



OPEN ADOPTION & FAMILY SERVICES 2017-18 ANNUAL REPORT

OA&FS adoptees and brothers Henry and Dominic.

*"It's not like we 'feel' like family, or we're
'sort of' like family, we are family and it's
just as valid and genuine as any other."*

- Birthmother Melissa

Pioneer BIRTHPARENTS: GARRETT

The power of choice and validation in open adoption.

by Shari Levine

What are the core components of a genuine and fulfilling open adoption? I set out to identify and explore the unique ingredients that birthparents and adoptive parents bring to the table to create not just a good open adoption, but a great open adoption. I wanted to learn more about how we as an agency can foster and develop those key qualities.

I interviewed two pioneer birthparents, Melissa and Garrett, who 20 years ago invested their hopes and dreams in a new adoption model, called open adoption. Join me as we step into their world, their perceptions and experiences that have spanned the last two decades and profoundly touched the lives of many.

As I interviewed them, I set my original questions aside and followed their lead which uncovered new themes that I hadn't considered. The thread that brought together the stories of Melissa and Garrett, the children they placed and the adoptive parents they entrusted them to, were the elements of choice and validation in their open adoptions.

Interview: Birthfather Garrett

Shari: Can you briefly describe your story?

Garrett: When I was 18 my girlfriend got pregnant. I had moved away so when I received the call, I was quite surprised. I realized what we were going to do wasn't really up to me because I had different choices than my girlfriend did.

She had, as I saw it, three choices: she could have the baby and keep it, she could have an abortion, or place the baby in an adoption. I had two choices - whether I was going to be involved or whether I wasn't.

I felt being involved was the responsible thing to do. We settled

pretty quickly on doing an adoption as the best option for us in the situation that we were in. We also had a discussion about the differences between an open and a closed adoption. This was the first time I had ever heard of an open adoption. There are many adopted people in my immediate family and in my extended family, but all of those were closed, so that was what I was familiar with.

Initially I was not excited about the idea of an open adoption, but my girlfriend was more astute than I was about the emotional realities of the situation. She talked to me about open adoption, I read some books and materials on it, and ultimately came around to the idea. I knew that this child would realize that somewhere out there was a birthfather—it's not like that can be kept a secret or should be kept a secret in my opinion. I felt that I should give the choice to the child about how he wanted to approach the situation, and if it were closed I would be taking that choice away from him.

Ultimately we settled on doing an open adoption. We found the agency and a family that we really liked. I will never forget going to their house, sitting on their couch talking with them and me just feeling as awkward as I have ever felt, and just thinking "oh please, I hope they like me, I hope they don't think I'm weird". We talked and apparently I didn't scare them off with my awkwardness - we chose them and they chose us.

Garrett and Fin: THEN AND NOW.



After Fin was born, we did the placement and I thought of that as the end of the story – I now realize it was just the beginning.

He is now 19 years old, the same age I was when he was born, which is absolutely bizarre. It's been one of the great joys and privileges of my life to be involved like I wanted to be, to see him grow up and have the things that I hoped he would: a happy childhood and good life.

Shari: So you were 19 and here was this relationship awaiting you. How did you feel about it?

Garrett: I was very anxious about what was going to be expected of me. I was already profoundly ashamed of not being able to give him what I thought he deserved and to some extent, I wasn't sure what I had to offer. He was going to have a father, who I admired and respected and had chosen in part for that reason.

Shari: You initially moved away to go to college and returned to the area, right?

Garrett: I came back to Portland in 2010. Fin was 11 at that time when I permanently moved back to the Northwest. Before that I was in school or having other adventures around the world. Every time I was in town I would always make a point to go see him, and really enjoyed doing that. Once we were back in the neighborhood so to speak, it made it a lot easier to do that.

Shari: What are some of the values that the adoptive parents brought to the table that made this work? There certainly are birthfathers that move away and never come back. What are some of the ways in which they welcomed you, and made you feel intrinsically valuable and accepted?



Fin (green shirt) with birthfather Garrett, adoptive mom Joell, brother Max, birthmother Katherine and adoptive dad Hans.

Garrett: His parents have always encouraged me to come and see him, and made me feel like I had something to offer him and the family as a whole. Over time I'd like to think that I lost some of my awkwardness and now when we're together it feels much more natural.

Shari: Often in open adoptions, the adoptive moms are very welcoming and gracious. They tend to reach out to the birth family and actively include them in their lives. I have a theory that it takes the adoptive dad also reaching out to help the birth dad feel like he's has a place in the family too.

Garrett: Yes, I agree. I remember when I took Fin out for lunch years ago and his father said to me, he just glows after he's with you. That really helped me. To see that Fin was happy and having the life that I thought he deserved, and that he wanted me to be a part of it, and that was important to him, made it all come together for me.

Shari: What other milestone moments have you had?

Garrett: This moment has always stuck out in my mind. It was Fin's 7th birthday party. We were at his house, and because of the nature of open adoption there's a lot of people there – double the amount I guess you would normally have. Fin and I were sitting at the kitchen table and I said, "So Fin now you're seven years old, what are your plans?" And he told me, "Well I'm going to tell you, but you have to guess". So he was writing down hints for me, like an acronym. He wrote T N F. I'm looking at T N F and I am looking at him and finally I say "Okay Fin, I give up – I don't know." And he said "Well, now that I'm seven I'm going to try new foods!"

That story has stuck in my mind, not just because it's a cute story, but because it was really a turning point for me personally. I remember sitting and thinking that what I hoped would happen, actually happened, that he was living a happy childhood in a stable family and trying new foods when he turned seven. Everything that I wanted for him seemed in that moment to be real.

Shari: Like his biggest challenge in life, was to try new foods!

Garrett: Right, yeah he might have to try a tangerine or something!

Shari: Can you talk about the extended family connections and the relationships that have been created through your open adoption?

Garrett: The families have joined together. If I see one of Fin's parent's siblings, for example, it feels like meeting a relative at a family reunion – someone I don't see all the time, but I know them and they're family.

My wife and Joell are friends, they often talk and plan times for us to get together. My mother also is very involved and is integral in arranging things. Fin's birthmother is friends with my sisters, she still lives around here and we see her at gatherings. It feels like a big extended family with people to whom I feel related even though I know there is no blood relation.

Shari: Can you talk about some of those interconnections?

Garrett: Before Fin went off to college, my son Zach wanted to learn to play the drums. Fin is a very good drummer, so for several months we went to his house every Saturday and he'd have his drum lesson with his big brother. Fin came with us when we went to Disneyland. Also my daughter had a gymnastics tournament in Eugene so Fin came with us to that and cheered her on. My daughter and son were in Joell's music class for many years.

Shari: So Fin is at college now. What's he studying?

Garrett: I'm bursting with pride to say, that he was admitted to the jazz program which is very selective. He's a music major and lives in a special dorm with other music students and trundles his big ol' stand-up base all around campus.

