

Jena Heath: It's great to be talking with you. If you could tell us your name and where you're from and just a little bit about your adoption of Haven. When? From what province?

Kim Vander Bie: My name is Kim Vander Bie. I'm a resident of Chula Vista, California, originally from Holland, Michigan. I adopted Haven in 2002 from the Chaohu Children's Welfare Institute in Anhui Province.

Jena: How old is she now?

Kim: She turned eighteen in April.

Jena: I did talk with Haven. I know we connected over Facebook. I curse Facebook and I love Facebook, like all of us.

Kim: I understand.

Jena: You were saying that you had this very interesting story in that Haven is recently in reunion with her birth parents. I was wondering if you would tell us about that. How did it happen? Then maybe a bit about what that's like for you.

Kim: After I got Haven, I had questions, obviously, about how she ended up at the orphanage. I knew a lot about the one-child policy and the reasons why parents were giving up baby girls. In the back of my mind, I knew that maybe someday we would find out who her parents were through DNA testing, but didn't speak to her about it. She knew she was adopted early on. She was about three or four in the bathtub. I was washing her, so it was probably closer to age three. I said to her, "You have loved the water since day one." She said, "You mean since the day that I was born?" I said, "Since the first time I put you in the bathtub in the Chinese hotel." She goes, "Oh." Then I walked away for a moment to grab a towel. When I came back, she said, "Mama, I feel bad for my Chinese mom and dad." Where did that come from? I said, "You do? Why?" She said, "Because they had to let me go."

There was no blame. It was more compassion. It wasn't, "They gave me up." It was, "They let me go." Of course by this time, I'm crying. [laughs] I said, "I know, honey, but they didn't want to. They loved you very much." She said, "You know, I bet they think about me every day, especially on my birthday." By this time, I've got her out of the tub. We're sitting on the end of my bed. She's wrapped in her towel. Then she says, "Mama, do you love my Chinese mom and dad?" "Oh, yes. I love them very much. They made sure you were healthy and safe." Then she said, "Do you think sometime we could visit my Chinese mom and dad?" I was like, "Well, I'm not exactly sure where they are." She seemed surprised by that. She said, "Really?" I said, "Yeah. I'm not sure if we'll ever find them, but maybe we'll meet them in heaven someday. Then she said, "I'd just like to see what they look like." [laughs] I didn't bring it up again. She didn't bring it up. It was just something she had on her heart. I was so amazed that this little girl with such an old soul had such insights.

I wanted to do a heritage tour with her, bring her back to China so she could see where she came from and visit the orphanage. We did that in 2012. When we did the orphanage tour, they actually had relocated to a newer facility, but they had the same staff. The director of the orphanage remembered Haven. I had the address on the abandonment certificate. Several years earlier, I had hired someone in China to take a picture of the finding location. I showed her the photos. I showed her the address. She said, "That's not right. I'm from the area where she's from. Would you like us to take you there?" I said, "Yeah, I'd love that." She said Haven was the only baby that came from that village. She's said there's a chance we could run into some of her relatives. She said we should go in very quickly, go in and go out. I said, "Okay, I agree with that." So we did. Haven had very distinctive eyebrows. We did encounter some people along the way. I was like, "Hmm, I wonder if anybody has her eyebrows." [laughs] Nobody said anything to us or bothered us *per se*. After we left, the director said that some families of adopted children were coming back with journalists looking for the birth families. She said she thought that some of them were having some success. She said, "If you want to come back when Haven is older and maybe bring a journalist or something..." I was like, okay, all right. Great, thanks.

I put that on the shelf for a while because I wanted to wait until she was older. I knew someone else whose child had found their birth parents. Had a little bit of information from her on what to do. She recommended that the next time we went to China that we create posters that showed then and now and a short message saying, "I'm looking for my birth parents just to let them know that I'm well. I'm not angry." That was very important. They had done some initial flyers. People were confused. Is this the same person? Why do they want to find them? Are they upset? When we back to China last year for a service tour, we made arrangements to go back to the orphanage again. Basically, we wanted to do DNA testing. We were going to be there on a Saturday. The DNA place was closed. The new orphanage director said she would take us to the police station to do DNA testing. That's what we did. Then we told her that we had these flyers that we were going to take to the village. She said okay. She was extremely nice and accommodating.

