

## OUR JOURNEY TO JOHANNAH (JOEI)



It began 15 years ago with an Anniversary trip to China. Prior to the trip, arranged as a surprise by my husband, I knew I wanted to help baby girls in China but felt it would be linking with an NGO to do so. This all changed when I went to gymnastics with my niece one day and saw a lady dressed in the same outfit like me. She had on black turtleneck and black tights with a sweat shirt saying "I climbed the Great Wall". I knew she had been to China because of the sweat shirt but to be dressed in the same colors was weird. So I went up to her and we began talking and told her how I wanted to help little girls there. She said the unexpected, why don't you adopt. She had adopted a little girl, which was the reason she was at gymnastics. I said, no, I already had three children. However, it was too late, a seed had been planted in my heart and the desire just grew with each passing year.

We began the process in 2006 to adopt a "healthy girl" and we were told we were too old at the time to do so; we were 49 and 50 respectively. The adoption agency at the time said we had to choose another country, so I chose Kazakhstan, as it borders China, and I felt I was being directed by God towards China. We processed the paperwork and submitted everything, just to be told we didn't qualify again. We ended up losing quite a bit of money in the process. My husband at this time was quite discouraged and didn't want to continue the process but I couldn't shake the desire, so I investigated every country that borders China, Vietnam, Thailand, and even Mizoram bordering Thailand because of their Chinese heritage. In the process of doing all of this, I stumbled upon the plight of Human Trafficking and went to Thailand for five months, volunteering with an organization there. While there, my husband and I fell in love with a little five year old girl whom we painstakingly tried to adopt, but to no avail. She is from the ethnic minority Hill tribe in Thailand, and is without citizenship and could not be adopted. After coming back from Thailand I started a nonprofit to help children involved with human trafficking, called Silence Softly Speaks. However, this didn't stop the desire to adopt.

In 2011 I said, I'll try one last time. This time we explored China's Special Needs Program. We were now 54 and 55 years respectively, kind of, the cut off age for China. Johannah went to the orphanage in China days after we submitted our application. I got a call from our worker at Lifeline Children's Service one night at 10:45 asking me if we would look at a file. It was a little girl with a heart condition. I agreed. The whole process with Lifeline and Hands Across the Water took about one year and was seamless compared to our experience before.

In October 2012 my three grown children, my husband and I went to China. We went to Changsha to a government office, all excited and apprehensive, not knowing what to expect. Would she scream her head off when she saw us, what would she be like? As we entered we heard children crying, all eyes were on us and there she was, playing at a little table with her Chinese nanny. They said, there is Mama and she looked up. She was 15 months at the time. I knelt down beside her, giving her space to warm up to us. She covered her face with her little hands as though to say, why is everyone looking at me. Joei came to me without a whimper. She then went to my husband and all my other three children.

Johannah had two open heart surgeries the December and January after she arrived, her heart condition was more serious than was explained on her medical records from China. However, everywhere that Joei goes, people have fallen in love with her. At the hospital, the doctors and nurses would gather around her bed and pick her up and play. When we travel the flight attendants would take her away playing and put their hats on her. We cannot begin to explain the joy that she brings everywhere she goes.

Johannah is now two and a half, and is happy, healthy and an energetic little girl.