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A family's newest blessing

Mattingly family adopts 21-month-old girl from China

By Brandon Mattingly

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Adoption for Bobby Joe and Amanda Mattingly was not something that was always in the couple's plans. For them, the addition of 21-month-old Emma Grace to their family was the result of the opening of a door of opportunity.



Photo submitted
Bobby Joe Mattingly and Amanda Mattingly are pictured with their children, from left, Anna Kate, 5, Isaiah, 7, and Emma Grace, 21 months.

In 2010, the couple was raising two children – Isaiah, now 7, and Anna Kate, 5 – and they wanted to add to their family. The only problem was that some minor medical problems led to Amanda needing a hysterectomy. They agreed that moving ahead with the procedure was the right decision because having any more children was going to be unlikely regardless.

"It was a really tough decision to do that, but I think in looking back, God allowed that to happen to open this door," Bobby Joe said.

"Going ahead and having the hysterectomy is probably what pushed us through the door and showed us, 'This is what you need to be doing instead,'" Amanda added.

Bobby Joe said he asked his wife to take the lead in gathering all the information they could about adoption, and he said she took on the task "full throttle." They finally decided they would adopt a child from China, in part due to a manageable timeframe and only being required to travel on one occasion. After submitting their application in February 2013, however, they quickly saw that getting approved for adoption was going to be a lengthy process.

Amanda said she would go through the strain of the application process "100 times if I had to for (Emma Grace)," while Bobby Joe added that the double-checks and triple-checks of their background information only comforted them to know that officials behind the adoption program take it very seriously.

"We appreciate the thoroughness," he said. "People in high positions over there are showing that they want to make sure each child is well cared for."

The couple found out early on that the adoption would be for a special needs child – standard adoption in China can take around six or seven years – and that didn't deter them in the slightest, as

they were allowed to be very involved in the matching process throughout.

"We were completely in control of what we thought we could handle as a family," Bobby Joe said. "They had probably 15 pages of disabilities with everything from very mild to very severe conditions. It was a pretty smooth process."

The couple said the reason that special needs children can be adopted more quickly is because they are often the ones who are abandoned, and they said they were more than glad to provide Emma Grace a home.

Emma Grace, who was given the birthday of Oct. 18, was born with a birth defect that led to some of her digits becoming fused together.

She was found abandoned on Oct. 21, 2012. Amanda said she recently read an article relating to the adoption of special needs children in China, and said that it pointed out one thing all of the children have in common.

"The biggest special need all of these children have is the need for a family and someone to love them," she said.

Through A Lending Hand in Lexington, a division of Nightlight Christian Adoptions, Bobby Joe and Amanda were finally able to travel to China from July 10 to July 23 to meet and bring home the newest addition to their family. Along with Amanda's mother, Patti Spalding, they were able to embrace some of the culture early in the trip before meeting Emma Grace.

"It was a good experience, because we can tell her about it later on, because we got to visit some museums while we were there and learn a lot about the culture," Amanda said. "We've even thought about taking her back and doing a tour to show her what it's like where she's from."

Finally, on July 14, they met Emma Grace for the first time, and that's when Amanda said it became real.

"That's when I really felt like, 'Oh my gosh, this is really going to happen,'" she said.

Bobby Joe added that it summoned feelings of seeing Isaiah and Anna Kate at the hospital as newborns.

"Our other two kids were born from us, but she was born from our hearts," he said. "You get the same chills, the same emotions and the same rush, it was just a different setting."

Though they said she was initially shy, Emma Grace quickly took to Amanda, while Bobby Joe said he's had to work his way into her good graces.

"We finally got to where she would throw a paper wad back and forth with me and give me high fives — this was all while Amanda was holding her — but you take those small victories and you just hang on to them," he said with a laugh.

Other adoptive couples assured them that they had similar experiences, pointing out that those who care for the children on a daily basis at the orphanage are likely all female.

Amanda said finally making it home two weeks ago was what has helped the family mold together, and it's happened quickly.

"When we got home, it was kind of like we could all take a breath and the stress was off of us," she said. "I think that helped her too, because she's had to ease into it and get comfortable with us."

"We got in at like 4 o'clock that morning and when she woke up, the kids were all already playing music and dancing together," Bobby Joe added.

While they said they know adoption isn't for everyone, the Mattinglys said it is a service that others should at least support. From their own personal experience, they have seen how much the support of family, friends, co-workers at North Washington School — where Bobby Joe teaches second grade and Amanda is the school nurse — and the members of the Washington County High School football team, of which Bobby Joe is a coach, meant to the family.

"The overwhelming support back here was from people that were praying for us and people that would call us to support a child that they've never seen," Bobby Joe said. "To see how many lives she had already touched, it's amazing how God has used adoption to help so many people."

"People have told us, 'She's so blessed to have you,' and stuff like that, but I think we're really blessed to have her," Amanda added. "She's done so much for us that she'll never realize. It's been a great experience."

Bobby Joe said he now feels a calling to do something to give back, either directly to A Helping Hand or through a 5k or other fundraising event, "because God has used adoption in our lives so wonderfully."

To find out more about A Helping Hand and Nightlight Christian Adoptions, visit www.ahelpinghandadoption.org or www.nightlight.org.