As we were leaving, or close to the village where we thought Haven had come from, my guide got a phone call. She said to go to this, like a civic center of a very small village and that they had information. We went to the village and went to this little civic center area. There were five men behind the counter, very friendly. Of course, I couldn't understand a word they were saying, but very nice. They were chatting with my guide and providing her with a couple of phone numbers. One was for an older lady -- that's the way they described her -- from the village where Haven had come from. The other one was for her father who had moved away shortly after she was born, he and his wife and their daughter. I was pretty shocked. I was like, we have the number for her father? She said, "Yeah, let's give him a call."

This is the part that I don't really understand. Why were we in the car and on the way to the village when we were told we could get the phone numbers later? I don't know. Some of it, like Haven says, we don't really understand. We're just happy, the way it turned out. We got her dad on the phone. He was elated. The first thing he said to me was, "Thank you. Thank

you.” He was gregarious. You could tell. He was over the moon and said, “Do I need to come tomorrow for DNA testing?” He lived on the other side of the country at this point, like the distance from New York to LA. Something like that would've been a huge expense for him. We're like, “No, just come when you can to verify.” When I saw his picture -- we asked him to send a picture. Oh, my gosh. She's the spitting image of her father. Then her father has a cousin who's a businessman in Shanghai and speaks English very well. He contacted me. He said he'd like to meet us before we went back to the US. We were able to meet him and his wife and son the day before we went back to the US. We started keeping in touch through WeChat after that point.

Then our relationship continued to evolve. Her father and I are kindred spirits. We just connected. It was like we'd known each other forever. He said, “I don't think we'll be able to come to the US. Do you think you can come here?” I said yeah. He said, “How about for spring festival?” In other words, Chinese New Year, which was late January/early February this past year. I said, “Yeah, let's do it.” I'll take Haven out of school for a week if I have to. [laughs] She was a senior. I figured this would be a good educational experience. I don't know how much Haven told you about our visit with them. We met an extension of our family. We're all now one big family. It's remarkable. I can't imagine our life without them at this point. We plan to go back, hopefully again in 2021. She has an older sister and a younger brother. Her brother's a senior in high school. Possibly when he graduates, he and sister will come to the US for a visit. Her sister just got a job in Shanghai after graduating from college. Her sister is just lovely. If I had to choose anyone on the planet to be her sister, it would be her. The family was -- one day after another, it was just... [laughs]

Jena: I have a couple of questions. Is that okay?

Kim: Sure.

Jena: The first thing I want to say is congratulations. I'm very happy for you. I'm happy for Haven. I know what an incredible thing this is. It's a door that I sometimes think adoptive families -- you open it. You can't just close it again. It's a relationship that begins. It's really great to hear that's how you regard it and that's how you all are handling it. It's a gift, it sounds like.

Kim: For sure. My family, my parents and siblings and whatnot, lived in Michigan. I'd said to Haven a couple years ago, “If we ever find your birth family, then what?” She said, “It'd be nice if we could just visit them now and then like we visit our family in Michigan.” I was all for it. Yet there was still this little part of me that was like, but what if she meets them and she wants to move there? She's American true and true. [laughs] She loves her family and her Chinese family and the culture. She knows that her life here has provided her with a lot of opportunities that she wouldn't have had if she'd stayed there.

Jena: I'm sure her bond with you is very profound. You're the only mother she's ever known.

