

Jena Heath: Tell me a little bit about how you decided to adopt from China. What was that process and decision-making like?

Michael Wohlfeld: We were trying to have a child and went through a lot of processes on that, a lot of issues with fertility and basically starting late and came to the point to where we decided we couldn't have a kid or couldn't spend the extra money that you need to. We started looking towards adoption. Kalen was looking at all of the different avenues, different places, different countries. I had a lot of friends from China. The gentleman that was teaching us calligraphy was a friend of our family. I've had lots of other friends in college and elementary school that were Chinese. The Chinese culture was something that I already knew and was familiar with a lot of people here. When Kalen brought that up, that was pretty much my choice for where we would want to go.

Jena: How did it all go when you went to China? How long were you in China? What was all that like for you? Had you ever been there before?

Kalen Hoyle: I had never been, no.

Michael: I'd been to China before. I worked on a corporate report for the Coca-Cola corporation where we went to every country in the country that sells Coca-Cola. It was a four-month long job.

Kalen: You were only there a couple of days. Right?

Michael: I was in China ten days.

Jena: Your trip, did you spend time in Beijing first? Did they work any of that in?

Kalen: You're going to have to help me remember this too.

Michael: We went there with a plan on spending a week before we met up with our adoption group. Our family here in town, the Youngs, that we went with, we coupled up with them. We got in with the tour group recommended through CCAI to get us a package tour. With as many people as we had, we got to have our own little bus. We got to go to all of the major places to see all the stuff around Beijing.

Kalen: We did our doin' Beijing for several days. It's all a blur now.

Michael: Once we met up with our group, we went right to our province. Essentially, it was a shock because we'd done all of our touring and then, boom.

Kalen: They took around a little bit in Hong Kong, right?

Michael: A little bit, yeah. We saw Hong Kong. Once we did that, it was like, boom, right to our province. It was literally within maybe six hours of being there, they're like, "Guess what? In two hours you get your kid." It was like, "Whoa." It was like getting married. All of a sudden, you plan for this and you knew it was coming but man, when it came, you were getting ready to jump off that cliff. We went into a room where they were taking down an Amway convention. We're in there having this most poignant moment in your life that you could have next to giving birth on your own. They're like, "Here's your kid." In the background they're clangin' chairs and pullin' down banners. I'm like, "Well, this is efficiency. That's what China's about." It wasn't this grand thing, yet it was, but it was more grand internally. We had it. It was a pretty awesome experience. We were one of the last ones to get our kid.

Kalen: We watched fourteen, everybody getting handed their kids.

Michael: We saw all these emotional breakdowns and all of these powerful moments, most of it with kids being totally freaked out and rejecting. I can remember I'm sittin' there going, "Every creature likes to eat," so I pulled out the Cheerios. Maybe if I give her some food... [laughs] It was pretty powerful. Then they're saying, "Go back to your room. You got an hour. Hang with them. Then come out and we're going to have a group meeting." It was like a rapid marriage, Vegas style almost. Boom. Here's your kid. Now we got her. "You like it, right?" You're like, "Yeah." I like it, meaning the experience. Everything was powerfully emotional at that point. When we got Greta, it was what we had all came there for. That was the good part about it.

Jena: I see when you're talking about this, you're both tearing up. It's still a very powerful memory.

Michael: Here's the thing. Through my photography, I've gotten to experience a lot of things. I worked on a book called A Day in the Life of America. We started that day at Parkland Hospital photographing the first birth of that morning. I knew what it was like even though it wasn't my kid. I was there with this lady having her kid. I was taking pictures as close as you could be. I got to see that whole experience. For me, that was my birth that I got to experience. Even though I got a ten-month-old, it was still like seein' that kid come right out. Wow. Now, it's real. Now, I'm really a parent. What I learned later was you're not really a parent until you get barfed on. That's your baptism as a parent. We all eventually got it. Kalen got the most.

Kalen: I got the most barf.

Jena: How long did it take to get barfed on?

Kalen: We were at some temple that we had to climb up these stairs going up to the top. She barfed down my cleavage. I had her in one of those baby wrap things facing in. She barfed down my cleavage. We were on this tour, and so I finished the tour smelling like barf the whole day.

Michael: You got your picture taken with ---

Kalen: -- the dancing ladies. Then we went to lunch.

Michael: Good thing they can't smell it.

Jena: Did you feel like a real mom then?

Kalen: That was it.

