

Robert Decker: There are a number of factors that I think made our search very successful very quickly, which is that our contact in China was someone who was knowledgeable, and then, our area was very small. It was a very rural area that you're not looking in a metropolis of ten million people. This is a very rural village area with several thousand families. It's a very small community.

Amy Decker: The finding location was definitely a big contributor in our success, and the fact that it was accurate. It was a relatively small town. I've talked to a lot of people about how to search because people have a lot of questions about it. I know there are people now who will go search for you and do that as a business countrywide. I always tell people, "Your best bet is finding somebody very, very local." It's the same as searching in America would be. If I were looking for somebody who had not had their baby in my town, I would want to ask around in my town. I'd want somebody who lived here, who knows who to ask.

I always think that a big, underutilized place to search is an elementary school or even middle school. Most of our kids have siblings who are older or younger who have stayed in China with their family. If there was a mom at school where my kids go to school who had been pregnant and then did not raise her baby, everybody would know.

People tend to think that China's very exotic and very difficult. In a lot of ways, China's still just a place with people going about their lives. If you think about how you would search here -- if you couldn't keep your child, where you would leave that child? I think it makes the search a lot more logical. Having someone really, really local who is comfortable asking around and asking a lot of questions makes a big difference.

Robert: For example, our contact was in the same area as Lena's birth family. It is not difficult for that person to, in their own network of friends, figure out, "There's seven families that this could be applicable to." If you think of your own small suburb, our suburb that we live in, we can get access to virtually every family in our suburb through one or two degrees of separation.

If you had a focused person who was willing to be discrete and ask questions, you could figure out within three months who had given up their child for adoption just by having discrete conversations. That's the type of process that we followed to try to identify the area in which we believed that Lena was given up to the orphanage system, and then identify a contact there who would have either a personal relationship or could easily develop a personal relationship with the targets.

Amy: Yeah, with the targets, with the birth family. Another thing that I think is important is a lot of people like the idea of going and hanging up posters. In our situation, that could have been a deterrent to having Lena's family come forward. The fact that we had someone contact them privately -- they were very afraid when we contacted them. They were very nervous. They thought that they were being scammed or that somebody was going to ask them for money to keep it quiet. Being able to approach them privately, and so that they

could come forward and have contact with us on their terms, made a big difference too. It was in her family's comfort at that time.

Robert: I don't follow the adoption news the way that Amy does, but my impression from the -- was that Lena's birth family, we identified them and then it was still a long time before they were willing to initiate person-to-person contact with us. There was a quite a long period of time where all communications occurred through our local contact. If you think of it from the birth family's point of view if you were in their situation, that's what you would do too because of the language barrier, because of the economic barriers, because the fact that they possibly could be engaging in illegal activity just by having a communication. You want to deal with known quantities. I've always been interested and a little skeptical of the public posting pictures and stuff because that's as likely to scare off people who you would want to talk to, in addition to helping identify people who want to find them. I don't know. I don't follow close [indiscernible].

Amy: In a rural area -- maybe not so much in a big city, you may have no other choice -- but in a rural area, going discretely is probably to your benefit.

Robert: We were very lucky that, one, that I have a better understanding of Chinese culture than someone who's not Chinese American. Two, that our local contact was very effective. An American searching directly by themselves in China is very difficult. It's going to require a lot of luck. An American who marshals resources to identify people in China -- and there are many -- the right types of people, and able to form a real relationship with them that is more than transactional, a relationship built on trust and honesty and the right thing to do -- the Chinese people, the local contact that we work with, it took a long time for us to explain to that person why we would want to have contact with Lena's birth parents.

That person was initially focused on health care reasons in case that Lena had some sort of disorder that needed some sort of medical history. It took a several month-long process to discuss with our local contact that, that's important, but in addition, there are psychological benefits. We've done the research to know that there are psychological benefits to having that sort of contact. That's not something that a Chinese person is going to be familiar with. As soon as they're briefed on that, they understand that at a common-sense level just like everybody else would. Working hard with our local contact and the translator to explain these concepts and say, "This is more than just tryin' to get access to a blood sample. This is because we want to develop a lifelong relationship."

The local contact then immediately understood the moral importance of this. The local contact believed that this was a cool thing that that person could be involved in, and also important for the birth family and was incentivized to try to help us. That's the level of relationship that it took several years to develop. Once it was developed, it ran on its own. An American living in Arizona is never going to have knowledge of some rural village in Western China. They're not going to have sufficient knowledge. The only people that have the knowledge sufficient to identify the birth family are the people living in the village where that birth family is located. You got to go out there and find that person.

