



# Questions for the Filmmakers of *Adopted*

## An Interview with Nancy Kim Parsons

*Nancy Kim Parsons, co-creator of ADOPTED, spoke with us about the filmmakers' intentions in making the film, what went on behind the scenes during the filming, the editing process, and how she hopes that adoptive parents will receive the film and its messages.*

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**Q:** What inspired both/each of you to pursue documentary filmmaking and why this subject in particular?

**NANCY KIM PARSONS:** Barb and I initially began a discussion about our own personal experiences as adoptees, which evolved into a common curiosity about adoption today. With the growing population of Asian adoptees in New York, we wondered how their experiences would be both different from and the same as ours.

As storytellers – I am an actress and Barb had experience in both writing and video production – making a documentary seemed the best way to explore adoption.

**Q:** Which main audience did you have in mind when making the film – adoptees, transracial adoptees, adoptive parents, or the general public in need of education about adoption?

**NKP:** The main audience we wanted to speak to was white American adoptive parents. It is essential for all adoptive parents to have a deeper understanding of the grief and loss that is inherent in adoption. Moreover, white parents adopting internationally and transracially have the additional responsibility of understanding the challenges surrounding race, racism and identity formation.

Although every adoptee has a different experience, there are specific issues and themes that unite us. We hoped that adoptees would somehow feel validated and united through Jen Fero.

We have learned that there is a tremendous need for adoption education for non-adoptive families. Families created through adoption are becoming more mainstream and are increasingly in need of support. Therefore, society needs to have a better understanding of the challenges they face in order to meet their needs and to support them.

**Q:** What was your original vision for this film? Did it turn out as you originally envisioned it, or did it take on a path/life of its own that you were compelled to follow?

**NKP:** Originally, we were going to follow John and Jacqui Trainer [the couple in the film adopting from China] through the adoption process. We planned to intermittently interject different commentary from adoption professionals, adoptive parents and adoptees. But several people who watched early cuts of the film found the commentary to be distracting. In order to keep the integrity of the story, Barb decided to leave out the commentary. Meanwhile, we had just interviewed Jen Fero [the Korean adoptee] and captured footage of Jen and her father in a frank discussion about the racism that she had encountered growing up. It was a beautiful exchange between a daughter and father talking and listening. The older family and the newer family revealed much about what is different and what is the same in adoption today, so we decided to juxtapose the two stories and that is how *Adopted* came to be. The Feros' story certainly turned much darker than we had anticipated, but to stay true to the art of documentary we documented the story as it unfolded.

**Q:** Do you feel that the film portrayed the full range of aspects of adoption/adopted life? To what extent do you think the two main stories can represent transracial adoption in America?

**NKP:** The film is a portrayal of Jen Fero's experience with adoption. The challenges and issues that she faces regarding race, identity and loss, however, are common to the adoptee experience.

I think both the Feros and Trainers represent the love and need for family. The Feros have a fierce love for one another, but they each have their moments when they cannot get past their own needs. Even so, it is their love for one another that motivates them to keep trying – even though they run out of time. The Trainers repre-

sent the possibility of hope for all new families along with the best intentions.

Love is a powerful force for change and growth and is often the reason we challenge ourselves in ways we never imagined we would.

**Q:** What would you say to someone who would claim that the film shows only the negative and difficult aspects of adoption?

**NKP:** I would challenge them a bit. Yes, the film shows the complexity of the issues and challenges that adoptive families face, but it also shows the love and joy shared in each family at the same time. Furthermore, I have to say that I don't think of the difficult aspects of love and family as being negative or bad. The times when I struggled and had my greatest challenges are my most meaningful and rewarding achievements. Relationships are difficult. For example, marriage is extremely complex and has many challenges, but it is when working through the difficult times that a relationship grows and strengthens. All strong relationships take a lot of work and I think the same can be said about families.

**Q:** Do you feel your personal views about transracial adoption were conveyed by the film (and what are those?)

**NKP:** Yes, there are definite moments where I identify with Jen Fero and can relate with her experiences – for example, with the feelings she expresses when she is in the Korean restaurant. In the restaurant she tells her dad how disconnected she feels from the other Koreans because she cannot relate to them culturally. I had similar moments in the past where I was confused about my identity. Jen's feelings around identity, race and racism are the issues that most resonated with me.

**Q:** What were some of the biggest challenges and frustrations of assembling the film?

**NKP:** It was a challenge to find families who were willing to be so generous and courageous in sharing their personal lives. We filmed three couples who were waiting to adopt because we needed to complete one family's story. We knew there was a probability that at least one couple could change their minds. It required a lot of travel because one couple was in San Francisco, Jen [Fero] was in Portland and the Trainers were in New Hampshire. The enormous expense of travel was also a challenge and there were many

times when we weren't sure we could finish.

We were able to show several people the unpolished version of the film for feedback on structure and content, but prioritizing the different perspectives and points of view was difficult. The feedback from other filmmakers and industry people was that Jen was annoying and that she should shut up and be grateful. Meanwhile, the adoption community found Jen to be such a strong and articulate voice and they had such empathy for her.

The opposing opinions confounded us and it was difficult to find the balance. At this stage in the process it became clear that there was a lack of understanding between the general public and the adoption community. We are hoping that the film will be a catalyst for more discussion and will prompt the desire for further education.

**Q:** What did you feel were the most rewarding aspects of this project?

**NKP:** There were so many rewarding aspects to be shared. First of all, as an artist, it was a tremendous gift to work in a medium that focused on a topic that I am extremely passionate about. Barb Lee was an incredible mentor with so much talent and she had such clarity in her vision. I am truly grateful for the opportunity to meet and to work with so many wonderful families and adoption professionals for whom I have so much respect and admiration. The whole experience was life-changing both personally and professionally.

