



2011-2012 Annual Report

When hospitality works,
people feel at home.
When adoption works,
children feel at home.

-Jim Gritter



Rex, open adoptee.

“Hospitious Adoption” offers vision, guidance.



Shari Levine

“Hospitious Adoption”, Jim Gritter’s latest book has given our agency a new paradigm for exploring open adoption in greater depth. It has served as a beacon of hope, a light in the distance guiding us forward. Is his vision too idealistic? Not at all. We see these hospitious acts every day. In fact we’ve interviewed adoptive parents Michele Greco and Mike Banker along with

their daughter Carly’s birthmother, Joanna Ames, in order to see how this has unfolded in their lives.

Q. What were your relationship expectations of the birth/ adoptive family prior to meeting them? How have those expectations changed as you have deepened your relationship with one another?

Michele: It was always my expectation to have as open a relationship as possible. I visualized and hoped for total comfort and ease with our birthmother. After we first met, it seemed pretty great and comfortable. Now, we consider each other family, plain and simple.

Mike: Over the first year we found ourselves to be so comfortable and at ease around each other that the whole family dynamic just came together kind of organically.

Joanna: I really liked them after meeting them and hoped we would remain close, but I don’t think I could have dreamed how close we would all become.

What are the necessary components to an open adoption? How do a group of relative strangers become family? It begins with:

- Noticing – the transformative effect of being visible, seen and acknowledged.
- Goodwill – giving the other person the benefit of the doubt, assuming the best and finding common ground.
- Respect – having a sense of who the other person is and having admiration for that.
- Courage – a small, steady courage. Courage to overcome fear. Courage to trust in the person, and the situation, even when you feel the most vulnerable.
- Listening ... really listening. Listen to what’s being said, what’s not being said, how it’s said and what’s between the lines.

Q. What special things do you remember doing to make the other party feel comfortable in the beginning? And now?

Michele: We tried to include Joanna and her parents in big events and also in some of the small everyday things too. I also made it very clear in the very beginning that I wanted and needed the phone, invitations etc. to go both ways. I anticipated that as a new mother I would be tired and not always on top of everything and I wanted to be sure they would do their part to keep the connection happening. They did, but were also quick to let us know that they understood and expected that there would be times when we would need our space as our little family and they wanted to know that we would take what we needed.

Mike: We treat them like family and we are completely comfortable being around each other. As with any relationship it requires work and maintenance but bringing more people into your life in a situation like adoption just increases your capacity to love and care about someone.

Joanna: I think it is funny to use the words “visits” when talking about our family. I can’t imagine my life without Mike, Michele, and their families.

Jim Gritter reminds us that when hospitality works, people feel at home. When adoption works, children feel at home. After years of watching open adoptions take root and flourish, it seems the concept of “feeling at home” in one’s open adoption adeptly captures what all constellation members are seeking. What could be more welcoming, accepting and comforting than an open adoption relationship in which all the participants feel at home?

Hospitious adoptions embrace everyone equally. “We/they” thinking simply can’t exist when everyone feels at home. In this model, nobody has rank on anyone else. This is vital because if a “we/they” split exists between the birth and adoptive families, it will exist in the child as well. It will make integrating the two halves of the child’s identity- the genetic half and the adopted half- very challenging. Open adoption is about connecting families, not replacing them because they are both invaluable to the child.

Q. Do you treat your open adoption partner as you would any other friend or relative? How is it the same or different?

Michele: Yes, I believe I do. Although in some ways it is different because we share a deep connection in how we feel about Carly. A sort of deep parental pride and love that one can only feel about their child.

Mike: In many ways our relationship with them is closer than a friendship and different than our relationship with our relatives because we have gone through a powerful process of intentionally creating a family relationship around the birth of a child. You realize early on when you have a child that you become closest with the people in your lives who truly love and care about your little one.

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Joanna: *I honestly see them more than I see my direct relatives.*

What stands in the way of hospitality? Fear. Fear of rejection, imposition, change, commitment, lack of control, judgment, failure. Fear is a normal human reaction. But open adoption gives us the opportunity, and the challenge, to face and move beyond our fears, rather than becoming entrenched in them. How do we overcome our fears? By seeking education, communication, support, self-forgiveness, trust and vulnerability. By having the courage to be vulnerable with the birth/adoptive family, we can see how interdependent and connected we truly are.

I want - never will I have the “what if” types of questions. I have gained a big, loving family.

Q. What guidance would you give to new open adoption participants as they begin their relationships?

Michele: *Be honest with yourselves and everyone involved about your feelings and then trust that your heart is big enough to do this, until it gets just easy.*

Mike: *It is so important for your adopted child to know her story and be comfortable and proud of it. Keeping a relationship with her birthfamily is paramount to that, so be as welcoming and hospitable as you know how to be with them and you will make everyone feel at home with the relationship.*

Carly and family: Mike, Joanna, Michele (l-r).



