

Jena Heath: Tell me about yourself, Carlos. How old are you?

Carlos Maldonado: I'm fifty-seven years old.

Jena: Tell me about your decision to adopt. Why adopt? Why China?

Carlos: My wife and I, Carmelle, we've tried several times to have children. She had miscarriages. Our son almost didn't make it. After that, we tried again. She had complications. We went a few years. I said, "Why can't we adopt? Let's adopt." We heard about China and about India. I went to a seminar. She came with me. She didn't want to come. She didn't think it was a good idea. I heard this commercial with Oprah International talking about Oprah International adoptions. We went. I said, "This sounds exciting. Let's do it." She said, "Let's pray about it." She came to me and said, "I think I'm ready." That's how it all started.

Jena: I'll ask her this question, but from your point of view why was your wife hesitant?

Carlos: She's had a rough time, had four miscarriages. It was rough. I think she was a little bit angry with God and wasn't sure what she wanted to do. I introduced it slowly. The second time I said, "Let's do it." She said, "You know what? Yeah. Let's do it." That's how it took place.

Jena: Why did you choose China? It sounds like you researched various options for adoption. Why did you settle on China?

Carlos: We thought about Korea and India. We heard that the Chinese were -- you could get adoption in a year. In all the other places it was eighteen months. I think Korea they would have flown over to the United States. It was a process. We wanted to do it the quickest way possible. When we heard there was five hundred thousand children up in China we were like, "We need to go there." That's where we felt that God was pushing us to go. That's how we did it.

Jena: How did the process go? When you settled on an agency and all that, how was all that?

Carlos: I probably should let my wife talk about that part. It was a process, a very lengthy process, a very thorough process. It wasn't cheap. Money wasn't an issue. I was in the military, by the way. I was close to retirement. We made the decisions. I had nineteen years in. I'm thinking, "Should we do it now? Should we wait?" Basically, it was very thorough. I thought it was pretty painless, lot of paperwork.

Jena: Were you in the Army?

Carlos: I was in the Navy.

Jena: How old was Ivy when she came home?

Carlos: She was three and a half years old.

Jena: When was that?

Carlos: That was in 1996.

Jena: What province and orphanage? Do you remember?

Carlos: Yiwu...

Carmelle Maldonado: Y-I-W-U, Yiwu Social Welfare Institute in Zhejiang Province, China, south of Shanghai.

Jena: Got it. Thank you. That's what I needed. Three and a half, she must have been talking a lot.

Carlos: Actually, no. She only said a few words. Obviously, they were all in Chinese. She, in time, point to the refrigerator and wanted water. We figured out. She spoke only a handful, maybe ten, twelve words that we got from her.

Jena: What was she like as a three-and-a-half-year-old, newly arrived in this new place?

Carlos: When they came out and gave her to Carmelle, she screamed bloody murder for a second. Then she grabbed onto Carmelle, latched onto her, and didn't let her go. When Carmelle gave her to me to held on, she screamed and cried for three months after that. I think I was the first male that she saw. It took about three months where she started feeling comfortable around me. It was an experience. I was helpless. I don't know what to do here. Every time I pick her up, she's crying.

Jena: Did you have any idea that might happen? Were you totally surprised by that?

Carlos: I didn't know what to expect. We got the picture. Carmelle can tell you the story behind that in itself. I didn't know what to expect. I just went with the flow. When she cried, I just wanted to console her. I would give her to Carmelle. She would stop crying. I felt bad thinking, "Man, do I smell? What's going on here?" [laughs]

Jena: I should actually introduce you to my husband because it was exactly the same. My daughter was two. I was this life raft. She wasn't sure she wanted to be on, but I was it. My husband and my stepson who came with us, who was so excited, who was thirteen -- she didn't want anything to do with him either. I had two mopey men and this perfectly, totally hysterical two-year-old.

Carlos: We had our son. He came with us. He was twelve. He was a trooper going to China, how difficult that was. It was a long trip. We have photos actually, on VHS still, when we were there,

Eli our son playing with her when we picked her up. It was an experience, something you can't forget.

Jena: How 'bout in the years since? What surprised you about the whole experience, if anything?

Carlos: When you adopt a child from any place, they don't tell you anything. When we were there, we had to get a medical checkup to make sure she was healthy and all that. We got home. Right away we noticed that she was vitamin-D deficient, rickets or something. There was something going on that we had to go -- she can clarify that. We found out that she came home, we put food in front of her. She did not let it go. It's something she did. Also, she became a hoarder with things. She would take things and put them in her room, which I thought was interesting. Again, I didn't know what to expect. Our son was totally different. Learning to communicate was difficult, what she wanted when she was not feeling well. She was very active. She would move around a lot. At the time I'm thinking, "Eli, I don't know if he was like that." There were some things that were different. As she got older, it got better. She was able to communicate more and more. She still didn't speak very much. Then one day she started talking. She has not let up since.

Jena: How old was she that day?

Carlos: You can correct me if I'm wrong here. I want to say she was about eight years old when she started really asking a lot of questions. Before that, she was quiet, going with the flow. In school, she didn't talk much. She still didn't understand a lot of things. She's black and white. There's no in between. When she says, "I went to class one day. The teacher said, 'I want to cut the class in half,'" She asked us, "Does that mean they're going to cut us in half?" That's one example.

Jena: Very literal in the thinking. She's home four and a half years, almost five years, very quiet. Then all of a sudden, the floodgates open.

Carlos: Now we have to deal with how do you tell her, "Enough's enough now? Can we talk about that tomorrow? Go see your mom." It was constant. We noticed that a lot of it was repetitive, the same thing over and over. Through school we found out there's some issues going on here that we identified. We didn't know what they were. I'll let Carmelle talk about this.