**Q:** What has audience response been thus far?

**NKP:** The overall response has been extremely positive, but most people have found it to be a painful film, albeit a necessary one, to watch. Members of the adoption community have expressed how much they appreciate the issues and challenges being so well articulated in the film and in the companion DVD. We have screened at many conferences around the country where adoption professionals have purchased the film as a teaching guide and plan to incorporate it into their adoption training. Therapists also plan on using it with their adopted clients and adoptive parents. Overwhelmingly, it has been well received by adoptive parents. Only a few parents have accused us of being 'anti-adoption' and have labeled us 'angry adoptees.'

**Q:** As an adoptee, Nancy, were you tempted at times to convey your own experience and views through the voices of the adoptees? Was it occasionally difficult just to let the cameras roll and not to jump in to make suggestions to the family or adoptee?

**NKP:** No, a character's story is sacred and I can't just change the story to better suit our needs. Furthermore, I learned quickly not to interrupt when the camera was rolling, because when we first began shooting, it took some time for the Feros to trust and become comfortable with us and to forget about the camera. If a moment was interrupted, not only did it break the flow, it took them even longer to forget our presence. Barb and I were camped out in another room (usually the bathroom) watching from a wireless monitor. Admittedly, it was difficult to hear some of the discussions and to know that a fellow adoptee was in pain and struggling, but I knew my interference would disrupt the integrity of her story.

**Q:** At the end of the process, how much of the story-telling and final message of a documentary film like this is artful editing and how much is straight on, cameras rolling? How much footage ended up on the cutting room floor?

**NKP:** *Adopted* required both a director with a clear vision and an artful editor, because of the juxtaposition of the Trainer and the Fero stories. Most of the footage is verité [where the cameras just roll] with the exception of the on-camera interviews. John and Jacqui's story followed their adoption process, so it was linear with a clear arc. We knew the basic milestones as far as shooting specific footage, which made it easier to plan ahead. For example, we knew that we needed to shoot the day they got their referral, the baby shower, packing and the trip to China. Jen's story was more difficult because she was beginning to explore her adoption with her family. We wanted to document that process, but we were not sure what her story was going to end up being. Therefore, we needed to shoot a lot of verité, which meant we were learning her story as we were shooting. Subsequently there was a lot of footage that we didn't end up using. The most artful part of editing was finding the voice-over that best conveyed what Jen was experiencing. We had to listen very closely to what she was trying to say, did say and sometimes didn't say to be truthful about her story. We couldn't just go with her behavior and her rhetoric because many times her private interviews were so different from what she would do when she was with her family.

**Q:** At some point you made the decision to produce a film with a story line(s) AND an accompanying DVD with teaching materials. How did you make the decision to make this a two-tiered approach to the subject? What is your hope for the accompanying *We Can Do Better* part of the project?

**NKP:** The accompanying DVD came out of the need to be responsible filmmakers and because we are members of the adoption community. We wanted to empower adoptive parents and adoption professionals. Barb felt strongly about not wasting the expertise and wisdom we had acquired from professionals over the year, so we created the second DVD *We Can Do Better*. We know the film is painful and difficult and we didn't want parents to feel discouraged, overwhelmed or accused. *We Can Do Better* is a tool to help parents understand the film better and to give them some knowledge and insight, to hopefully inspire the creation of more intimate families. Ultimately, we hope that adoption professionals use the DVD set for pre- and post-adoptive training, so that adoptive parents can be better prepared to parent their adopted children.

**Q:** Many adoptive parents and adoptees might cringe at the notion of an extremely personal moment (happy or painful) captured on film for public viewing. They might worry that a clip out of context could portray them in a bad light or somehow misrepresent them or their family relationships. Did you have any trouble with your subjects asking you to remove something too personal or sensitive? Did you have trouble getting your subjects to open up for the same reason?

**NKP:** No, I think we were extremely fortunate that our subjects were so generous and brave and that they trusted us to tell their stories with integrity. From the beginning we told them they would be judged and criticized once the film came out, but they were willing to do it so that others could learn from them. Naturally, it took some time for them to get used to the cameras, and each time the families began to adapt more quickly and were more at ease.

After seeing the final version of the film, the Feros and Trainers gave us a verbal and written approval to move forward. They were confident that the film successfully delivered what we had all agreed to at the onset of this project.



**Q:** What would you like to say to adoptive parents who are just embarking on a transracial adoption?

**NKP:** Knowledge is power. Read books by adult adoptees – yes, even the ‘angry’ ones. Find out why they are angry instead of judging them for their anger. Anger is just grief turned inward and it’s important to understand this so parents can help their adopted children. Read books by adoption professionals and adoptive parents, watch other documentary films, go to conferences, and talk to adult adoptees and adoptive parents.

Be open and willing to ask for help because at some point you will need it. Finally, watch our film and the companion DVD for the hours of expert advice, frank discussions and realistic experiences. As an adult adoptee, I genuinely believe that all adoptive families can benefit from watching them.

**Q:** What is the final, overall message of your film?

**NKP:** Family is messy and it’s supposed to be. There’s no ‘happily ever after’ in adoption, just like there’s no ‘happily ever after’ in real life. We hope *Adopted* and the companion DVD take the romanticism out of adoption, because families created through adoption have to deal with additional challenges and adoptive parents must know this. It is essential for parents to have those challenges demystified to better understand their children’s needs.

– Interview conducted and edited by Mary Child

*\*A note from the editor: Like many others in the community of China adoptive parents, I agreed to be interviewed for this film, some brief cuts of which are included in the instructional DVD, We Can Do Better. This small role has no bearing, I trust, on The Journal’s neutral editorial stance and intentions to present a balanced discussion of the film.*

*Barb Lee on the set preparing for the first interview with Jennifer Fero.*