

Pact Family Stories

Martha, Mary & Olivia: Making Changes For Our Family



Pact Camp was really different for us last summer. Our first Pact Camp was in 2002. We were new in our learning about the complexities of transracial adoption. We were living in Maine and our adoption agency had spent 15 minutes on the topic, mostly focused on the need to find a hairdresser. We knew right away there were gaps, but we didn't know how to fill them. The internet led us to Pact. When they announced their 1st Family Camp we decided it was worth the investment to send Martha as a scout. Olivia was 2 and a half.

Martha called from the hotel, reading notes over the phone and chanting the refrain, "We have to move." Mary (who had not drunk the Pact kool-aid) had spent the last 5 years building a business in Maine. She was rightfully skeptical.

"Why?"

"Because we have to."

"But why?"

"Because Olivia needs to grow up with more Black people."

Mary aptly pointed out that we hadn't made a sincere effort to connect with the Black community in Maine. We had just moved into our first home after completing a huge renovation project, our family's income depended on a growing local business and we lived 10 minutes from Martha's parents. Before we dismantled everything, we owed it to ourselves to really try and make it work in Maine.

And we did. We started going to an A.M.E. Zion church, we attended every Rainbow Connection playgroup, we hung out at the NAACP and Center for Cultural Exchange and Martha began networking with other transracial families statewide. We even followed Black shoppers out to their cars in grocery store parking lots, where we engaged them in conversation and tried to make friends. We made great progress. We had black friends, both children and adults.

Two years later, all three of us went to Pact Camp. New beginnings were always hard for Olivia. We knew she would be afraid for us to drop her off with the

other preschoolers so we were prepared to take turns attending the adult workshops and hanging out with Olivia. However, from the moment we got to Pact Camp nothing scared Olivia. When we took her to meet her counselors, she never looked back. When we saved a seat for her at lunch on the first day, she sat on the floor with her friends. We thought we would need lots of family re-group time, but it felt like we didn't see her all week. We had never seen her so comfortable in a new situation. She had found her tribe. We had found our family's tribe.

When we left camp, though tears and heavy sobs Olivia said, "I wish we could stay forever." She spoke what was in all our hearts. We had to move.

While we had racially diverse friends in Maine, kind warm people in our lives, every interaction with a person of color was deliberate. It required constant planning and coordination. There was not one Black pediatrician in Maine. We couldn't find a Black dentist or occupational therapist. None of our co-workers were Black. There were only 4 Black teachers in the entire Portland Public School system. And while we attended a Black church, out gay and lesbian parishioners were prohibited from officially joining. It became clear to us: our community wasn't large enough or diverse enough to meet our family's needs.

Mary made a spreadsheet and researched cities all over the country, weighing our priorities and values. Nine months later we moved 3,200 miles to Oakland, California. Moving wasn't easy. We struggled financially and needed to make lots of personal and professional changes, but - without a doubt - it has been worth it.

Olivia's confidence and comfort with herself has grown, and ours has too. We didn't move for Olivia - we moved here for our family. We didn't realize what a relief it would be to be living in a place where all three of us are reflected in our environment constantly. It's been two and a half years, and we are each thriving. Every morning we carpool with two boys who are black, adopted by an inter-racial gay couple. Our co-workers, neighbors, classmates, school administrators and health care providers are Black, Asian, Latino, multi-racial white and LGBT (and hetero). It's not that we don't have to keep working at finding support for our family - but it does mean it's easier to find.

A couple months after our big move we were still unpacking boxes and Olivia and Mary came across framed photos. Olivia found a frame she had made in preschool. It was covered in red glitter with one stray white sparkly speck. "That's how I felt in Maine." she said pointing to the singular white piece of glitter. "Oh yeah. How do you feel now?" Olivia replied, " I think you might feel like the only ones now."

Previously, Pact Camp was the only week of the year Olivia was immersed in a peer group that shared her racial identity. A time where she was clearly in the majority. Since moving to Oakland, Pact Camp is now just one more validating experience in a string of many within Olivia's daily life. And while we see racially diverse and queer families every day in the Bay Area, Pact Camp is still important because it's a place where being adopted is normal. That we are local to camp means we have the extra benefit of maintaining these relationships year-round. We're counting on them being life-long.