

Jena Heath: Tell me a little bit about yourself. How old are you? Where'd you grow up? What do you like? What do you hate? What do we need to know about Jian?

Jian Rzeszewicz: I am nineteen years old. I am currently a sophomore with senior standing at Whitworth University in Spokane. I have decided to double major in biology and psychology. I love sciences. I love learning about the mind and what makes people do what they do. I'm also really into poetry and photography. I played classical piano for eleven years. The arts are also a huge part of my life.

Jena: Tell me about your family.

Jian Rzeszewicz: I have my mom and dad. They adopted later in life. I don't have any more siblings. I do have two dogs, which are also Chinese. They're Shih Tzus.

Jena: What are their names?

Jian Rzeszewicz: Their names are Mingo and Dumpling.

Jena: What are your parents' names?

Jian Rzeszewicz: My parents are Kim and Dan.

Jena: How old were you when you came home from China? What province are you from?

Jian Rzeszewicz: I'm from the Guangdong Province, Zhanjiang, China, a really small city in the south right along the coast known for fishing and its pearls. I was five months old when I came to the US. I was very young in comparison to a lot of Chinese adoptees.

Jena: What's your gotcha day and year?

Jian Rzeszewicz: Oh, goodness. May 13th, 1996.

Jena: You were young. You may be the youngest so far that I've interviewed. It's unusual. Tell me about your growing up. Did you know a lot of other Chinese adoptees? Did you do a lot of Chinese cultural events? What was your family's take on growing up as a Chinese adoptee?

Jian Rzeszewicz: Growing up was not as difficult as most people because Washington is extremely diverse in race. There are lots of Asian populations where I live. Although they're not Chinese, it's not uncommon to see several Asians. Even though my parents didn't look like me, I didn't get a whole lot of weird stares unless we were out together. I knew I was adopted all my life. I can't remember a time that I didn't know. There was no big conversation where my parents sat me down like you see in the movies.

I first realized that our family was different when I was taking swimming lessons one year at a local pool. I was probably seven or six, probably younger than that, maybe five. There was a girl who saw my mom waiting for me. My mom is blonde and white. All the parents sit along the side of the pool. The kids are getting the lesson. One of my classmates saw my mom getting a towel or something like that. She commented on it. She's like, "Is that your real mom?" Although that's a common question among adoptees, I had never heard it. I didn't really understand what she meant at that age. I never considered that she would be a real or fake mom. She was just my mom. I told her, "Well, yeah. She's my mom." She's like, "Really? You don't look alike." Then I started questioning that. It was a realization of, "I guess we do have kind of a different family." Along with that, I guess we released some feelings of, "Well, then what happened with my 'real mom?'"

Around the age of four before I really knew what I was talking about, I started asking about what happened to my birth mother. My mom said that was extremely unusual at such an early age, but I had been extremely perceptive of it. I know that I've always wanted to know about that. One thing that helped fill that gap was my parents were consistent about getting together with the girls that I was adopted with each year. They went to China with about ten other families. They all adopted children on the same day. Several of them were in the Pacific Northwest. We got together every single year, once a year, as long as I can remember.

It was comforting knowing that these girls were going through the same experience and that we came from the same origins. That was something that was consistent in my childhood, and even now, which has kept me grounded. I was a curious child. There are lots of Chinese adoptees in my community. It was not an uncommon event. I was friends with a lot of them through middle school. They never seemed to be as curious as I was about wanting to know about my past. They disregarded it. I never felt like someone could understand my desire to know that information because nobody else seemed to want to know about their own. Overall, easy childhood, lots of opportunities to feel included.

