

## FILM REVIEW

### Adopted

directed by Barb Lee, co-produced with Nancy Kim Parsons

### We Can Do Better

directed by Barb Lee, written by Catherine Wigginton Greene, co-produced with Catherine Wigginton Greene and Nancy Kim Parsons

Point Made Films, \$59.95

In *Adopted*, filmmakers Barb Lee and Nancy Kim Parsons present us with the gripping story of two adoptive families

at opposite ends of the adoption experience: one set of parents in the process of meeting their adopted baby, the other facing terminal illness and trying to leave their adult adopted daughter with dignity and love by discussing some of the issues that have been unspoken within their family.

When Pact staff first watched this movie, an adoptive parent and an adult adoptee were both moved to tears, especially by Jen

Fero, the adopted adult who courageously allows viewers into her family as she explores her own experience of adoption with her parents and brother. We come to care deeply about her and see her as a hero, a very articulate hero, who helps us understand, once again, the complexity of adoption.

*Adopted* is distributed as a two-DVD set with *We Can Do Better*, a companion film designed for training purposes. In the words of Cheri Register, who adopted two children from Korea and is the author of *Beyond Good Intentions* and *Are Those Kids Yours?*, the material covered here is "not for the faint of heart, but neither is transracial or international adoption." *We Can Do Better* intersperses the firsthand experiences of parents and adopted adults with child welfare professionals talking about some of the challenges inherent to transracial and transnational adoption. Each of the five sections is between 20 and 35 minutes long, and conveniently divided into topics for trainers and parents.

*Intentions:* This section explores infertility, adoption as a "calling," parents who want either a boy or a girl to complete their family, issues of motivation, adoption readiness, the meaning of "rescue mentality," and the notion of adoption as "better" for children. It gives voice to some of the secret accolades that adoptive parents enjoy and explores the complex implications of the myths and assumptions that surround adoption.

*Parenting the Adopted Child:* "It's not the same." This section addresses in an amazing amount of depth parenting issues ranging from bonding and attachment, children's responses to orphanage care, developmental delays, learning disabilities, mental health issues, grief and loss, children's stories of adoption, birth parents, siblings in blended families, and guilt.

*The Multiracial Family:* This section addresses issues of color-blindness, white privilege, parenting strategies, racial stereotypes, Asian sexual stereotypes, and when and why adopted kids talk (or don't) with their parents about racism. The focus is on Asian transnational adoption, reflecting the experience of the filmmakers, but they have worked hard to make sure that the material is relevant to transracial and transcultural adoptions of children of all races.

*Identity for the Transracial Adoptee:* Racial vs. cultural identity, cultural appropriation, racial mirroring, cultural guides, and internalized racism are among the topics discussed in first-person voices of impressive complexity, compassion, and honesty. A call for parents to become their adopted children's allies is intermingled with positive suggestions for how to help transracially adopted children succeed.

*Tough Questions:* This section handles outsiders' questions and looks at ethical issues in adoption, including socioeconomic inequities and child trafficking. Unfortunately, the filmmakers neglected to distinguish domestic private adoption from domestic foster-adoption, which leads to some confusion. Statements such as "domestic adoption takes longer than international adoption" and "domestically born children available for adoption are older than those available internationally" are contradicted by Pact's own placement of (generally newborn) infants of color, usually within six months of the adoptive parents' home-study readiness. But despite these inaccuracies, there is very useful information in this section about how to answer children's and adults' questions about adoption. There are interesting interviews with parents of color who have adopted white children, later revealed to be actors. These provocative and effective segments give the audience the chance to analyze, outside the lens of white privilege, the language and assumptions that white adoptive parents often use to justify their own transracial adoptions. As Susan Soon Keum Cox, herself a Korean adoptee, reminds us at the end of the film, adoption is about families for children, not children for families.

