

Spotlight: Advocating for Adopted Children at School

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Our Guatemala

*Mother Meets
Son of Her Heart,
Orphan Meet Mother
He Has Longed For*

Back to School

Preparing for the Transition
Back to School This Fall

Gift of Identity

New Program Helps Adoptees
Take Return Trips to Their
Country of Birth





Gift of Identity

By Kim Phagan-Hansel

Ties Program helps adoptees return to country of birth

As a single woman, it was difficult for Michelle Bowers to pull together the money to adopt from China more than a decade ago. But through perseverance and some unique fundraising, Bowers was able to make her dreams of motherhood come true in 2004 when she adopted 18-month-old Anna from the Wuhan Child Welfare Institute.

Bowers recently made another dream come true through a return trip with the now 10-year-old Anna to China. Though finding the money for the return trip to China was challenging, with the help of the Gift of Identity Fund, it became a reality in June.

“I adopted as a single mom, so without the Gift of Identity we wouldn’t be able to go this year,” Bowers said. “It’s allowing us to make the trip at a critical time.”

Anna received \$4,000 from the Gift of Identity Fund, half of which has to be repaid to the fund within 100 days after the trip is made as a way to pay the opportunity forward. Anna and Bowers have been making all-natural handmade soaps to earn the \$2,000 that must be repaid.

“I did the same fundraiser when I adopted



Anna,” Bowers said. “We hope to sell 1,000 bars of soap. Right now we have 420 sold. By Thanksgiving, we should have it all repaid.”

The work put into repaying the Gift of Identity Fund is worth it, Anna said. She said she enjoyed the trip immensely and looks forward to helping other adoptees have the opportunity to return to their birth country as well.

“This trip helped me figure out who I am as a child of two countries,” Anna said. “It’s a great thing and I’m really happy.”

Started last year by the TIES Program — Adoptive Family Travel, Anna is among the first recipients of the Gift of Identity Fund. For TIES Executive Director Becca Piper, the creation of the Gift of Identity Fund is also a dream long pursued.

Piper launched TIES 20 years ago after she realized there was a need to have homeland tours for adoptees. An adoptive parent herself, Piper said she just instinctively felt that the children who were brought to America would one day want to reconnect with their country of birth.

So in 1994, Piper took the first group of adoptive families to Korea and from there the program has grown.

“We’ve gone every year since,” Piper said. “We open new programs about one a year.”

Today TIES travels to 16 countries and has taken countless families and adoptees on an adventure to explore their culture, heritage and early life story. But it’s the stories of the families who call Piper and can’t afford the trip that stays with her.

“Gift of Identity is something I had been thinking about for a long time,” Piper said. “I



tend to take the phone calls from people who really want to do this, but can't afford to go."

As more programs were developed around the country to help families adopt, Piper knew that eventually those same families may find it challenging to honor a return trip to their child's birth country. She knew there would be a need for a program that would help families return to their child's birth country.

"I had that in the back of my mind about all the children who had been placed with the help of organizations like Gift of Adoption Fund and Show Hope," Piper said.

But plans to create the Gift of Identity Fund were put on hold when Piper's 14-year-old son, Michael, was diagnosed with leukemia. For the next few years as Michael battled for his life, Piper's work was put on hold. After he died in 2007 at age 15, the only thing Piper could find any energy for was creating the Gift of Identity Fund.

"It was such a life-altering experience to lose a child," Piper said. "When I came back to work I could barely talk. What I really wanted to work on when I got back was getting the Gift of Identity going."

Getting it launched was not easy, but in the fall of 2013, Piper's dream came to fruition when the first set of applications to the Gift of Identity Fund were accepted. At that time, four grants of \$4,000 each were awarded to adoptees. Those first awardees traveled throughout the summer. In the spring two more grants of \$5,000 each were awarded to adoptees traveling this winter.

"It was exciting to think I could finally tell people you don't have to tell your kids they can't go," Piper said. "It's so important for every adoptee to have the opportunity to visit their birth country if they want to. I've seen it be so settling for so many kids over the years."

The Gift of Identity is available for adoptees of any age looking to travel to their birth country, something Piper said she felt strongly about.

"The applicant is the adoptee and not the family," Piper said. "We wanted to focus on the adoptee."

Adoptees who are awarded the grant are required to repay half of it within 100 days of traveling to their birth country. In setting up the program that way, Piper said the board

felt it was important for adoptees to be able to pay their gift forward to another adoptee.

"The funding is distributed with a pay it forward responsibility," Piper said. "It's not just grab and go. It's grab and help."

So far, Piper has seen positive results with adoptees raising money to meet their pay it forward obligation. With a wide variety of fundraising projects underway, some families have paid their obligation before even leaving for the trip.

"People have come up with some amazing stuff to raise funds," Piper said. "We hope they take this on as their lifetime thing."

Piper is hoping that the program will continue to grow and more adoptees will be able to benefit as the base funds for the program grow. For Piper she sees the Gift of Identity Fund as her own legacy.

"I just think the impact it has on the life of these kids is so important," Piper said. "I want to leave that legacy. I'm so thrilled it's going."

For more information, visit www.gift-of-identity.org.