

Jena Heath: Tell me a little bit about your relationship with Lily and about witnessing your sister who had been living one kind of life undergo this transition.

Jean Morris: Similar to Barbara, I had a bigger career at one point in my life and was in a position at one point to step back away from it. I got my teaching certificate. I became a teacher as my second career. My relationship with Lily, she always looks at me like I know something because I'm a teacher. [laughs] As she follows her rules in life, teachers do know things. I like to think of myself as being able to provide some advice and guidance. I love her to death. I was thrilled to be able to go with Barbara to China when she got her. More recently, I went to China with my other sister Judy to get my niece Kate. The difference between the two trips was the ability to reach out and touch back to America, the electronic difference in the electronic age. We called on the phone and had maybe ten minutes that we were talkin' on phone. "We have the baby," and that type of thing. One of my girlfriends had a \$150 phone bill after we had been to China in talking to us. You could do it all free on the internet by the time we went to get the next one. That was quite a difference.

When Barbara said that she wanted to adopt, we all couldn't imagine it. She was very career oriented, and worked a lot, and was always busy. When exactly are you going to have a baby in your life? A couple of my little stories of being with her as a first-time mother -- one point we were in this very small hotel room in Nanning, China, which was the capital of her province. We both have our full-size bed. There's a crib in the room. It was very tight living, not necessarily what we were used to. The bathroom was to the side. It had one step up to get into the bathroom. I was in the bathroom and brushing my teeth or something. All of a sudden Barbara comes in. She's brushing her teeth or doing her hair. I go, "Who's watchin' the baby?" The next thing, we hear a plop. [laughs] "Whaa!" She slid off the bed. We always told Lily that story when she was young. She enjoyed that, the first moment of not watching her.

There were five families that were on our adoption trip together. Each one of the babies seemed like they got matched with the parents that were perfect for them. They were all born within a month of each other. One of the little girls was already walkin'. Her mother was this big runner and athlete. That baby went well with her. There was another child that the mom was very just so and very pristine. Her daughter, she looked Chinese royal. It seemed like they fit together. It was great to be with the babies. I was the number one assistant. Barbara never had her wallet or her money. I was always pullin' out the money, and doin' all the exchanges, buttering the bread. She would be holding the baby. I would get all their meals together and ready for them. There were three single mothers in our travel group. One had another sister. One had a cousin that had come with them. We were having a little "Who's the best assistant?" type competition. I clearly won. I continue to win in the favorite aunt category. I always make Lily say that I'm her favorite aunt. Behind my back, she says that to everybody, to all her aunts.

Jena: I will make her commit on tape.

[laughter]

Jean Morris: Our travel to China was good. Then when we came home from China, we get on the airplane. We were thankful that we were able to fly first class when we went to China. It was that type of trip that you just make the decision this is what you need to do in order to take care of yourself and make everything happen. We were in the first-class cabin. In the front row seat they had a little fold down bassinet. You could fold down and put the baby in the little bassinet. Barb gets on the plane. She says, "I'll never sleep the whole thirteen-hour trip home." She puts Lily in the little bassinet. Lily immediately falls asleep. Three minutes later, Barbara's sleeping. All of a sudden I hear, "Whaa! Whaa!" Baby's crying. Barbara is snoozin'. [laughs] I have to wake her up to say, "Your baby's cryin'." It was all good. Lily bonded with her right away. Barbara had said before she had a couple of colleagues that she worked with who live in China. They had come to be with us. It was so wonderful to have your own translators with you. They were able to get the whole story. Then they helped us when we had lost our luggage. They helped us get our luggage. They made the trip so much easier. They were there to help us in any way that they could.

Jena: Did they come from the very beginning? Did they come and meet you in Guangzhou?

Jean Morris: They came and met us in Guilin.

Jena: Guilin, sorry.

Jean Morris: They came to the social welfare institute with us when they got the babies. They helped. Shee-Shee was our guide. She was there to translate. They also helped translate with the different families. They did the videotaping.

Barb Morris: It's a lot of commotion.

Jena: I remember. It's wild.

Jean Morris: They held the video camera so that we could all be there. Mrs. Wan was telling Barbara, "Bouncy, bouncy, bouncy is what Lily likes." They helped us to capture all those moments on film. It was awesome havin' the translators. They came to Guilin. Then they went to Nanning with us, which was the head of her province. They were there on adoption day and then they left. They were maybe with us for three days of the trip. When we were in Guangzhou they had some other women that worked at Baxter come and meet us. In Guangzhou we got smarter and got a bigger room for ourselves. We were gettin' a little bit too close. [laughs] I need my space. Then they came, and they sang some songs to the babies. It was nice having people from China to help us with our experience. They took us out to dinner one night and said, "Can we take you to dinner?" We go to this restaurant. It was an open market on the bottom, then you eat upstairs. You actually pick out your live food that you're going to eat and then you go upstairs. We walked in and were a little bit shocked by the whole thing. They're like, "Maybe you should sit upstairs. We'll pick what you're going to eat." We decided that was probably the best idea.

