

Deborah Amazon: I want to go way back to when I was probably ten years old. One of my neighbors came back from the hospital crying, a lady. I asked the neighbor, not her but the other neighbor, what was wrong. She said she just found out she couldn't have children. I said, "Why is she crying?" Then I went home and I asked my mom, "Mrs. Cody is crying. She found out she couldn't have children. Why is she crying?" My mom said, "That's very upsetting to a lot of people." I said, "Oh." I couldn't understand why it was so upsetting. As I got older, I learned a little bit more what this was all about. Down deep I kept saying, "I don't want a baby. I just don't want a baby. I'll take a one-year-old, but I don't want an infant." Sure enough as I got older and older and older and never really got involved with someone long enough to consider having a baby, I thought, "That's it. I don't need a child."

Then at the age of forty-nine, I believe I was, I'm listening to the news. It comes on about an adoption agency that caters to singles. I couldn't believe that I could actually still have a child, but not a baby. I quickly called up the agency. They were as nice as can be, in Connecticut. They directed me towards a social worker. I went up to see the social worker. She said, "Where do you want to adopt from?" I said Russia. She said, "Why Russia?" I said, "I don't know. I think a Caucasian baby might be the best." She said, "No, you don't want Russia." We talked for quite a while. She said, "China is for you." Everything clicked. China's definitely for me. That's definitely where I want to go.

It took me about a month and a half to get my dossier together, get it to China. Thirteen months later, I get the referral call, which was maybe the second or third best day of my life. A couple months later, I'm on a plane with my very best girlfriend who has twins. She's a preschool teacher. I knew she'd be great help with me. Off we went to pick up my beautiful daughter. There was only six people in our travel group, six families, three being single parents. The very next day they handed me my beautiful daughter who was the only child in the whole room that wasn't crying. She was smiling and so happy. Took a couple days for her to realize what was going on, and then the crying began. It didn't last that long. There's so much to tell. I don't know what I'm skipping or where I should go.

Once we did get home, I have a lot, a lot of friends and they all started coming over rather quickly to meet Leah. She was shy and didn't cry much. She certainly didn't say much. She was twenty months old. I got my child, but I didn't have the infant that I didn't think I could handle. Of course looking back now, infants are great. That was just how I felt at that time. Leah has grown up. She's almost fifteen now. She is the most beautiful, intelligent, smart, sweetest kid I know, but very, very quiet, very shy. Amongst her peers, she lets loose a little bit. She has what we call Chinese sisters, all the girls from the groups that travelled together to China. We do stay in touch as much as we can. She feels she has a lot in common with those children but does not really open with them as much as I would hope.

We've discussed finding her birth parents. She says she very much wants to. However, when push comes to shove, if we really did go back to China and look, I don't know how she'd feel. She tends to say one thing and then when it comes right down to it, something serious, she'll do something else. However, I think that's being a teenager. It's interesting because when Leah

was born, I was forty-eight years old. Being a single, older mom, I'm sure it's a little tougher for my daughter who would really like to have both mother and father and a load of siblings if possible. Doesn't look like it's in the cards. That's it in a nutshell.

Jena Heath: Was it hard for you to decide to adopt as a single mom? What kind of thinking went into that decision?

Deborah: That's such a good question because it happened so quickly. So many people say to me, "Did you think about it for a long time?" Honestly, I did not. It just happened. As soon as I heard that newscast saying this adoption agency caters to singles -- I had no idea a single person, unless you were a movie star, could adopt. When I found out that China allowed this, I was just taken. I knew. Yes, yes, yes, yes. This is the way it's got to go.

Jena: Did you know anything about the one-child policy or why China had opened its doors to international adoption at the time that you heard that newscast? Did you learn about it as a result?

Deborah: I did know. There was a documentary on TV years before I thought about this. It always stuck with me, this woman who left this little bundle near a police station and then hid in the woods, hid behind a tree to be sure this child was going to be picked up and cared for. She was crying, but she knew she had to do this. That's when I really learned about what was going on. It stuck with me. I never realized that I would be part of a story like that. It really, really stayed with me. I did know what was happening there.

Jena: Where you live in Vermont, are there many other Asian kids?

Deborah: No. I don't know if you're born with city-girl genes or country-girl, but my girl is such a city girl. She wants the bright lights, the traffic, the nightlife. I want the country, listening to a waterfall, and no lights. That's probably where we differ the very most. We do have probably three other Asian children in our area of about three thousand population, which consists of four or five towns. She will be going to a high school that has a lot more, which is a good hour from where we are, but that's the way it goes. Honestly, she tells me that there's no difference between her Asian friends and her Caucasian friends or her any-color friends. She feels there's no difference. Down deep maybe she feels differently, but she claims there's no difference.

Jena: Do you think there's a difference?

Deborah: A difference regarding just their physical appearance. When we go to Chinatown or even into New York City, there's so many Asians and I feel the one out of place. Leah seems to engross herself in it. She walks ahead of me even and wants to join in with all the Asian influence. I think there must be some difference other than the physical. Here in southern Vermont where there isn't much going on, she just doesn't see it. It's hard to get anything out of her. It's real hard to get anything out of her.

Jena: About how she's seeing her ethnic identity and the context that she's in?

Deborah: Exactly.

Jena: You said you're staying in touch with your travel group. Are there other opportunities for her to -- is there an FCC chapter there?

Deborah: There's not.