In the spirit of full disclosure, we should point out that Pact Director Beth Hall and Lisa Marie Rollins, Pact's former Adoption Education Specialist and *Pact Point of View* Editor, appear as speakers in *We Can Do Better*. We admit our bias, but we really believe this two-part video is a valuable and important contribution to the field. It's not always easy viewing, but it's an honest and poignant look at the many layers of adoption, and the ways that we can do better. ■

*Note: a screening and discussion of Adopted and We Can Do Better, with the filmmakers in person, will be included in the Pact Spring Training, March 7, 2009.*

## About the Filmmakers

**B**arb Lee and Nancy Kim Parsons, the co-producers of *Adopted/We Can Do Better*, met about six years in a New York restaurant. Nancy, a recent drama school graduate who was waiting tables to support her acting career, happened to serve Barb and her daughter, who were visiting from Georgia. When Nancy blurted out, "Your daughter reminds me of my niece—but she's white," they discovered that they were both adopted. Nancy was born in Korea and adopted by a Minnesota family when she was eight months old. Barb's mother was Korean and her father a white American; she was adopted and raised by her paternal uncle and aunt. Neither of them had met many Korean adoptees who wanted to talk about race and adoption; they bonded instantly.

Their chance encounter led to an intense friendship—today both say that they have "adopted" each other as sisters. In an interview with Pact, Nancy expressed how grateful she is to have found Barb, saying, "Lots of adoptees are searching and don't ever find what

they are looking for. For me, I have Barb. I never felt like I belonged. In this process, I found kinship." Barb described their filmmaking collaboration ("our passion project") as a way to nurture and foster the strong connection they feel. Speaking with them, it becomes clear that this film is an outgrowth of what Nancy calls "the lifelong process of adoption."

Both creative people (Barb left the corporate world to become a filmmaker, Nancy is a performer), their conversations focused at first on their careers and artistic ambitions, as well as their experiences as adoptees. Eventually, as they observed the wave of young girls being adopted from China, they began to wonder together what had changed, and what hadn't, since their own childhoods. "We wondered, 'What are they getting?'" says Barb, "'What can we contribute?'" They started with the assumption "we don't know anything," and set out to ask and learn. They spent a year conducting research (reading literature, watching films, attending conferences, interviewing experts) before they began shooting their film.

The first cut of *Adopted* inter-mingled personal stories with "talking head" interviews, but early viewers strongly encouraged them to let the personal narratives speak for

themselves. Feeling that the information communicated by various experts was "too valuable to lose," they decided to team up with writer/producer Catherine Wigginton Greene to create the companion piece *We Can Do Better*. They are happy with the resulting two-part package: the personal stories of the families in *Adopted* "allow viewers to relate to and emotionally experience" some of the challenges of adoption, while the companion piece examines issues of identity, adoption, and race on "a more intellectual and informational level."

Both women found making the film a transformational experience. Barb moved into new territory as a filmmaker, using her skills as a former educator to make the material as accessible and useful as possible.

On a personal level, she explored her own feelings about racial identity and the loss of her birth mother. Nancy realized that feelings of anger and resentment that she thought she had resolved were not entirely worked through. As she observed her own reactions to the material they were

collecting, she was able to move forward and see her family (and herself) in a more forgiving light. Nancy says, "Anger is pain and grief turned inward...Making this film and watching it with my family allowed me to be more open with them. I have words for my feelings now, and we have a better understanding of one another."

Barb and Nancy see parents as a key audience for the film, and hope that it gives them knowledge and perspectives that will help them build healthy families. Knowing from personal experience how easy it is to mask difficult feelings, Nancy wants parents to know that even children who seem well-adjusted and never bring up the subject may be struggling with identity issues related to their adoption. At screenings so far, audience response has been predominantly positive, but a few viewers experienced the candid, no-punches-pulled nature of the project as "anti-adoption." Nancy responds, "It's not an anti-adoption film, it's an *anti-ignorance* film." She hopes that many adoptees and their parents will find viewing the film a validating experience, allowing them to think, "Okay, so I'm not crazy!" As a mother herself, Barb knows how hard parenting can be. "I would never make a film to criticize parents, I need too much help myself." She feels passionately that parents need to be given resources to help them succeed. In this film she has done just that. ■



Barb Lee and Nancy Kim Parsons on the set.