Kim: She's the best thing that ever happened to me. We are very close. That's another thing too. Because I'm a single mom, she hasn't had a father in her life. When she did meet her birth father, it was easy for them to fall into pace. He didn't have to feel like he was stepping on someone else's toes or whatever. Her birth mom -- part of it's personality, part of it's culture -- she was very reserved towards me. She stepped back. She's more quiet the way Haven tends to be, more introverted. I felt like even if she develops a relationship with her birth mom, which she slowly is or will, nobody can ever take away what I've had with her for the last eighteen years. It is what it is.

Jena: Do they tell you why, what happened, the story of their relinquishment of her, assuming it was a relinquishment?

Kim: Her father is one of five children. He's the only son. He and his wife had a daughter, Rae. Because they lived in the country, they could have two children, but they had to be at least four years apart. When Rae was four and a half, Haven was born. I'm assuming they didn't know ahead of time what her gender was. They had been in contact, as he described it, with the brother of a relative who had no children and wanted children. They said that they would adopt her if it was a girl. He told me that she was born in a hospital. She lived with them for four days. Then the other family came and took her. Then they just assumed that she was living with them all this time. They actually do have a daughter right now, apparently. They thought that daughter was Haven.

He told me that it wasn't until Haven and I showed up that they realized what had happened. We're not sure why. We think it has something to do with money. They didn't follow protocol the way it was supposed to be done, apparently, if a relative adopts a child from a family member or something. That's all I understand at this point. They couldn't keep her. They're the ones who turned her in. Her abandonment certificate cites there was a finding spot and a police station. I remember we were standing in the room, when we were in China this last time, of the house where Haven stayed for four days. Grandma was there, and mom and dad. I asked about the police station. Even the grandma, she was shaking her head. No, there was no police station.

Jena: Had you ever questioned or wondered if the story in the abandonment papers was true or not?

Kim: I was a little bit skeptical because I had heard that sometimes they just fill in the blanks and everything is not completely accurate. When we went to her "finding location" seven years ago, in my heart I never believed that she had been abandoned there. It was basically on the patio of a house in this village. I thought if she was "brought to a police station," I suspected that it was a relative who said, "We found this baby -- wink, wink -- at this address." One thing in her file at the orphanage said that she was brought in wearing new clothes which also told me that this child was valued. [emotional] It's unfair because it's so easy to judge the Chinese people for "giving up" these baby girls. How could they do that? There's a lot of judgment. The story is much more complex than that.

When we started this search, the clues were unfolding before us. I said to Haven, "If at any time you want me to stop, I will. I'm doing this for them as much as I'm doing this for you because I believe that they love you." I just had this feeling. I knew there was a family out there that loved her. If I could give them piece of mind and share her with them, I wanted to be able to do that. Some children die young, and those parents never have a second chance. Some children are kidnapped, and they never see their kids again. I felt like if I, through divine intervention or whatever, have an opportunity to bring them together, I want to be the -- what's the word? I just want to be a catalyst for that.

Jena: The fact that there are subtleties and nuances to this family's story that may go unanswered -- it sounds like the only way they would be answered is if you or Haven was intent on pressing it. Tell me if I've got this wrong. From talking to her and listening to you, it sounds like you can live with a certain ambiguity. You understand that these situations are often very nuanced. It's not one extreme or the other. You can live with that ambiguity. That's okay.

Kim: I feel like it's trade-off. I'm very curious by nature. I like to get to the bottom of things, but not at the expense of offending someone or alienating someone. It's not worth it to me. It's all worked out now. The last night we were all together, we had this big dinner. We hugged the birth parents, Haven and I. Afterwards, through Charlie our translator, Haven's dad said, "This is god's arrangement."

Jena: This is god's arrangement?

Kim: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jena: Wow.

Kim: We feel like the stars aligned. It all worked out.

Jena: They really did. It sounds like your guide at the time, your guide was helping you search? How did she even get this phone call? She must have been doing some research?

Kim: It was through the orphanage director, was my understanding. The service project was through Red Thread tours. They also arranged the visit with the orphanage. I was told by the representative from Red Thread, "The director's being very cooperative. He's actually sending people up to try to get some answers."