One cannot be a birthparent, adopted child or adoptive parent apart from the contributions of the other. These connections become a fundamental part of each person's identity.

Q. How have you personally benefited from involvement with your child's birth/adoptive family? What have you gained from them or learned that you would not otherwise know?

Michele: *I have grown in too many ways to name or possibly even identify at this one time in my life. Becoming a parent is an experience that expands one's capacity for love. Becoming a parent by way of open adoption, does this too, but exponentially. I have learned that love overcomes fear. We figured out pretty quickly that we had the most important and amazing thing in our lives in common. It is hard to get much more connected than that.*

Joanna: *As an adopted child myself, I think it's been wonderful for me to be able to see her practically whenever*

Q. What benefits to your child have you noticed as a result of them witnessing this connection between you and the other family?

Michele: *Carly is vibrant, sensitive, comfortable and at ease with herself and her family, her whole family.*

Mike: *Carly is a very confident and secure little girl. I think to feel secure every child wants to know they have family around them that loves them.*

Joanna: *She has a really big family that loves her to pieces.*

What are the children of open adoption entitled to? For the child, “home” is a state of mind that makes room for all of the people she counts on and loves. The hospitious home welcomes and celebrates the wholeness of the adopted child. As Jim Gritter enthusiastically states, “We can do this!”

Sharon Levine

Executive Director

Online marketing, outreach, partnerships expand message reach.

At Open Adoption & Family Services we remain fully committed to staying at the forefront of providing quality options counseling and adoption planning services. As we stay true to our mission and maintain our high ideals, we continue to be cutting edge leaders in the field of adoption. As the times have shifted, we've focused on finding new ways to articulate our message and make our services more accessible. **Significant resources were allocated to the following efforts in 2011-12.**

Increased Access for Expectant Parents

- **Text Contact.** We've made it easier for expectant parents to contact us in a way they often communicate -- via text. Signing up for Google Talk allowed up to open a text line for them that's prominently posted on our website. This text option is also included in our new materials that are widely distributed to expectant parents.

OA&FS National Reach

- **National Infrastructure.** We are one of the only adoption agencies in the US that is pro-choice, welcomes a diverse pool that includes same sex adoptive parents, promotes adoptions with ongoing visits and provides lifelong counseling. We've built an infrastructure that enables expectant parents nationally to access our unique services and are now seeing positive results from these efforts. In July 2012, which marked the beginning of our fiscal year, we had 33 expectant parent calls, which is our second highest monthly call count in 12 years.
- **Partnerships.** Through our work nationally with the Adoption Access Network, we are also exploring a partnership with Planned Parenthood and the National Abortion Federation (NAF). This would also bring an increased number of expectant parents to the agency.

Database Management

- **Customer Relations Management Software, (CRM).** The agency transitioned to Microsoft Dynamics CRM software which enables us to more efficiently and effectively manage the abundance of client data.

Online Presence

- **Search Engine Marketing, (SEM).** Our new SEM consultant has trained us to use SEM as an effective tool to amplify our online presence. This includes placing campaigns of sponsored advertising listings within Google search results using Google Adwords. As a result, our website traffic has increased, especially in the area of new visits. This campaign has also contributed to the number of expectant parents contacting the agency.
- **OA&FS Website.** Our site reinforces OA&FS' position as a leader in the open adoption field and provides current, accurate and relevant information to those seeking

pregnancy counseling and/or considering open adoption. We are also beginning a redesign process that will further enhance the website user experience for expectant parents.

- **Search Engine Optimization.** The OA&FS website content is continually managed to ensure our website appears at the top of organic search engine results for searches involving "open adoption", "pregnancy counseling" and "birthparents".

Events

- **Jim Gritter.** We were honored to bring the "father of open adoption" to Portland in April, with more than 80 members of the OA&FS community coming to hear him speak.
- **Pregnancy Options Dialogue.** In February we hosted our third annual workshop for pregnancy counseling professionals in partnership with Planned Parenthood and Backline. This event drew 22 attendees.

Outreach Mailings

- **Direct Mail.** Targeted mailings were sent to OBGYN doctors and hospital social workers. Plus, we've produced a convenient form for ordering new materials for the professionals that serve expectant parents. These promotional mailings reached more than 3,000 contacts.
- **Collateral Materials.** Our brochures, fliers and OA&FS DVD are continually being updated and distributed through community outreach presentations to professionals working with pregnant or parenting women/couples. These were also distributed by request and via vendor tables at conferences throughout the Northwest related to pregnancy and reproductive health.

Social Media

- **Social Media Advertising.** Social marketing is a significant platform for reaching woman ages 16-30, which reflects our expectant parent demographic. We have two ongoing Facebook display ad campaigns that appear daily. The first features waiting families, the second highlights our educational videos. Engagement with our Facebook page and ads equate to an ever-widening audience via social media.
- **Social Media Presence.** The agency actively posts content in Facebook and has a YouTube channel.

