

Jena Heath: Haven, it is really good to talk with you today. I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about yourself. How old are you? When did you come home from China? Where are you from originally in China?

Haven Vander Bie: I am eighteen years old right now. My birthday was April 20<sup>th</sup>. I came home just under a year old. I was adopted on April 7<sup>th</sup>. I'm from the Anhui Province in the city of Chaohu.

Jena: Were you in an orphanage, or an SWI, or were you in foster care?

Haven: An SWI.

Jena: What year did you come home?

Haven: That would've been 2002.

Jena: Where have you grown up?

Haven: I've grown up in Chula Vista, California. It's just a couple miles north of the Mexican border.

Jena: Interesting times to be on the Mexican border.

Haven: Yes. I was raised here. I've been here all my American life.

Jena: Are you in high school now? Have you graduated?

Haven: I just graduated.

Jena: Congratulations. What are you doing?

Haven: I'll be studying neuroscience at UCSD.

Jena: That is awesome. What is your career plan? Are you thinking about medicine or research?

Haven: More research, not sure specifically, but just in that direction. I've switched my interests around quite a bit. This is one that I landed on for now.

Jena: That's awesome. Congratulations.

Haven: Thank you.

Jena: Do you have siblings?

Haven: I don't, not any adoptive siblings. We recently discovered that I do have biological siblings, an older sister and a younger brother.

Jena: Wow. We're cutting right to the chase here. I need to hear this. Can you tell us how this happened? Were you searching for a long time? Were you intentionally searching? I know that some of the people I've interviewed have had -- there's been one case of a completely accidental reunion with a twin. Why don't you tell us your story?

Haven: Starting from the beginning, we were never actively searching. I've been aware from as long as I can remember, that I've been adopted. It never bothered me too much. I was very comfortable with my mother and the family I'm in and the home I'm in. I never really had a desire to search for them. I was a little bit curious when I was younger. My mom likes to tell a story about how one time I was in the bathtub and I asked her randomly if she knew my birth parents. I wanted to know what they looked like, just basic stuff like that, but nothing really like, "I need to find them." We went to China maybe seven years ago now just for a tourist trip. It was with a large group. We extended our trip a little bit. We went to Chaohu to go visit the SWI that I was at. We met the director. She had some files on me. Her information had been that I was found on a doorstep of some residents and brought to the police station and then brought to the SWI. They even claimed they knew where I was found. They took us to that spot. We thought, wow.

The director said, "There's a chance we might run into someone you're related to while we're in that village. Are you prepared for that?" I was eleven at the time. We thought I probably wasn't ready for that yet. We made it a quick in and out of the village just to visit the place where I was supposedly found. Then last summer, in 2018, we decided to take another trip to China. This time it was a service tour. We volunteered in a couple orphanages. We went with another big group. Before we met up with them though, we went back to my SWI in my city. There was a new director there. Supposedly, she had different information than the previous director we had talked to. We had been in contact with her before we came, over email and stuff. We had a contact from the first time we went to China who we were still communicating with. She helped us and translated for us and that kind of thing. The director that is currently there that we met this time, she was from or had some connection to the village that she said I was from.

Before we had arrived, she had sent a couple people into that village to find information or collect whatever she could dig up. Somehow, we were given a phone number that was my biological father's. It was a wild goose chase for a little bit. We were driving around everywhere going from village to village because everyone had different information. We finally got our hands on a phone number. My mother and I are not very sure about how this all happened. We called the phone number. A man picked up. Our translator and guide, Queenie, she translated for us. He was able to confirm my birthday and the place where I'm from and stuff that maybe only he'd know. It was very interesting. We talked just for a little bit. I asked a couple questions about their family dynamic. Did I have siblings?

Then later on, we started using WeChat for our correspondence so that we could translate ourselves. We had to leave that village the day after we made that discovery to go join the group for the service tour. We didn't get to stay around much. Although, we did go and get my DNA sampled at the police station. My father had said, "My wife and I can be down there within the next couple days." They actually had moved out of that village many, many years ago to live in a different province for better work opportunities and stuff like that. They were not there anymore. They said, "We can come down there and get our DNA tested too if you wanted to wait for us." At that point, we were already a day or two late on our other tour. We were like, "We should probably join up with them. We'll get the DNA results back anyhow." We left.

After we got back to the States, we started corresponding more. They invited us back for Chinese New Year, to come visit. Every other year the whole family comes back to that village because they all dispersed, all my cousins and uncles and everyone. Every other year they come back for the Lunar New Year to all be together. They weren't going to do it this year. With the discovery of me, they thought that it would be a good excuse to all come together. We planned a trip. We went in early February this year. My father and my sister picked up us from the airport. A crazy week and a half of festivities and meeting all these people. They were so welcoming and nice, just an absolute dream.

