



**Open Adoption & Family Services, Inc.**

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*OA&FS: A great addition  
to your address book.*

## Keep OA&FS in the Loop

As the natural gathering place for the OA&FS community, we are able to practice our hospitiousness skills every day. It's like being the house on the block where kids know they'll be

offered Popsicles, the largest minivan in the carpool or the yard with the baby-friendly dog. (P.S. We love it!)

Because of this important role, our staff strives to keep current information for every OA&FS family.

In April, Program Manager **Suzie Williams** launched a new database that allows the agency to smartly manage these many bits of data.

But our database is only as good as the content in it. **Please let us know of any changes to your mailing address, phone numbers and email addresses. Simply email [info@openadopt.org](mailto:info@openadopt.org).**

This allows us to stay up-to-date and continue delivering information to you in a timely manner.

### **What's your story, Morning Glory?**

We're amazed by the abundance of misinformation concerning open adoption that resides on the internet. One of the ways we counter this is by maintaining an online library of stories shared by OA&FS families. These first-person narratives give voice to the many benefits of child-centered open adoptions. (You can read them on our website at [www.openadopt.org/about-us/open-adoption-stories/](http://www.openadopt.org/about-us/open-adoption-stories/).)

Have a take you'd like to share? **Stories are welcome from all points of the adoption constellation.**

Please contact Marketing & Development Director **Sally Shuey** at [sally@openadopt.org](mailto:sally@openadopt.org). She'll be very happy to hear from you. ■

## Hospitality in Action

by **Katie R. Stallman, LICSW, CGE**

**Jim Gritter**, a prominent open adoption pioneer, has inspired Open Adoption & Family Services to take a deeper look at our services and the education we impart to families through his latest book, "Hospitious Adoption". In this, he deconstructs open adoption relationships and redefines them through the lens of hospitality. Since the goal in open adoption is for all children to feel "at home" in their families, the adults must first extend a generous hand to one another. We are all familiar with those places and people where we feel "at home." Maybe your home growing up was the gathering spot where all the kids congregated? Maybe you are known for always having room for one more place setting at Thanksgiving? If not, Jim Gritter's description of hospitality leaves room for everybody to be inspired and grow in this area.

We've noticed a steady increase in recent years in the number of birth and adoptive families who need no convincing that openness greatly benefits their child. "It is best for my child and I want to do whatever I can to ensure his or her well-being," we oft hear. What we don't hear as frequently is, "and this is best for me." For many of the parents and extended adoptive and birth families involved, openness truly enriches their lives in completely unanticipated ways. When the adults connect and honor one another, the child feels truly loved and supported. As Jim Gritter relayed in his book, "Making sense of the totality of one's adoption will always be a daunting task, but the unencumbered opportunity to explore and acknowledge all influences makes the project of integration more workable. By countering adoption's undercurrent of separation with a vivid spirit of welcome, hospitality throws open the doors of multi-dimensional at-homeness. On these terms, an adoptive person's embrace of one branch of family no longer carries the risk of alienating the others."

### Have Hospitiousness on Hand

Chances are most of you have heard about Jim Gritter's *Hospitious Adoption* through one of the various ways we have shared his insights. In case you've missed out, this book can be purchased from the Child Welfare League of America, [www.cwla.org](http://www.cwla.org).

### About This Issue

Hospitious adoption is at the heart of OA&FS' mission. In this "keepsake" edition of *Open Page*, Seattle Regional Supervisor **Katie Stallman**

interviewed numerous families to provide our community with a unique picture of how truly hospitious open adoptions work in the real world.



Katie Stallman

### Defining Hospitality

What is it? For the staff at OA&FS, we welcome having a simple term to define those magical moments. As participants who have long witnessed the work of hospitality, any counselor could list countless tender times of hospitality: at adoption planning meetings, placements, and beyond. We never tire of these! For example, one adoptive mother began knitting a shawl for the woman who – although she didn't even know her yet – would soon choose her to raise her child. "This is a way to send her love now," she said. "Talk to the mommies," a rather exuberant birthmother declared to the

... continued on Page 2

Hospitality is not a singular act of welcoming,  
it's an orientation that attends to others.