Shari: So much has happened since Fin's birth. If you could go back in time, what would you tell your 19-year-old self?

Garrett: I would encourage myself to be there for him and I'd say to myself, "I'm looking back on it now and I can tell you that it will not only be valuable to him, but valuable to you too."

It's been an absolute joy and pleasure to be a part of his life. Every moment that I have with him, to me, is a privilege. I would tell myself to look forward to that because at the beginning – and I don't want to minimize this in any way – there's a sense of loss and a failure.

Shari: Do you think the negative stereotypes in our culture around adoption led you as a birthfather to feel that sense of failure?



Birthfather Garrett and birthgrandmother Lisa celebrate with Fin at his high school graduation.

Garrett: It wasn't the adoption that felt like the failure. And maybe it's because I already knew so many people who were adopted – people in my family, and some of my friends. But I did feel like I wasn't able to do what I was supposed to do – provide a normal stable home and have a job, for example. It was a sobering moment realizing, "Oh my God Garrett, you would not be a good father at this point". That's what really felt like a failure.

Shari: As you saw Fin thrive over the years was that sense of failing him lifted? Did you feel that you had created a family for him and that you are a part of that family?

Garrett: Yes, absolutely. That was part of the pleasure to me – of seeing what I hoped he would have – was the life and childhood that he did have. You have to let go of your ego a little bit and realize it's the important thing for him.

Shari: Do you think the values of inclusion and acceptance you felt from the adoptive parents, were the same core values that guided how they raised Fin?



Fin (in red shirt) with adoptive mom Joell, birthfather Garrett and adoptive dad Hans, (l-r).

Garrett: I do think so. I respect and admire both of them a lot and would even if there were no family relationship between us. They are wonderful people – wonderful parents. Honestly I often

try to model my own parenting, now that I am muddling through it, on the way that they are with Fin.

Shari: How would you describe Fin now: his personality, his traits, what he believes in?

Garrett: He is such a mix of me, his birthmother, and his parents. He's fairly reserved but also a very engaged person. He has a lot of interests, he's very smart in my view – maybe colored a little bit. One thing that I have really noticed when watching him relate to younger children is that he's so good at empathizing with them. It's something I really admire. He's very dedicated, very thoughtful. Like me, he overthinks a lot of things. I see it in my own kids too, "Well dad if dragons were real they would not be able to live in this climate because..." He's very analytical, but also intensely creative with the music career he is pursuing. I like everything about him.

Shari: How has your open adoption experience shaped you? How has it changed your view of family and parenting?

Garrett: It has profoundly affected me in every way. It made me more thoughtful than I might otherwise have been about when I was ready to have my own kids. I really felt proud to be at a point where I could raise kids. For me, that was a milestone.

It's made me more open to interacting with people. Having relationships is something I was very uncertain about at the beginning, and yet I got put into this situation where it was my responsibility to have relationships. Now it's one of the things I am most happy about in my life.

One distinct change is that initially I was opposed to the idea of an open adoption on the theory that it would be confusing and difficult and

weird. Now I have the opposite view – that a closed adoption is weird and confusing.

To see that Fin was happy and having the life that I thought he deserved, that he wanted me to be a part of it, and that was important to him made it all come together for me.

- Birthfather Garrett

Shari: What would you like the world to know about open adoption and specifically this model of open adoption? There's a lot of imposter open adoptions out there, where they're selling openness, but it's not very genuine, and that is apparent in the relationship that follows.

Garrett: I've spoken with women of an earlier generation of closed adoption and from what I've

gathered from their stories, they were given no choice. Every possible choice was taken from them.

I think that this is an infinitely better model. One of the things that attracted me to Hans and Joell, and to this agency in particular, was that the commitment to respect was real. And, the reason I came around to open adoption was out of a respect for Fin and the choices that I would either take from him or let him make himself. I wanted him to make the choices himself.

For me it's absolutely been positive; it's been what I hoped it would be. It's painful, particularly at the beginning. It's a loss that one has to reckon with, but there's a joy in the mourning.

Shari: Do you feel that it was the fact that you did reckon with that loss that enabled you to have this relationship?

Garrett: I do, and I also think that coming into this as a choice is what made it so positive. The respect I felt from his parents and this agency was very important to me. When people are given a choice and make that choice consciously, it's much easier to deal with the loss in that situation. As time went on all the reasons I made this choice turned out to be good reasons. I was very happy about that.



Fin with birthmother Katherine.

Shari: We often hear from the kids who were placed through our agency how powerful it is for them to know that their birthparents hand-selected their adoptive family. They were literally entrusted to this family; it wasn't random at all.

Garrett: Yeah, Absolutely. I'm not surprised to hear that that's important to them.

Shari: Now that Finn is starting to live this independent college life, do you think you'll still have a strong relationship with Hans and Joell? Do you have a friendship with them that is separate from Finn?

Garrett: Yes, I deeply admire both of them. I would be proud to be friends with them and see that relationship continuing. Since Finn is off at college now I think we're all figuring out how things will be the same and different. I'm looking forward to figuring it out.

Shari: Any other closing thoughts or takeaways?

Garrett: For me it's been fantastic in the sense that what I wanted for Finn I got to actually see him get, and still be a part of his life. Moving into the future is one of the most important things that I have in my life.

Shari: Where is everyone now?

Garrett: My wife and I and our three children live in Portland, as do Hans and Joell. I work as an attorney. Finn is going to college in Eugene.

... Continued on Page 7



Garrett with wife Bayra and their children Nate, Zayaa and Zach.

A family is born.

Curious about how an open adoption placement begins? This video pulls back the curtain.

Fin's family participated in a video produced by OA&FS when Finn was 11. In this, his birthparents Garrett and Katherine recount their hospital experiences, and adoptive parents Joell and Hans share how they felt at the time that Finn was born and entrusted to them.

Their stories convey the rich emotion that forms the foundation of their relationship, and the mutual trust, respect and compassion each demonstrates. ■



Watch Video: The Placement and Entrustment Ceremony.

An Open Adoption Timeline: GARRETT & FIN.

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brave

1999

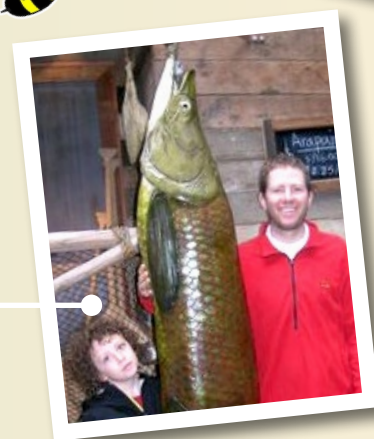


Feeling relieved that we found a family for Fin in this photo taken for a newspaper article on open adoption.

REMEMBER:
RIGHT NOW



Christmas at Fin's house - feeling happy to be included in the festivities.



CELEBRATE
EVERY TINY
VICTORY

At the Oregon Forestry Center - enjoying taking Fin and his brother out for activities.