Amy: That's correct.

Jena Heath: Do you think the fact that you are Chinese American had any bearing at all on your ability to make those kind of contacts? Did it play a role? Do you speak Chinese?

Robert: Yeah, I do. I speak Chinese at a third-grade level. The way that I would explain it, it is helpful, but it is not necessary. The most important thing is to have a deep level of emotional and cultural awareness. You can't get anything in done in China that is complicated or difficult with spending -- you can get things done in China. You can go buy cheap shoes. You can go on a sightseeing tour. Getting anything complicated done in China requires a level of time investment and relationships -- the time investment is related to the relationship. You have to understand that, that you may go there several times and meet with the local contact one or two times, and it will fail.

You can have numerous telephone calls that are hours long, and those telephone calls result in what you would see as failure. The Chinese are culturally -- as a culture, what matters most is sticking to the relationship, keeping to work at it, and being present. If you have to go have dinner for four hours with your local contact, that's what you have to do even if it results in no real new information. You have to have an understanding of, how do complicated, difficult things actually get done in China? They get done by a combination of developing a real relationship but exhibiting actual effort so that the other person knows you're exhibiting effort on the relationship.

Jena: I got you. Suffice it say that, if I may generalize, that Americans are, we tend to move through the world with a sense that if we put our shoulder to the wheel, things are going to happen. They're fairly well going to happen on our terms and on our timing. It takes, it sounds like, a real suspension of that, an understanding that this is a much more subtle, long term -- should not be, cannot be overtly transactional, as you said earlier. In other words, who wants to feel like somebody is there to get something out of them and then leave, as far as sharing something so intimate?

Amy: A lot of people who are searching want to just pay someone, have them go handle this, and be done. That's a big part of the reason a lot of birth families aren't [indiscernible]. You can't do that. In our case for example, our local contact had actually found another birth family for us, for another family that we knew from the same orphanage. Then communication broke down between that family and the birth family. We, then, lost contact with our local contact because it made us lose face. It made him lose face with the other birth family. He's no longer willing to help us anymore. I really wished that we had managed that situation on our own instead of putting him directly in contact with that adoptive family because now it's a resource that's lost to us.

Jena: Did that adoptive family decide -- we're not naming them. I don't want to press you to discuss another family. I'm just curious. Did that other family decide, "We don't want contact," or try to negotiate terms that were scary to the birth family?

Amy: What happened in that situation, without getting into anybody else's too many personal details, they had a very easy to locate birth family based on the circumstances of their child's finding. It was very easy to locate them. It all happened very quickly without this period of time it took us to really wrap our heads around what we were doing. Robert is talking a lot about his relationship, but I was the one mainly working with the translator. It took about a year of phone calls and stuff before we found them.

There were a lot of times where I had to sit and reflect, "Do I want to stop with this amount of information we gathered, or do I want to go forward?" You can make that decision at every point, in my opinion, until you find the birth family. We had committed in our family that if we found the birth family, that we're in this for the long haul. It's in Lena's best interest. There are other people on the other end who we as Lena's adoptive parents are the gatekeepers, while she's a child, of their contact with each other. We are very aware of that responsibility. It took us a long time to find them, so we had a lot of time to reflect and think about what did we want the contact to look like.

In the case of this other family, it happened practically overnight. They weren't prepared for the reality of what that was going to look like. They shut it down. I know a number of adoptive families who've found birth families, and that happens. It's an incredibly emotional and stressful experience to be all of a sudden sharing your child with another family. It's not easy. For adult adoptees who are in reunion, there's actually a cycle of emotions that adoptees going through. I found an article about that cycle. I discovered that I was experiencing that same cycle myself.

At the beginning, you're very excited. After a little while, it becomes very overwhelming. It took me, personally, about a year or eighteen months to really feel like my life was back to normal. We met the birth family several months after we found them because we had already scheduled a trip to China at that time. We hadn't done DNA. We weren't positive it was the right family, but we thought it was. When we met the birth family, it was an incredibly stressful day. We only had one day with them. First of all, they didn't know if we really had their child. They still thought it was possibly a scam at that point. When they met us, they thought that we would see them the one time and they'd never see her again. That experience for us of seeing them and then taking her away from them, when they're just people who obviously really care about her, it was an overwhelming emotional experience just for me, and it's not even my birth family.

I have incredible sympathy for other adoptive families who are going through this. It's not an easy situation to manage. It's a choice by us on a regular basis. We choose to keep contact open. We choose to not be jealous of their place in Lena's life and in her heart. We choose to visit them even though there's a lot of emotional fallout for all of us while we're there and when we come home and leading up to that trip. It's a huge level of commitment that a lot of people don't think about. Then when they find the birth family, it can be overwhelming. A lot of people, even domestic adoptees when that happens, sometimes people withdraw and shut down.

