family was ill, one of the families in our travel group. This idea that there's a kind of fairytale story narrative, our families are like all families. We struggle with the same issues that other families struggle with. How do the girls adjust to what's happened, to the split and to your ex-husband's, it sounds like, intermittent involvement in their lives now?

Corinne: They have adapted very well. Initially, there was lots of turmoil and unexpected hostility. They were quite young at six and nine. I had arranged for each of them to have a counselor. I had a counselor. We all had someone that we could go to and work through what was happening on our own without having to worry about taking care of somebody else. There's a lot of the girls being concerned for me, being concerned that mom's okay. Ultimately, the three of us have bonded. It's very sad that Dad's become kind of an afterthought. The three of us, we have a nickname. We're the three C's. We also have a little game that we play sometimes on the holidays called McKissons in the Kitchen. We do a play

acting of cooking show with the three of us in the kitchen. It's quite comical. We have a few videos of it.

I think they realize how much this village concept of taking care of each other has been very real for us, my sisters and my brother, their grandparents, aunts and uncles, even older cousins. Melody, who Campbell does dance with, that teacher, she's been incredible. You don't expect people that you think initially of on the periphery, they've really been part of our inner circle because they've seen our circumstances change. They've stepped in to help carry us. Friends through the soccer team, folks making sure rides happen, "Don't worry about the payment, whenever it works out. Do you want anything from the vegetable garden? Come pick with me."

Jena: It also sounds like your ex-husband's family has been helpful, or at least his sister. Is that right?

Corinne: His brother and sister and my brother-in-law, sister-in-law, very much so. They love us. They make a point of letting us know that. They're very involved with the kids. There's never been any thought of excluding me at holidays. I'm part of the family. The fact that we were married for so long before the split, we grew up together in our early adulthood being together over twenty years.

Jena: You went into this with the expectation that you would be traditional, married parents. You have had the experience, or having the experience, of being a single mom. In your own mind in terms of your own sense of identity, what has that adjustment been like?

Corinne: I'm definitely a single mom. I've gotten to a point where I'm very comfortable with that. During the transition, with the age the girls were at, we were still pretty involved with things like the local FCC activities, been to the culture camp one time. Even all of our friends in our network of the connections, I didn't have any other family that looked like ours. They were all a number of adoptive moms that were single and mostly married couples. Got to say, did not enjoy going to intimate gatherings of five, six families where I'm the only single adult. Kids are having a great time, but I'm at the table with all of these couples. I think that's probably pretty typical for folks that end up being divorced or widowed.

It's been five years. I've adapted. Part of the adapting is to not always go to those events. They're either uncomfortable or sometimes they don't feel relevant in the same way. All the adults are together talking about things that I don't think other folks see as being related to being coupled, but it's just that missing piece, the fact that I'm coupled anymore. It brings something up to the surface, this awkwardness that never goes away. Who's to say what natural fluctuations would've happened and connections with different families anyways? Kids at the age that they are now and having serious interests and activities, both the girls in drill team, Campbell with her dance performances, Colleen with her soccer -- families that we were really close with when they were younger, other Chinese adoptive families, someone's in ballet all the time and can never make a playdate because she's always

committed, or someone's always in gymnastics. There's got to be some natural transition there that's part of what I think any family goes through as their kids age.

Jena: Regardless of whether parents remain married or not or started out as single parents or become single parents, it's true. As the kids age, it's not all dragon dancing and face painting anymore. Also, where we have the opportunity to set the agenda when they're younger, they are going to decide what they're interested in as they get older. I'm assuming, it sounds like from my discussion with the girls, that that's happened. I know they both do dance and drill team. What is their evolution in terms of their interest in doing Chinese-related things? Is that still there? Is it lessening?

Corinne: I don't know if that's ever been a natural interest for either of them, something that we made a commitment to that our family was becoming Chinese. We were making sure to integrate opportunities to be part of our local Chinese community as part of our family. When they were young, it was more as part of the adoptive community. As they've gotten a little bit older, we've made a effort to have connections in Chinatown, which is a very rich community in Seattle, and thrilled that our middle school and high school offer Mandarin as one of the world languages they can take. There've been a number of things, including Mandarin and drill team, that the girls initially very strongly did not want to participate in. I didn't give them a choice. They get a lot of choice. We encourage them to pursue the activities or the sports they want to do. Campbell wanted to do cross country. You find a way to get the rides and get people where they need to be, same with the Select Soccer.

