

## Mark & Leo's Story



I (Mark) had recently moved to Richmond and didn't know anyone. I had also just come out and felt ready to meet other gay people. So, I went on a chat room (this was in 2008), and talked to someone. We shared a few interests, including that we both spoke German. We chatted online for a few hours. Mind you that back then, this meant we actually sat in front of our computers for the whole conversation. In the end, we didn't exchange contact information. All I knew of him was what his profile picture looked like. I told him, "maybe we'll meet someday."

The next day, I decided to go out. I went to one of the few gay bars. After sitting there by myself for a while, and becoming increasingly frustrated at my inability to make friends, I saw someone that looked very similar to the profile picture from the night before. It took me some time, but I gathered the courage to approach him and ask, "Do you speak German, by chance?" It was him. He ditched his friends and we talked all night.

I always wanted to be a father. During one of our first dates, I asked Leo if he could see kids in his future, and he said yes. We didn't talk about it for a few years after. Eventually, we started to make comments about having a baby or being parents. The conversation became more specific as we evaluated the options of surrogacy vs. adoption. We learned about open adoption, and it resonated with us. In open adoption, the adopted child can maintain a relationship with their birth family. After a lot of research, paperwork, and a long emotional rollercoaster, we became parents to our daughter.

At first, Leo was more inclined towards surrogacy while I felt more comfortable with adoption. We researched our options. The laws for surrogacy in Virginia were not the most favorable for gay couples. It was also a greater financial commitment. We read more about adoption, specifically open adoption. It made sense to us that an adopted child should maintain a connection to their birth family.

Back then, only married couples or single parents could adopt in our state, so we (a cohabitating couple) couldn't adopt together. I was also not yet a permanent resident of the United States, so I couldn't adopt a child in the US. Gay marriage was not yet legal, so I had to pursue my Greencard through my job, and that took much longer than when couples are able to marry. This all led us to pursue a single parent adoption where Leo was considered the father. Once the baby was born, he was able to give me guardian rights. And once gay marriage passed, I was able to adopt Zoe so that we now share equal parental rights.

Our waiting time during the adoption was about 18 months. I was the most anxious of the two. Even though most waiting couples eventually became parents, it terrified me to think that there was a chance that this would not happen to us. We chose an agency where the birth parent chose the adoptive family for their child. We felt that this was fair, but it also meant we had less control over the process. We created an "adoption profile" where we described each other and our life together. In a way, it felt like a dating profile. When we weren't contacted by anyone for months, we feared not being "good enough" to be chosen as parents.

Along the way a birth parent contacted us. They were very emotional and called us frequently for a few days. It was very intense. They said they had only a few more weeks left of the pregnancy. But when we reported this contact with the adoption agency, we found out that this person was an "emotional scammer." This experience drained us emotionally, and we put our adoption on hold, meaning we pulled out of the waiting pool for a few months.

After we cleared our heads again, we restarted the process. Just a few weeks later, we received an email from a young woman who was looking to place her daughter. Her name was Fiona. She specifically wanted to choose a gay couple. She lived in Atlanta with her parents, so we visited them a week later. All of us immediately felt a strong connection between us. They were also a German family, so we shared the language. We used similar expressions and laughed at the same jokes. From what we could tell in such a short period of time, our values also aligned. We spent the morning having brunch at their house and getting to know each other on their back porch. They told us the baby could come early, and that they wanted us to have the experience of seeing her in utero. So, they took us to a clinic where the Fiona, her parents, Leo and I sat in the room and watched a 3D ultrasound! When the nurse allowed us to listen to the heartbeat, we all started to cry.

Leo and I returned to Richmond, where we prepared the house for our baby. We made arrangements at our jobs, and let friends and family know about this development. Throughout that week, friends sent us baby clothes, strollers, baby bottles, even a crib. The next weekend we headed back to Atlanta for the birth.

Zoe was born, and we stayed at Fiona's parents' home for two weeks because we needed paperwork to take our baby out of the state. During this time we became close with the birth family as we ate together, took walks, and all cared for Zoe. Our love for her united us all. It was a crazy and magical time!

The experience was very different for each of us. I'm more emotional, and I felt emotionally prepared to be a parent. So when Zoe was born, I just wanted to hold her all day and sing her songs. Leo is more practical, so he was more concerned than me about getting the house ready, making sure our finances were in order, tending to all the paperwork.

I took a break from my job, but he couldn't do that. So I did night feedings and took care of Zoe during the day. I was constantly exhausted but emotionally elated. Leo, who is more naturally clearheaded, spent more time shopping, setting up furniture, and planning. Every day, after he returned from work, I was usually ready for a break. He took Zoe for long walks every evening, giving me time to myself. He also spent a lot of time with her on weekends. We felt that with all the stress that a newborn brings, we balanced each other out well.