### Hospitality Skills:

*Goodwill, Respect, Courage.*

### Hospitality Attitudes:

*Noticing, Listening,  
Creating Room, Making Space.*

hospital staff shortly after delivery, referring not to herself but to the two new and uncertain mothers who would soon be taking on a role for which they did not yet feel entitled.

An expectant birthfather saved his meager earnings to treat his unborn daughter's prospective adoptive parents to a home-cooked meal during adoption planning. "This is a big deal," he said. "I want them to know I care." An adoptive father who's also a master griller, decided to host a BBQ for all the extended birth family members immediately following the placement. "We were just getting to know each other. I didn't want them to leave the hospital and go home hungry," he said. A birth grandmother, who discovered her new role only hours before the child's birth, stood by her daughter several hours later to welcome the new adoptive parents into the hospital room. "Come meet your son," she and her daughter said in unison after his arrival as they extended their arms to hug the new parents.

These are the people who set up a "big tent" as Gritter described to make room for and honor the many players in the relationship. This is hospitality in action. Some people naturally set up this large tent, and others must consciously work to create it. Regardless, the benefits to the child are innumerable and easily defined. However, the true surprises are in the relationships that evolve between the respective birth and adoptive families, and whoever else emerges as a vested member of the constellation.

What can we learn from these natural practitioners of hospitality? How do you extend a generous hand while also maintaining your own sense of wellness? We spoke with several families in the hopes of learning more. We extend heartfelt thanks to these open adoption families for their contributions: **Matt, Patty, Alyson, Carol, Mike and Sarah; Christa and De and Amy and Megan.**

## The Art of Making Room — Families in Action

Gritter notes in his book there are both attitudes and skills needed to extend the hand of hospitality. Ultimately, what practicing all these attitudes and skills allows for is the creation of "room." By room we literally mean a physical and emotional space in your heart, in your life, and in your psyche. Hospitality is about truly embracing the new people you are connected with through open adoption so your child sees that unconditional acceptance in action. It is easy for everybody to bond and embrace the child, but what about the adults you add to your family as a result? How is it that the adults can first create this atmosphere?

### **Matt, Patty, Alyson, Carol, Mike, and Sarah – Family to Lucas**

Adoptive parents Matt and Patty exude an unassuming attitude of warmth to all who meet them. Their home is definitely a home for all and a frequent gathering space for friends, family, and now birth family, who are just "family" at this point. After seven years in their open adoption relationship, the intermingling of the families is so extensive, that introductions are no longer necessary when others outside the adoption constellation are present. They visit one another in each other's homes and stay for the weekend, enjoying good food and lots of good conversation. They rent a beach house on the Oregon Coast together every year for a week and include all the grandparents, aunts, and significant others. Patty's mother has visited the birth family on her own and they travelled to join her for her birthday party recently. They do Christmas together for three days starting the day after the holiday generally. Lucas' birth aunt came to town on her own to run/walk a half marathon with Patty. And birthmother Alyson has recently started to visit them independently. How did they get there? Was it just good luck or is there something more to it?

Matt and Patty were thrilled to receive "the call" about Lucas after their annual trek to choose and cut down their Christmas tree after Thanksgiving. Alyson had just given birth. Her parents, Mike and Carol only learned of Lucas' impending arrival after Alyson went into labor. Alyson's twin sister – although she had suspected and



*Adoptive Mom Patty, (left)  
Birthmom Alyson.*

... continued on Page 3

*Hospitality in Action continued ...*

to be really honest. “First and foremost you should be very honest when putting together your bio, that way you find a good match and there are no secrets. I really feel like this clicks so much because the birth family all agreed on us when they read our profile. They knew we sounded like people they could relate to and there were no pretensions,” they said. And Alyson relayed, “It is hard to put yourself out there when you have just had a baby. But keep the communication open and let it develop,” she said. Birth grandfather Mike noted, “...To birth families: be open to the relationship and whatever it is going to be. Talk about your expectations and your involvement. But don’t be too pushy or overbearing. Let it progress. And for adoptive parents: just make sure you are willing to have more people in your child’s life.”