Robert: That's a personal choice. That's totally fine. It takes a lot of time, energy, and money to maintain that relationship. It is a significant adjustment in how you choose to raise your child. It's something that we have gotten way more out of it than we put into it. There is a cost to the benefit.

Amy: The experience of meeting Lena's birth family and building a relationship with them is largely, almost on every level, is about learning to trust each other and showing them they can trust us. When they first met her, they thought that would be the only time they would see her in her entire life. We had to say to them, "No. We want to see you again. We want to talk to you." There are times where I really don't want to have contact with them because it's emotionally draining for me to build up even to a phone call. It's a big responsibility. It's stressful. We have to get a translator involved. It's not an easy process.

I have to have a schedule set so they know they can count on us not to disappear with their child. We have to know that they care enough about her to put up with us. They're a countryside family who has had a family of foreigners dropped in the middle of their lives. They didn't ask for that. They had no idea that Lena was going to go to America. They had no clue. They didn't believe it when our local contact told them. For them, we really do have one of the best-case scenarios you could have in that they welcomed us. They're accepting of us. They don't have any information about what foreigners are like. They tolerate us making cultural mistakes. They accepted us into their family in a way that would be hard for a lot of rural families to do. We're thankful every day for how well this has worked out. It's certainly not the way it works for everybody.

Robert: The other thing I would say is that Amy was talking about her emotional adjustment after finding the birth family. They also went through a pretty serious emotional adjustment. It's been, I don't know, five years since we initiated contact. The first year of contact, it was very stressful because people were feeling each other out. They weren't sure what to say on the phone calls. Every phone call would end up in crying because they were -- it was very stressful.

Now, the relationship has developed to the point where I would characterize the relationship as the type of relationship you would have with a close extended family member, like a close aunt or uncle who lives on the other side of the world and you visit from time to time. It's a very comfortable, warm, loving, familial relationship. We're blessed to have the ability to go travel there and visit them in their village. When we go there, Lena used it as her second home and runs around the village and chases all the chickens and that kind of stuff. It's a very, very, very wonderful thing that Amy has really driven. It's created great benefit to our family and to Lena.

Jena: Let me ask a couple of nuts and bolts questions. They didn't know that their child had been internationally adopted, which is not uncommon at all that birth parents don't have this information.

Can you tell us a little bit about what happened here? They had an over-quota child. Do they have other children? Do they have other daughters?

Amy: Lena has an older sister and a younger brother. They live in a rural area. It seems from talking to people that, first of all, the year Lena was born, which was in 2006, there were heavy enforcement of family planning rules at that time. She had an older sister who was already with her family. At that time I'm not even sure if she had been a boy if -- the family may have had to pay a very large fine for that, but they probably would have done it. When her younger brother was born, family planning had been loosened up quite a bit by that time. In her rural area, they will permit two children if you pay. They did have to pay for her younger brother. I don't think it was as much as if he had been born several years earlier.

Things have changed. Things have relaxed a lot in China in that period of time. When she was born, it's a very typical situation. If you've ever read *Wanting a Daughter, Needing a Son*, Kay Johnson's book studying birth families in China, they needed a son. Lena's father, there's not a lot of men in his family. He really needed someone to carry on the family name for cultural reasons. They needed a son in their village. It's very clear that there's a lot of favoritism towards boys and sons in general. It's a difficult decision that they made. I know that they didn't make it lightly. They were very sad that they lost her. Her mom told me that she cried. In China they stay in bed for thirty days after a baby is born. She told me that she cried the entire time.

Jena: Did your paperwork, before you knew any of this and you were just looking at your documents, did your paperwork have an abandonment narrative? "She was found at the railway station. She was found in front of the health center?"

Amy: Yes.

Jena: Yes, it did? Okay.

Amy: It did. The place she was found was actually the place she was born. That was what was on her paperwork.

Jena: I'm curious about a couple of other nuts and bolts things. One is the DNA test. At the point where you were asking for confirmation, was the birth family nervous at all about a DNA test? How do you do that? Is the test performed in China? Is the sample taken out of the country and performed here?

