

Crossing borders to find your family, for free

When international adoptee Marcia Engel set out to find her biological parents, she found that the system wasn't geared to helping her—and that intermediary bodies were even exploiting her during her quest to find her family.

Her response was to create a network to give families the opportunity to reunite without having to resort to paying for help.

“I wanted to have this free registration system,” says Marcia. “It is important that adoptees and their families have the option to search for one another. Currently families and adoptees have little information and they always experience ‘bumps’ in the road, dead ends.”

Marcia's newly launched Adoption Angels Network is part of her initiative, Plan Angel, which she created after following a long and torturous path to find her biological parents.

“I found out that I was adopted when I was 11: my mother told me that I didn't come out her stomach. She told me that there wasn't any information on my background and that even if I wanted to look for it, it wasn't possible.”

Marcia learned that she was brought to an orphanage in Colombia at 12 months. They didn't know much about her, not even her birth date.

She was adopted at two years and, by the time she was seven, she had begun to experience some feelings of alienation. “I felt lonely. People asked why I looked different from my sister who had blond hair and blue eyes. I felt angry, as I felt that nature had simply made me look different and they shouldn't question it.”

Marcia began to search the house and found some papers, dated 1981, which said Martha Patricia Ramirez. “As my name was Marcia Engel, I thought that another child had passed through the house,” she explains.



“For many years I thought it wasn't possible to look for my roots. I never imagined that my parents in Colombia would think about me or search for me. I started trying to look in 1999 using the Spoorloos programme. In the end they sent me a letter saying that they couldn't help me. As I didn't think that my parents really thought about me, I didn't go further.”

Marcia decided to try again in 2005 and telephoned the orphanage in Colombia which was noted in her adoption papers. “They sent me back my mother's name and the name of a person in Colombia: the TV correspondent from Spoorloos, who could help me with my search. I had to pay around EUR 600 for the service,” she says.

Within four months Marcia had found her biological family and, after corresponding with them by phone and internet for eight months, she made the trip to the land of her birth.

Meeting the family in Colombia

“It was a beautiful experience but it wasn’t what I’d dreamed about. My biological mother told me her story; that when I was eleven months, she left me with a woman and the government took me from her. The actual story was that she left me when I was two months with a friend of hers; she was only seventeen. The friend took me to the police and I ended up in the orphanage,” recounts Marcia.



“My father found out via my grandmother that I was in the orphanage and went to find me—he already had my older brother whom my mother had given birth to when she was 14 years. He found out that I had already been adopted by people living in a ‘foreign’ country.



“My biological father is very sweet. I see many similarities between him and me. I just thought, it’s not meant for me to have a mother. I felt deceived by my own mother though; she kept changing the details in the story about how I ended up in the orphanage. But still, the most important thing is that I found her. And I found peace within myself about my story.”

Inefficient and corrupt systems

Marcia is concerned that in poor countries like Colombia, mothers don’t know their rights. “There isn’t any government control and the system is riddled with human error. The system doesn’t work for children, it’s corrupt. You’ll see the same thing in other countries,” she says.

In 2007, the Dutch papers reported that Justice Minister Ernst Hirsch Ballin was tightening up supervision on adoption in response to two investigations which showed that the monitoring of adoptions has much to be desired. For instance, in India, one orphanage had arranged 350

illegal adoptions whereby children were abducted or taken from their families under false pretences.

In April 2009, the Dutch government announced that it would make it more difficult to adopt American children as investigations have shown that "small children can easily find homes with American families."

Only this month (July 2009), Minister Ballin has asked the Dutch childcare inspectorate to investigate the adoption of children from China following revelations in a television program that, in one of China's provinces, the authorities force parents to give their children up for adoption. The children are then adopted by foreigners, including Dutch couples. On their papers it is stated that the children have no parents.

Regulations can change opportunities for adoption but "you can also increase your chances of adopting and sooner if you have money or position—think of Madonna, who bypassed the usual routes to adopt her child from Malawi—which is also a disturbing factor in the adoption 'marketplace' where demand far exceeds the supply of children," says Marcia.

Having been involved with activist groups in the adoption field, Marcia sees such organizations as often being "too busy with their politics to do anything that counts for the near future." She would like to see such groups making inroads to convince governments to address their loose regulations governing adoption and child trafficking.

"I don't want to wait for seven years until a debate has run its course," she insists. "I wanted to set up a support network which focused on the basic rights of the child and their families."

Through Plan Angel, Marcia is working with organizations such as www.childtrafficking.org, which takes out lawsuits against governments and agencies when necessary.

"I believe that you need to go to the source where it goes wrong, rather than getting into negative discussions with the parents," says Marcia, who sees that there are ample cases where children have been put up for adoption without their mother's will being taken into account. "If the government claims that you aren't fit to be a mother then you'll lose your child," she says.

Working with Adoption Angels Network

Currently, there are systems "which enable those searching for family to log in and scroll through page upon page where you can read messages in the hope that you can find your parents," says Marcia.

"But my parents in Colombia have never heard of such things. It is important that locals hear about what to do and that it is for free. You can use other media such as radio, local people working in the community and on the street, a postal address, telephone, all of which I have set up in Colombia. It's really informal. Colombia is my pilot country but I am setting up networks in other countries. Currently I am looking to set up a network in Lebanon and the Amma Foundation has supported our cause. "

Marcia invites people who want to help to become a contact person in their country of

residence. “They can help through giving out the word and handing out flyers. Or go one step further and offer a phone service.”

Education Plan Real and Adoption Files Network

Adoption Angels Network is just one of the projects that Marcia is involved with. Another is an education project in Colombia called Plan Real in the city of Medellin. “We want to give information on human rights, because a lot of working groups don’t share information about such things.”

A third project, Adoption Files Network, involves collecting as many adoption files as possible “to make it visible to the world just how many are incomplete in order to muster an appeal to the international court,” says Marcia.

“We would also like to have better adoption care. We are doing this through working with specialists who have a clear view of adoption. We need people who can give you the right legal advice on adoption without the adoptees and families having to go here, there and everywhere. We already have experts working for us in Belgium, Canada and the US, as well as the Netherlands. We have seven people actively working with us in Holland and other volunteers who contribute where they can. We feel that it is more important that you have the expertise to help people than to be an adoptee yourself.”

For the first two years of her life Marcia was called Martha. One day, she suddenly became Marcia. For her, this was the beginning of a long journey to retrieve her identity.

“The child’s rights and right to know comes first,” she says. “I hope Plan Angel helps many children and their families in the future to find their way.”

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