Christa and De advise to “view it all as an adventure.” They appreciate that their open adoption adventure has allowed them to learn things, meet people, and have experiences they are certain they would not have without Murphy’s birth



*Lucas with Birth Aunt Sarah and her partner Brad.*

family. Christa also relayed that some adoptive parents she has known put up too many boundaries and too many barriers in the relationship to “ensure safety” and then wonder

why they never see their child’s birth family. “I think it is because the birth family is scared off by that,” she said. In their view, you have to meet people where they are and not wait for them to function in a way that is more similar to you. You can find common ground with just about anyone. “There isn’t a right or wrong way to be” they said.

Amy noted that although in many ways the relationship she has with Maren’s birthmother, Megan, has evolved pretty easily, it started with very open and respectful communication. If she could provide any guidance, it would be to have A LOT of empathy for one another, and then work hard to support each other through that empathy. Megan added and normalized that fear and awkwardness are part of every relationship and that all relationships will have their challenges, but that the vulnerability that underlies those challenges is critical. “This is what leads to honesty, growth, and a life that is enriched,” she said.

Megan hopes all birthparents can move away from fear and stigma, while also embracing that life is bittersweet and complex. “That is real and that is what makes it life,” she said. To adoptive parents Megan advises, “Be real. Be honest with yourself. And know this takes measurable integrity and security.”

### **Keeping the End in Mind**

The dance of hospitality undoubtedly has many gifts and requires many skills.

It is not for the faint of heart. But as Jim Gritter recently reminded the staff at OA&FS, the ultimate goal is for the children to feel “at home,” and for the child to truly “adopt” his parents. Yes, the birthparents make the decision to place their child. And then the adoptive parents actively accept placement of the child they have been entrusted with. And then these adults intentionally welcome each other, love each other, and sometimes exasperate each other. But the final task lies in what the child will then grow up and tell himself or herself AND tell the world. Will theirs be a story



*Birthmom Megan and Maren.*



*Murphy with Adoptive Parents Christa (left) and De.*

wrought with loss, insecurity, and a sense of limbo? Not quite in one family, and not really in another? Or, will these children resoundingly tell us that they are home? I think Lucas, Murphy, and Maren will tell us that yes, they are home. And hopefully they will look to *all of their parents* as the people who made that possible. ■

*Katie R. Stallman, LICSW, CGE worked as an agency counselor from 2001 to 2008 before returning in January of 2011 as the half-time Seattle Regional Supervisor. She also independently facilitates the Bringing Baby Home workshop for adoptive parents.*

relayed that her mother likely never felt entitled to be her mother, because she didn't have the opportunity to hear directly and continuously from Amy's birthmother that this role was indeed one she should receive fully. With that background, Amy was able to fully welcome, appreciate, and see the necessity of Megan's presence. The greatest gift Amy has received through her open adoption with Maren, is Megan's very clear endorsement of her as a parent. "When Maren falls down and cries, Megan picks her up and hands her over to me, saying you need your mama," Amy said. "She makes me feel more confident that I am the one truly parenting Maren," she added.

Amy relayed that the ease and graciousness with which she and Megan interact began almost immediately. "We each gave to each other pieces of the things we have lost," she said. When she met Megan a few days before birth, Amy felt an instant connection.

There was immediately deep communication about the complexity of emotions both were feeling – and grief and loss were definitely part of those conversations. "We both openly talked about how we were jealous of each other," Amy said. From her perspective, it felt amazing to be so real about it. Amy noted that through those intense conversations, both were able to offer some things to the other

in the coming days and months that neither thought were possible. For example, Megan initially anticipated wanting the labor and delivery experience to be her own. She was surprised when her water broke that the first person she called was Amy. Megan felt it natural to include Amy in the whole experience, a reflection of the general flow and ease of their evolving relationship. "She was so generous with me," Amy said. Megan added, "It wasn't a power struggle. It was right for me share that experience."

The hospitality they show to one another continues and Megan marvels at how included she feels. There is a big photo of Maren with her birthmother in Maren's bedroom. Maren and Megan each have the same stuffed penguin, which Megan brings on her visits - a symbol of their connection even when they are apart. They share birthdays, Mother's Days, and occasionally other holidays with one another. And visits often include Megan coming up for a long weekend. "She isn't a guest that we have to entertain.

