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Dawn C. Degenhardt, Portland High School class of 1953, didn't set out to start a revolution, but that's exactly what she did in the areas of adoption and foster care. That journey is the subject of her new memoir, [*It Was Meant To Be – 5000 Plus 9 Adoptions*](#).

"When I graduated, a lot of people were planning to get married and have children," she said. "Very few people went to college back then, at least people I knew. I just didn't feel that was something I wanted to do. So, I got a job in France with the Department of the Army." She worked for two years as secretary to the superintendent of American schools in post-war France. "It was very exciting to be traipsing all over Europe when I was 21," she laughed. "That kind of set the pace for me."



Dawn C. Degenhardt signs a copy of her new memoir at the It Was Meant To Be – 5000 Plus 9 Adoptions book launch at the Portland High School library

Over the course of her life, Dawn has traveled to 54 countries and worked in 27. She was among the first Americans to visit the Soviet Union during the Cold War and, in 1991, worked with the Russian government to allow for 12 children to be adopted into the United States. Adoption has been important to Dawn from a young age.

"I knew that someday I would adopt children," she said. "My favorite book was *Anne of Green Gables*. Still is one of my favorites! *Anthony Adverse*, *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*—all these stories I would read about homeless children when I was 12 years old. I was always very sensitive to children on the move. I just knew someday I would adopt, no matter if I had children or not biologically."

She first took an interest in adoption policy when living in Ohio with her husband, Edwin, better known as "Hunk." Ed worked as an engineer with TRW and worked at the university as well. Both wanted kids, but Dawn had an infertility issue and did not want to go through surgery. She and her husband discussed other ways to add to their family.

"We adopted two healthy infants in Cleveland, and then we wanted to adopt waiting children," she said. She was told there weren't any older children waiting to be adopted, though. "We said, 'wait a minute.' There were 8,000 kids in foster care in the country at the time. What did they mean there weren't any waiting children? We had to fight to find a way to adopt some of those kids."

She started the Ohio chapter of the Council on Adoptable Children (COAC). The group was a way for Dawn to exchange calls and letters with other adoptive parents to learn about what worked and what didn't in different parts of the country. It was the beginning of a movement, as these different groups of people came together to change the system.

Dawn and Ed moved back to Maine with six kids. They were in the process of adopting a child from Vietnam, but that adoption fell through. Then, she received a call from the Maine Department of Health and Human Services about a different child.

"I nearly fell over because they didn't like me at all," she said of people working in the foster care system. "I was a loudmouth, and I was very critical of the system. All of a sudden, they're calling me up and wanting me to take one of their kids. And we did. We adopted her. She was nine years old, and her previous adoption didn't work out."

Dawn started her own adoption agency to do the work the way she thought it ought to be done. It worked with different types of parents, sought out difficult-to-place children, and worked on international adoptions, particularly in countries that had no adoption agreements with the United States, like India and Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

"We had a real hard time trying to get the system to place some of these children," she said of older children in the United States. "They were just putting them in foster care,

and that was it. They weren't trying to do anything except try to get good foster homes. It was really a fight to try to change things."

Maine officials became more supportive of Dawn's work as time went on, and social workers began calling Dawn for advice.

"We offered a series of 10 trainings and, at that time, the system was not doing any education or training for foster families," she said. "They would just do a home study on the foster families, and that wasn't enough. There was no preparation. We had to kind of change the whole system, but it was hard and it came from without."

Dawn unintentionally became a leader in a nationwide movement to reform adoption laws and the foster care system. Advocates began organizing an annual conference to share their successes and lessons learned.

Over the course of her career, Dawn has won several awards in recognition of her work, including the Jackie Kennedy Onassis Award, and was named the 1985 Child Advocate of the Year by the North American Council on Adoptable Children. In 2002, she was given the Congressional Angels in Adoption Award and then-Gov. Angus King declared June 22 of that same year to be Dawn Degenhardt Day.

Be sure to check out Dawn's memoir, [*It Was Meant To Be – 5000 Plus 9 Adoptions*](#), which she co-authored with non-profit leader and child welfare advocate Tim Younes.

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Michael Langenmayr
Development and Alumni Coordinator
Foundation for Portland Public Schools
(207) 842-4637

Portland Public Schools Alumni & Friends · ME 04101, United States