Back in the Northwest and glad to see Fin more often.



Fun times at Disneyland! Fin was a good babysitter for the little ones.

Feeling proud during Fin's senior year of high school. Things had really come full circle.



Photo Credit: Greg Wytcherley.



FAMILY

2018

Pioneer BIRTHPARENTS: MELISSA

... "Pioneer Birthparents" continued from Page 5

Interview: Birthmother Melissa

Shari: Where did your story start?

Melissa: I was 14 and a freshman in high school when I found out I was pregnant. Initially the birthfather and I planned to parent, and it wasn't until about 7 months into the pregnancy that we decided to consider adoption, but not before we went through many months of trying to figure out what parenting would look like and exploring every avenue and dealing with a lot of pushback from family and friends. The only way I would have considered adoption was through an open adoption.

Shari: What values have guided your open adoption relationship?

Melissa: It's evolved so much over the years. Now I can see how much Greg and Jan as adoptive parents were willing to meet us where we were at as birthparents. They accepted me for who I was and always seemed to genuinely value me and my importance in Brianna's life. They even accepted my imperfections and celebrated those too. We were and are a family: just like any biological family.

Looking back I also think that, I was doing the work of letting go of mothering my daughter and trusting them by releasing her into their care.

Shari: What qualities do you see from the adoptive parents that allowed you to do that?

Melissa: It was their willingness to value our place in her life that allowed me to feel I didn't have to prove myself, or prove my worth.

It wasn't just lip service, they actually walked that walk in terms of including us, and inviting us, and wanting us to be a part of their family. I didn't have to worry that at some point they were going to

exclude me from Brianna's life or from their lives. They were always very encouraging, welcoming and trusting of me—which allowed me to then reciprocate that.

Shari: They seemed to provide their unconditional acceptance to Brianna too, and she seems very secure in her adoption.

Melissa: Yes, she does appear to be quite comfortable in that part of her identity. It doesn't seem to be something that she grapples with at all.

Shari: What do you think people need to come to the table with in order to be successful in their open adoption?

Melissa: I would encourage all parties to come to the table with a genuine sense of curiosity, willingness to learn, and openness.

It really helps when everyone is open to the idea that we all have a

special and unique place in this child's life. The goal, ultimately, is to allow the child to explore all parts of themselves in a safe space and with a family that is loving and caring.

My philosophy is that if we walk through life thinking I, as an individual, am superior to this other human who walks on this planet with me—I just think that sets you up for all kinds of falsehoods and missed opportunities to really learn from other

Seeing how quickly and naturally we melded into one family helped to shift my idea of what it means to be a family and how people create families.

- Birthmother Melissa

Melissa and Brianna: THEN AND NOW.



people. Children can get so much value from so many different people and different experiences in life. Adoptive families can have so much to offer, but that doesn't have to replace something else.

As a parent in general, anytime that you set up a scenario where something is off limits or "we can't talk about it", children rail against that, nobody wants to be told that "you cannot have information about this". Anytime there is a hard stop—people generally don't like that. I don't think children, even from a young age, are any different.

Shari: If you think back to your 14- or 15-year-old self and the ideas that you had about family, how has your open adoption experience expanded those views?

Melissa: Seeing how quickly and naturally we melded into one family helped to shift my idea of what it means to be a family and how people create families. It's not like we "feel" like family or we're "sort of" like family, we are family and it's just as valid and genuine as any other.

Shari: In the beginning did you have a vision, or a hope, of who Brianna would become? How would you describe her now?

Melissa: She is incredibly well-rounded and a genuinely thoughtful person. She's super caring and really compassionate about all people's different experiences in life. She's a huge advocate for equality and human rights and all kinds of things that I couldn't have necessarily wished for her at that time, but now I am just super inspired by what a great person she is becoming and I'm sure that will continue to evolve.

We went to the Women's march together in D.C. It was such a profound experience to have this badass moment with my birth daughter and her friends, who are incredible and coming into their sense of themselves as young women.

Shari: How has your experience as a birthmom impacted your worldview?

My experience has certainly solidified my very strong beliefs that people need to be in control of their own reproductive decision-making because it is such a profoundly life-changing experience regardless of what decision they make.



Brianna with her birthmother Melissa, (l-r).

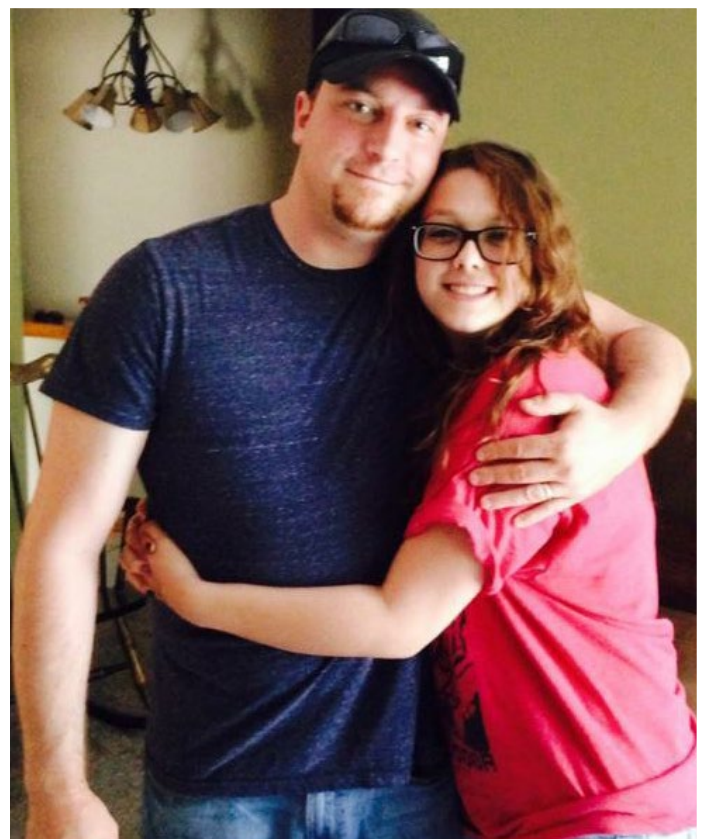
With Brianna, I can say yes I had a pregnancy, it was unintended, and I weighed all kinds of options and ultimately my choice was to place you in an adoption, and you have now lived that experience as an adoptee. We can also celebrate that it doesn't have to be everyone's choice, all choices are valid.

Shari: How has your relationship with the adoptive parents evolved over the years?

Melissa: Early on in the relationship, everything centered around the children. Over the years as Brianna got older, and as her brother got older, there's been times when we visit where the children might not even be there. We came to enjoy one another above and beyond

the children and we shared a genuine interest in what was going on in one another's lives.

Shari: Given the experience that you've had, what would you want to tell people about open adoption?



Brianna with her birthfather Steve.

Melissa: Open adoption can be used interchangeably with so many different types of adoption that I don't believe are genuinely open.

