

## This decades-deep open adoption thrives on close-knit family relationships.

*By Ally Simone, Counselor*

When Laurel and Stitz adopted their daughter, Kaya, in 1996 they knew they were forming a family that was bigger than just the three of them. What they could not have predicted was how their bonds with these new family members would strengthen and deepen over time to become some of the most important and valuable relationships in their lives.

Today, their open adoption constellation includes not only birthparents Megan and Andy, but also birth grandparents, birth siblings, birthparents' partners, and those partners' children from previous relationships. They have faced challenges together, shared their joys and triumphs, supported each other, and done all of the boring, little day-to-day things that every family does.

**Briefly recount your story.**

*Kaya:* My adoption story has always been a huge part of my childhood narrative. I used to ask for my adoptive parents to tell me the stories over and over again before bed, so my adoption story exists in distinct snapshots in my head. One snapshot is from the first time my adoptive parents and birth mom met; Megan's car wouldn't start at the end of the evening, and my parents were so impressed that Megan dove in under the hood and got the car running. A few weeks later, my parents were driving home from visiting her in Portland for Mother's Day when she went into labor. Since there were not cell phones in 1996, they didn't find out until they got all the way back to Seattle, and then they turned around and drove back in time for my birth.

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*Adoptee Kaya on her first birthday with adoptive parent Laurel, birthparents Andy and Megan and adoptive parent Stitz.*



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**Laurel and Stitz:** We remember feeling a little nervous about the birthmom who had chosen us, and then when Megan walked in we had a face to put to the name and it became real. We spent two weeks getting to know each other, going back and forth from Portland to Seattle and spending time with Megan, Andy, and their families. We were honored to be present for Kaya's birth. The placement ceremony was powerful. Because Andy was only able to arrive shortly after Kaya's birth, Stitz decided to give him the single turtle earring he had been wearing because it had witnessed the whole thing. Laurel was wearing a



*"Stitz decided to give Andy the turtle earring that he had been wearing, because it had witnessed the whole thing."*



cherished necklace that had been her mom's, who died when she was a child. After sharing what it meant to her, Laurel gave the necklace to Megan. In the entrustment ceremony, there were also four candles representing the relationship that each of us would have with Kaya, unique and equally valuable. We shared a lot of tears that day. Then as we left the hospital together in one big group, a passerby asked, "Who's the dad?" Stitz nodded toward Andy and said, "We both are!"

**If you could go back in time, what would you tell yourself then about how the process and your progression of thoughts and feelings would unfold?**

**Kaya:** Being open is key. My parents have always shared everything I wanted to know about my adoption story in an age-appropriate way, so I was never wondering about anything or confused. Figuring out what my adoption story means to me and to my family is a lifelong process, but it's a process that has been so full of joy and understanding.

**Laurel:** Something I found challenging was trying to understand how I could possibly do a good enough job as a parent to honor the fact that Megan and Andy chose us to parent their child. Then I was very ill for several years and couldn't parent the way that I wanted to during that time. When I shared my guilt with Megan, she took me in

her arms and said, "You have to let go of that! You were sick and did the best you could!" I didn't understand in the beginning that Megan and Andy would be our most important allies in Kaya's upbringing. Their words of support over the years have meant the world to me.

**Stitz:** There's so much we can gain as adoptive parents, so much we can learn. I sometimes see a mannerism or a smile in Andy or Megan and get so excited because I recognize the same thing in Kaya. I could not have appreciated how much knowing Megan and Andy would help us know our daughter. Megan and Andy are valuable members of my life, not just my child's. Many of us come to love deeply, and to count as family, people we aren't biologically related to, for example your husband, your wife, or your partner. Why should open adoption be any different?

**What are some of your favorite memories and milestone moments?**

**Kaya:** My favorite memories are sharing birthdays with my birthfamily. When I was younger, everyone would come up to Seattle and we would all sit around one big table at the Old Spaghetti Factory. I never felt more loved than sitting at that table. When my sisters were born, they got introduced to the tradition too.

My whole family was able to come to my high school graduation, which was so important to me, as I know it was for them too. When I graduated from college this June, I really hoped that my birthfamily would be able to be there with me. My family was able to make it work for my birthparents and sisters to come to Minnesota. I was so happy to be able to introduce my sisters to my college friends (who all knew who they were), and to show my siblings what I had been doing for the past four years. It was an

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*Adoptee Kaya (center) with adoptive mom Laurel, birthmother Megan, birthfather Andy and adoptive dad Stitz, (l-r).*



*Adoptee Kaya (center) with adoptive mom Laurel, birthmom Megan, birthfather Andy, adoptive dad Stitz, (l-r).*

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amazing experience to connect these important people to a place and time in my life that was so important too.