Jena: This is really interesting on a number of levels. I have a few questions, if that's okay.

Haven: Yeah.

Jena: It's interesting to me that the orphanage directors in both cases, the original director and the next director, seemed both to be not only cooperative, but actually actively initiating helping you with this. In other words, with the first director, did you say to her, "We're trying to do a birth parent search"? It sounds like when you went when you were eleven, actually she broached the possibility of meeting biological family.

Haven: Yes. Our only goal when we went that first time, mine and my mother's, was to just visit my orphanage. Then when we got there, they said that they knew where I was from or something, so we thought we'll go there. Then the director had said, "This is a very, very small village. There's a good possibility that someone you're related to might either recognize you or piece together that this baby that might have been" -- not abandoned -- "left all those years ago, she looks about the right age," They might be able to piece something together. We actually didn't run into any problems like that when we went. Like I said, it was very quick, in and out.

She didn't necessarily volunteer to help us search for relatives. She just told us of the possibility that we might see someone. Then the new director -- when we went back this summer, we had a goal. It was more oriented towards let's see how much we can find out about them. If we actually get to meet them, even better. She was very cooperative. We were very lucky that I had as much information in my file as we did. The other people that we were on the tour with, a lot of them were adopted Chinese girls. We all talked about it a little

bit. A lot of them didn't know a single thing about where they were from. Wow, we got so lucky. When we went back in February, the new director had told us that there's been 270 children adopted out of that orphanage, and I've been the only one to reunite with my birth family.

Jena: What's the name of the SWI?

Haven: I think it's the Chaohu Social Welfare Institute, pretty sure.

Jena: That sounds right. The tour you were on, was it a heritage tour, a returning tour of adoptees? It sounds like it was a service tour.

Haven: It's through Red Thread Tours & Services. It was called the Teen Service Tour. It was two weeks in July. We spent the first half going to two different orphanages. We painted some of their rooms and decorated stuff, and helped make it a better living environment, and interacted with the children, and that kind of thing. Then the second part of it was more exploring China. It was a mix of both. It was called a Teen Service Tour.

Jena: Is this Red Thread out of Minneapolis?

Haven: Yes.

Jena: Two questions. One, at what point were you made aware that there was an actual DNA match? You guys got tested. Then you went on. When did your birth parents wind up being tested?

Haven: I'd say maybe a couple weeks after. Then our contact in China, our guide and translator that we had used, she had them send the results to her. She told us that everything was a match. Plus when he friended us on WeChat, he had his profile picture. I'm the splitting image of him. It was just astounding. There's no way that he couldn't have been my father.

Jena: Wow. What did they tell you about the circumstances of your adoption? You said you have siblings. A sister?

Haven: Yes. Her name is Rae. They gave us English names to call them. Hers was Carol. Her Chinese name is Rae. She is twenty-three, maybe. My brother, we call him by his English name, Andy. He is a year younger than me, so seventeen maybe, or almost turning seventeen, something like that. This is very mind-bending, this whole circumstance of my adoption. They had my sister five years before me. In rural parts of China at that time, families were allowed to have two children. They tried again. I came out a girl. The whole patriarchal China was still in place. They really needed a boy to provide for them when they got old because the men stay with their parents. It wasn't good for them to have two girls.

What they told me, my parents, was that they had relatives who were trying for a child but couldn't conceive. They were going to try to have them adopt me so that I'd still kind of be in the family. I was placed in their care for a little while. My parents said that I had stayed with them for four days after I was born. After that, I was placed in the care of the relatives, but there was issue with the adoption in that manner. I was brought to the police station after that to be put in the orphanage. They never told my birth parents that they had done that. They did adopt another child soon after giving me up. My parents had been in the understanding that that child that they had was me. They weren't very close relatives, so they didn't have much contact. They never really went to visit her or talk to her or anything, so they wouldn't have known that wasn't their daughter. When they got the phone call from us, they were pretty shocked. They were like, "We're very mad at those relatives that we thought you were with." It was very shocking for them to hear that I was actually in America and I've been there for my whole life.

Jena: They did not know that these other family members had given you up?

Haven: Yes, that was our understanding of what they had told us. Some of the translations get a little bit murky. That was what we understood it to be. It was all very, very weird. My mom thinks that maybe there was an adoption fee that those relatives couldn't pay or something. We're not too sure, though. We don't even know who those are. They must have been very distant.

Jena: How do you feel about the story? There are some details that may never be totally known. I wonder, where you are with all of that? Are you okay with it? Is it enough? Is it not enough?