It needs to be entered with this fundamental belief that we all are valuable in this relationship. As soon as you start taking away any pieces of that value system—it becomes a game of Jenga, and the whole thing would just fall apart.

I can say what adoption is not: saving a child from bad parents and being rescued by good parents. That sets everyone up for failure—even if it's called open. It's implied that there's the good guy and the bad guy, and the child is just a pawn in that game, and that's not in the best interest of a child.

A true open adoption is based on the idea of a family—whatever that family may look like -- coming together from a place of intention and making a choice together that is not influenced by ulterior motives or other people's assumptions.

My experience of open adoption is that it is something much greater than just adoption and just the creation of a family, it is really a way of living and a way of going through life in terms of the value system we create.

It needs to start with the mindset of I'm going to enter into this experience of creating and expanding my family beyond the child—by welcoming these other people into my world. We'll all have a really special place in this family.

We're going to set into this big huge adventure together and we will come out of that with a well-balanced child that is loved, comes into a place of their own identity and hopefully can get a little something from everyone.

Shari: Where is everyone now?

Melissa: Brianna lives and goes to college in Philadelphia. Greg and Jan live in Northern Virginia. Brianna's biological father lives in Kansas. My partner Jason and I live in Portland with our three

children. I have a step-son who is 13 and two young daughters who are 5 and 6 1/2 that are Brianna's half-siblings. I work as a Registered Nurse.



The power of choice surfaced throughout Garrett and Melissa's stories and affected the lives of all of the participants in deeply meaningful ways. What is this illusive act called "choice"? Choice has been politicized, but it is simply "the act of selecting or making a decision when faced with multiple possibilities". It is a fundamental right and immensely important to the human condition. Choice gives us agency over our lives and affirms that our thoughts and beliefs matter. The

element of choice is especially essential in adoption, since it is such a life-altering experience.

Garrett, at the young age of 19, recognized that his choices were different from the birthmother's. She could choose between parenting, abortion and adoption. But for him there were only two forks in the road; to be involved, or not to be involved. By being involved he could have a voice in the pregnancy decision, but the ultimate choice was in the birthmom's hands. It also

It really helps when everyone is open to the idea that we all have a special and unique place in this child's life.

- Birthmother Melissa



Melissa (center) with her family: Stepson Tucker, partner Jason, their daughters Bonnie Ray and Mabel Jay and birthdaughter Brianna, (l-r).

An Open Adoption Timeline: MELISSA & BRIANNA.

1997

Our first meeting. Little did I know about what an incredible journey would follow.

Our first visit after Brianna was born. It was a magical holiday week.

A family reunion visit, and Brianna's first birthday celebration.

We really started seeing more of Brianna's resemblance to me around this time.

Celebrating Steve's marriage. Brianna was a very honored flower girl. I was going through a tough personal time and was so grateful for our irreplaceable relationships.

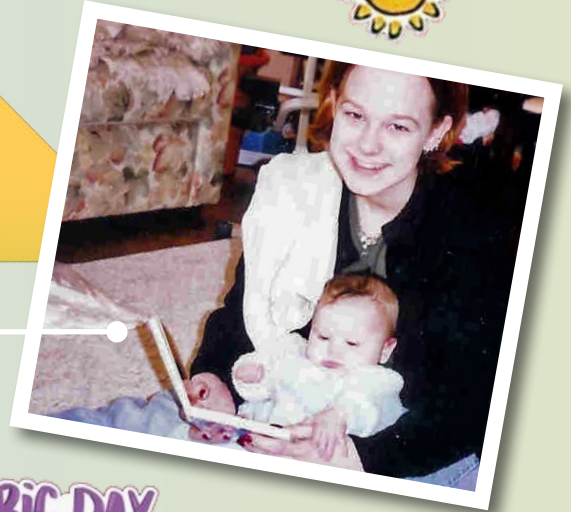
A recent summer visit with much needed breaks for us both.

Women's March in D.C.! What a pivotal moment for both of us. I value this experience so much. It was priceless to share it with Brianna and some of her closest friends.

2018



family TIME



BIG DAY



Smile



ENJOY THE LITTLE THINGS



RELAX



occurred to him that by being involved, he would give his son, Fin, a choice: to have a relationship with him or not.

Acknowledging everyone's right in adoption to make choices requires letting go of control over the outcome. But I suppose if you live long enough you come to the realization that you never had control over the outcome to begin with, especially if it involves the actions of other people. There is something fundamentally empowering about being trusted to make a choice. Garrett had faith that the birthmom, Fin and the adoptive parents would make the best, most thoughtful choices they could.

The thread of choice and intentionality was reflected in every part of their open adoption. Knowing that his choice to be involved was a conscious decision, helped Garrett move through the grief process. Knowing that his parents were hand-selected by his birthparents, allowed Fin to feel he had been genuinely entrusted by his birthparents into the care of his parents. As Fin grew into adulthood, he chose to deepen the relationships within his birth family by teaching drumming lessons to Garrett's children and going to Disneyland with Garrett's family.

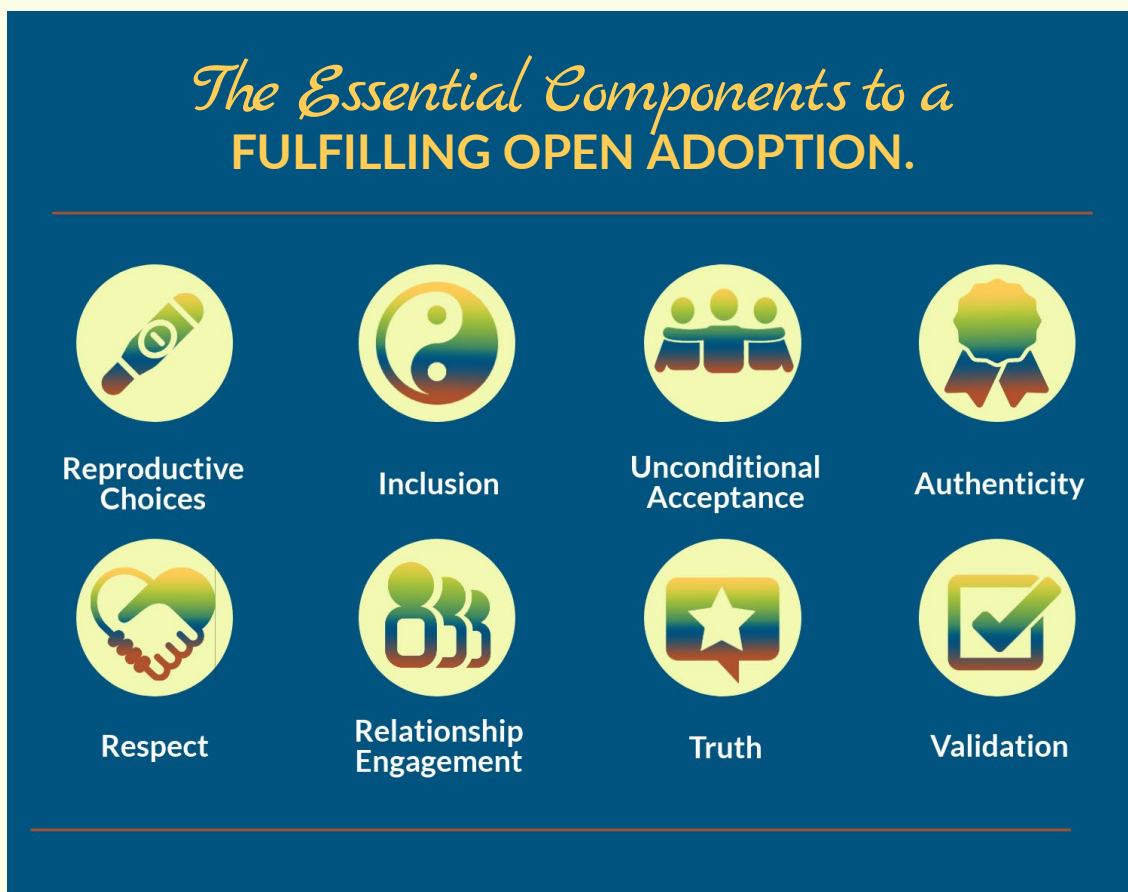
Melissa explored her options thoroughly during her pregnancy. This experience led her to form a strong value around the importance of people having control over their reproductive choices, free from the influence of others. She believes that when