Jena: This group of kids who you were adopted with, seeing them every year, how did that feel as you got older and you became your own people? I know because we do this with our group too. We're very close with our group. In fact, I'm working with an adoptive mom whose daughter was in the same SWI with my daughter. We adopted together. She's a photographer. She's travelling with me and taking pictures. It's a bond among the parents. I have to tell you that in our group, the parents are very different. We love each other. If we hadn't had this life-altering experience together, this very intimate experience, probably most of us would never have even met. We are politically different. In those ways, we're quite different. It seems to me that the experience of having become parents together and adopted together has blurred all those lines. It doesn't matter. We don't talk about politics. Why? Who cares? We have something very profound that binds us. I wonder from your perspective what that's like in terms of you guys, the girls. I don't know if there are any guys in your group or if you're all female adoptees.

Jian Rzeszewicz: The group I've been seeing consistently, we're all female. We take a giant photo each year of all of us. Unfortunately, it's dwindled down to about five to seven of us who appear regularly at our yearly reunions. It started as a really giant group. It's funny that you want to know the perspective of the adoptee because honestly, we didn't really understand the significance of it until probably fifth grade. Fifth grade was probably when we started to be like, "Hey, I remember you from last year." We started to talk more and have more fun. Usually, it was just normal. If you're a young kid and you're put with somebody you don't know in a strange environment, you're not really going to want to talk to them. That's how it was for us. All of us are extremely grateful that despite that initial, "This isn't really that fun, mom," they continued with it. They knew one day it would be important to us. It is.

After that reunion where we finally started to click, it's been almost amazing how much we care about each other. We travelled to China together. Two of us went to our orphanage on this heritage trip. The orphanage set up an event specifically for the Chinese adoptees from that orphanage. Two of them went back. The next year, a girl and I from our adoption group went of a different kind of heritage trip. We travelled all over China. Our last stop was our orphanage. It was slightly different. Our past means a lot of us. We always text each other every once in a while and catch up. We are very involved in each other's lives when we see each other. We want to know everything about each other. We're basically long-distance sisters. The bonds that we feel is more than friendship because we know it goes on further than that. Because we're so spread out and we're starting to take our own paths, it's getting harder to maintain contact.

It's been such a valuable experience. I can't imagine not having that kind of support and not having that kind of understanding that's shared between this group. Our parents are very similar. Our dads are super into fishing or outdoor activities. All our parents get along extremely well. Some of them adopted more children from China. Some of them adopted some more children from Vietnam. Even them, even though I wasn't adopted with them, I feel I know them extremely well because I've been seeing them all my life too. It's been so amazing watching us grow up. My mom has a scrapbook of all of the reunions that we have. She made it like a reunion book of all of our pictures over every single year. We bring it each year. We always go back and reminisce on certain memories. It's something that I don't hear about a lot with adoptees anymore, which is unfortunate.

Jena: You said there were ten of you initially?

Jian Rzeszewicz: It was around ten. I'm not sure how many there were. There were quite a few families.

Jena: How many now still get together? You said as the years have gone by -- the same thing happened with us. We all started coming to the first couple. Now it's a core group, most of the group, but still we've seen less of two or three families over the years.

Jian Rzeszewicz: There are four of us that consistently come every single year. There are two more that come usually every other year or every two years. There are about six of us who really mesh well together and have been doing this for a long time. The rest have either moved to Florida or cross country, something like that. I'm actually still friends with a girl who I haven't seen since I was maybe two or three. We found each other on Facebook. We're still connected in some sort of way.

Jena: She was part of the group that you were adopted with?

Jian Rzeszewicz: Mm-hmm.

Jena: You found each other on Facebook?

Jian Rzeszewicz: The idea didn't occur to me because my mom told me that we get a Christmas card from her every year. "From who?" She said, "From one of your other adoption sisters." I was like, "I should try to reach out and see if she is interested in getting to know me more." We haven't really spoken. We just are Facebook friends. It's nice to see what's going on in her life even though we don't have that bond like I do with the others.

Jena: The other three who you see more consistently, can you tell me a little bit about what they're doing now?