Michael: That's when you know. For a while, Greta only wanted to hang out with Kalen that first couple days. I was like, "You're my daughter." I took over some of the feeding of her. It's like, "You're going to like me."

Kalen: I needed to hand off to him. It was a lot.

Michael: We got along. I can remember feeling like a family one day when I was sitting there in the hotel room. Both Greta and I are eatin' Cherrios. We're watching Japanese sumo wrestling on TV. There's only two or three channels on. There's nothing kid-related. It's not like here with PBS where you can turn on twenty-four-hour kid shows. This is what I like to do at home. Maybe that's what she did at some point and she'd recognize -- we sat around and watched the Japanese sumo.

Jena: What was it like for you as a dad? In our group, it was similar. Caroline was not interested in Dad or my stepson, who's thirteen, her brother, who came with us. He was so excited. It took a while for almost all the girls except for one in our group of eleven families to warm to the dad. Did anyone help you understand that, why that was happening, anyone in your group? Did you have any theories about why that might have been happening?

Michael: What I had heard was that in the Chinese adoption environment, men played a very small role. Usually, they were the administrators, the one who just sat and were concerned with the expenses and how things were going. I knew there weren't many men around. From that point of view, then this means I'm actually more special because I'm rare. It helped out a lot with me and bonding with Greta later on down the road. After we got Greta, Kalen was working a lot. I would take Greta with me to go out and to work on my dad's farm. I would take her out in my pickup truck and bring her along just like she would be anywhere in the world hangin' out with her parents while they work. It turned out to be a real positive thing for me because I was one of the few men around in her life. We had a little preparatory about it. The adoption agency gave us a lot of information about what to expect and what to do if things happen. I had a good idea. Still, when you experience it, what anyone says to you is minuscule compared to your actual experience when you're really there.

Kalen: You can't just learn something from what they tell you. You have to really get through it.

Jena: It's an experience you have to have to really understand what it's going to be like. Was it hard for you to relinquish Greta when you were in China to Michael?

Kalen: Yes and no. I really wanted them to have a bond. It was obvious that she was clinging to me. I also needed a break. That's an intense thing, being a grown-up, being an older mom, and being handed a ten-month-old. She was sick too. She was sick, so there was a lot of breathing.

Michael: She had a little skin thing going on too.

Kalen: We got home, and she had bronchitis in both lungs and double ear infections. She was sick kid. I pulled the crib up to the bed and listened to her breathe all night. She was havin' a hard time.

Jena: Did you have the supply of medicine that they tell you to go over there with?

Kalen: We did. We took a big box. We started her on antibiotics right away. I don't know that they were the right antibiotics, honestly, because we came back home and she was really sick. Then they started her on a different one.

Jena: Then she has to fly with bronchitis.

Kalen: She screamed for the twenty hours. She screamed the whole time.

Michael: She screamed and kicked the entire flight. We were at the back of the airplane. I can remember seein' a guy next to us in the other row. He had five seats where no one was sitting. He was stretched out, layin' there. He kept on telling me, "Can't you keep your kid quiet?" At one point I wanted to say, "Here. Maybe you can try to keep her quiet." I was sick too. I didn't get sick until the day before we left. I got really bad food poisoning. For me, that last day when you're trying to get all those trinkets that you want to get and then also the eighteen-hour flight that it was, was a whole experience in itself.

Jena: Ah yes, that joyous moment of those first few hours.

Kalen: She had bronchitis and ear infections. He had food poisoning. I was the least sick.

Michael: It's an experience that no one can really prepare you for. It's a fun experience, but it's heavy. It was like camping for me. I spent a good hour every evening boiling water to clean all the stuff to then pour all the hot water over everything. Then I'd go make my phone calls to America where it was eight in the morning trying to take care of other business. It was strenuous and stressful, but fun.

Jena: Let me ask you about -- slightly change the subject a bit. I want to ask you what you thought about, to the extent you thought about, the lack of information about their earliest life, their birth families, their biological connection. Did you give that a whole lot of thought at the

time that you were deciding to adopt? Have you thought about it since? What are your feelings about it?

Kalen: I knew that there was going to be no information. We were one of the only families that they told us that our daughter was left with a red note. They showed it to us. They said we could pick it up in eighty years or something like that. They were like, "We can relinquish this document in eighty years," or something like that.

Michael: Way, way, later. Only Greta could get it.