Jena: You're Americans. We're used to it being shrink-wrapped already. We can pretend it wasn't actually alive.

Jean Morris: I was lucky enough to also go on the heritage trip with Lily when she was ten. We got to walk on the Great Wall of China. I teach sixth grade. We do ancient history. Ancient China's one piece of that. I just recently showed again my little travels on the Great Wall to my class and said, "I was there." It was fun to be with the girls and to see what they thought of China and to share that experience with them.

Jena: What do you make of Lily's desire to find her birth parents?

Jean Morris: It's a question out there for her. She wants to know everything that she can know about herself so that it's a question out there. She knows who her family is and loves her family. She knows that her family loves her. She has a hole that she wants to fill. It's by understanding who those people are. I will let you know that Barbara had the paperwork for months, but Jean was the one that made it all happen. [laughs]

Jena: You mean for the adoption itself?

Jean Morris: No, for the birth parent search. I did all the electronic pieces of that.

Jena: I'm interested in this. Is that because Barbara was hesitant on some level?

Jean Morris: She's not as good on the computer as I am.

Jena: That's because somebody else was doing it for her.

Jean Morris: You had to scan things in.

Jena: You really were like a partner in this in helping her move forward with the stuff that had to get to Shee-Shee to get in -- you, clearly, fully support this?

Jean Morris: Oh, yeah. If she finds her birth parents, I'm out going on that China trip in order to meet the birth parents as well. We're going to take Kate on a heritage trip when she's ten. Lily will be twenty-one. We're going back to China at that point.

Jena: Do you want to go on that trip, Lily? Depends? Who knows what you're doin' at twenty-one?

Jean Morris: She has to go on it because we already told her foster parents we were coming back to see them.

Jena: Did you know anything about China before this chapter in your life opened?

Jean Morris: No. I really didn't. The funny thing is, even about adoption, my grandfather, my dad's father, had a sister who had a son that was adopted. Every time my grandma said his name she would say, "Dungee, he was adopted." [laughs] For the whole life, even as an adult when she would say his name, after that she would say, "He was adopted." That was somebody that was in our family, part of our family, was adopted. It was the normal thing. Grandma was so funny because she defined him by that every time she said his name. Then in her later years she was in a retirement home. There was a guy that had gone blind. Every time she said his name she'd say, "Allen, the blind man," very loud. For herself, she needed to give an attribute to every person.

Jena: We've talked a lot this afternoon about how others perceive us. I'm always aware. I try to remind myself that sometimes I think we can make assumptions about how others are perceiving us. Your mother wasn't picking on your relative because he was adopted, she just always offers these caveats so you know who the blind guy is.

Jean Morris: My grandmother, though, it was.

Jena: Your grandmother.

Jean Morris: My mother was very open to all people.

Jena: Tell me about your hopes for Lily. When you look ahead, as I'm sure you do, what do you envision?

Jean Morris: I hope she goes to a college that's not farther than two and a half hours away so then I can come and visit her on the weekend and come back home.

Jena: Not every weekend.

Jean Morris: Not every weekend, but enough so that I don't miss her.

Jena: You guys are close together physically.

Jean Morris: We are. It used to be that we often had, and we still have, on the weekends, a lot of meals together. She has a very busy schedule. We like to go to her sporting things, and watch her do her sports, and be part of her life even though sometimes when she's doing poorly she would rather us not be there. I said, "We're going to be there in both the good and the bad." I hope that she finds the thing that makes her happy. She doesn't yet know what does she want to do as her career, or what's that thing in her life that she wants to do in order to make herself happy. I feel certain that she'll find that, and she'll do that. She's a good friend. She's loyal. She'll find the right people in the world to hang out with. She's going to have a lot of old aunts that she's going to have to take care of. [laughs]

Jena: Do you have that wistful feeling that I think many of us have that it's going too fast?

Jean Morris: Oh, my gosh. When I look at her today I'm like, "How can she be this old? How does it happen that fast?" Especially once she started high school, and started wearing makeup, and doin' her eyebrows and her lips, she started to look so grown up and mature. Some of the ways that she talks and knows what's goin' on too is just -- you feel so happy for her, but at the same time I want to say, "Wait," stop time, and keep her little.

Jena: Hit the pause button.

Jean Morris: And only wanting to do things with her family and not her friends. [laughs]

Jena: Is there anything that you want to say or put out there about this experience of being an adoptive family of a Chinese kid?

Jean Morris: At the beginning when Lily was a baby and then everybody would always say, "She's such a lucky girl." It was us that was lucky. I look at it and say, "What would our family be like without her?" It would not be as happy and as well-rounded as it is. It's what Barbara was saying before too, don't judge what a family is or what a family should be. You put a group of people together, and they support each other, and work together. They're a family. It's all good.