

## Families made from love rather than blood

*Touched by the great need in foreign countries, three Beaverton families expand their clans through adoption*

BY SHASTA KEARNS MOORE

*The Beaverton Valley Times, Oct 8, 2009, Updated Oct 30, 2009*

---



JAIME VALDEZ / THE TIMES

Henry Harris, 16-months, works his way around the living room at his home in Beaverton. Henry was adopted from Rwanda by John and Mandy Harris.

**Henry was abandoned on the side of the road in Rwanda. Sadie was left on the doorstep of a police station in Ethiopia. Miko was born to a family with too many children for their meager resources on the tropical Marshall Islands.**

But today all of these children call Beaverton home, and their three very different adoptive families say this is the perfect place to raise their interracial families.

“Most of the comments we’ve gotten are very positive,” said Mandy Harris, Henry’s adoptive mother, though she concedes: “We get a lot of looks, just because it’s an unusual sight.”

Indeed, one of the many questions Andrew Palau, Sadie’s adoptive father, said he had running through his head before the adoption was: “Is it fair to bring an African baby girl into our white community?”

But as the Vergun family found out, Beaverton is already home to many international adoptive families, including several who share their synagogue.

“We chose moving here in part because we knew what our family would look like more or less,” Pam Vergun said, noting that Miko and her African-American son actually have very few white elementary school classmates.

In third and second grade, respectively, Miko and her brother Isaac don’t seem to particularly notice or care that their parents are white and say neither do their friends.

But as Rob Vergun wryly notes: “The challenge is going to be in middle school. Generally, students are not as diplomatic as in elementary school.”

### **International adoptions are costly**

Nationwide, the U.S. State Department reports inter-country adoption rates are down 24 percent after a peak of 22,886 adoptions in 2004. Experts say the lowered rates are partly due to a bubble in Chinese adoptions that is now abating. Wait times for Chinese orphans have increased to as much as four years, causing families like the Palaus and Harris to look to Africa to adopt.

America World Adoption Oregon/Washington representative Briana Currey said she sees a lot more families looking to adopt out of Africa because of the lower costs and shorter wait times.

Whereas adoption out of China can cost up to \$33,000 and adoption out of Russia can reach \$55,000, adoption from Ethiopia costs between \$20,000 and \$30,000, said Currey, who coordinates adoptions all around the world out of her home in Tualatin.

Currey said the bulk of the cost of international adoption is the cost of traveling to the children's home countries and staying there during the time it takes to get through the court system.

By comparison, she said, domestic adoption of infants averages around \$16,000 to \$18,000. Older children or those with disabilities can be adopted for much less — even for free — through the Department of Human Services.

But those who adopt children from abroad often speak of personal experiences in other countries and the desire to help the least fortunate.

“These children truly would be destitute without a family coming to get them, especially from Africa,” Currey said. “Our struggles here cannot compare with what those people live through.”

### **‘The love is huge’**

The three families The Valley Times talked to said their own experiences abroad greatly influenced their desire to adopt out of the country and create an international family.

Andrew Palau, son of famed Argentinean evangelist Luis Palau, was born in Columbia and met his wife, Wendy, in her home country of Jamaica.

Wendy Palau, who has two biological children, admitted the first week with Sadie was hard to adjust to.

“She didn't smell like me,” she said. One of the many worries Wendy Palau said she had was whether or not she was going to be able to love Sadie as much as her two biological boys. But, she said: “The love is huge.”

Her husband, Andrew agreed: “It hasn't been hard; that's the least of our concerns.”

Sadie's 11-year-old brother Jonathan said he loves having Sadie around.

“She's really nice and she's really fun to play with,” he said. “She gets into my stuff sometimes, but all little sisters do that.”

Sadie's brothers were actually the ones to pressure their parents for another sibling. But after many disappointing miscarriages, and friendship with an adoptive family, the Palaus felt that God was telling them to adopt.

For the Verguns, who are Jewish, the correlation between their religious faith and their desire to adopt wasn't as strong, but Pam Vergun agrees that the winding path her children took to her family feels like part of a greater plan.

The same was true for the Harris family.

“There's a plan,” Mandy Harris said, “and Henry was meant to be part of our family from the beginning of time.

“He's our son,” she added. “A little bit of pigment difference doesn't change that.”

Copyright 2010 Pamplin Media Group, 6605 S.E. Lake Road, Portland, OR 97222 • 503-226-6397