Jena: What's the closest big city to you?

Deborah: Albany, New York, or Boston, which are both a good, couple hours away.

Jena: Who knows? Maybe when she goes to Chinatown, suddenly it's a feeling of "Wow. I look like everybody else."

Deborah: We were in Hawaii not long ago. She said the same thing. She said, "Wow. You're the one out of place here." I said, "I know. I know." It was great for her. She really is gorgeous. People turn their heads and look at her in our area. When we go to areas where all these beautiful Asian people are, they don't tend to turn their heads that much. I think she likes that better.

Jena: Maybe she likes not feeling that she's an object of attention?

Deborah: Right. She definitely feels that. As a matter of fact, I don't really mean to brag about her that much, but she's an exceptional student, as many Chinese students are. I think she purposely didn't hand in some homework last year so she didn't get that 4.0 average. She just didn't want the notoriety of her academic ability. I kept saying, "Leah, the teacher said you didn't hand in the homework. What's going on?" She kind of ignored it all. At the end of the year the teacher called me and said, "I don't get it." I said, "Do you think she just didn't want that 4.0 average so she wasn't set up on a pedestal?" We said, "That could be it. That really could be it." It's challenging, but in a good way.

Jena: Did you decide to let that go? Did you talk with her about it?

Deborah: I definitely talked to her about it. She wouldn't talk back about it. She just said, "I didn't understand." I said, "Yes, you did. I know you understood what he was asking." She just kept arguing about it. The second to the last day of school, she did hand in some homework, but she wouldn't hand it all in. She just didn't want those high honors. I said, "You better change your mind when you get in high school because that's our key to getting you into a good college." We'll see what happens in the next few years.

Jena: Do you find that it's challenging, or maybe you don't, to try to discern in your own mind what may be about being Chinese in a largely Caucasian community and what may be about being fifteen?

Deborah: Yes. I can't figure it out. I thought maybe there was a little bullying going on that she didn't want to participate in a certain class. They assured me that wasn't it. Talking to some of her friends, they tell me that isn't it either. I think it's more that she's adopted, rather than she's Chinese, that holds her back a little bit. She's very concerned about why her biological parents didn't keep her, even though she's read as much as she possibly can on the subject and understands it. She feels real sad about it.

I think I've seen this girl cry maybe twice since she's been adopted all these years. She doesn't cry. Even if she gets hurt or sick, she doesn't seem to cry. Only once when we were visiting my niece, who has three young children and all sorts of family were there and everybody was saying, "You look just like your dad. You act just like your mom," as we drove home, she started crying. I was shocked. I pulled over. She said, "I'll never know if I look like my mom or dad. I'll never know if I have their traits." It really got to her. Then I started crying because I felt so bad. I didn't know what to say. I said, "Leah, if we can find your biological parents and find out more, I'll be happy to." She is in the DNA bank. Maybe someday we will find out a little bit more. I think it upsets her more that she's adopted than she's Chinese.

Jena: Can you talk a little more about the DNA bank? How did you become aware of it? What did you do to get her in?

Deborah: From the good old internet. Everybody was talking about they can now spit into a tube and be in a large DNA bank. It was definitely worth it to get Leah started somewhere. Sure enough, we connected with maybe three fourth cousins, which we know are way down the line. We actually found one second cousin, which was really interesting. We have not met them yet because they live in Nevada and we're in Vermont. We stay in touch with them via the internet. We don't know how the girls are connected, but the DNA seems to say they're second cousins. It's exciting to get something saying, "We found another relative. Why don't you check it out via the internet?" We do. So many people have come forward and been very, very nice. They're all over the world so it isn't like we can hop in the car and go visit someone. We're not even sure if it's someone's second cousin's third aunt that had a baby. It's very, very interesting. We're going to pay attention to it.

Jena: Even those more remote connections -- I imagine with DNA testing, probably a fair number of matches come up by sheer probabilities -- do those give her any solace or are they too remote?

Deborah: No, too remote. This one little girl, who isn't that little anymore, from Nevada, she pays attention to her on the internet. That's the only one that really connected. This little girl also has a single mom, although she was married when she adopted. She isn't anymore. Leah feels like they have a lot in common. Leah still thinks that she should have a father. I'm still

looking. I don't know if I'll ever find one. [laughs] A little difficult for us being an older mom, single, living in a very rural area.

Jena: Are you originally from Vermont?

Deborah: No. I'm from the Berkshires in Massachusetts, similar, not too far away. I just love the solitude here. She doesn't. That's been probably our biggest struggle. Two years ago, I had my house for sale. I was ready to pick and move. The house never sold, so we stayed. Then I realized I don't want to move anyway. I'm just doing this because Leah needs it. Because Leah needs it, I felt it was the responsibility of mine. We go back and forth on it. She just laughs now and says, "You're never going to move. You've told me that since I was in third grade." It's a tough one.

Jena: It's easier said than done, as anyone who's an adult with a house and a job recognizes. What do you do for a living, Deborah?

Deborah: I'm a real estate broker. I have my own firm, which also is difficult because I've been here so long and have so many referrals. It keeps my business going. If I were to start over again somewhere, it would be so very different. It's really hard. We're in a vacation area, ski areas. I feel like I'm on vacation where I live. When I go away, I can't wait to get back home. I love it here. Leah just doesn't. We've got to find a happy medium. If I can get her through high school and then she's off to college, then I know she'll be happy.