Jian Rzeszewicz: One is from Oregon, Portland area. She is so passionate about dance. She's very good at it. She's been doing it for a very long time. She was going to a university in Oregon. She decided to pursue her passion in dancing. Right now, she's in California travelling to all of these auditions and living the dream, trying to get her name out there. She's extremely passionate. She's assertive. She's funny. She's probably the one that's the most full of life out of all of us. She emanates all of this happiness and energy. It's really fun to be around her.

The girl that I traveled to China with, back to our orphanage, she and I probably get along the best. The other two get along with each other pretty well. She's from Washington. Right now, she is going to a [indiscernible]. I think she is in marketing. I'm not entirely sure. It's something along those lines. I'm pretty sure it's marketing. She also still lives at home. She commutes to her classes. She was very involved in tennis and sports and things like that in high school.

Jena: How old were you when you went back to China with your friend?

Jian Rzeszewicz: We were going into our sophomore year of high school, almost four years ago.

Jena: How was that? Was that a good age to go? What were your impressions of the whole thing?

Jian Rzeszewicz: That trip was absolutely incredible. We went at the right age. We were old enough to understand the significance of it. We were experienced enough to know the privilege that we had, that we were given by being adopted. We were old enough to have that desire and the endurance to travel around China. It's pretty exhausting. We started in Beijing. We worked our way down to our orphanage. We went through a tour group that had -- we had two tour buses filled with people. It was specifically for Chinese adoptees. Every family had at least one Chinese girl or Chinese boy. We were split up between the two buses. We travelled together. As the journey went along, we branched off into our respective orphanages or home towns.

It was a twenty-one-day trip. We hit cities like Guilin, Chengdu, Beijing, Shiyang, Yangshuo, several, all over. We saw the Forbidden City, the Temple of Heaven, the Great Wall. What was amazing about that trip was with the older girls and with, of course, my adoption sister, all of the Chinese adoptees would always congregate in the back of the bus. All we would do was bond. We all varied in age. There was one who was going into seventh grade. There were some girls who were probably nearing your daughter's age or were your daughter's age. I still keep contact with them as well. After four years, at least two of them I talk to on a regular basis just to catch up and see how they're doing.

It was the most amazing experience because we got to see other aspects of China and then go back to our home town and then realize, "Whoa, this is different from all those places," that you normally see on the internet, in the movies, or something like that. This is home, basically. That's how I thought of it. Going back to my home town I realized that my heart was still in that place and that a part of me still belonged there. When we arrived, it was a surreal experience. We had brought a picture of me as a baby with my foster mom. Our tour guide was from our orphanage. She's still there actually. She still works there. We gave her the photo when we landed in Sanjiang. We asked her, "Does this woman still work here?" She looked super young. She looked sixteen or something. She's like, "Oh, yeah. She still works there. She's a school teacher. She teaches the kids." We're like, "Oh, my gosh. Do you think we could meet her?" She says, "Of course. She'd be delighted to see you." That was our greeting at the airport. Going into that, it was extremely overwhelming. Oh, my gosh. I'm going to actually meet somebody who is a link to my past that I've always wanted to know about. It was overwhelming.

We arrived at the orphanage. She knew that I was coming, so she met us at the entrance in the courtyard. She knew my Chinese name, so she knew exactly what baby I was. I was one of her firsts that she fostered. When she saw me, she was just like a mom. It was almost surreal how motherly she was in terms of the way she would touch me or guide me. Even the way her gaze fell upon me, it was like she couldn't believe how big I had gotten and how well I'm doing. Even though there's a language barrier between us, it didn't feel like that. We were going through the orphanage. She was giving us tours. We looked at my files and then my friend's files that the orphanage had. There's not a lot. There never is. I was left in front of a hospital on a really, really busy street, this giant, pink hospital. A policeman found me and took me to the orphanage. That much I know. I don't really know my birthday. They use your umbilical cord to make you the youngest, most desirable baby. Knowing that piece of

information alone, though, has made me feel at ease. I know that even if I was a girl and either my parents couldn't afford me or didn't want me, they still cared about me enough to leave me in a place where they knew I would be taken care of and found. That was a huge comfort.