We continue to battle a little bit about Mandarin at school. It's not been an enjoyable experience for her. She does okay at it. Her teacher, when she talks to me, is very encouraging. She doesn't say, "Please don't make that kid come anymore. She's killin' me. She's holdin' everyone back." That's not what I'm hearing. That's not what I see in the grades. I see her working on it every night. They do the writing too. She can write fluidly. It's crazy to me that you can do it that fast over one to two years' time. Drill team, I had to physically push Campbell onto the parking lot where they were practicing to get her to do it. She was holding back. We went to watch. I had to physically make that motion. She went ahead and walked forward when she realized I was going to continue. She wanted to minimize the embarrassment. [laughs]

The aunties at drill team asked the other girls, "How many of you wanted to come to drill team when you first joined?" Two of thirty girls raised their hands. "How many of you like coming to drill team now?" They all raised their hands and screamed and yelled. Colleen had a little bit different resistance, but she resisted as well. We had some tears shed. Yet after the first or second time for both of them, they were like, "Mom, no. We need to be on time. Auntie says it starts at ten o'clock. We'll get in trouble if we're late." They really take on ownership of it. It's exactly what I hoped it would be, a sisterhood, potentially a lifelong sorority of sisters and friends, and certainly what we see with the older girls and the women that are still involved with it. It's right in the heart of Chinatown, so it takes us there every week. We start to get known by shop owners. We have certain restaurants we go to. It really feels knit into the fabric of our family life.

Jena: It's interesting to me. You've made a kind of decision that you're not always going to say, "Okay. You're not interested anymore. I understand. We're going to go with the flow here." There's a certain core decision about Chinese culture that you are willing to impose on the girls at eleven and fourteen. What are your hopes for what that will mean as they get older? There's going to be a day when you can't push them onto the field.

Corinne: Absolutely not. My hope is that it adds some perspective to them as they get to an age, maybe in their late teens or into their twenties, where they're more self-aware and thinking about their full life experience and where they've come from. If they decide not to continue speaking it, to me, that's fine. To me, it would not be acceptable to have access to that, the opportunity to learn the language, and to just say, "If you don't want to..." No, you'll do it. I've heard from plenty of people when they're older, "I wish I had." I've heard many people say, "I wish my parents had made me. I wish I'd listened to them." We all have moments like that, whether it's about a friend or about a certain class or visiting your grandparents before they were dead, all those types of things. Yes, I make them come to visit grandparents. They may not want to, but their grandparents are in their late eighties and early nineties. They're going to be around a lot longer. I know how meaningful it is to have that memory as an adult, those childhood experiences with the grandparents. I see these in a similar vein.

Jena: It's a parental role in your view?

Corinne: This is my job.

Jena: I'm going to have to put the thing in front you that you may not want to see.

Corinne: What you do with it down the line, that's part of your story.

Jena: Tell me about their curiosity about returning to China. It sounds like they're both pretty contented now not to do that. Do you have any desire at some point to take them back? I know Campbell's been back twice. There are only so many trips to China that most of us can manage to afford.

Corinne: Yes. There's a little bit of a family story to that. The original plan had been at age eight because of the lucky nature of that number and because we had agreed that was a age when kids are older that they will actually retain some solid memories from what they did at that age. Much younger than that, we just have little fleeting snapshots from those days. We were going to go every three years. Campbell went at age eight. A year and a half later, her dad left. Our household income went to about fifty percent of what it had been. It hasn't been an option since then. Colleen totally understands. They're both beautiful girls. They have so much understanding and acceptance about our changed circumstances. She'll joke once in a while, "You got to go twice. I haven't gotten to go at all." We'll go. We'll figure it out. It'll be the tax refund one year instead of replacing the appliance that needs to be replaced or something. We'll stay in hostels instead of the -- maybe we won't get a paid interpreter.

Campbell will know enough Mandarin at that point. Maybe she could be our interpreter. [laughs] She's shakin' her head no. Maybe it'll just be the trip of Colleen and I alone because Campbell got that opportunity. That was really special.

Jena: I hear you. You're thinking about the future and how it can work out.

Corinne: We'll make it work out. It was not affordable for us to do it when we were a family of two incomes. It was very hard to make it happen. I just said we're going to do it. We figured it out. I've had many opportunities to do that over the last five years. How am I going to pay that mortgage? How am I going -- you just figure it out. Seems to come together.

Jena: It's all about an acknowledgment that life is a series of troubleshooting exercises in one form or another. The faster you get with that, the more manageable life is. Is there something about your experience that I haven't asked you about that you would particularly like to share or feel like would help other people to know?

Corinne: At the outset -- people are figuring this out more and more with adoption -- realizing that if you're drawn to adopt and you think you can't afford it, you can figure it out. There's all sorts of resources available. There's creative ways of pulling the money or the equity out of things that you or family members have. I couldn't imagine regretting it. Even farther from that, this was the life I've been waiting for. I looked for my kids in all the wrong places, as the song says. There they were waiting for me in China. I can't imagine not having moved forward with it. I know the way things have changed with adoption now, it's not as readily accessible in China as it was. We finished in 2005. Things changed the next year. We're really fortunate. Even though we have had that experience of going back to the orphanage and seeing the home culture and the language and for all of those FCC events, we're still just pretty typical American family. My girls are sitting here in two chairs in the room both looking at their telephones. I wouldn't trade it for anything. Being their mom is the best thing in the world.