Kalen: I'm not going to be alive then. We took a picture of it. It's at the orphanage. When we go back, I bet you they'll give it to us. I looked up my picture in the phone the other day to show somebody. We don't know anything about if it was actually written by the people that left her, her parents, her grandparents, whoever. We don't know anything about that. It said when her birthday was. It said what time of day she was born and I don't think much more than that.

Jena: They call it a red note?

Kalen: It's written on that red rice paper. I pulled it up the other day.

Michael: It's their finding note. Since we were one of the only ones that got one, it was shocking.

Kalen: There were two in our group. Of fourteen, there were two people that had one.

Michael: The other question was, was this really truthful? The one description I had heard was that they would have this thing available to comfort us. Whether it was truthful or not was the question. They knew that the white people needed this kind of information.

Kalen: I don't think the person that left our daughter thought about a white person adopting.

Jena: Are you saying, Michael, that you question whether the note itself was actually left or if that's something that the system creates because they feel it's like an appeasement to families?

Michael: Yes, correct. I'd later seen the Lisa Ling special about the lost girls in China. That might have been one of the points put up.

Did you find it? There's the note.

Kalen: It's taken on my old flip phone. We've had it translated by Mr. Yu.

Jena: What does it say?

Kalen: It says something like she born at midnight. It uses the old Chinese calendar, so it says something like September 26th. It actually translates to October 24th. In America, it's October 24th.

Jena: So you do have the assurance, to the extent that anyone has an assurance, that her birthday as you celebrate it is accurate?

Kalen: I believe it is. From what the orphanage people said, they said that the way her belly button looked, that's a telltale sign, how it scabbed over, how fresh it looks. Within twenty-four hours, your belly button looks different than it does, or the cord or whatever. They have supported, also, her age. I really do feel like it's truthful.

Jena: Does she ask or talk at all about wondering about her birth family, her birth parents?

Michael: I have heard nothing from her. I've asked her if she ever thought about it. She said no. I'm not sure where it sits with Greta. We've always told her the whole thing pretty much from the start. You were born in China. We're your parents, but you also have your birth parents, your mother who gave birth to you and your father. We just know that they couldn't take care of you so they took you to a place where you would be safe. That's where it's been left. Ever since the very beginning, there was no question about letting her know where she was from. She would oftentimes walk up to the little kids when she was three years old on the playground and say, "Hey. I'm from China." I remember one little boy said, "Yeah. I can tell," [laughs] like, "Yeah, duh."

Jena: I love when those people come up to you, and they look at you, and they look at your kid, and they go, "Is she adopted?" Once I said to a woman, "No." That blew her mind. She didn't have anything to say after that.

Michael: They would say to us, "Your son looks cute." She'd be in full pink with bows and all that. They shaved her head when she was given to us, so she did look like a little androgynous kid.

Kalen: She always looked like a girl to me.

Jena: It sounds to me like you've had some thinking in the years since, or maybe even then, about the system itself and about the narrative. We've all got a similar narrative. In fact, probably if you took all of our finding documents and lined 'em up, we essentially have the same version of the stork story, the Chinese adoption stork story. How much were you thinking about that during the process? In other words, is this an awareness that you came to after she came home? Did you have some awareness or question about the process while you were in the process? What has your evolution been about that?

Michael: I was told that there might be some information that we're given that was just information that was given that might not be truly applicable. Kalen did a research where she paid a group to go and basically have a detective to go and check on it.

Kalen: We got a thirty-five-page document. That document and that whole experience was basically about the life when our daughter was placed in foster care. When she was found to when we got her, that was that whole situation. It wasn't about possibly what the birth parents, what their situation was. Is that kind of where you're going?

Jena: What it told you about was her experience in foster care, and then she was in the orphanage after foster care?

Kalen: She was left at the orphanage gate. They called it a mantel. Do you know what I'm talkin' about? It's almost like a little blanket bassinet. I honestly think that the orphanage left the little bassinets, the little mantels, outside. I could be makin' that up because that's just what's in my head, but that then the birth parents came and put the kids in those blankets to keep them safe and then waited for the people to come pick them up.

Jena: At what point was she in foster care?

Kalen: She probably left within days after being found. I think our orphanage put all the healthy children in foster care and then kept all the special needs with the nannies. It was a pretty modern facility. When we went to China, you were not allowed to go visit the orphanage. We chartered a bus. We went outside the orphanage and stalked them a little bit.

