Giving thanks for more children: Opinion



Three-year-old Aldanrod Dudley and his newly adoptive family gather to have to have a portrait taken during a reception at Rutgers Law School in Newark. Aldanrod is one of about 40 children officially adopted by 29 families during Essex County's annual Adoption Day on Nov. 14. November is National Adoption Awareness Month. (Robert Sciarrino | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)

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By Star-Ledger Guest Columnist

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By Carl Golden

Most everyone has a favorite Thanksgiving holiday memory ---- a family gathering, a trip to visit relatives or friends, a vacation.

Mine took place Nov. 26, 1998 in a place called Maoming in Guangdong Province in southwestern China. There was no holiday feast or decorations, no acknowledgement that it was Thanksgiving --- one of the most revered holidays in the United States.

It was midmorning as my wife and I stood with 10 other nervous couples in a dim, stuffy, sparsely furnished waiting room in a state-run orphanage, waiting for our number to be called. To the folks in charge, western names were unpronounceable so a numbering system was used.

The journey that had brought us here, halfway around the world, had begun more than a year before --- 12 months of paperwork, criminal

background checks, fingerprinting, disclosing all manner of personal detail to satisfy government bureaucracies in two nations. All of that was followed by an 18-hour flight, another two-hour flight on a Chinese airline, and a two-hour ride on an ancient bus that seemed to have just two devices: a horn, and a gas pedal which the driver leaned on frequently and with equal vigor.

Suddenly, the orphanage director called our number and handed us an infant of little more than a year old, head shaven to her scalp (to prevent any contagious diseases, we were told), wearing a two sizes too large T-shirt and a cloth diaper. She neither cried nor smiled as my wife carried her back to our waiting bus, the first leg of our trip back

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to the United States.

0 Tweet 39 Share 0 <u>3</u>+ Share 0 Today she is a beautiful 17-year-old, a junior in high school who just received her license to drive. She's an honor roll student who likes to shop at mall clothing stores with odd names that seem to have nothing to do with the merchandise they sell.

A cell phone with capabilities to tap into the rest of the universe has become a permanent part of her life, as it has for her contemporaries. I watch in awe as her fingers fly over the phone's keypad, sending a text message or responding to one.

If she's noticed boys (and, I'm certain she has), she hasn't let on and, so far at least, none have shown up at our front door.

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She's since been joined in our household by two sisters, one brought here from China in 2002 and another in 2006. They, like her, spent the first months of their lives in orphanages under the care and attention of young women who devote their lives to them and, as we have witnessed, become emotional when it comes time to part.

All are naturalized citizens now; not Chinese-Americans, but Americans. They are proud of and embrace their Asian heritage, understanding they were adopted into our family and responding openly and without hesitation to questions from their school mates about where they are from and how it is they came to be living in New Jersey.

We've dealt as candidly as we can to their questions about their native land and, though it's often difficult, have explained that who they have at one time or another referred to as "my Mom in China" wasn't able to keep them but was, we were sure, happy that they are loved and cared for.

They have five siblings --- my biological children --- who have welcomed each of them without reservation, joining in celebrating their birthdays and holidays.

There have been 16 Thanksgivings since our first trip to China and all have been special in the same way as any family observes it.

For me, though, each time I pull up my chair at the dining room table, a part of my mind drifts momentarily some 10,000 miles away to a dim, stuffy, sparsely furnished room in China, waiting to hear a voice call: "Couple number eleven."

Then, I give thanks.

There have been 16 Thanksgivings since our first trip to China and all have been special in the same way as any family observes it. Carl Golden is a senior contributing analyst with the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey.

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