Print Media

- **Yellow Pages Advertising.** Most of the agency's advertising resources have been allocated to Google and Facebook ads, however we continue to have basic listings in directories throughout Oregon and Washington.
- **Innovative Video.** Our agency videos, DVD, online profiles of waiting families and video introductions of participating families provide expectant parents with a unique window into our open adoptions and waiting families.

Service statistics: the numbers behind the mission.

July 1, 2011 through June 30, 2012

Open Adoption & Family Services (OA&FS) is a pro-choice nonprofit adoption agency. We provide free, all-options pregnancy counseling for pregnant women and couples in Oregon and Washington. We plan open adoptions at no cost to birthparents. We offer lifelong counseling for our clients. We've completed more than 1,250 open adoptions since we were founded in 1985.

Placements

- During the last fiscal year, OA&FS completed 37 adoptions. Last year, our agency completed more domestic adoptions than any other agency in Oregon or Washington.
- On average the agency completes 37 to 60 adoptions per year, with a 10-year average of 49 per year.
- 22% of adoptive families were parenting other children at the time of placement.
- Adoptive parents and birthparents spent an average of 4.5 weeks in adoption planning prior to placement.

OA&FS staff has ...

- Responded to 247 calls from women facing unplanned pregnancies.
- Hosted events attended by 737 members of the open adoption community including a birthmothers' retreat and our first birthfathers' gathering.
- Delivered presentations about open adoption to 1,579 professionals and students.
- Distributed over 5,000 copies of the DVD "Exploring Reproductive Choices and Open Adoption" to service providers in Oregon and Washington.
- Shared over 5,000 brochures about open adoption as an alternative to state adoption with professionals who work with clients at risk of state involvement.

Clients

- This fiscal year there were an average of 80 families waiting in the prospective adoptive parent pool.
- Overall, adoptive parents waited 16 months before being chosen by birthparents.
- Gay and lesbian adoptive parents waited an average of 18 months before being chosen by birthparents. Placements with gay and lesbian families totaled 10 (27% of the total).
- Last year, adoptive parents and birthparents agreed upon an average of two visits per year in their legally-enforceable open adoption agreements.
- Birthparents received an average of 9 weeks of counseling prior to placement.
- Birthfathers signed consents to adoption in 68% of placements.
- The average age of birthmothers was 24 years old, 28 for birthfathers and 39 for adoptive parents.
- Of the children placed, 89% were newborns.
- Of the children placed, 46% were female and 54% were male; 46% were Caucasian, 43% were of mixed ethnicity and 8% were Hispanic.

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Love our volunteers!

Thank you to the following individuals and organizations who contributed their time, talents and expertise to support the agency's mission last year.

Roy Abramowitz	Karl Kesel & Myrna Yoder
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Thanks to all the OA&FS community members who donated their photographs in this year's annual report, the agency website and other publications.

If you would like to volunteer or donate photographs, please contact us at info@openadopt.org.

Why do you give to OA&FS?

Karen Enns, an OA&FS board member, has supported the agency in many facets over the past few years – as an active board member, a donor, and as a critical community partner. Karen has spent her life working with families faced with difficult decisions. Pregnancy support, family planning, abortion, and programs aimed at helping people become better parents have been the focus of her professional life.



In her current work as Program Director for the non-profit, The Next Door, Karen manages two programs that are closely aligned with the work of OA&FS. She oversees their New Parent Services program and their Families First program. Healthy Start/Healthy Families is their core program. Their Mission Statement: Opening doors to new possibilities by strengthening children and families and improving communities. We envision a supportive community where all children and families are safe, healthy, and valued.

Karen's interest in OA&FS was piqued several years ago when she needed an agency to do some training on options counseling and adoption. Linked to us through a Healthy Start contact who was then an OA&FS counselor, Satya Maness, Karen was thrilled to learn about the agency. "Adoption isn't something people think about everyday," she said, "And I want to do what I can to make sure people know about it." She sees OA&FS as providing a critical link and options for families involved or at risk for involvement with the public child welfare system. "This agency empowers people to make decisions that are best for them, and therefore, best for their child. I am very impressed by the core values OA&FS embraces: truthfulness, honesty, and transparency." Karen went on to state that she deeply appreciates how the agency has no fear. "You trust and believe that the right outcome will occur, no matter what that outcome is," she said.

Karen continues to show her support for OA&FS by providing ongoing education about the agency's services to other community partners as often as possible. She was recently asked to provide input to Oregon's Department of Human Services on how they could improve their services. Partnering with OA&FS was at the top of her list. Although change in some systems occurs slowly, Karen is an advocate who won't compromise her beliefs and will continue to tirelessly advocate for clients to have ALL their options. Thank you Karen for your ongoing efforts on behalf of so many families! ■

Thanks for your generous support of Open Adoption & Family Services!

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