Michael: They only let two people out of the bus even. It was pretty restrictive. I was one of the only ones.

Kalen: They got in trouble. We weren't allowed out of the bus in Jiangxi. Kiki, our guide, she got in trouble for that.

Michael: I was one of the ones who was out there when she got yelled at. I was takin' pictures. I got a bunch of panoramas. It was a nice, Chinese style situation where they had the older people on one side and then they had the kids on the other. They both got to interact so the old people had something to do.

Kalen: She was there. Then, she was given to a foster family. We actually found out, not from our agency but from that company that did the investigating, we found out that she had two foster families. They don't really give a reason why she was switched from one foster family to another.

Jena: After foster care, did she live in the orphanage?

Kalen: She lived in foster care for most of her time in China. Then two weeks before she came to us, they brought her back to the orphanage.

Michael: The readjustment period is what they call it.

Kalen: I really have mixed feelings about that. I think they wanted to separate her from her family that she knew and bring her to somewhere where she could, whatever. I think that traumatized her more, to have three crazy experiences, foster family, orphanage, us, in a matter of three weeks.

Jena: Theoretically, four in the whole thing.

Kalen: She'd had two foster families, so it was five, and then being dropped off at birth. You can count 'em up. It's a lot of trauma that went on for a little being.

Michael: It was like she was abandoned five times, is what it was really like emotionally for her. For us, we were like, "Now, we're going to take care of you."

Kalen: Now, we're the real deal.

Jena: Do you see any vestiges of that? Do you feel like whatever that was is resolved internally with her and she seems fine?

Kalen: There are residual effects in attachment. I do feel like there is something that we haven't gotten to the bottom of. I don't think that she thinks we're going to abandon her. On a conscious level, we are her family. She loves us. We're the ones. We're the comforting people that she goes to. I do think there are some vestigial attachment, bonding things that we don't know too much about.

Michael: I agree on that. I feel like she was probably still wondering.

Kalen: It's like when they explain to you in therapy, the brain's short-circuited in a way. It's almost like it can't relax sometimes.

Jena: Have you been in counseling, or has she been in counseling?

Kalen: We did some classes that taught us how to react to her or relate to her better. It was a five-week class. I found a therapist through that. She wanted to get us on the same page before we brought Greta in. Then, we just fell off. We never got Greta into it, integrated. It's something that we're thinking about.

Michael: It's definitely a wish that we'd like to pursue more.

Kalen: I would like to get something going before the teenager years because I do feel like there's an aloofness. There's Greta pushing us away in a way that I don't want to let go on for the thirteen, fourteen, fifteen years that are coming up soon.

Jena: Am I correct in interpreting this that you want to be clear that whatever that is, if it has anything to do with the early bonding questions, that you maybe can address and start to resolve them before adolescence?

Kalen: Yeah, whatever we can do to make it easier for her.

Jena: How important is her friendship with her friend from Jiangxi Province? Tell me her name again.

Kalen: It's Camille Young. It's extremely important. They are probably closer than any person on the planet. Her mother and I have become really close. She said that Camille doesn't act silly and goofy and crazy, she doesn't act it with anybody else other than Greta. They have an underlying bond. It's special to the girls. It's a primary friendship that will last.

Michael: One time Greta was asking me, she said, "I want a sister." I said, "You kind of have one, Camille. Y'all are both the same age. We don't know. You could've been sisters. We don't know." She takes it as that. This is her first friend.

Kalen: They were in the orphanage together. We got pictures together. We got pictures of them in a group of kids together. We got a lineup of kids, all of them in the same group.

Jena: Aside from Camille, is there much in her school? Is she the only Chinese kid? Is she one of very few Chinese kids?

Kalen: Very few. It ranges. There's been other Chinese kids.

Michael: I don't think they're there now. There might be one.

Kalen: There's several in the younger classes that have come in. They're not adopted. They're just Chinese or Korean or whatever, but they're from families. In Camille's school, there's quite a few kids of many different ethnicities, a lot of Asians. She lives up in Richardson where Chinatown is.

Jena: There are a lot of Chinese national kids in my daughter's school, but it's a whole different ball of wax.

Kalen: It's almost like they straddle the world in between. They are Chinese, but they are American. It's an interesting thing. I really think Greta thinks she's white in a way because we're white, or Caucasian. She identifies with that. I think that's an interesting -- we're her mind.