a pregnancy option is framed as the "right choice" it's dismissive of the individual's experience and the fact that none of the choices are easy. Her contention is there isn't a type of woman who chooses to parent, or to terminate the pregnancy, or to plan an adoption. They are all valid choices, and there are women who have made all three choices for different reasons and at different times in their life.

The other essential components to a fulfilling open adoption that were woven into Melissa and Garrett's experiences were inclusion, unconditional acceptance, authenticity, relationship engagement, respect, trust and validation. Validation, in particular seemed to be

a catalyst for the other components. Knowing that she was deeply valued by the adoptive parents inspired Melissa to fully entrust Brianna into the adoptive parent's care. When the adoptive dad shared with Garrett how much Fin cherished their time together, Garrett felt a deep sense of value and worth.

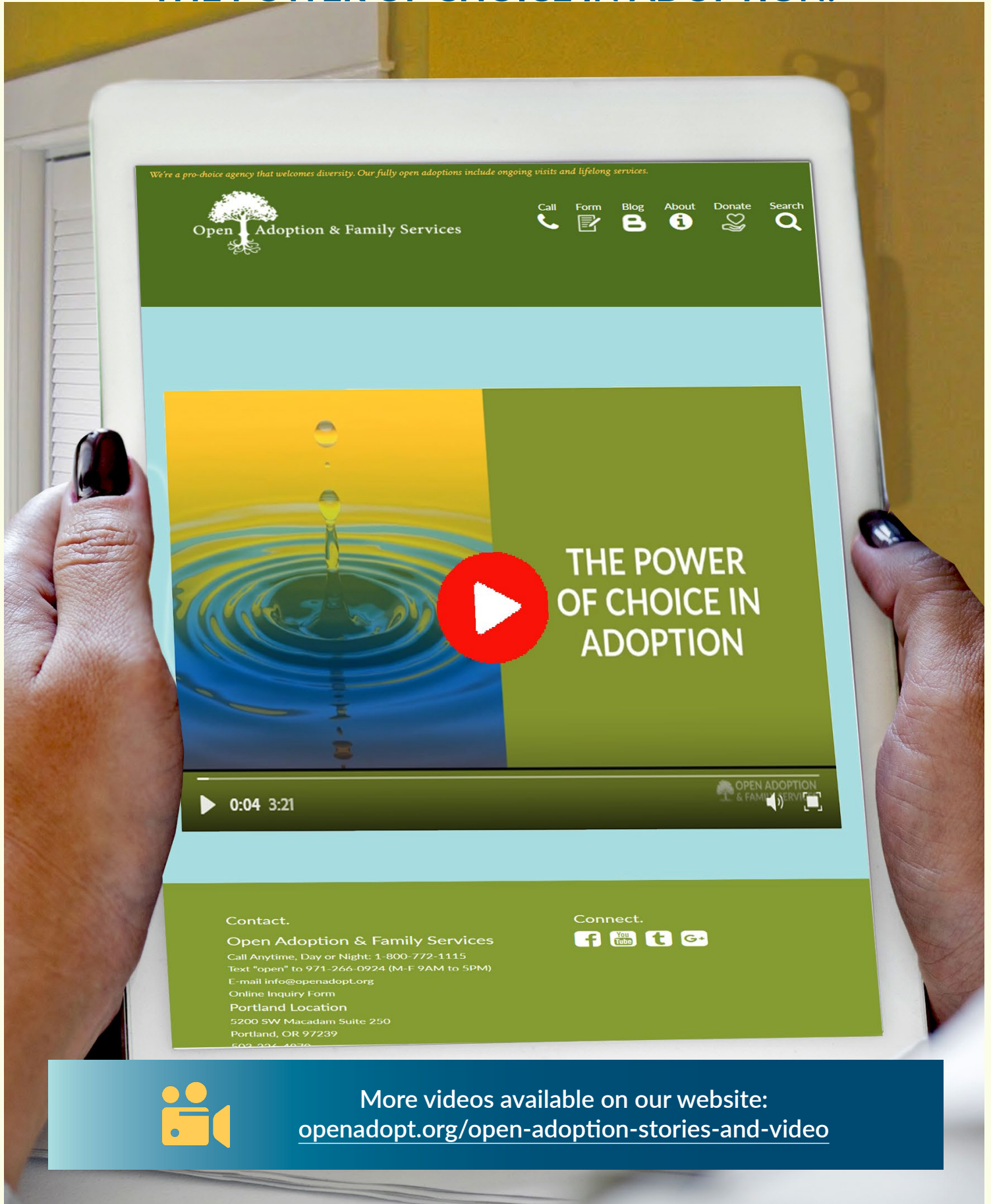
So what makes an open adoption work for all of the players? It starts with the adoptive parents coming to terms with their own losses so they can create an exclusive place for the birthparents. As Melissa says, "Children can get so much value from so many different people and different experiences in life. Adoptive families can have so much to offer, but that doesn't have to replace something else. Open adoption needs to be entered with this fundamental belief that we all are valuable in this relationship."



Once the birthparents see they are genuinely welcomed, respected and accepted, they can plant the seeds of trust. Over the years, this trust blossoms and a family is formed that surrounds the child with love and honors every person's place in their life.

Every open adoption looks different, just like every extended family looks different. When we are guided by the tenets of compassion, trust and validation, we will create something that's uniquely ours. The legacy of these treasured ingredients will inform the child's choices as they grow and carry these relationships into the next generation. ■

Watch our newest video:
THE POWER OF CHOICE IN ADOPTION.



