

Jena Heath: Let's start by talking a little bit about your decision to adopt. Why did you decide to adopt? Why China?

Bobbie Sterner: We had our two boys, biological sons. After we had our second son, we'd always talked about adoption. We joked around and said we want a guaranteed girl. I was only thirty years old. In high school, so ten years earlier, I had heard about the one-child policy in China. Growing up I never thought about having biological children. I felt like after I got married that's the only time that ever entered my mind. I said, "I think we're supposed to adopt." We had a reason to because we had our two boys. We looked at different countries. He was adamant at looking at different countries and different programs. Together we decided that China did have the healthiest girls.

Vic Sterner: First of all, I wasn't into adoption. I didn't have an inkling to adopt or anything when I was younger. When she started talking about it, before even we were married, I was like, "Yeah, sure. Whatever."

Jena: You're like all the guys I've talked to.

Vic: Then when we had our two boys she goes, "I think it's time to adopt." I go, "Boy, you're serious, aren't you?" When we looked -- we had some other friends that were looking at Russia, Ukraine -- there was a lot of alcoholism there. It really seemed like China, that the babies were very, very healthy. That's what we were most concerned about.

Jena: You were going to be adopting across ethnicity. Did that enter into your thinking at all about concerns or worries?

Vic: Maybe we were naïve about it, thinking it's not a big deal. Maybe we were not that worried about it. We definitely knew that anyone who's adopted, that they're going to have identity issues, let alone now be physically looking different than your parents is even worse, and how the program's run where you don't know who your biological parents are. They just keep stacking up. The girls are coming into a time where identity is a big issue for them, really important. They struggle more than the average. Every teenager has identity issues. These are a little bit more.

Jena: Exactly. That's pretty much how I think about it too. How does their struggling or questioning about identity manifest itself? Do they ask more questions?

Bobbie: I don't think they ask more questions. I dealt with behaviors. It more comes out in their behavior. We go, "This is because of identity or something that they're not able to talk about." We've really worked with therapists over the years and tried to find the underlying reasons that they're behaving the way they are.

Jena: What kind of behavior? Do you mind if I ask?

Vic: It seems like there's a lot of anxiety. Both our daughters manifest their anxiety differently.

Bobbie: [anonymous] has reactive attachment. She gets angry and rages. Our other daughter withdrawals and goes into herself.

Jena: [anonymous] was how old when she came home?

Vic: She was six years old when she arrived into foster care, in American foster care.

Bobbie: She was two years old when she left China to a family in Houston. They were Vietnamese and Chinese. Four years later, she fell into the foster care system.

Jena: That initial adoption was not a success?

Bobbie: Right. She was physically and emotionally abused by them and witnessed violence. She's been through a lot. She has the personality to apparently cope and move on really well with stressors in her life. We're all constantly looking for things that might be manifesting into anxiety. We don't know where because she seems so stoic, but also just [indiscernible] that you don't know where these little things are going to pop up. We try to be aware.

Jena: The situation in Houston, she was removed from their custody?

Bobbie: Her mom took her from Houston to Seattle. We don't really know the reason why. While they were in Seattle, they were homeless. Her dad passed away during this period of time, when they were in Seattle, of cancer. He apparently was the affectionate, primary caregiver, the affectionate person. Her mom had taken her up to Seattle. There was an incident where she was witnessed being abused and removed by police and put into foster care.

Jena: How did you come to adopt from the foster care system? You lived in Washington State at that point?

Bobbie: We were foster parents already. We mainly took care of medically fragile infants. While we were in foster care, we were asked to take another Chinese girl about a year before [anonymous], who had been placed in foster care because of extreme abuse. We tried to adopt that girl. That fell through. The state, Washington, determined she was too severely abused, and she might act out against our children. They wouldn't allow us to adopt her. [anonymous] came into care. Since we already were known by the agency to have a Chinese adopted daughter and be interested in adopting one, we were contacted and asked to go meet this little girl in the receiving home. We went and met her and fell in love with her.

We kept her for a year. They gave her mother the opportunity to get her life together. She had two sisters from Australia who came up to Seattle, tried to get her out of homelessness. Her mother from China was trying to help her. There seemed to be some mental illness there.

She couldn't take of her. After she'd been with us for a year -- so she's about seven years old -- her mom didn't show up to all the meetings she was supposed to. They were terminating her rights as a mother. We were at, it's called a family planning meeting. Her sisters flew in from Australia. [emotional] Her mom came up to me and said, "I can't take care of my daughter. Will you take care of her for me?" We haven't heard from her since then. We know that she was in and out of jail after that. Because of her mental illness, she couldn't stay. After that, I knew that she was supposed to stay with us.

Jena: At this point, she was seven?

Bobbie: When we adopted her, yes.

Vic: She was a wild, little girl. We went down to Disneyland and watched the parade. They invited her to come out dancing. You know how they do that? She did that. Then she started climbing on all the floats. [laughs]

Bobbie: They had to stop the parade.

Jena: She'd been living a life with the mom. Do you know how long they were homeless?

Vic: Probably a couple of months. She had problems when they were in Houston, then they left. We don't even think that she went to preschool or kindergarten when she was there.