Michael: But Greta and I always compete every summer to see who gets the darkest tan. [laughs] She goes, "If you take out your hair, then I'm darker." It was funny. We do that little, silly competition. Our Chinese national friends would be like, "Oh, you let her skin get too dark. Put sunscreen on." We're like, "Uh, okay. We're American where we like to be dark." It's different.

Kalen: Our mail lady was Chinese, the lady that delivers the mail. She is always telling me to cover Greta up. She's like, "You shouldn't go swimming."

Michael: "How come you let her get so dark?" We're just like, "Uh, because that's what we do here."

Jena: It's interesting about this because Caroline will say to me occasionally, "Do I look Chinese?" She's genuinely puzzled. I realize that. I said, "Yeah. You look Chinese because ya are Chinese." I say, "Why?" I asked her about it when I interviewed her. I actually wonder if there's some kind of dysgraphia or something that can actually happen in their perception of themselves.

Kalen: My mother babysits her a lot. My mother said one day, she might have been five or something, really young, she said, "When am I going to turn white?" That's an amazing brain -- I don't know how to even talk about it. It was really amazing.

Jena: How old was she when she asked that?

Kalen: It might have been four or five, maybe six. I don't know. It's not been recently.

Jena: When you hear that, do you ever ask yourself, "Did we do a good thing, or did we do a bad thing?"

Kalen: I constantly am doing that, tossin' it back and forth. Overall, yes, we did a great thing. I don't believe that kids in the orphanage aging out of the system are going to have any kind of life. If we didn't get her and somebody else didn't get her, then I really don't think that life is much of a positive thing at all. Is it better that she stayed in her country and had the rich experience of being Chinese in China? Yes. That would be awesome too. I keep tossing it back. I don't think there's a win-win situation.

Jena: How 'bout you, Michael? Do you ever think, "Did I do a good thing, or did I do a bad thing?"

Michael: All of my experiences in China have shown what the country was like for the people who were providing the kids that needed to be adopted, showed me that they were living very basic living standards. I don't want to be misunderstood, but I knew that I could provide a life where my daughter would be considered to be like a princess versus where she would be in China. In either case, we'd both try to be good parents, whether it was me or her birth parents.

It would just be a whole different world. I felt like I'd be doing something good. It's always a concern in the back of your mind about what am I doing for the brain here?

My father taught me a lot about what he knew. I'm trying to teach my daughter a lot about what I know. In some aspects, she has more richer experiences. When we got Greta, I became unemployed. I spent a lot of time with my daughter, carrying her around and doing stuff with her while Kalen was off working. I always would go around and I'd point to things and say what it was. Then I'd say, "Greta, what is that?" She learned a lot of words very early on. I don't know if she spoke English earlier or spoke earlier, but she knew a lot more words than the other kids in her class in preschool. I felt like that was where I was providing for her.

Kalen: She started talkin' when she was three. I don't think they ever heard her voice.

Jena: It sounds like, like most things in life, there's complexity. Essentially, you're a family.

Kalen: We came to be a family through choice, through actively seeking it out. We chose the way we became a family. It's always like, "Were like kids stolen?" There was that whole thing. We just don't know. I don't think we'll ever know. I would not be opposed to doing DNA. I would not be opposed to doing anything to seek out -- I do think that having that later rather than sooner. If you did find a match for the family in China, a nine-year-old brain trying to process that, that's a little heavy for anybody at any age. I think that's a little young.

Jena: If she wanted to later, that would be something you'd support?

Kalen: Oh, yeah. I'm not adopted. I've known people that are adopted. I've known people that are adopted that have found their family and maintain a friendship with them. I can see that as only a positive.

Michael: We definitely hope to be able to go back. We're trying to plan for the reunification visit, the heritage tour. I honestly don't know, I don't think that she'll really care about that. It could pop up. That's what we're worried about.

Jena: Anything you'd like to say to people who don't know anything about this, you think they need to know?

Michael: It's an incredible experience. It's an experience that you can get a lot of information about. When you really, really experience it, it seems so much bigger than what you were prepared for. I was really prepared for it. I read a little bit of stuff about it. She read a little and I read a lot. I got a lot of the information from our agency. They had a good list about what-ifs. This might happen. That might happen. You could be approached when you're there with your kid by someone who actually knew them. You could be approached by the parents. They told us what we should try to do in those situations. Being there, it's an experience that no preparation can really, truly prepare you for what it's really like.