More videos available on our website:
openadopt.org/open-adoption-stories-and-video

Why DO YOU GIVE TO OA&FS?



Adoptive mom
Jen with son
Kismet.

When did you first hear about OA&FS?

I was looking into adoption and called a friend of mine who had adopted in NYC. She connected me with her agency and they recommended OA&FS as an agency with similar values and principles.

What attracted you to the agency?

I went to the two-day seminar for prospective adoptive parents and walked in feeling optimistic but also unsure. There was a square table set up with packets of paperwork and it was all two by two. As a single parent adopting on my own, I had a pang of insecurity sitting by myself next to an empty chair and packet (although maybe there was another single

parent who didn't show?) Then Shari came and opened the meeting and I immediately felt my energy change. There was so much passion and depth in the intentionality of the mission. It felt like someplace that understood this went way beyond a packet of paperwork.

What do you appreciate about the OA&FS mission?

What aspects of the agency's work are meaningful to you?

I felt like open adoption was the most conscious way to go into having a child. There is something incredibly powerful about the idea of the families on each side - birth families and adoptive families - holding space for this child.

When I went forward with the agency, I had friends say, "Oh, I would be so afraid of open adoption, I would just want to run away with that baby!" but all I could think about is how sad it could be to have anyone in the world denying the existence of your child. I knew open adoption was the right thing not just for my baby, but for me.

When Kismet was born, his birth mom was unsure that she wanted to continue the relationship. But in the end we see her every few months, and she follows K on Instagram. We text back and forth all the time. She is making K his birthday cake.

People tell me all the time how much K and I look alike. And it is with pleasure that I tell them "He actually looks just like his birthmom."



Why do you choose to donate to OA&FS?

Obviously I gave to OA&FS in the hopes that more families find each other. But it's not only the magic of adoption. I was so impressed with how OA&FS handled everything in my case. The process was very well thought out and I could feel the pacing of the steps and how they were designed to be increasingly challenging as you got closer to being in the pool. I loved Delphine, my counselor! She was a pleasure to connect with, first during my homestudy then while I was waiting in the pool. It meant everything just to have a human, empathetic face to connect to while you're just flapping out there waiting to be picked - very grounding. This is an organization that knows what its doing!

How has your open adoption experience changed your family's life?

One of the amazing things in our experience of adoption is how many people are touched by it. Kismet has fans at the grocery store and the park where we walk every morning. People love babies, but they are brought to tears by an adopted baby. I knew going into the adoption that I had a good support network, but the number of people who have stepped in to help or

even to just give us love has been phenomenal.

I always tell people I'm not a "joiner" I lean towards introvert! So we haven't done all the picnics or networking events out there and available to us. But actually, so many people have joined us. "How lucky are we??" I tell Kismet all the time ... so, so, lucky. ■



Creative ways to give.

Put Open Adoption & Family Services on your donation list!

We very much appreciate the generous donations we receive each year from community members. Your support is a tangible reminder of the positive and lasting impact our program has on people's lives. Now there are more ways than ever to channel your donations to our agency! Here are just some of the creative ways to give.

Payroll Deductions.

Many employers have giving programs through which you can make payroll deductions to the organization of your choice.



Social Media

Fundraisers. Let your online friends join in the support fun! Use the tools in Facebook and other platforms to create your own fundraiser.



Retail Giving

Programs. Amazon Smile is one of many programs through which the dollars you spend send contributions our way.



Instead of Gifts.

Celebrating a special birthday? Getting married? Use the occasion to make a difference by letting guests and well-wishers know their donation is your gift.



Give Your Time.

We currently have a need in our Portland office for a person to help collate outreach materials. This would be on an as-needed basis, and you can work when it suits your schedule during our office hours of Mon.-Fri. 9-5. If you're interested, please contact Melissa Mullaly, melissa@openadopt.org. ■

The YEAR IN REVIEW.

Building the model for America's next era of adoption.

It's been a busy year here at OA&FS!

As the leaders in open adoption in the Northwest, and as national spokespeople, our advocacy efforts have reached far and wide.

Our ongoing goal is to provide pregnant and parenting moms access to our all options pregnancy counseling and high-integrity open adoption services locally as well as nationally. In particular we want women who are at risk of a state adoption to know about our empowering alternative track.

Outreach efforts impact hundreds of providers.

I'm proud to say that last year we presented to over 1,300 service providers at more than 90 organizations, (see page 23), about our innovative services. According to our Oregon state licenser, the trusting relationships we've fostered within our social service network is unprecedented in the Northwest.

Through our trainings, we've reached hundreds of services providers serving pregnant moms who are exploring their options. By providing them with access to our services before they become involved with the child welfare system, we can make a real difference in their lives and the lives of their children.

State adoption alternative for at-risk moms remains a priority.

Our non-judgmental, non-directive all options pregnancy counseling enables expectant moms to make a fully informed decision about their pregnancy. Moms at risk of a state adoption can access our unique open adoption process in which they hand-select a family and form a close and lasting friendship, much like an extended family. This offers struggling parents a way to keep their child out of foster care, and to stay actively involved in their life.

Our open adoptions embody authenticity, compassion and inclusion. We're redefining what adoption can and should be: a process of entrustment that puts the child's needs at its center.



Shari Levine

This heartfelt process replaces secrecy with transparency, separation with lifelong relationships and shame with transformation. This is the model for America's next era of adoption, and we are immensely honored to be at the heart of it!

Warm Regards,

Shari Levine

Shari Levine
Executive Director

Oregon Legislative Initiatives

State Senator Sara Gelser invited Shari to present our State Adoption Alternative initiative to the Senate Human Services Commission, which she chairs. Shari also served on a legislative workgroup headed by Senator Gelser to write a new foster care



Senator Sara Gelser

reform bill, and a bill to ensure all at-risk moms had access to our open adoption services, that would've been presented at the 2019 session.

This group's work was paused when Senator Gelser shifted priorities to focus on large-scale changes happening in the state child welfare system due to the passing of the federal Family First Prevention

Services Act. Shari Levine and OA&FS board member Steve Stegeman worked with State Senator Sara Gelser to create Senate Bill 1525, an amendment to SB 1515.

DHS Relationship

The Oregon Department of Human Services (DHS) has made significant shifts in the leadership positions over the past year. We're focusing on our successful trainings with Self Sufficiency workers as the most effective way to work with DHS during their time of transition.



As of July 2018, we've provided trainings to Self Sufficiency workers in Hillsboro, Tigard, Clackamas County, Oregon City, Tillamook, Astoria, St. Helens, Coos County, Roseburg, Beaverton, Deschutes County, Baker City, John Day, Ontario, Hood River, Eugene, Klamath Falls, Medford, and Salem.