Haven: It's enough for me. Sometimes I'll think about something and be like, I have no idea how that is the way it is, but I don't honestly care too much. We are where we are. I'm just happy that I got to meet them. They've shared with us very openly. We've asked them questions. They've tried their best to answer. I'm not disappointed at all about any lack of information. None of it is too important. We're not sure how the director got their phone number, but all I care about is that they did. Overall, I'm very happy. It's an overall great experience.

Jena: How has it been for your adoptive family? How are they with it?

Haven: They were so excited. With us being there during the Lunar New Year preparations and stuff, everything was so -- we always had dinner at someone else's house. In their village actually, almost everyone who lived there was part of the family. We just walked next door into my uncle's house or something, or my second cousin and their children. Everyone came in to see me and to meet me. They were glad to know that I was okay. They were glad that I was so interested in coming back because a lot of adoptees don't go back and get in touch with their roots. They really appreciated that me and my mother took the effort to go and connect with my Chinese roots. It was all very exciting. We kind of felt like I was some exhibit at a museum or something for everyone to come see. It was fun.

Jena: How do you envision your relationship with them now? Are you keeping in touch on WeChat? Do you plan to go back? How does this unfold, do you think?

Haven: We're still talking regularly on WeChat. We do plan on going back, maybe not anytime soon, maybe in a couple years because it is such a big trip. I'll be going to college soon. That makes it a little harder to align schedules and stuff like that. We asked them if they wanted to come to America. They weren't strong enough in their English. My sister actually speaks very good English and so does my brother. My parents don't know any. We invited them to come to America whenever they want. They were like, "We'll learn more English first." We definitely plan to keep in touch and visit as much as possible.

Jena: What can you tell me about them? What do they do? What are their professions?

Haven: My father is -- what's the word for it? He lays tiling. A contractor, maybe. That's probably the word. What we understood is that my mother works with him or for him. They're in the same business. That's what they do. My sister just got out of college. She's looking for a job in Shanghai. My father is actually a lot like my adoptive mother in personality, very outgoing and makes jokes, very personable. My biological mother is more like me. I'm more reserved and stayed in the background. She's always cooking because of the new year, but very quiet. I'm a mix of both of them.

Jena: How about your siblings? Your sister is looking for work in Shanghai. How about your brother?

Haven: He is still in high school or whatever their system is over there. He's preparing for his exams to get into a university. He hasn't really thought about work yet. He's still in school. He's very quiet, didn't talk much. According to my sister, his English was stronger than hers. Hers was pretty good. We were like, "Please, talk so that you can tell us what everyone is saying." [laughs] He was very shy too, which I didn't mind because I'm kind of that way.

Jena: Do you think they might come visit sometime, your sister and brother? Did they seem interested?

Haven: I don't know about my brother. We asked my sister. She definitely sounded interested. She was like, "I need to learn more English." We're like, "No, your English is just fine." She's worried about that. I think she'll definitely come out here some time. She wants to see America, but she's worried about her language.

Jena: I'm wondering if you have anything that you'd like to say or offer other adoptees about the experience of being in reunion with your birth family. It wasn't really something you were actively pursuing. Some adoptees I've talked to, it's been a burning desire from the time they were young. Others, very neutral. You sound like it wasn't necessarily a burning desire. It was a question back there, but not this huge thing in your head. I wonder how you think

about it and whether you have any thoughts that you might want to share with other adoptees, or maybe not.

Haven: Obviously, my situation was incredibly rare and entirely lucky. We do believe, though, it was divine intervention that brought us together. We do believe that played a part in it. It was also all the pieces just fit together, the fact that I had so much information and the fact that both directors seemed to be in touch with the village that I was from. It was crazy how everything fell into place. Honestly, it kind of makes me sad that some adoptees spend their lives with such a desire to find their parents, and here I was just mildly curious and it fell in my lap. What I would share with other adoptees is don't stop looking. You never know when you might make a discovery or find something that could change everything. It's a profound experience, meeting them. It was amazing. They were just glad to know I was okay. Parents who give up their children don't do it because they want to. It's because they have to. We really felt that from them. They keep telling us, too, how sorry they are. It's like, no, it's okay. It's really okay. I have this amazing life in America. You have a better life too now. We found each other, so it all worked out in the end. My thoughts, I only have positive feelings about this experience. Everything's been wonderful.

Jena: I want to thank you for sharing this with us. It's an amazing story. I appreciate you sharing it and participating in the project.

Haven: It's no problem at all. My mother had posted something on Facebook about it. Her friends are saying, "You should write a book." Like I said, everything just fell into place perfectly. We're still wrapping around our minds around how fortunate we've been with this whole experience.

Jena: Thank you so much.

Haven: It's no problem.