

BIRTH FAMILY

Honoring our son's heritage

I am a proud mom of a 20-year-old young man, Eric, through adoption. As it typically goes, we entered our adoption journey after 10 painful years of infertility. But, without realizing it consciously, I fully grieved the child that my husband and I would create together before we began the

process of forming a family through adoption. What could be more powerful?

In fact, not only am I “OK” that he came to us from another family, I am eternally thankful that I was given the honor of being “mom” to this child. I will love his birth mother, Lisa, to

I could write a book about how our relationship unfolded from there, but for the purpose of this story, I'd like to share just one way we've tried to integrate Eric's birth family into his life these last 20 years, through a birthday tradition.

We were navigating our “open adoption relationship” gingerly in those first visits, and our adoption agency’s social worker was there to help. As it turned out, we needed little help, because while no one knew where the road would take us, we were all connected quickly and deeply by a common love of one beautiful baby boy.

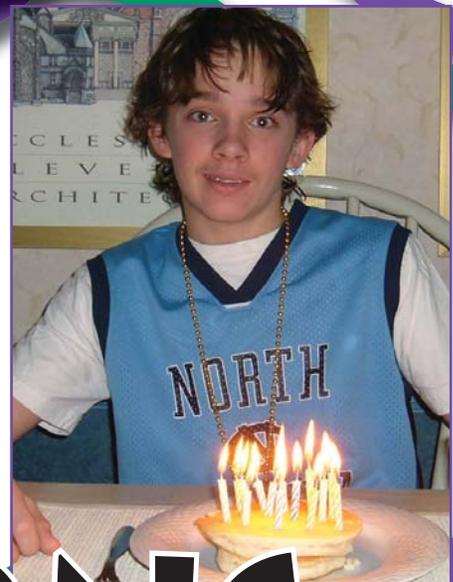
Eric has known many members of his birth mother's family and birth father's family his entire life. We've had a full and rich 20 years together, full of everyday family times together, like baseball tournaments, school programs, golf and his high school graduation in 2010. It hasn't been co-parenting, but it's been an amazing journey of respect and love that has been shared together.

process of forming a family through adoption. In retrospect, this allowed me to fully accept our baby son in 1992 as a full person with a right to his own story and heritage. He came to us from another family and that was completely OK deep in my heart. They created him and we were given the utmost privilege of helping

the moon and back until the end of my days, because she was the first to define me as a mom. The moment we met, she handed me a coffee mug with a balloon that said “new mom.”

“This is for you,” were her first words to me. Eric was 18 days old.

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TRADITIONS

by carrying on a birthday custom
By Linda M. Schellentrager

interests at heart and with kindness we put one foot in front of the other.

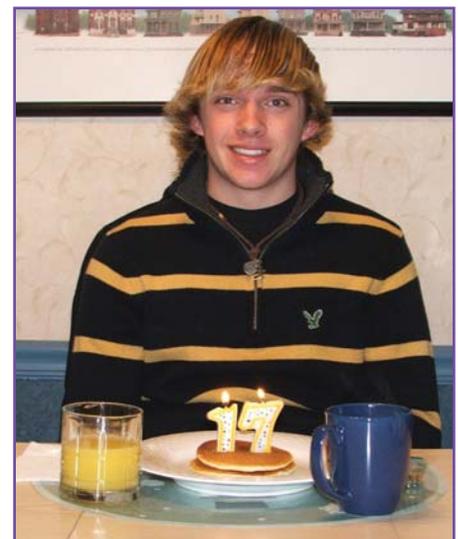
I met his grandparents, his birth father's parents, Karen and Ed, when Eric was 7 months old in August 1992. We had each driven a few hours to a central location to meet. At that point, we didn't know where each other lived, and the agency social worker was again there to navigate. After I got Eric out of the car, I turned to walk to greet them, and realized that Ed was videotaping the moment. The last time they had seen Eric was the day he was born, thinking it may be the one and only time they'd see their first-born grandchild. We all embraced warmly, and as tears started streaming between Karen and me, Ed quickly took Eric over to see some squirrels in a tree.