Webinars

We used the concepts of our State Adoption Alternative pilot training program to produce a new webinar, "An Alternative for At-Risk Pregnant and Parenting Moms". This webinar was created specifically for organizations that work with moms in vulnerable situations who are at risk of having their parental rights terminated. It details how moms can proactively plan

a high-integrity open adoption through Open Adoption & Family Services for her child before the child enters the foster care system.



This type of free, easy to access and convenient educational resource is welcomed by these providers, many of whom are governmental

agencies or non-profits without a lot of funds or time to train staff on their own. Viewers can watch the webinar any time online, or request a presentation in which an OA&FS counselor comes to them to provide additional context and answer questions. They can also download the slides for their own use.

Exploring Adoption? Know Where to Go

We produces a series of tips – "Exploring Adoption, Know Where to Go" – that compares the services of adoption agencies, adoption attorneys and facilitators. This was developed to give expectant and prospective adoptive parents, as well as service providers, an honest assessment of the differences between these types of organizations. It was inspired by a birthparent's



experience in trying to differentiate our agency from another local religious agency.

Community Outreach

Shari met with Scott Lee, the Program Director for the CASA attorneys in Multnomah, Washington and Columbia counties who represent birthparents and kids in the child welfare system. In addition to meeting with Yuko Spofford, the CASA Training Manager for Multnomah, Washington and Columbia counties, Shari and OA&FS Communications Director Sally Shuey met with Robin Christian, Executive Director of CASA for Clackamas County.



In May, OA&FS was invited to be part of the Multnomah County Child Welfare Council and Shari now regularly attends their meetings. This council oversees cross-agency collaborative work amongst child welfare agencies and professionals in Multnomah County. Shari presented to the group in June, on the topic of our Alternative to State Adoption.



Shari met with Tonia Hunter, the Executive Director of Children First for Oregon, an organization that provides legislative advocacy. They invited OA&FS to join their 100+ member children's agenda partnership.

2017 Appeal

Shari and Seattle Counselor Delphine Vieth collaborated to create three composite stories that combine real world details of expectant parents that have accessed our services. In addition to featuring these composites in the appeal letter and on our website, we're also repurposing them for counseling staff to use in outreach presentations. Another feature in our 2017 appeal was the "Exploring Adoption: Know Where to Go" infographic.



Outreach Mailings

Our outreach mailing focus this year was new resources for at-risk moms. In May, 1,830 packages were sent to our entire list of service provider contacts. These are the healthcare workers and other professionals that refer their patients and clients to OA&FS. The direct mail packages included samples of our new "State Adoption Alternative" and "Pregnant? You Have Choices" mini brochures, plus a separate piece that gave an overview of all OA&FS services for professionals.

We've had such great success with our spring mailings to service providers, that this year we've launched a fall edition. This was sent on Nov. 1 in the form of an email that featured our new webinar, "Alternative for At-Risk Pregnant and Parenting Moms".

Planned Parenthood Partnership

In early April Seattle Counselor Delphine had a series of conversations with Planned Parenthood of the Great Northwest and the Hawaiian Islands. She persuaded them to add OA&FS brochures to their health center resources that are distributed to pregnant women who want to explore their options. Outreach Coordinator Melissa Mullaly worked with their affiliates to provide a full array of OA&FS materials.

OA&FS Vendor Tables

Thanks to Seattle Counselor Heather Goldy's boots on the ground observations and guidance, we were able to update our event booth signage in a way that really stands out in an exhibitor table crowd! This new signage debuted at Seattle's School Nurse Organization of Washington conference and will



continue to be used by our counseling staff in more events to come.

National Pro-Choice Adoption Collaborative (NPAC)

In the course of Planned Parenthood Federation of America's most recent website redesign, they increased the number of referral links to our National Pro-Choice Adoption Collaborative (NPAC) website from one to four! Since many local Planned Parenthood affiliate sites redirect to the national pages for adoption information, this is an important acknowledgement of the valuable support our agencies provide to their clients. To recap, NPAC is our collaboration with Friends in Adoption to offer a nationwide referral source for individuals and organizations seeking pro-choice agencies that are high integrity, not religiously affiliated and do not discriminate.

In early summer 2018 we transitioned NPAC's website to a new hosting service and upgraded the design theme to give it a fresh look and up-to-date user interface.

OA&FS in the News

Abbie Goldberg's pioneering study on lesbian, gay and heterosexual couples adopting, the "Transition to Adoptive

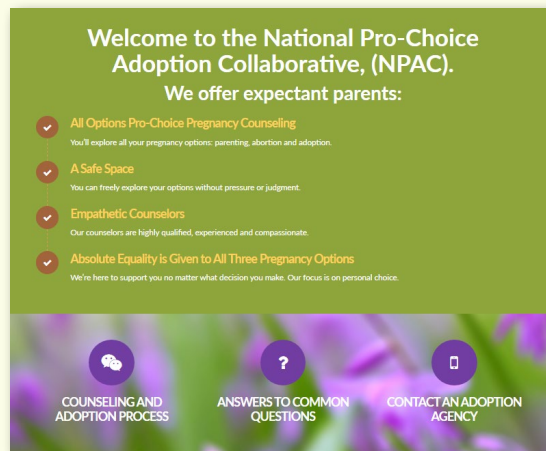


Abbie Goldberg

Parenthood Project" (TAPP), began in 2005. Her team is now re-interviewing as the kids enter kindergarten and beyond. Many OA&FS families were involved in this study. Abbie interviewed Shari, as she is a subject matter expert in the field. Abbie loves our Alternative to State Adoption, and feels

that OA&FS and FIA are truly the last of the pioneers doing relationship-based open adoption work.

The June 2018 issue of The Rational Enquirer featured an OA&FS birthmom. This annual publication from the Oregon Teen Pregnancy Task Force is created by and for teens on a variety of topics regarding adolescent sexual health, and is distributed to over 5,000 schools, health centers and social service agencies in Oregon.



Diversity

The agency formed a diversity committee comprised of staff members and adoptive families of color to ensure that we're meeting the needs of the clients of color we serve. A result of their work is that our Pre-Adoption Seminar now includes new activities, videos, and materials about transracial adoption that more accurately represent the experiences of transracial families. We also changed the structure

of our parameters discussion to encourage deeper reflection in this area. Several waiting adoptive parents have formed a "Waiting Families of Color" group in order to create community, connections, and support.



Social Media

We began using Adobe Spark to build tiles for our social media feeds. Any art we create in Spark can be easily resized into a myriad of formats. This takes the labor out of producing each piece separately so that they display correctly on the different platforms. This is especially important for mobile viewing, which is how the large majority of our expectant parent audiences access the internet.

Posts created in Spark started in January with campaigns that feature waiting adoptive families, exploring adoption and

information meetings. These new tiles continue to roll out in our [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Tumblr](#) and Instagram feeds over the course of months. Our Spark tiles also double as website content. For example, one campaign was created by chunking up the "Exploring Adoption: Know Where to Go" infographic into social-media friendly tips. When grouped together, [these make a great online gallery](#) to peruse or print.