She just goes with the flow," Amy said. And Maren at age two was speaking about her adoption with uncanny clarity, since she had witnessed both Amy and Megan having seamless conversations about it so many times before. Megan knows absolutely that Maren is completely secure with her parents, while also feeling her deep commitment powerfully. There is no competition, no fear, and clear agreement that they are all vulnerable, but in it together. And Amy feels like she has gained another sister. She said there is clear understanding and security between all of them that this is a lifelong relationship. Maren seeing both her mothers "on the same side" provides security to her in a way that is profound. Amy sees Maren having the freedom to ask questions and explore her own fears in a way that is definitely atypical of such a young child. Megan echoed the benefits. There is so much fear, shame, and stigma that accompanies being a birthparent, and she no longer feels alone in it. "Amy has helped me go through this loss and



*From Left: Brother Liam, Birthmom Megan, Adoptive Parents Amy and Bill, Maren.*

see the beauty in it. Knowing and seeing them makes me feel so valuable," she said. Megan too feels like Amy is an older sister, and that she and her husband are people who are totally encouraging and accepting of her.

"I feel like an adult

with them. They respect me, honor me, and that helps me cultivate my own sense of worthiness," she said. During their visits, after the kids go to bed, Megan cherishes the late night talks with Amy. "Those are some of the best times in my life," she relayed.

### **Words of Wisdom**

How does one strive for a relationship that grows, evolves, and is rooted in hospitality? As always, the values inherent in any successful open adoption relationship were mentioned by our three families - Honesty, communication, empathy, respect, compassion and flexibility to name a few. And now, with the unveiling of Jim Gritter's new book, hospitality is right at the top of that list.

Matt and Patty encourage new prospective adoptive parents

*... continued on Page 7*

asked – learned about Lucas post-delivery. To say that this family was in total shock is an understatement. A close knit group, they each dropped everything to welcome Lucas and support Alyson. An adoption plan was discussed on day two. When all were asked to review prospective adoptive parent profiles, they all chose the same family. Alyson stated her reasons for choosing Matt and Patty were quite instinctual, but said “there was just something inviting about them”.

As the two families connected over the next days in the hospital, expectations were initially shared and plans were made. Alyson had almost no expectations for what ongoing contact would look like. She only hoped for “something,” especially on behalf of her family members who had quickly grown attached to Lucas. Matt and Patty anticipated the “quarterly visits” that they heard were the norm during their OA&FS training. The closeness and the intimacy that has evolved between the two families have far surpassed anybody’s vision of what was possible. All had hoped it would go well, but with nobody having a template for this kind of relationship, they relied on their innate personalities and intuition to carry them through. Sarah distinctly remembers Patty saying to all of them before they left the hospital, “We really want to include you in our life. We will show you.” It was as if Patty noticed all their fears and skepticism and spoke to the heart of it. Matt also had his moment as they said goodbye once Lucas, snug in his car seat, was safely in the car. “We are family now,” he said, as he hugged them all. And they have followed through.

Alyson initially felt hesitant about the contact. “I recognized they were new parents and didn’t want to intrude,” she said. However, Patty and Matt kept gently inviting. One month later Alyson, Carol, and Sarah made their way to Renton from Salem for their first visit. They drove down and came back in one day. Birth grandfather Mike, still feeling skeptical, stayed at home. Patty noted that she and Matt had initially thought they would meet in a neutral spot. But when the time came, they felt Lucas was so young, they just wanted them to come to their house. This set the

tone for the relationship that would soon evolve. “We all just felt so comfortable at their house immediately. It was natural,” Carol, Alyson, and Sarah relayed. There was also a bit of a crisis with Lucas getting a terrible rash while they were visiting that involved a call to 911 and a visit from an EMT. Sarah noted seeing Patty react so quickly in “mommy mode” and Matt’s calmness made her feel that they were clearly great parents. After hearing about this initial visit, Mike says his skepticism melted. He soon went for another visit and understood what everybody was talking about. Hearty endorsements from all have continued ever since.