*Laurel and Stitz:* When Kaya was just three, she and Andy sat on the floor playing Legos essentially *in silence* for two hours; Stitz and I can't stop talking, so it was really nice to see the ways that Andy could be with Kaya that we typically aren't. She loved it! Being at Megan's wedding and attending her kid's plays really stand out too. Another memory, is when we first met Andy, he said he would like to someday come to Kaya's high school graduation. When that day finally came around, it was a chance to reflect on what we had all built together, how nice and easy it all felt. Years later, having Kaya's birthparents and siblings at her college graduation was really meaningful and so much fun. When we talk about our family, it includes Megan and Andy – they're not just “Kaya's birth family,” they're part of our family.

**What about this experience has been challenging or difficult?**

*Kaya:* As I'm getting older, it's challenging to negotiate what it means to be in an open adoption as an adult. My family's adoption story is so positive, but as I went to college I began to navigate the aspects of loss that were still present, even within such a positive experience. I took a sociology class during my junior year about adoption and assisted reproduction that prompted a lot of conversation with my family. In learning about others'



*Adoptee Kaya (center) at her college graduation with birthparents Megan and Andy and birth siblings Cadence and Hailey, (l-r).*

adoption stories, I began to realize perspectives in my adoption story that I had never considered before. When I was younger, my adoption story had always revolved around me, but as I thought more deeply about my adoption story I realized there were so many stories that I did not know. Being able to talk to my family openly about this was invaluable and helped me process the feelings I was experiencing.

*Laurel and Stitz:* We have had such a happy adoption story, that at times it was easy to overlook the adoption related losses. But they are still there and effect each member of the adoption profoundly at different times. As a new adoptive parent I think it can be hard to know how to best support your child's birthparents in the face of their loss. I wish I had reached out to Megan more often when Kaya was an infant, but I was afraid of making her pain worse. I'd also encourage adoptive parents to talk openly about the losses with your child, as it's part of their story and opens the doors for them to express their own loss, which will come to the fore at various junctures in life including young adulthood. Open communication, unconditional love and acceptance of wide-ranging feelings

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are really key in every open adoption.

### How has your open adoption shaped your view of family?

*Kaya:* It has expanded my view of family in a lot of ways. I guess my experience of family is different than other people’s experiences of family, but I would never know that. This is my family. My patchwork family has taught me to love unconditionally and to create community wherever I go. It’s really boundless as to who and what family can be.

### How does your family look different from other families?

*Kaya:* I’m 6’1” and my adoptive parents are 5’5” so when people see me with them they get confused. Otherwise, people probably wouldn’t guess that I’m adopted. When I tell people, they don’t always know how to react, but I always appreciate when people are curious about my family. I love talking about my adoption story because it is such an important part of who I am. My family might look different from the outside but they are so important to me, and I want people to know that it’s okay to ask questions.



*Adoptee Kaya with birthmother Megan at Megan’s wedding.*

other people would call them my “half” sisters, I would always say, “No! They’re my whole sisters!” My birthmom and her husband then had a son, so now I have a brother too. It has been wonderful to be part of their families as they grow.

*Laurel and Stitz:* Megan and Andy becoming parents was a big deal for all of us. It was so wonderful to be able to visit right after the kids were born, and to see Kaya’s relationship with her adorable siblings grow over time; they have such a strong connection. Kaya cherishes all three of them, as do we, and they love and look up to her, their big sister.

### What would you like our culture to know about open adoption and your experience?

*Kaya:* That it’s not confusing. There are so many false media representations about adoption. My “real mom” is my adoptive mom *and* my birthmom – they’re both my real moms. People used to ask if having adoptive family and birth family was confusing, but it’s not at all! Some people have two sides of their family and I have four. I always understood.

*Laurel and Stitz:* That open adoption can be so healthy and normal. It doesn’t diminish the role of anyone involved; it doesn’t diminish the role of adoptive parents, it enhances it. It’s unfortunate that other people tend to view open adoption as a chore. Some people even say, “You’re just lucky that you landed in such a great open adoption,” but the values we hold can be applied in any situation, even the most difficult ones. Engaging in an open adoption is part of loving your child fully. Over time you forget that it’s an adoption story, it’s just a family story. The way you got there just falls into the background and you get to enjoy this amazing thing you’re in – an open adoption family. 



*Adoptee Kaya with birth brother Logan.*

### How are the relationships between birth siblings?

*Kaya:* When I was a really young kid my adoptive parents told me they weren’t going to have another child, and I used to cry over the fact that I wouldn’t ever have a sibling. My birthdad and my birthmom had separated when I was a baby and were both dating other people. When I was ten, my birthdad called to say that he and his girlfriend were expecting. I was really excited to have a sister! Not long after that, my birthmom said she was expecting a daughter as well. They’re six months apart and were born when I was in middle school. We’re really close. When

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