Amy: How we did it five years ago is very different than how we would do it now. Now, there are American companies like 23andMe and Ancestry where you can do DNA testing and compare it relatively cheaply and easily. We knew we were meeting the birth family and at the time our thought -- this was five years ago -- our thought was we'll collect hair samples. Then we were going to have it run through a special lab that does paternity testing. As we were in China, I heard from a friend who had done similar testing with a possible birth family in China that the hair samples were very inaccurate and hard to test. Then we

panicked because this was several days before we were going to meet Lena's family and tried really hard to figure out what could we do.

We found a lab that would allow you to use a regular Q-tip, a cotton swab. There was a certain procedure on their website as to how to do it. You had to let it completely dry and then seal it in a paper envelope and then send it in. We spent several months in Asia at that time. We were traveling, and then we did this test on the Q-tips and sent them when we got to Hong Kong to the lab that would accept them on Q-tips.

Now, I do genetic genealogy, which is DNA birth parent searching for domestic adoptees. I would suggest to anyone doing it now would travel with a 23andMe or AncestryDNA test kit. Do it that way. Because if you're meeting a possible birth family, that would then put that birth family's DNA in a larger database so that if it doesn't match, it may match another adoptee who would also be in that database. That's how I would do it now. At the time, we didn't have time to have a DNA test vet and tested because our local contact was not in the area where Lena's birth parents were working. They were working at a different province. He had talked to them by phone but hadn't met them in person.

It was too complicated for us. In general if you were from a distance, I would suggest definitely do a DNA test in advance because I know of people who have met possible birth families and then it ended up it was not a DNA match. In our case, Lena looks so much like her birth father. They have a very unique look that I think we were fairly certain that we had found the right family.

Robert: Or closely related to them or something like that.

Amy: Based on the paperwork we had, the dates and stuff matching up, we were fairly certain. Having been through that experience, if we could go back in time I would never introduce my child to someone without DNA evidence, knowing what I know now about the emotions of this process. She was very young. She was only four and a half, or five. Especially with a child who is a teenager or ten or eleven years old, I wouldn't introduce my child to a possible birth family without a DNA confirmation, if at all possible, just because it happens too often that you find the wrong family. I know too many cases of that happening.

Jena: What is it like now? It's been five years. Lena was five.

Amy: Four.

Jena: Four. Does she have any much concrete memory of not knowing her birth parents? Is her worldview on this that she has two sets of parents and that's something she's pretty much always known about herself at this point?

Amy: I think she doesn't remember not knowing. I think she remembers us telling her about her birth family a little bit. She was still pretty young. I think she remembers our first meeting, maybe as much from pictures as her real memory. We try to keep regular contact

with them. We talk on the phone about every two months, which seems to be a good amount on both sides. It seems to be a good balance for everybody involved. We've managed to go back and visit them about every two, to two and a half years, which is interesting because then Lena is meeting them again at different developmental stages.

Each visit has been a very different experience for us. The first visit we went, we did not go to the village because her family wasn't comfortable with anybody knowing about us. By the second visit, they had told people in the village, in part because we had told them, "We don't mind if people know. We're happy to visit. We'd really like to see your home. We'd like to meet Lena's grandmother. We would like to see that." In that first visit to the village on our second trip, was definitely hugely nerve-racking for them. It was a lot of pressure. By this most recent visit -- we visited them this year -- it was very comfortable. It's clear everybody in the village knows who we are. They know why we're there. They know whose child Lena is. They understand what's going on. It's a small enough village that there's no secrets.

Robert: It's a celebratory atmosphere when we arrive, which is very similar to other experiences I've had when I visit rural China. "Hey. This is a new, interesting thing happening." The whole village will come out and say hello. All the kids come out and play. The wonderful thing about a small village in rural China with only three hundred families or so is that everyone knows each other. There are villagers who know of Lena who aren't related to her but understand that she's also a village girl. They treat her that way.

Any: It's great for Lena to have the opportunity to meet her siblings at different ages. The siblings don't participate as much in the phone calls that we do regularly. We've more recently started using WeChat. We do occasionally send videos back and forth between us, and we can see her siblings. Her sister will probably get a smartphone in the next couple years. That might open up some direct communication between the two of them. They don't seem to have a problem with speaking different languages. They just start to play. The last time we were there, we asked Lena's brother who was his favorite American friend. They said our older daughter. He said our older daughter's name. Then we asked Lena's older sister, "Who's your favorite American friend?" She said, "Lena." They have little inside jokes. They play.

There's always going to be some emotional issues between Lena and her birth parents because they're the ones who chose not to raise her. They chose that she would leave their family. I think that there's going to be some emotional baggage there for the rest of their lives. I don't think that that same baggage is going to happen between Lena and her siblings. That might be the real long-term relationship that really, really, she carries with her in her life.