Alyson indicated that Patty and Matt continue to do an excellent job reaching out and assuring her they value her presence, even after seven years she appreciates that. She’s just now starting to visit more on her own, without the rest of her family members present. And Alyson and her family tell Matt and Patty all the time how much they love



*Left to right: Birth Grandfather Mike, Birth Aunt Sarah, Birth Grandmother Carol, Adoptive Dad Matt, Birthmother Alyson, Lucas.*

them, and how glad they are that Lucas is their child. From birth grandmother Carol’s perspective, making these relationships work is about a good fit, but it is also about something more. “It takes the right combo of people to make it really work. But I do think some people go through it and just follow the rules, but they don’t do it with their whole hearts. Matt and Patty did this with their whole hearts,” Carol said. And Matt and Patty adore

all of them. Patty stated, “Lucas benefits so much by all of the love he gets and by seeing the unconditional love that both families have shown. He has brought us all together and I do believe he knows this inside. I can’t think of a child more loved by so many people as Lucas. It’s been the most beautiful experience we’ve ever had in our lives.”

### **Working with Differences**

Indeed, we readily acknowledge that it is much easier to have a big party under the tent when the players have some things in common. As Jim Gritter noted, “Congruence between birth and adoptive families is desired because it asks fewer adjustments of everyone involved, most importantly the children. Whether they are aware of it or not, most potential birthparents look for commonality as they assess and select prospective adoptive parents for their children. Similarity reduces anxiety in adoption, but

*Hospitality in Action cont...*

as much as we long for it, there are many situations where little is available.” Many of our families repeatedly cite “the match” or “the fit” or the combination of the personalities involved for their success. However, when even there are few similarities, some of the attitudes and skills of hospitality practiced by our families can be cultivated and nurtured in any relationship. A person does not have to be the same as you to feel empathy, to provide validation, and to communicate with “dazzling clarity,” as Gritter calls it. And sometimes people have to know when to not communicate everything you feel! The bottom line, our three families inherently know that open adoption is about connecting families, not replacing them. They each operate from a place of acceptance and welcoming, rather than fear.

### **Christa and De – Mothers to Murphy**

Like these other families, adoptive parents Christa and De’s home in Olympia is a warm, gathering space for many. When Christa and De were waiting in the prospective adoptive parent pool, they made the counselors and their fellow cohorts feel “at home.” Adoptive family gatherings were not complete without Christa passing around some of her homemade baked goods. You could also always count on Christa and De to reach out to the new families who recently entered the pool and “show them the ropes.” And even now, four years into their open adoption relationship, they are avid participants in the open adoption community, noticing all the new folks and extending a gracious ear or words of support. They built some lasting and amazing friendships during their time waiting, and those relationships continue to flourish and provide the many children in their circle a great sense that, “this is all just normal.”

However, when De and Christa received the call about Murphy’s birthmother, several facts were clear. They and the birthmother they would soon embrace had some stark differences: culturally, racially, socio-economically, and

with regards to life experience. She was only two years younger than Christa and De, had other children already, and had many distinct barriers and challenges in her life. It appeared that the hard knocks she had been dealt had created a very necessary protective barrier around her. Not too many people are allowed into her world. However, through Christa and De’s absolute and total clarity that this woman was now family, they somehow managed to get a seat at her table. They engage in family gatherings in varying combinations every couple of months and go on a lot of “adventures” to stores, restaurants and parks. “We definitely look like a strange family when we are all together and get some stares,” they laughed, “but we are a crew”. Yet Christa and De embrace these “differences” and note that all that is required is some creativity and patience.

De and Christa relayed that when scheduling visits with Murphy’s birthmother they typically have to call several different relatives and dial several different phone numbers before reaching her. Often she has moved and they are traveling to a new neighborhood to find her. And sometimes when they arrive at her home for a visit, she isn’t quite ready to receive them. “It is a process,” Christa and De said. They prepare Murphy by saying “We’re going to see if we can visit with your birthmom. She might be there, she might not. Let’s go see!” They emphasize that they love her and want to spend time with her. In this way, they are able to share interesting meals, birthday celebrations, and regular

visits with Murphy’s birthmother and many members of his extended family. Do their visits mimic typical interactions you might observe at the homes of Matt and Patty, or Carol and Mike? No, not quite. But the

same qualities are there. There is warmth, affection, and an appreciation for all the characters that make up this family. Christa and De noted that there are some issues they are not in agreement with. Certain lifestyle choices are challenges. However, they clearly believe that they aren’t the only ones who get to set the tone of the relationship. “She is our family,” they said emphatically, “so we do what we need to do,” they said. And as Murphy’s birth mother has invited them into her world, as chaotic as it may be at times, she fiercely protects them when they are her guests. Out of



