



The Greatest Gift

The tragedies and triumphs of building a family through adoption

by Christie Judson • photos by Gord Goble

Love, hope, openness and family – when it comes to the Christmas holidays, these are the things we cherish most.

For adoptive parents Carmyn and Mike Brandner, however, these four words take on an extra special meaning that they say signifies a gift so “loving and selfless,” they are both humbled and honoured by its immensity and grace.

And although the couple’s story begins with emptiness and loss, today the proud parents of two adopted girls, ages two-and-a-half and two months, say their life is not only full, but “bursting at the seams” with happiness – a

message they hope will help others who are considering the path of open adoption.

The Brandners’ quest to have a family began approximately 10 years ago. After trying unsuccessfully for three years to conceive, they turned to fertility treatment. Although they were advised their chances were low, their last attempt at pregnancy was a success. Sadly, however, at 18 weeks gestation they were told their baby — a son, whom they named Owen Michael — would not survive more than a few days after birth.

“We never found out [what was wrong] because we didn’t want that to be what defined him,” said Carmyn. “After my

water broke, I went into normal labour. He passed away right at birth. We got to spend the whole night with him. We had pictures taken. Our parents saw him. We had a plan in place because we knew we were going to be saying goodbye.”

Although they had previously dismissed the idea, four months after their devastating loss, the Brandners began the process of adoption through Hope Adoption Services, a non-profit society in the Fraser Valley that specializes in open adoption, a child-centred form of adoption in which the biological mother or parents and adoptive family know the identity of each other.

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“There is no such thing as having too many people to love your child...”

“They have been amazing,” Carmyn said, acknowledging that, in the beginning, the idea of open adoption “scared us right off.”

“They don’t try and sell you on adoption,” she said. “They tell you the truth – the good stuff and the hard stuff.”

Despite their initial fears, the Brandners committed to building a family through the open adoption model. Just a few months after registering with the agency, they received word that they had been chosen by a birth family and were about to become parents of a baby girl. She was born exactly nine months and eight minutes after Owen passed away – a fact that is comforting to both sets of parents.

“We think he went and picked her out,” Carmyn. “He had eight minutes to choose her and then he sent her down for us.”

In regular contact with the birth family – including parents, grandparents and great grandparents – the Brandners say the moment they received their daughter was “the most incredible experience of their lives.”

“We had just let go of a baby nine months before, so we understood how difficult it was for them and how much incredible, unselfish love it took. We took it as such a huge responsibility because we knew how much love went into their choice and how much trust they were putting in us. I don’t think there could be anything more humbling than someone choosing you for something so incredible.”

A year and a half after their daughter was born, the Brandners were thrilled to receive a call notifying them they had been chosen again. This time, they would welcome a two-week-old boy.

However, they soon learned first-hand about the “hard stuff” that had been discussed in the early stages of registering for adoption. Six days after bringing him home — before the legalities had been finalized by the courts — the birth family terminated the adoption and, for the second time, the Brandners lost a son.

“We knew there was a risk,” said Carmyn. “But we’re not the kind of people that can hold ourselves back from loving a baby so we loved him with our whole hearts. Losing him was devastating. It was almost harder than losing Owen because, to some extent, people understand death. We had a funeral. We saw people grieving along with us. But with this baby, we pretty much felt like we were on our own. There were people who

Adoption IN NUMBERS

- In 2006/2007, the B.C. government placed 266 children into homes.
- In that same period, 1,307 children were registered for adoption, with 42 per cent of Aboriginal heritage. Forty-five per cent were female and 55 per cent male.
- In 2006/2007, 24 per cent of the children waiting to be adopted in the province were older than 12.
- In 2010, 1,946 children were adopted internationally by Canadians. The majority of those children (472) came from China.
- There are two avenues for adoption in British Columbia – through the Ministry of Children and Family Development or through a licensed adoption agency. There are six licensed adoption agencies in B.C. – a complete list can be found online at www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/adoption
- There are currently more than 1,200 B.C. children and youth waiting to be adopted.

tried to understand but I think it was easier for them to believe that maybe this wasn’t as hard for us. I think they just didn’t want

to believe this could happen to us twice. In some ways, though, it was harder because it’s not the kind of grief that you know how to process.”

Although the Brandners were crushed, their faith and respect for the process of adoption enabled them to not only continue to pursue building their own family, but also to help others by sharing their story with prospective adoptive parents.

“Building a family through adoption is not something that happens instantly,” said Carmyn. “It’s a journey [and] part of the open adoption concept is being open to talking about things.”

This fall, with just nine days notice, the Brandners received an early Christmas gift: another baby girl. While they have “opened the door” for contact with the birth family, they said their number-one priority is to show “deep respect” for the people who have given them the gift of a child and to honour all birth families for their difficult choice.

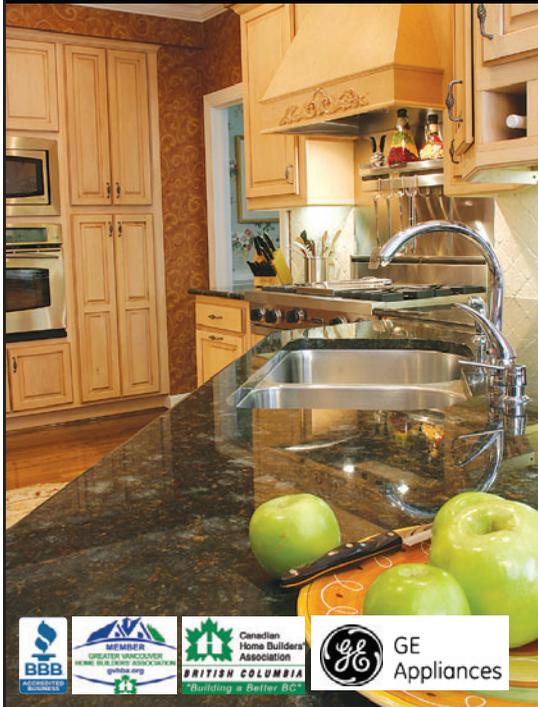
“I hope that people will understand what a loving and selfless act it is to choose adoption,” said Carmyn. “There are so many families out there who are waiting for a child to love and who have open hearts and are willing to open their lives up to open adoption. It’s not like it was in the past. It’s not like you are saying goodbye to your baby. It doesn’t have to be that way.

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Connection to roots...

"We imagined building our family in the ordinary way. Now we're so grateful because, in our minds, we've built our family in an extraordinary way and it's so much better than what we had planned for ourselves."

"In the beginning, nobody really knows what to expect," said Mike. "I think people have a hard time wrapping their heads around it but, really, it's so simple because there is no such thing as having too many people to love your child."

"Ultimately, having a connection to your roots is important and that's the thing we want to celebrate with our kids. I think when the birth families see the relationship developing, they're like, 'Wow, this is not what I imagined - this is fantastic!' But for everybody, it's different. It's a relationship you figure out as you go."

Although Carmyn says they are grateful for every moment, she is especially looking forward to the holidays this year. "Christmas is a time when we realize what a gift our family is," she said. "Our family was literally built through the gift of adoption. Because people chose us for their children, we now have a family. We're just so happy." ☺

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