Jena: Has Lena posed the question to you -- here she sees there's another sister, a brother. Has she asked, "Why me?" Does she understand? "Why give me up?"

Amy: She does. We've talked quite a bit about the one child policy. We've talked about the law in China and having to pay a fine. We've talked about the cultural issues around having a



son and why that would be important for her birth parents. She knows that. I think that her understanding of that is different at different ages. On one of our visits there was a moment where she had a real emotional breakthrough in understanding what it meant. She said to me, "It's not fair that I can't live with my mama and baba. It's not fair that my brother can and my sister can." It was a real moment where we all cried about it together. It isn't fair. It is a really crummy thing that happened to her in her life. The roll of dice is being the second daughter. That was her fate. It sucks. She knows it. She rolls with the punches pretty well. She has moments where she's processing that, and other moments where she's just happy to play with her brother and sister and happy to be with her mama and baba when we visit.

These are things she's going to have to come to terms with as she gets older. All we can do as the adoptive parents in this situation is keep the door open between Lena and her Chinese family and let her know that any relationship she had or any love she had with them doesn't threaten us in any way. Her truth of knowing all of the truth about how she came to our family doesn't change her place in our family. It doesn't change her place in her birth family. Choices were made that were out of her control. We can all tell that her parents love her very much. Her Chinese parents love her very much. We all want the best things for her. Sometimes in life bad things happen. Sometimes in life people make choices we wish they didn't make. That's a theme that we talk about with her quite a bit.

Jena: We all make choices in a social context. In fact, the notion of choice in this whole question is an open one. When you're "making choices" in a social and societal and legal context that by its very nature limits your ability to choose, it's an open question about whether it's really choice at all. As she gets older and other adoptees get older and they have, as you say, developmentally a greater understanding of all of this, maybe the nuances of all that become clearer.

Amy: Let me say to that point, there is something that I think is very different about our family and other adoptive families because we have this level of openness and real understanding of what was going on in her family that led to the choice that they would not raise Lena. A lot of times adoptive families create a fairy tale about the birth parents and about the story of how the child came to be adopted in their family. These are living, breathing people. They're people we care about. They're people who we know. We can see that see sometimes they don't make good decisions. Sometimes they make decisions based on their circumstances. There's no fairy tale about it.

I've had people say to me, "Her birth mother must be so amazing because she's the most amazing child." Lena's amazing. Her mother is a lovely person, but she's a person. She's not a fairy tale protagonist. She's a person who has a difficult life and sometimes makes good decisions, sometimes makes bad decisions. They're just regular people. There's no fairy tale in it for us anymore. They're like any other people you know. You know your relatives. You know which relatives sometimes make bad decisions and which relative is generally making good decisions. Our relationship with her birth family gives us a level of insight into the messiness of life that a lot of adoptive families gloss over.

Jena: I hear you. The mythologizing of the birth mother and the assumptions about what may or may not motivate her can -- I understand exactly what you mean -- can be --

Amy: -- I'll say to that too. Lena has been in the village. She sees that in the village many families have two children. Many families have younger daughters. It is also the case that her family made a decision for themselves that not everyone in their same circumstance makes. There could be reasons each family made a different decision. Her understanding of the complexity of her circumstances will be different than someone just saying, "One child policy, and so you had to leave your family." It's going to be a really complicated thing for her to integrate and understand as she gets older, but I think it's the truth. It's easier to reconcile one truth than a hundred possible fairy tales or imagined worst-case scenarios. We'll work with her. She will grow up trying to reconcile her understanding of the truth of her circumstances.

Jena: Have you thought about the possibility that she may, at some point, decide this is not a relationship she wants to continue?

Amy: It's absolutely something I've thought about. I read a really great book about open adoption, which is much more related to domestic adoption, but I find it really applicable in our experience, which is a book called *Hospitious Adoption*. I think the author's last name is Gritter. He talks about at different stages in an open adoption, different people, different members of the triad are the ones who have to display hospitality. At this point in the relationship, it's on us. It's on us as the adoptive family to keep that door open, to invite her birth family in to have a relationship with us and with Lena, and to make sure that Lena knows that door is open and that we love her family and we want as much contact between all of us as possible, so she can have a relationship.

As she gets older, the responsibility for that hospitality will be different. It's going to be on Lena to decide if she invites her birth family into her life or not. It will be her birth family's decision whether or not they keep the door open to her as she becomes an adult. These are things that we can't predict. All we can do is the best we can do right now to keep things open and to have a relationship. I have thought, though, that if there's a time where Lena decides to shut down conversation with her birth family and to stop having communication with them, it would be very difficult for us to completely close the door on them too because she's choosing not to have contact. At this point, there's a relationship between the two couples, between our family and Lena's mama and baba. We have a familial relationship with each other in addition to her relationship with them. We've spent a lot of time building their trust with us. It's hard to imagine that we would ever completely close the door on them if she chose to stop contact.