*Murphy with Adoptive Parents De (left) and Christa.*



*From left: Christa and De with OA&FS friends Ryan and Izzy.*

respect for her, specifics are not included, but Christa and De definitely feel under her protective wing when they are with her. “She would never endanger us or Murphy. We trust her”.

### **Hospitality’s Unexpected Gifts**

Another certainty all three families we spoke with shared was their sense that these new relationships have been hugely beneficial not only to the child, but to the adults. They each have made new friendships, had new experiences they would not otherwise have had, and relish in the unique personalities of all involved. They also bear witness to the budding security, certainty, and ease with which they see their child navigate the two respective families. All felt the beauty of what they were involved in as a result of open adoption was too profound to even articulate.

“We have gained ENORMOUSLY from involvement. I can turn to them and ask about, for example, if Lucas has an allergy, or about his personality traits. It’s been such a great resource to ask them important questions and it’s been a huge benefit to Lucas to have this family in his life. He knows them as family and I think that is why it’s made him such a secure person. He knows he is loved and there are no secrets,” Matt and Patty said. Alyson said she feels so lucky to know people as generous, caring, and fun as Matt and Patty. “They are role models to me,” she said. Alyson hopes to build a life much like the one they have. Mike added that he has gained more family members, “As much as people would like to replicate it, it is difficult. It is who we are and who they are. We are family. I love Matt and Patty like my own kids. I can’t explain what happened. Matt and Patty have just been so open and accepting.” Carol feels like their family is now complete with the addition of Matt, Patty, and Lucas. “It is like we have been together our whole lives. I can’t tell you how blessed I feel. This is the most beautiful thing I have ever been a part of.”

### **Amy and Megan– Mothers to Maren by Adoption and Birth**

Amy and Megan, the final women that we spoke with, were two women who had some clear expectations for what they were hoping for in an open adoption relationship. Amy, adoptive mother to Maren, knew that she wanted there to be a lasting relationship that would just feel like “family.” Raised in a closed adoption, Amy ultimately chose to search and find her birthmother as an adult. Extremely well-versed in the benefits of openness in adoption, when she and her husband were unable to successfully carry another birth child to term, Amy looked no further than open adoption.

For her, it was absolutely critical. Amy believes that there are almost more benefits to an adoptive parent than there are to the child.

Equally intentional in her approach, Maren’s birthmother Megan, knew she was seeking something above and beyond the norm in openness. Initially working with another agency, Megan was stunned to learn that openness is still looked upon “as a concession” for birthmothers in the adoption community. This didn’t fit her vision and, as she learned and spoke with some different practitioners, she knew that a relationship could be more meaningful. Her presence she felt was vital, not an “extra” she should feel grateful for. Megan hoped to be an integral part of her daughter’s life. In her search for a family, she wrote, “From a family I do not expect perfection, but am looking for openness, love, and trust. The decision to adopt has been most difficult, but in the end inevitable. I love her so much and so absolutely and know she deserves more than I, on my own, could provide. I have found some peace in the idea of an open arrangement, knowing that I can be a positive, supportive adult in her life and continue to love her actively and unconditionally even when I am not her primary caregiver. If you were to raise her it is my wish that we could grow a relationship of love and trust that could redefine family. She is my heart which I would entrust to your safe keeping.”

Megan found many families unresponsive to her introduction. Once connected to OA&FS and soon to



*From Left: Adoptive Mom Amy, Maren, Birthmom Megan.*

Amy and Bill, she began to see the reality of her vision was possible. In Amy’s family of origin, she recalls her adoptive mother talking fondly about her birthmother and talking positively about adoption, but that there was some kind of an unspoken threat or fear underneath it all. Amy, who is highly sensitive and intuitive, undeniably felt this. She sadly

*... continued on Page 6*