Bobbie: By the time she started school with us, it was February of her kindergarten year. Because she'd been through so much, probably the first year even after we adopted her it was almost as if she had completely checked out emotionally. She was present, but emotionally and academically and everything, not present. She was disassociated. We feel like her academics probably didn't start until about her first-grade year where she started absorbing things. She was just trying to figure out that she's safe. She's not going to be hurt. Now, it's full speed ahead. She's a happy, healthy kid.

Jena: She's twelve? What has the adjustment been like? That's only five years for someone who -- I haven't been with her very long but having just talked to her for a few minutes, I'd have no inkling at all.

Vic: When you first start out, like when we would grab her, she would go off, talk to other adults.

Bobbie: She didn't have a fear of strangers. She barely spoke English. She spoke Vietnamese and Chinese. She's been in ESL programs. Academically, she's struggled. Anything that you offer her she will take ahold of it and try her best. We've advocated a lot with the schools to try to get her help academically. Now, she's graduated from ESL programs. She doesn't fit into special education programs, but she's still having some problems with reading and writing and language processing. She's in a gray area academically. She does really well in music. Her brain really picks up on music easily. She does really well in taekwondo. Just

having structure of a home has helped her a lot. Knowing that she's not going to be hurt has helped her.

Jena: She likes her flute playing. She was telling me about her music. It seems like she's really into it.

Vic: She really likes music. She really looks up to her brother who plays music, is in the marching band. The music teacher made them the honorary mascot, so her and another girl play at high school basketball games. They get to play with them. They just think that it's awesome.

Jena: She made a point of telling me about that. I could tell she was really proud of it. Was there anything with [anonymous] that was diagnosable or just pretty much attributable to the obvious circumstances?

Vic: I think it's obvious. You can see that when she does something wrong and either in a very stern voice or if you're really talkin' to her what she did wrong, you see her shut down. She may not even be paying attention to you. She realized that she did something wrong. She's afraid. The wall goes up. You can see the thousand-yard stare in eye.

Bobbie: Sometimes I think that's more from the abuse from her first adoption more than the orphanage.

Jena: That's what I was thinking too.

Bobbie: She's afraid to be hit or hurt. When we first got her, the first year or two after we adopted her, every time she'd do something wrong, she'd hunch over and hide her face and her head.

Vic: What was also interesting was when other people that spoke Vietnamese or Chinese around her, she would cower. She would back away. You knew that she kind of understood it. She didn't want anything to do with it.

Jena: That's interesting because she told me, unprompted, that she wants to learn to speak Chinese.

Bobbie: She's not afraid of Asian people anymore. She was when she first came to live with us. She's in taekwondo. Her master is Korean. She's really learning that this wasn't about ethnicity. This is about two individuals, probably one individual -- I think her dad was a good man -- but her mom, who was mentally ill. She isn't lumping everybody together anymore.

Jena: What has this been like for your sons? You brought these two girls into the family. Now, you're all one big family. Were they like, "Dudes, what's goin' on here?"

Bobbie: They don't know any different. This is the way they've been raised.

Vic: When [anonymous] first came home and [anonymous], who's here, wanted to hug her or play with her, she wanted nothing to do with him. She wanted to play with [anonymous], our older son. He wouldn't want anything to do with her. Typical family dynamics. They were so young that it's not an issue.

Bobbie: I don't think it is an issue. Their lives growing up have been a little bit more difficult with the [indiscernible] in the house. There's been times that they wanted to have friends over that they haven't been able to because they never knew what was going to happen.

Vic: That's been very tough. With my work, we've moved a couple times. That's been very disruptive. That's possibly added more stress and anxiety in the house.

Bobbie: We have moved a lot. That has been stressful, especially with kids who have attachment issues already. This move has been the best because both of the girls have a lot more Chinese friends than they've ever had. [anonymous] found her identity with her Asian friends. It's been really good for her.

Vic: She's open about it. She jokes around about it. You can tell she's a little more comfortable with it.

Jena: You mean about being Chinese, being adopted?

Vic: Being Asian, that type of thing.

Bobbie: Everywhere else we've lived she's been the token Chinese child. Now, her community is Asian, all very smart Asian kids. We get a lot of jokes.

Jena: They both have -- I sense that in talking to them -- a real social context where they don't feel like they're the only ones.

Bobbie: This is the best place we've lived to raise them as Asian girls, I think so. It was good that we ended up here.

Jena: Is there anything that, given what we've talked about here, that you feel like it's important for people to know about in the adoption, Chinese adoption, experience?

Bobbie: In talking about [anonymous] and our challenges that we've had, it's important to know that our older son who's eighteen in college has Asperger's, the diagnosis of Asperger's, and knowing he's biological. I tell people that it doesn't matter if you have biological children or adoptive children, you never know what you're going to have. We've had a lot of the really similar experiences with [anonymous] that we've had with [anonymous]. People shouldn't be afraid of adoption because even if you have biological

children, it's a mixed bag. You just don't know what your children's personalities are going to be.

Vic: You can tell they try to identify with similar looks. We didn't really see that from [anonymous] until here. She was very quiet. She never really talked about it. I could see it being a challenge if they were in a very, very small rural community where the daughter was the only one that was Asian in a small middle-class, white community. I could see that being tough. You see stories where they work it out and they're good. I'm sure that there is some residual things that are going on that they need to work out. They definitely need to work it out.

Jena: How are you two? It's a lot.

Vic: It's just another day in paradise.

Bobbie: We're looking forward to everyone going to college. Three more years to go.
[laughs]

Vic: One down, three to go.

Jena: Who's counting?