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## Adopted children learn about heritages through trips

By Beth Behrendt, nsfeatures@news-sentinel.com  
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International adoptions in the U.S. quadrupled between 1982 and 2004; the year in which the number of adoptions from outside the U.S. hit an all-time high of about 23,000 children. The children adopted during those peak early to mid-2000 years have reached the age when a trip to the country of their birth can be especially educational, enriching and meaningful.



Noel DenHouter, right, stands under a "welcome home" banner at her former orphanage. She was greeted by her foster mother, the foster mother's children and the orphanage directors. (Courtesy photo)

Many parents have embraced the idea of a trip abroad to give their children a deeper connection to the country of their birth. A number of international adoption agencies and travel agencies have responded to meet this demand. They arrange family vacations that give the children a rich cultural experience and expose them to elements of their early personal histories. The agencies arrange tours that combine visiting the country's historical sites, first-hand exposure to cultural traditions, and personalized trips to the orphanages and the local area from which the child was adopted. In many cases, children meet the staff or foster parents who cared for them as infants; in rarer circumstances, meetings with birth parents or siblings can occur.

Two local families who enjoyed these unique and very special tours shared their stories:

### DenHouter-Pratico Family

When Joy DenHouter and Paul Pratico's daughters, Lily and Noel, were 15 and 11, respectively, they traveled to China through a program offered by Chinese Children Adoption International. The girls had been adopted through this same agency: Lily at the age of 9 months and Noel a couple of years later at the age of 18 months. As parents, DenHouter and Pratico took every opportunity to expose the girls to their birth culture.

"I felt it was an important step in their development to see where they came from," DenHouter said. "I also thought it would be significant for them — growing up in this part of the country — to see how many people in the world actually look like them."

The girls, their mother and a friend made the trip through the "Heritage Tours" program of CCAI, which organizes tours to China two times a year.

"We actually went with a group of families from all over the U.S.," DenHouter said. The children on the trip ranged in age from 8 to 15 years old. The 10-day tour began with the group visiting historic sites in and around Beijing with an English-speaking guide. The girls said highlights of this part of the trip included a jade museum, the Great Wall and Tiananmen Square.

After three days in Beijing, they broke off from the larger group to travel on a tour arranged specifically for them to Guangxi province, where both Lily and Noel were born. There they visited the two different orphanages from which the girls were adopted. Lily met the "nanny" who took care of her when she was an infant. Noel met her "nanny" at the orphanage and the foster mother who cared for her until she was adopted. DenHouter said all of the caregivers remembered the girls as babies and were moved to tears to see the lovely young women they are becoming. The girls also spent time touring the orphanages and playing with the children who live there.

While in Guangxi province, the tour organizers arranged for Lily and Noel to have hands-on experience with cultural traditions. The girls learned to cook traditional Chinese dishes at a cooking school, write their names in calligraphy and speak some basic Mandarin, and they dined at a traditional restaurant.

"We weren't sure what we were ordering and were pretty surprised when one dish came out with whole chicken feet in it!" Lily said with a laugh.

Both girls are extremely appreciative of the opportunity they had to experience China in person. And both are eager to return.

"This time on my own! No tour group," insisted Lily, who is now 17 and a senior in high school. Lily, 14 and a high school freshman, concurred, "My best friend and I will go as soon as we can. I can't wait for her to have a real

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mandarin orange — you haven't tasted one until you've had one in China."

### Betley-Slabach Family

Clara Betley was just 5 months old when her mother, Brenda Betley, adopted her from Guatemala. Brenda Betley, like the DenHouter-Praticos, tried to enrich Clara's ties to Guatemala as best as she could. "But I always promised her a trip back to her homeland during her 13th summer," she said.

In summer 2014, Clara and Betley, along with her husband, Bill Slabach, and Clara's aunt went on a 10-day tour of Guatemala. The trip was organized by Velocity Travel and Tours, which specializes in adoption-related travel. Two other Fort Wayne families with children adopted from Guatemala went as well. Their tour was similar to the DenHouter-Praticos' in that they toured the main city and took side trips to see historic sites, such as the ancient city of Antigua. The children also visited a school and learned to cook traditional dishes. The Betley-Slabachs then visited the remote area, near the Tikal ruins, from which Clara was adopted.

"I finally felt like I was home," Clara said, "seeing people who looked like me."

Her trip then took an unusual turn. Through a series of fortuitous communications between another Fort Wayne family with Guatemalan children and some foster mothers in Guatemala, the family learned that — though Clara's birth mother had died several years ago — her four older siblings were still living in the same area. They met her three sisters, two of whom remembered her as a baby (dire circumstances led to her birth mother's decision to put her up for adoption shortly after her birth). At the end of the trip, the Betley-Slabachs brought the three sisters to Guatemala City to spend a couple of days with Clara. The four girls spent the time bonding: painting each others' nails, enjoying the hotel swimming pool (a first for her sisters) and going out to dinner at a "real" restaurant (another first). Betley had a special gift for the sisters: a copy of a photo that the orphanage had sent to her when she was just beginning the process to adopt Clara. The girls burst into tears at the sight of their mother, Angela, holding newborn Clara all those years ago.

Meeting her sisters was understandably the highlight of the trip for Clara. She wants to go back soon, this time "for family": to see her sisters again and meet her brother. Enjoying "frescas" (fruit smoothies), plantains and "awesome french fries" are also favorites she is looking forward to revisiting.

The impact of these trips on these girls, their families and perhaps the next generation is hard to quantify. Lily is intrigued by the orphans and vulnerable children minor offered at the college she is considering. Her sister, Noel, proudly gave a presentation to her entire middle school and shared the story of her adoption and her return visit to China. Clara and her adoptive mother are learning about the complications of U.S. and international law as they attempt to understand how they can best benefit Clara's siblings still living in Guatemala.

DenHouter's message goes back to the heart of this story: "I wanted my girls to share their story because it is a great story. My ultimate hope, though, is that it may encourage people to consider international adoption. The need is enormous."

International adoption groups estimate that there are hundreds of thousands of children in other countries who need homes. In 2014, international adoptions in the U.S. dropped back to their lowest rate since 1982.

### Birth country tours

- Chinese Children Adoptions International: [www.ccaifamily.org](http://www.ccaifamily.org)
- Velocity Tours and Travel: [www.new.velo??city?tours.com](http://www.new.velo??city?tours.com)
- The Ties Program — Adoptive Family Travel: [www.adoptivefamilytravel.com](http://www.adoptivefamilytravel.com)

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