It was tough at times. In our orphanage, we got to visit a baby room. That was really hard. There are so many girls that are just -- there's a constant stream of them who are always coming in. The room that we entered was -- they were less than a year old. They all had some deformity of some kind. They had cleft lip or something like that, a very affordable surgery in America but not so much in China. I always talk about this because I still remember it and how much it impacted me. There was one girl in the room who was honestly the most beautiful baby I've ever seen. She had the sweetest face. She was a gorgeous baby. She was wearing a light green little onesie deal with a jacket. I got to hold her. Her fingers were not separated. They were defined on her hand, but they were not their own digits. I don't know the reason why she was left at the orphanage, but I assume that was a contributing factor. She was probably one of the babies that I held the longest. I did hold her the longest. I didn't really pick up any others after I got her because she struck me so much.

She was very perceptive for a little one. I feel like she knew her surroundings well. She was smart. I was so taken aback by how beautiful she was, how bright she was. I couldn't not put her down. I wanted to take her home so badly. I was like, "You can be my little sister. That's totally fine. My parents can handle another one." I always wondered what happened to her. I'm in contact with an organization who is affiliated with my orphanage. I contacted them earlier this year, maybe a month ago, inquiring about her. They said, "We don't really know who that is. I can tell you that most of our babies are always adopted." She's somewhere. It's weird to think that I'll never know what happened to her. I'll never know her name or how she grows up. For a brief moment of her life, I was there to hold her. I wonder who was there to hold me that I don't know about. [emotional]

We spent the day with my foster mom there. When we were looking over my file, she remembered something. She said, "You know what? I have photos of you from when you were a baby. I live just across the street. I'll go grab them for you." We're like, "Are you sure? If those are your only copies..." She says, "Oh, no. I have the film saved. Don't worry. I have it all. I can get them again." We waited. A couple minutes later, she came back with probably ten or eleven photos of me as a child, really young. It was really weird because I know what I looked like as a baby, but I've never seen these before. It was almost an out of body experience. Wait, is that really me? I've never seen these before. It's not with my parents and stuff like that. It was so strange. Of course, my mother started bawling the moment they were pulled out. She was like, "Oh, my gosh. This is so beautiful."

The thing that really got me about that was she had saved them for fifteen years. They were heavily bleached by the sun, which means that she had them out. There was a photo of me wearing the clothes I wore on the day I was adopted. It was kind of like last picture. She let us have them. We cherish them. They're in the scrapbook. In that photo where I was in my

adoption clothes, there was another baby next to me. We don't know who it was. We guess that she fostered her at the same time that she fostered me. That's just another question I have. Who was that girl? She wasn't from our adoption group. Maybe she wasn't getting adopted that day.

It's strange how our paths as an adoptee are so different. Since you have no idea what happened your first months or first couple years of life -- most people have that knowledge -- or who interacted with you or you held you first, stuff like that, we don't have that knowledge. Uncovering little pieces of it adds to the list of questions I have. It was an amazing experience. I know that mine was very different from a lot of people who just go to their orphanage and see it. I had things that gave me answers. It made me realize that originally I had thought I have two moms, but I have three.

Jena: Your foster mother too?

Jian Rzeszewicz: Yeah. When we left my home town once the trip ended, I definitely left a part of myself there. [emotional]

Jena: How does this experience inform how you feel about China?

Jian Rzeszewicz: You mean in terms of their policies?

Jena: Yes.

Jian Rzeszewicz: I've never held it against China for the one-child policy. I've never held a grudge against that policy because without it there would be so many Chinese adoptees who would not have the opportunities or experiences that they have today. The flipside of that is you're ripped away from something that I feel like every human should have a right to, which is your knowledge of their family and of their past. That's not fair. It brings up a lot of psychological damage and emotional damage in life if you are affected by it like I have been. I don't think that's okay. You can't please everybody. They did what they were thinking was best at the time for the country. That's the way it goes. You can't change that. I'm not disappointed in what happened to me. My parents are the best. I love them. They've given me everything I ever needed. You can't ask for much more.