Robert: If Lena at the age of seventeen says, "No. I don't want to do these calls anymore," or whatever, I'm not sure that we would stop the calls. It just would be calls between me and Amy --

Jena: -- To me, this is a conversation that's about whole families, especially if we're talking about birth parent searching and now the reality in the Chinese adoption community of adoptive parents making the decision to search while their children are very young. The children are not making the decision. The children are not being asked to consent. The search is being conducted. People have various views and attitudes about this. Adoptees are very divided about it, the ones that I've interviewed. As it's happening, it seems to me that you can't negate the fact that what you're saying is true. The four parents in this situation have established a relationship that is in and of itself independent. I can understand what you mean. It would seem cruel to cut that off. I'm sorry.

Robert: We enjoy going there. It's an enjoyable thing.

Amy: Can I say something to what you just said? I've talked to a lot of adoptive parents who wanted to know how to search. I feel like a lot of people haven't done a lot of research in what open adoption looks like. They just want to do the search because it's like the show on TV where your long-lost people come together and you're hugging. Isn't that a lovely ending? That's just the beginning. The search is such a small part of what has gone on with our family. The commitment to doing what is best for Lena as she gets older and the commitment on all sides to ride through difficult moments and look past cultural mistakes, that is something that takes a lot of work, a lot more work than searching ever takes.

I have people say things to me like, "I will search for my daughter's parents. I'll search for her parents, and I'll keep that information for her. When she's an adult she can decide if she wants to have contact or not." To me, that's really problematic because at that point you've prevented your child from having a relationship with her birth parents as a child. There's something to be said for Lena developing a relationship at different developmental stages with both her siblings and her birth parents. That will inform her choices when she's older and has a better understanding of the choices that were made that led her to be adopted. She'll have had experiences with her birth family where she understands there's affection there. She sees their heart break when we leave. She's had the chance to be children with her siblings. She's had a chance to play and build a relationship like that.

Also, you have to remember that there is a family on the other side. If you search for them and you mess it up, the responsibility for that is on the adoptive family. The weight of responsibility in maintaining that relationship and making sure that we keep that door open for Lena as she gets older is not insignificant. It's a huge level of responsibility. Things will happen. People might ask for money in a really awkward way. You may do something to make people lose face and they feel like they can't talk to you anymore. You have to have, on all sides, have a level of commitment. I wouldn't open that door. I wouldn't search unless I was one hundred percent committed to the long haul of doing what is best for every single person in this relationship. That includes her birth family.

Robert: The birth family community needs to understand that while every successful relationship is mutual, you have to have an understanding that as the American in the situation, you are going to be putting in more resources than them. You are the one who's

going to have to travel to China. You are the one who's going to have to pay for the phone calls. You are the one who's going to have to identify a good translator that is willing to work with you over many years and that translator is socially gifted enough to maintain a comfortable relationship with the birth family, but also an appropriate professional distance.

The onus is on the American adoptive family to provide those resources because the people giving up their children in China don't have resources. They don't have money or the education or the know-how to pull any of this stuff off. If you're going to go in there and say it was their fault, that's not a realistic view of how the world works. A family working in a rice paddy in rural China is not going to be able to identify a translator who can deal with this situation.

Amy: Or have any cultural confidence dealing with foreigners. There's no reason we should expect Lena's family to have any cultural confidence dealing with us, because why would they? They're Chinese. They live in China. They only know Chinese people. The flexibility on our end is significant.

Jena: Since you did raise the issue of resources, I'm going to ask this very nuts and bolts question because I think it's part of it. It's important.

Did you pay your local contact? Did you pay your translator? If somebody's going to undertake this, what should they be thinking about financially?

Amy: This is what I tell people. The search itself doesn't have to be super expensive depending on how you do it. In our case, before the birth family was located, the only expense we had was paying our American-side translator to do the phone calls for us. That was, I don't know, two, three hundred dollars over the course of a year. Now, it has become more expensive for us because as a family we've committed to going to China fairly often. The translated phone calls are maybe fifty dollars every two months. It's very reasonable.

We have visited China several times. If our entire family, if all four of us went together -- the second trip, Lena and I travelled alone because plane tickets were extremely expensive, and Robert couldn't get off work the amount of time we needed. That was still fairly expensive. There's a certain baseline amount of money that has to be spent to do the visit.

