



pact's

point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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Pact Family Stories

Michael & Jim: Never Too Late To Love or Learn



When Michael Ginther and Jim O'Donnell met and fell in love, they considered themselves too old to be parents. Michael was in his late forties, Jim in his early fifties. Both busy professionals (a lawyer and a doctor, respectively), they were each grateful to have found a life partner, but disappointed to have missed out on becoming a father. Michael says, "When I came out as gay, my biggest concern was that it might mean I could never have kids."

After the events of 9/11, however, the couple's thinking began to shift. Realizing just how strongly he longed to be a parent, Michael decided he would be willing to give up his career and become a stay-at-home dad. Jim says, "I needed to be convinced, but once I knew that Michael would be the primary caregiver, I got on board."

It was important to Jim that they adopt an infant—as a pediatrician, he loves newborns and wanted to be able to connect with his child from the earliest possible moment. A friend referred them to a private adoption facilitator.

When Michael and Jim called the facilitator to get more information, she called back the next day saying she had a baby lined up and needed money sent right away. They weren't comfortable with the adoption professional's attitude, but at the time they were too naïve and anxious to just walk away. When the mother she matched them with decided to keep her child, the facilitator responded with disgust. Looking back on this experience, Jim and Michael share this advice for prospective adoptive parents: "Trust your gut. If you feel uneasy, slow down. Don't let anyone rush you. When it is right, it will happen."

Nine months after they began the process, they were successful in adopting their daughter Emma. They were both present at her birth, and Michael cut the umbilical cord. At first Emma's birth mother didn't want to continue contact, but she changed her mind and they had a chance to get to know her. When Emma, who is of Native American descent, was eight months old, her birth mother came to visit and brought Emma a dream

catcher that her own mother had given to her. It turned out to be a goodbye gift; they have not heard from her since.

As Emma grew, it was Jim who had to convince Michael that they should expand their family. At first Michael couldn't believe that he could love anyone else as much as their first child, but eventually he came to trust that there was room in his heart. The second time around, they found a facilitator with whom they felt more comfortable. After another nine-month wait, and another unsuccessful match, she led them to their daughter Audy, who was born when Emma was almost three. Again, they initially had contact with Audy's birth mother, but then she withdrew as the circumstances of her life became complicated.

Jim and Michael were aware of Pact early on. Since they assumed they would be adopting across racial lines, they attended a number of Pact workshops on transracial adoption in preparation. Once they became the parents of a Native American and an African American child, they considered every year whether they should go to Pact Family Camp, whether the girls were old enough to get something out of it. In 2012, when Audy was six and Emma was almost nine, they decided the time was right. Michael says, "Now we wish we had gone much earlier!" Jim concurs, "Going to Pact Camp is the best thing we have ever done as a family."

Both the girls found the Pact Camp experience empowering, providing them with new language to talk about adoption and race. Both of them loved being surrounded by other adopted children, and Audy in particular loved that "the counselors are chocolate like me!" Since camp, Audy has felt more confident pointing out situations in which she is the only person of color or only African American. Both girls are eager to go back. Jim and Michael are eager to return as well. They feel they learned so much, not only from the speakers and workshop leaders, but from the other adoptive parents.

They got to compare notes and share experiences with other transracial adoptive parents, as well as connect with some adoptive parents of color, and were happy to meet a number of other gay and lesbian parents.

One exercise that particularly hit home for Jim and Michael was writing letters to their children's birth mothers—many parents were in tears as they took turns reading their letters aloud. (Jim notes, "Throughout camp, I really appreciated the way the leaders would say, 'we know this is hard.'"") While Jim and Michael had been honoring the language of their original contact agreements by waiting for the girls' birth mothers to initiate contact, at Pact Camp they realized that they could and should reach out and let the women know how much it would mean to the girls to hear from them, and have since been working with Pact to regain contact.

When Jim and Michael first started pursuing adoption, they thought of it as "giving a home to a child in need," but they have realized it is so much more than that. They are offended now when someone says their children are lucky, because they consider themselves the fortunate ones. With almost a decade of parenting experience, they are still continually learning about white privilege and the ways that children of color are treated differently. Jim says, "We just try to keep listening to our children and learning from them"—as well as reading books, attending workshops, and talking to other parents.

They are also learning what it means for girls to have no mother in their everyday lives. Michael notes, "I was initially relieved to have girls, because I have never been good at stereotyped masculine behavior...Now Audy is teaching me how to play catch!" While they make sure that the girls have lots of women in their lives, including a godmother, the men acknowledge that they can't compensate for the loss of a mother. This was a challenge they didn't anticipate when they first became parents, but now they attend to it with care. Michael and Jim have always talked very openly and honestly with their daughters about adoption, and the girls often tell their dads when they are missing their moms. Michael and Jim are glad that their children feel that they can share their true feelings, even difficult ones.

Parenting can be hard, and adoptive parenting brings with it additional challenges, but both Michael and Jim agree that it is "so worth it!" They credit their daughters with giving them a whole new perspective on every aspect of their lives. "Adopting Emma and Audy is the best thing we have ever done...They are growing every day and we just keep trying to grow too, so we can be the parents they deserve."