Then begins the new journey from that point on until today of trying to help her and not knowing what's going on with some issues. It's been very exhausting, but good, good exhausting. You might ask this, but there was a period of time when she was a teenager where we did not get along at all. We had major issues. That was her trying to discover who she was and discovering that the world is not a very pleasant place to live at times. She's noticing the rejection, realizing that she's different. She's being treated different. That was a whole different experience for us. I'm sure she'll talk about it. Carmelle will talk about that.

Jena: Did you attribute that awareness to the fact of her adoption, her being Chinese in a non-Chinese family, or to the fact that she had these other issues that meant she behaved differently, and kids noticed that and can be kind of awful about it?

Carlos: Yes. I think the latter part's correct. The other things that were going on in her life started to come out. We didn't know what they were. She certainly didn't know what they were. She wanted to fit in so much. She started noticing, "Why I can't do certain things and certain people can?" She started realizing, "Wait a minute. There's something not fair here." That really started in her some bitterness and anger. Of course being in a family, when you love someone, it's safe to lash out at those that you love. We didn't know what to expect and what to do. We've seen so many different people, doctors, and professionals. She can tell you more about that, Carmelle can. That's just another piece of the story. The formulation of change, as a result we didn't get along very much. We had to take some actions -- which I prefer not to talk about, I'll let Carmelle talk about that -- to try to help her. In that process, in doing so, there was some healing and there was some hope up to today.

Jena: Where are you with things now yourself? How are you feeling about it all?

Carlos: It was five years ago. [emotional] Not knowing, not knowing where's this going. We didn't have a relationship. Today we do.

Jena: You mean you and Ivy?

Carlos: Yeah. We didn't have a good relationship. No matter what I did -- what do you do with this? I learned to pick my fights. I learned to appreciate who she was.

Jena: What about this feels so emotional for you? What is it that really gets to you? You're crying right now when you talk about this.

Carlos: The world's not fair. She's trying to fit in, and she can't. The world has rejected her. There's only a handful of us who are trying to get around her to show her the world can do what they want. We don't have to feel that way. There's hope for her. There's so much going on right now, good things that Carmelle can talk about. I see hope. Five years ago, I got a peace about this whole thing saying, "I don't understand all this. No matter where this is going, I'm going to trust God that there's a place for her." We going to make that happen, no matter what it is. That's what we're tryin' to do right now. That's where I'm at today and how I'm feeling.

I'm feeling a lot better than I did many, many years ago. We could sit here for hours and tell you stories upon stories about some of the things we went through. I will say this. You've adopted before. People that adopt have no idea what they're getting. They get a picture. They get all emotional. They get this person home. You want to love them as your own. Then you realize there's something wrong. Your thing is, "I'm going to make this work no matter what." I'm so thankful for organizations like NFAR and Regional that really try to help kids who are autistic

and Asperger's and other things. If we didn't have that, I don't know where she would be. It would be very difficult. There is hope. It's a really difficult thing out there for people that adopt not knowing. They're probably going through the same thing we have. I don't know where they're at in the world, if they have support like we get support. California has really good support for people that adopt kids who are autistic, Asperger's, and other types of special needs.

The difficulty is for us parents not knowing how to cope with those issues. It's a totally new thing. This is a funny thing. We've seen so many doctors. Most of them would ask us -- they'll put her aside where she's playing -- "Carlos and Carmelle, tell me what drugs are you on?" I says, "What do you mean?" He says, "Tell us what you're takin'. How are you coping?" I says, "We're spiritual. We believe in God. God's given us the faith," and all that stuff. He says, "No. Are you taking Valium?" "No." "Are you taking these things? Most families that come here are on something because they don't know how to deal." We're so thankful that we haven't gone there. Maybe that's why it's been so hard. It's interesting the difficulty out there that most parents go through. You have to have a separate support group for the parents when you have people like Ivy who's come here and special needs and learning all this. How do you cope? She's in a better place. She's doing wonderful. She's hopefully going to get a job here real soon. She's on a fast-track to do well. We're so excited about that.

Jena: Is there anything that you would want to say to other parents, adoptive parents or people who are contemplating adoption, based on the experience that you've had?

Carlos: I would say, go for it. I would not change my mind. I wouldn't change anything. If you're people of faith, I believe that God gave us her because we could handle her, the situation. I believe if you love somebody, if you're going to give love to someone because you can, go for it. I always wonder, what happened if we didn't adopt her? We have a video. They'll share this with you. Where we found her, they did this tours to the orphanages by year. We said, "1995." We looked at it. Whole behold, we saw her in this video when she was a baby. It's wonderful to see that, the fact that a year later we went and adopted her.

Jena: That was just by accident that you tripped over this video?

Carlos: She is part of --

Carmelle: -- Families with Children from China.

Carlos: She's communicating. Apparently there had been this group that would go to China every year to the orphanage. At the time we were there, we're not allowed to go there. They opened it up apparently, or they did special permission. We found out about this. Ralph sends this CD. It's about the visits. We're going down, 1999. Carmelle says, "It'd be nice if we had one, 1995." That would be the year before we picked her up. Sure enough, the very last one was 1995. We clicked on that. We were blown away when she saw her with the kids in that group the year before we adopted her. That was really amazing.

Jena: Sort of has that meant-to-be quality to it?

Carlos: It is. There's a lot of things that happened with this adoption that were certainly out of our control. Even before we adopted her, there were certain things that happened that we felt that this was meant to be.