Infographics

To boost our adoptive parent outreach, we created an [infographic that highlights the agency's service statistics](#). This was included in February's Adoptive Parent Bulletin, and is now in Adoption Information Meeting packets for each office. In this way, we emphasize the strength and success of our program with prospective adoptive parents as they're researching their agency choice.

Facebook Groups

A private Facebook group for Seattle Adoptive Parents was created in March. This new online conversation lounge is a popular community place at 50 members and growing! A group for all OA&FS waiting families is also in the works. Already established are birthparent and adoptee groups.

Events

Birthmother retreats were held in Portland, Seattle and Eugene in April. There were 27 birthmothers participating in the three locations combined. Says Counselor Ally Simone "we all shared meaningful experiences through storytelling, honoring grief, building community, relaxing, silliness, self-care, and so much



more." Here's what attendees had to say: "It's such a huge release emotionally that we can't get anywhere else." "It was wonderful!" "Great location, food, activities and massages!"

Online and Print Communications

One of the best ways we have to show what living open adoption really looks like is through the candid photos that our families share. [We use these photos liberally in our website, brochures, presentations, media stories and publications.](#) Outreach

Coordinator Melissa Mullaly sorted through our hundreds of pictures to create a library of those for which we have permission from the families to use in marketing materials.

We've evolved the agency's messaging directed to expectant parents at risk of state child welfare involvement with a [reboot of our State Adoption Alternative brochure](#). The new brochure is smaller, simpler, and includes frank information about the range of choices and what may impact the available options.

Website

A portal section was added to the "[Considering Adoption for your Child](#)" page that points to a [new page for our Alternative to State Adoption](#) to provide online information for at-risk expectant parents

and moms seeking information about their specific choices.

Each [waiting family profile](#) on our website has a link to read their family book, which used to open an online viewer tool when clicked. The code to operate these viewers was provided by the book vendors, and was not always reliable, especially on mobile devices. To counter this we built a work-around that makes reading a book simple and easy on any device – desktop, mobile or tablet. This involved producing [a .pdf document for each book](#), which ultimately proved easier for staff and better for the visitor than troubleshooting the myriad platform bugs caused by the vendors' book viewers. ■



Thank you FOR YOUR GENEROUS SUPPORT OF OPEN ADOPTION & FAMILY SERVICES!

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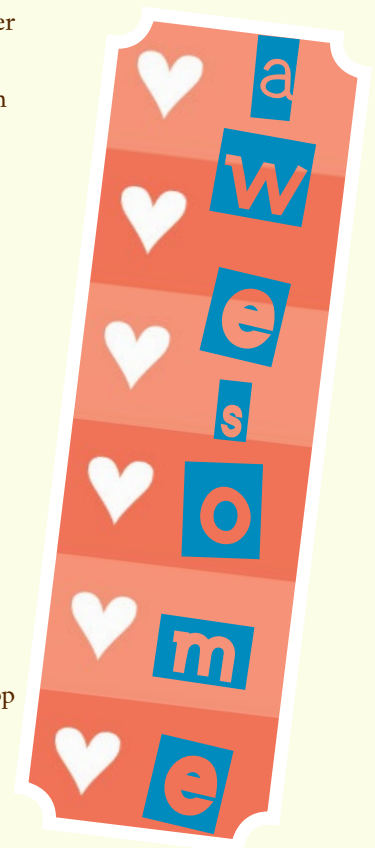
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organization under section
501(c)(3) of the Internal
Revenue Code. Contributions
are tax-deductible to the
extent allowed by law.*

Service statistics: the numbers behind the mission.

July 2015 through June 2018

Open Adoption & Family Services (OA&FS) is a pro-choice, nonprofit adoption agency with offices in Oregon and Washington. We provide free, all-options pregnancy counseling for pregnant women and couples, plan open adoptions at no cost to birthparents and offer lifelong services for our clients. We've completed more than 1,500 open adoptions since the agency was founded in 1985.

Placements

- We complete an average of 45 placements per year.
- 27% of placements were with gay or lesbian families; 4% were with single parents.
- 37% of placements were "last minute"—when adoption planning begins at birth.
- Adoptive parents waited an average of 18 months between entering the waiting families pool and placement.

Children Placed

- 95% of children placed were newborns; 1% were under three months, 1% were between 12-18 months, and 3% were between 24-36 months.
- 22% had no prenatal exposure to drugs or alcohol. 27% had mild exposure; 30% had moderate; and 20% had severe exposure.
- 59% of the children placed were white; 17% had Black or African American heritage; 15% had Hispanic or Latino heritage; 11% had Asian heritage; 9% had Native American heritage; 1% had Pacific Islander heritage (Percentages don't equal 100, as a child can have multiple racial backgrounds.)

Expectant Parents

- Each year, an average of 369 contact OA&FS to inquire about our services.

Birthparents

- Birthparents received an average of five weeks of counseling prior to adoption planning.
- 70% of placements had pregnancy-related expenses at an average of \$1,464.
- Open Adoption Agreements had an average of three visits per year.
- Birthfathers signed consents to adoption in 43% of placements.
- The average age of birthmothers was 26 years old, 29 for consenting birthfathers and 39 for adoptive parents.

In fiscal year 2017-18 our staff has:

- Hosted events attended by 283 members of our open adoption community, including 27 birthmothers who attended the Birthmother's Retreat.
- Delivered 92 presentations about open adoption to 1358 service providers, 94 college students and 71 teens.
- Sent promotional mailings and materials to 2,000 service providers. Of these 297 requested additional materials. ■

Board of Directors, 2017-2018

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Adoptive Parent,
Communications Services
Manager at Clark Public Utilities

President Erik Bergman

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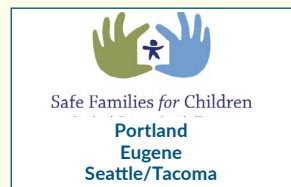
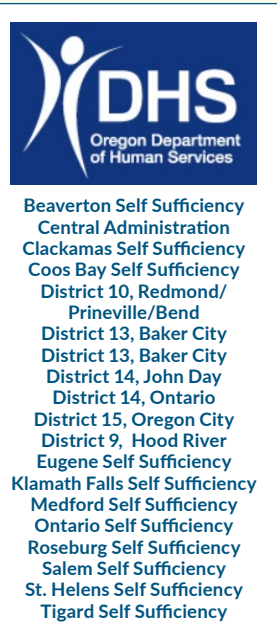
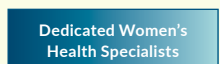
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We appreciate OUR COMMUNITY PARTNERS.

To educate others about open adoption and services available at our agency, OA&FS staff conduct outreach presentations and free trainings throughout the region year-round. In doing this, they form important relationships that benefit all who receive services from OA&FS. These logos represent all of the organizations we did presentations and/or trainings with in this fiscal year!





*Adoptee Eliana with
adoptive brother Liam
and adoptive mom Lisa.*

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