We felt very supported by our friends and our immediate community. Leo's family was very supportive and involved. My family and friends in Paraguay were not familiar with how a two-dad family worked. There were no open LGBT families in Paraguay. So it took them longer to get on board. At that time, I was so excited about our family, and honestly, too exhausted to pay much attention to people who disapproved of us. So I just completely blocked any negative or unhelpful reactions out and focused on Zoe.

We found providers to be very gay-friendly. Their paperwork asked for "Parent 1" and "Parent 2". The doctors and nurses most always remembered that we were a two-dad family, so they asked about "the other dad," instead of asking for mom. It felt very reassuring.

Zoe is now eight years old. During the first two years of her life, Leo and I both experienced internal changes in how we saw the world, and how we related to each other. In a way, parenting brought up our insecurities. So often, we didn't know if we were doing the right thing, and we felt inadequate. We became more distant from each other and struggled to connect. When we talked, we seemed to talk past each other without understanding where the other person was really coming from.

We also didn't know how we wanted to parent, or what kind of parents we wanted to be. We spent time with friends who had older children and learned from them. But at one point, we felt like we were trying to imitate something that didn't feel right to us. We decided that we needed to trust ourselves and be the parents that we believed we needed to be.

Shortly after Zoe turned two, we went to an amusement park for the day. It was a beautiful day and we sat in the shade while Zoe napped in her stroller. On that day, we were finally able to express how we each felt about ourselves, each other, and our life as a family. We pinpointed what each of us felt missing, and we made a plan on how to reach our goals. Since then, our communication has improved tremendously. We take more time for each other, and we also relieve each other so that the parenting work falls equally on both.

We realized that our romantic relationship needed to be strong so that we could both be good parents. As any two different people, our values and priorities are different. We try to support each other in what the other person values, even if it's not that important to ourselves. So if Leo believes that Zoe needs to make her bed every day, then I try to enforce it, even if I don't see it as important. And if I believe in talking certain things out with Zoe that Leo may not regard as highly, he supports me in the conversation. In my opinion, this is what has been one of the most important pillars of our parenting relationship.

What has been most supportive for us has been when we are treated just like any other family. We haven't had any negative experiences in Richmond. Everyone at Zoe's preschool was very welcoming. For example, for mother's day, she usually makes two gifts - one for each of us. We told them from the beginning we didn't want anyone to appear uncomfortable if Zoe talked about her birth family or her adoption, since those were open topics at our home. Zoe even brought books about same-sex families to the classroom and the teachers read them during storytime. Now she attends a Christian private school where everyone has been very supportive as well. As she got older, her classmates had more specific questions about adoption and about families with two dads. I visited the classroom to answer the children's questions. Fiona, her birth mom, visits every year for Zoe's birthday. So we also usually plan a visit to Zoe's school so that the other children can meet her. I believe this has also helped Zoe see how other's may not always understand our family structure, but that we can respond to their questions without feeling that there is something wrong with our "otherness."

My main advice to anyone who is looking to adopt, is to make sure you process any emotions around any preceding events to your decision to adopt, as well as emotions that come up when thinking about your future adoptive family. By emotions, I mean uncomfortable emotions. Does anxiety or fear arise around topics of infertility? Or that you may not become a parent? Or around the thought of your child's birth parent?

Find an adoption-competent therapist to process your fears and insecurities. Emotions around adoption are very complicated, and your child will need you to be able to put yours aside to support them with theirs. Adoption looks very different for each person in the adoption triad. The day when your child is born may be the happiest day of your life. It's also the day your child was separated from her birthparent.

Many adoptive parents push anxieties and fears away by framing them in a positive light. They might say, for example, that the adoption was an act of love. This can be very confusing for your child, resulting in the message "if I love you enough, I'll give you away."

Raising an adoptive child comes with its own complications. When adoptive parents are open to working on their own issues, they will be more open to exploring their child's perspective. One thing many adult adoptees say is that they were raised as if adoption weren't an issue, which left them to doubt their feelings around their experience. Many adoptive children don't speak up about their feelings because they don't want to hurt their parents.

So, my advice is to research and learn from every perspective, including adult adoptees. Even when babies are separated from their mothers at birth, and the baby may look like they are completely fine, the experience of being separated from the birth mom very often has life-long consequences. Her birth experience may affect how a child trusts the world around her, how they see

themselves, if they become people-pleasers, or how they bond with others.

As adoptive parents, we need to educate ourselves so that when our children subtly tell us about their thoughts and feelings, we can respond in a helpful way that helps them in their process. We are best suited to help our children sort through their emotional experiences when we've done (and are willing to continue doing) our own work.

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*Mark is the author of several children's books that feature LGBT families. You can learn more about them on his [website](#), [Facebook](#), or [Instagram](#).*