We settled into conversation quickly and naturally. Karen gently and lovingly walked through a small album she had created for Eric. It contained photos of her 18-year-old son Jason, Eric's birth father, growing up. She touched each picture with a mother's love. Then, she moved onto a bigger album

and she shared family stories about the photos inside. One particular photo made me pause. It was a photo of little Jason with birthday pancakes on his 5th birthday, or so. She shared with a smile, "We have fun with birthday pancakes, sometimes."

Immediately, my mind jumped into an idea that we could continue that tradition with Eric! I think Karen was taken aback a little by my enthusiasm, but I also think she was pretty touched by the gesture.

I grew up with my own pretty wonderful birthday morning tradition, as the fourth of five children. When it was someone's birthday, my parents would wake and gather each of the other kids outside of the bedroom door of the birthday child. Then, we'd count outside the door, one-two-three, and then go bounding in with presents, singing and piling on the birthday person. My birthday was my favorite day of the year because of this tradition and, to honor my parents, it was something that I couldn't wait to continue with my own child someday. Now, we had something to add to that morning — birthday pancakes. How cool!



When the morning of January 13, 1993, Eric's first birthday, arrived, I was so excited to start both of these traditions. As our little guy stood in his crib, waiting for his morning hug, my husband and I came into his room singing with presents in hand. In my usual form, I couldn't wait another moment for a morning hug myself, so I snatched him out of bed and we opened the presents together on the floor. Then, while Eric and Daddy played, I prepared birthday pancakes. I put them on his highchair and then positioned him for the ultimate photo-op for his birth grandparents. I couldn't wait to get that photo developed (the old fashioned way) and mail it to Karen.

We've continued both of those traditions every morning of every year since then, with the exception of one year. On Eric's third birthday, my dad was dying, and I just couldn't muster the energy for it. Later that day, on the same day we'd celebrate mightily for years to come (because it was also my father-in-law's birthday) my wonderful dad, Dick Mueller, died.

On the morning of Eric's fifth birthday, he came bounding into OUR room and exclaimed



in the dark, "Mommy, Daddy, it's my birthday! Come and wake me up now!" With that he turned and darted back to his bed, waiting for the events of the day to begin. His excitement about every birthday morning, especially that one, gives me such a big smile and full heart.

The continuation of both of these traditions, plus the celebration of his shared birthday with his grandpa, has been fully integrated in our most precious family memories. We'd document the moment with a lot of photos

shared. When digital photography became available, I was excited to be able to email a photo to his birth parents and grandparents just moments after taking it.

On his upcoming 20th birthday, which will be on January 13, 2012, I won't be able to wake him with the smell of pancakes. Instead, he will be away from all of us and will be in the middle of Marine boot camp at Parris Island, S.C. I am not sure how I will face that day without my son, but I have the feeling 20 years of photos and birthday morning memories will help me get through it. I imagine I will look and touch the photos with a mother's love, just as Karen showed me, all those years ago.

Linda M. Schellentrager is communications manager of Adoption Network Cleveland, a non-profit support, education and advocacy organization that believes in openness and honesty in adoption. This organization helped Schellentrager feel grounded as her family navigated the openness throughout the years. Schellentrager keeps the "M" in her name in honor of her father.

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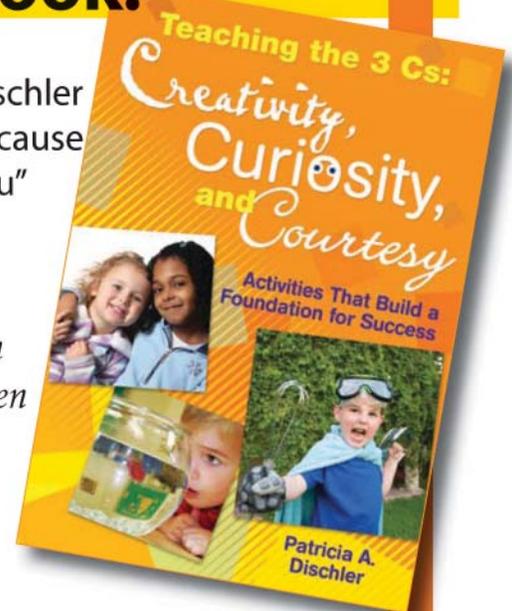
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