We don't give money to Lena's family. I know there are circumstances where that might be possible, where it might be an expectation on the birth family's side. We do compensate them for their expenses while we're there as a gift at the end. We give them money for food that they've paid and maybe travelling from where their jobs are to be in the village. We give them some gifts. It's like if you were going to visit family for Christmas.

Robert: A gift of, for example, five hundred dollars at the end of the trip to compensate for the inconvenience of feeding us for a week and those sorts of things, it makes the trip easier. It makes the experience easier for them. They're not wealthy people. Just like it impacts our lifestyle to travel to China every two years, it impacts their lifestyle. They have to stop

working to spend time with us. That helps things. There is expense. It's not insignificant, but it's very worth it. It's an expense that we'll maintain the rest of our lives.

Amy: One more thing to that, the expense stuff. People really need to think through before they do a search, what are you willing to spend money on and what aren't you willing to spend money on? During our search I suspected, having read a lot and Kay Johnson's work and other people, we suspected that Lena had a younger brother in China. I had hard feelings about the fact that he was likely getting more family resources. I had said to Robert, "I don't care. We're not paying any money for that son. We're not paying for him to go to school. We're not going to give him any money. If they chose him over our child, I'm not going to support him." Now, it's very different.

They've never asked us to contribute to their children's education or anything, but we would probably be open as Lena's sister gets older to maybe helping with some kind of vocational education or something like that. The same with her brother now. I know him. He's a real person to me. He's not just a boy who was chosen over my daughter anymore. He's Lena's brother. I care for her siblings as much as I care for my children in a lot of ways. I want to see them be successful. I want to lessen the gap of opportunity between our children and their children. You need to go into any search having thought through the complexities of what you're going to find on the other side, and what that means for your family, and what level of commitment you're willing to make, and that you have a translator who has the skills to help you negotiate that with them.

Robert: The things that people need to keep in mind if they're successful, first of all, in terms of the search, is to be effective. Using money is not equivalent to being effective. Being effective is finding someone who is willing to develop the relationships with the birth family that make contact possible, that make verification of the birth family possible, and make contact with the birth family possible. It is a relationship exercise.

The second is, if the birth family is found, the resources needed to be expended on things that enhance the relationship like an effective translator that is willing to work with you over many years and travel with you. That is an expensive resource. In terms of the money that we set aside, several thousand dollars are set aside for that translator. Those are the types of things that enhance the ability to communicate and create a relationship, a translator who's willing to check in on the birth family when we're not there. That is the type of person you want to identify. Those people are not difficult to find, but they also need to be vetted. They're special people. They're compensated for it and well compensated, but they're not doing just because they're making a lot of money in Chinese terms.

Amy: We're so indebted to our translator. The whole thing would not be possible without such excellent translators that we had.

Jena: I don't see how it could be possible. The great thing about your experience and your willingness to share it is that this is very concrete guidance that is so valuable that I think people only, if they think about, they half-think about.

Amy: They think about it like a fairy tale. They don't think there's nuts and bolts. The fact is Lena's family has asked us for not an insignificant amount of money. That had to be handled incredibly delicately because if we caused them to lose face, they could destroy our relationship. We didn't end up giving the money they asked for. That was due to the amazing abilities of our translator to negotiate that situation in a way that did not make Lena's family lose face and did not make us look like terrible family members who don't participate in the family the way Chinese families would. That's not an uncommon thing that would happen. People in rural China think Americans are very wealthy.

Robert: Comparatively, we are very wealthy. We can set aside ten thousand dollars every two years to go visit them. What they don't need to know is that occurs with considerable budgeting and impact on how we live our lives. Asking for an additional bucket of money is not achievable for us. The way that Chinese people will handle that situation in their own family is they will not have a face-to-face confrontation. Because we had extended resources, finding the right translators, multiple, they were able to explain the situation. It was not a face-to-face discussion.

It's a situation that I'm comfortable with because I'm culturally Chinese. I had a better understanding, not a complete understanding as a Chinese native, but had a decent understanding of the better way to handle it is the translator explained the situation. They were able to step back from the request without losing face. We never addressed and have never addressed and will never address that situation with them directly. That is how Chinese people handle it. That is the appropriate way to handle it. That's the professional way to handle it. Our translator handled it for us. If you don't have the right advice or resources, that would have ended the relationship.

Jena: That's very interesting. They asked for money. The translator explained. In a way, that's also a kind of cultural education for them that, yes, it may seem like there's a lot of money here in terms of how the two lives look. It's their opportunity to also learn something in a subtle way about what your limitations are and what the realities are, but it never becomes a face-to-face discussion.