Jena: You have a very touching and mature, at the risk of sounding like an old lady, view of it. It's true that there's a certain reality to this that can't be changed. There's a perspective on it that is a governmental perspective from the Chinese point of view at that point. Then there's the effect on China itself and on people in China. There are so many different perspectives on it. It's very good of you to be open about how you think about it.

Jian Rzeszewicz: When I heard about the two-child policy, at first I didn't know how to feel. When you hear about that, there are a lot of what ifs. What if? What if? What if? You can't dwell in those questions too long or else you'll drive yourself insane because you'll never know. It's fortunate for the families who actually wanted to keep the second child but were

forced to give one away. I'm happy for them. I'm happy for the future children who would've been put in an orphanage and no longer have to be. It's interesting how this country's developing with all that.

Jena: Is it fair to say, is it accurate to say that the root of your desire to know more was -- at least when you were younger and maybe now, I don't know -- fundamentally about wondering why you had become available to be adopted, why your parents had made that decision?

Jian Rzeszewicz: Yes. Assuming when I was four and started asking questions, and definitely now, I've always wanted to know why did they leave me there? I try not to think about it as, "Why didn't you want me?" I don't know if they did or didn't. That's the question that all of us carry all the time inside of us, is "Why?" If it can't be answered, then it can't. You hear these amazing stories of people who have found their birth parents and the first time that they realize that there is a chance of finding them or that people could do it and that it was possible. It's always been a desire. It's hard to go about that though. Some people just get lucky.

Jena: Do you think you'll search?

Jian Rzeszewicz: I honestly wouldn't know where to start if I did. I'm reaching the age where I could in the future if I wanted to, once I'm financially stable and on my feet. As of now, I try to not think about it as much because I know how I felt as a child with these questions. I try to direct that energy into things that could benefit people who might be going through the similar experiences as I have, which is partially why I started my club at my school. I speak at adoption panels a lot.

Jena: Tell me about your club. I hope this isn't too weird, but I looked you up on Facebook before we talked. I saw your club. [laughs]

Jian Rzeszewicz: It's okay.

Jena: I was interested in it. Tell me a little bit about the work that you're doing.

Jian Rzeszewicz: We are called the Adopted Pirates of Whitworth. I founded it my freshman year of college. I actually had the idea the summer going into college. It was a thought that was rolling around in my head. I always had a passion for wanting to know more about my own adoption and wanting to help others through that. It's been a huge theme in my life. I got to school. I immediately started inquiring about how to start a club. I wanted to see who would be interested in it and who would be willing to open themselves up and do stuff like that. Once I got chartered, which took several months because it's a long process --

Jena: -- To be a recognized student organization?

Jian Rzeszewicz: Yeah, like that, get the funding worked out, get approved by student government. It took about month. I revealed the big news on my mom's birthday. She was like, "Oh, my gosh, Jian. That's so [indiscernible]." It was kind of a thank you to my mom. I want her to know that I love her and that I'm grateful for what she's done in choosing me as her child. I want to give back that love in a way. We didn't really know where to start out at first because we were wondering what should we do as this club? There isn't a huge adopted community in Spokane. It's not as diverse as the western side of Washington. My roommate and I at the time -- she was a sociology major. She wanted to be a social worker. She had a lot of connections with foster homes and things like that. She was very passionate about foster care.

Together, we had the idea of if we can't really help internationally adopted kids, I'm sure that there are some domestic adoptions in the area. We know that there's a huge foster care population in the area. We have decided to host an event on campus for foster children. It was a little shaky starting out at first. We chose a holiday that's well known like Thanksgiving or Valentine's Day. We would go and buy all of the supplies, come up with activities to do for the kids. It's a very long planning process, more than I'd expected. I'd never really been in charge of doing a club or anything big like that before. It was a learning experience. The people who were interested in it, I think most of them were adopted domestically or internationally, not many past foster kids. I know that the percentage of them going to college is low, which is why we wanted to host it on campus so foster kids could see this is what a college campus is like. This is what going to college is going to be like.