Amy: It would be awful if it was face to face.

Jena: I hear you.

Amy: That is one big example of the cultural tension between our families that is always there on some level. They're Chinese people living in China with Chinese lives. They don't have any reason, except for us, to understand American culture. I've even sat down with Lena's mother and father before and said, "She's growing up American. We are teaching her as much as we can about Chinese culture, but she will grow up to be your American daughter. She will be very different than your Chinese children in the relationships that she has with you."

We had a very interesting conversation once where one of Lena's aunts asked me, "When Lena grows up, will she go live with her husband's family?" I can't remember why they were asking. It was something like, "Will she live with you until she lives with her husband's family?" We said, "No. In America, a successful parent wants their child to move out and live on their own. If your child lives with you as an adult, you've failed as a parent." Oh, the talking that happened around that table when they understood I was saying that. They said to me, "Oh, no. That's just because she's a girl. If it were your son, you would want him to live with you forever, right?" I said, "No. That would be worse. It would be so much worse if my son was living at home and he's thirty. He needs to be self-supporting and live out on his own."

Jean: Here in America what happens is we get old, and we go live in an old person's home. Our children live across the country from us. [laughs]

Amy: That was one of the funniest conversations we ever had with them where they could not understand. I was like, "No. We're failures if our children never move out. We have failed." It was so funny. Also at the same time, we were all looking at each other like, "We are from different planets." Her family, they're thinking, "How can we have a child like that? How can we have an American child who doesn't want to live with her parents?" It's a very interesting experience. At the same time, we're asking a lot from them. We're asking them to really go out of their comfort zone all the time to deal with us.

Robert: I do think we know them well enough now. They recognize that this is a significant change in how we live our lives as well. In this last visit which just occurred a couple months ago, the very clear sense is we are, all of four of us, walking hand in hand towards a future that no one knows what's going to happen. We're committed to doing the best that we can in the situation, which is a very positive situation. There's no model for us to go down.

Amy: Another thing that happened that has always been in the back of my mind is early on we were having some bumpy conversations with them where we were not seeing eye to eye, not in an argumentative way, but just weren't quite feeling comfortable. I had a conversation with Lena's mom, her birth mom. I can't remember who said it. Somebody said, "It's okay if we don't figure it all out right now. We have our whole lives to figure this out. She has her whole life to get to know us and for us to get to know you. We're all in this for the long haul. We're really in this together." When things get difficult, each side has taken the opportunity to remind each other, "No, we're really here for her forever, even if it's hard." Knowing that makes all of it a little more bearable even when it's difficult.

Jena: The image that Robert leaves us with of the four of you walking hand in hand into the future is a very beautiful image. I do want to say this, that I did ask if Lena's birth parents would want to participate in this discussion and be interviewed. They've opted not to do that even if they weren't identified. I was wondering if you could tell us why. What's their thinking about?

Amy: We asked them on the phone on our last phone call. Lena's baba initially agreed. We told him, "We really want you to think about it. We'd like it if you do it. It won't affect our relationship with you, obviously." We explained that there's a lot of adoptees in America who have these questions about what were their birth parents thinking and what were the things that led them to make the choices not to parent their children. That was why we chose to do the interview.

We had our translator go back and talk to him about two weeks later. He had talked to Lena's mama who had not been on the same phone call. They were separated in place at that time. They came back and said that they weren't comfortable doing it. They feel so sad about what happened to Lena. They feel ashamed of their choices. They're not comfortable right now. They're privately people anyway. They're rural people. There's a lot of shame there about their situation. While there's a lot of love for Lena and acceptance of the openness in our adoption now, that doesn't erase the fact they're parents who chose not to parent their child. Their hearts are broken about that. They're ashamed of it. They're sad.

Robert: It's not surprising, the decision they made. To go from not even discussing it internally in the family, to discussed openly and comfortably internally in the family, and now we've taken another step where everyone in the village knows. Everyone in the village knows us. Everyone in the village refers to Lena as a village girl when she's there. That is widening the circle a little bit. A conversation with your website, Jena, is widening that circle to the whole globe. They may change their mind later on if they get more exposure to this idea. Everything is always a process. We are happy that they've been willing to go with us this far. If they never go farther than this, we have a relationship that's valuable and worthwhile. We'll see what happens.

Amy: I want to say too, we did tell them we were doing this. They said it was fine. They know we're sharing our side of their story. It's not like we're doing this behind this back or anything. They know that we're continuing to go forward even though they chose not to.