We do cater to younger children. Our last event, we had around eighty people come. The oldest child was twelve. The youngest was probably two, very young. They come in. They eat. They do interactive food crafts or arts and crafts, get their face painted, win prizes. We really want to make some fun that's specifically for them. You want them to know that people are thinking about them. They deserve to have fun too. Their lives can be challenging. Since I don't have a lot of experience with the foster care system or a whole lot of knowledge about it, I'm trying to learn more. I'm trying to understand all aspects of it. In our nation it's something that affects so many families and children, but nobody seems to talk about it. That's the basis that our club is founded on. We wanted to raise awareness. We wanted to make people realize that there is this issue. We should know about it. The people who are involved in it deserve to have fun, deserve to have a normal life. We have that event.

We've slowly been getting our name out into the community. It's been very difficult because organizations might not want to spread our invitation to others or don't get back to us, several reasons like that. It's been challenging gaining popularity. This year was a huge success. We had over a hundred percent more people come than last year, probably over two hundred percent more. It was amazing. Of course, the club members who help make decorations or volunteer, it wouldn't be possible without them. There are only three officers, and you can't do everything. It's been exciting. We're now affiliated with a foster care support group who wants to have us host them. We're going to start that with the new year. We're going to have them come to campus once a month. They really want to have their meeting. We're going to look after the kids and have some fun with them while they have their meeting. One of them

has been very active in contacting me about potentially having a panel of some sort for future parents who want to be foster parents or want to adopt. I'm glad that we're making a difference because I really want to.

Jena: It sounds awesome. I know from my own university what it takes to get a new organization started. I really understand the rock you have rolled uphill to do this.

Is there anything that you would like to say to people about being adopted, being Chinese, being a college student trying to get a club started? Is there anything that you would like people to know that maybe they don't know, that you wish you didn't have to constantly say?

Jian Rzeszewicz: It's not offensive, but it's not exactly the most polite thing in the world to ask if your parents are your real parents. Be careful of the way you phrase things when you ask questions. It's okay to be curious. Most people are happy answering questions about their past. I know that one friend I've had since I was three -- she's been my best friend. She lives in my home town with me. She's adopted from China, as well as her little sister. Her little sister and her mom were in a store one day, years ago. It was a long, long time. I don't even remember it. Her mom told me that one time a woman came up to her and asked her, "How much did your daughter cost?" like she was an item at the store. Be careful of how you phrase things even if you don't mean harm.

Also, know that even if families look different, diversity is okay. Especially now in 2015, that's something that people are not tolerant of, the concept of diversity. It's unfortunate because it affects all races, not just minorities. If you try to understand different cultures and if you try to understand where they're coming from instead of throwing your stereotypes or your prejudices against them, then it'll be easier to accept them. Not just relating it adoption, but diversity is okay. Just because a family looks different, it doesn't mean that they're a different family. That's really hard for people to understand. I don't know why. Literally, we are just a normal family. It's not any different from all-white family or an all-African American family. Doesn't matter if one child is white and another is Asian or another is Hispanic. We're all the same. We're just a family. There's nothing that's unique about us other than our races.

I've grown up very open-minded about a lot of topics because my family is so diverse, not just my immediate family. My dad's side of the family is all Korean. My mom's side of the family has a lot of Russian-speaking people. It's funny because all of my friends growing up have been bilingual or their parents immigrated over from another country. I've had Russian best friends, Filipino best friends, Chinese best friends. The list goes on and on. I respect that. I respect that diversity. I understand the cultures. I appreciate them. Instead of questioning why a family is the way it is, you should just accept that this is the reality.