

## Karen Kingsbury's Adoption Story

For years, shelved somewhere in the storage space of my mind was a dry statistic, a fact that had little bearing on my daily reality. The statistic was this: Millions of children around the globe were without a family. My husband and I were vaguely aware of this truth. At times we had even discussed adoption. But the statistic about homeless children was not something that kept us awake at night.

We were busy, after all, my husband, Don, teaching and coaching, and me, writing best-selling Christian fiction. Besides, we already had three beautiful children, a number we planned to stop at after our youngest, a boy, was born with a heart defect that required surgery when he was just three weeks old. And so the statistic about homeless children remained, and we did nothing about it.

Then late one night alone in my office I met EJ.

In the quiet incandescent glow of my computer screen, I stumbled upon an Internet site that had a photo listing of children available for adoption in Haiti. One of those was a darling five-year-old boy with huge brown eyes and dimpled smile. "EJ," the heading stated.

The connection between us was instant.

"EJ is a charmer," the accompanying description said. "He is the first to hug the workers at the orphanage each day and is easily one of the fastest learners in our classroom."

His photograph made an impact that was overwhelming and indelible. In a moment's time, Haiti was no longer another country with starving homeless children. Rather it was the homeland of this precious child.

I could almost hear him calling out to us: "Mommy, Daddy, I love you. I'm here waiting for you. Please come take me home. I need a family. Please"

Until then, family discussions on adoption had been brief and esoteric. All that changed the moment I found EJ. I called my husband into my office and for the next hour we talked about this sweet child. There were no disagreements. EJ belonged in our family. Now we needed to present the idea to our children.

I printed his photo, and the next morning Don and I introduced him to Kelsey, Tyler, and Austin. Setting his picture up in front of an empty chair, I asked our kids, "How would you like EJ to be your brother? He's five years old and he lives in Haiti."

"Well," our only daughter, Kelsey, 12, sounded thoughtful. "He looks friendly."

"He's five?" Tyler, 7, chimed in. "That's right between me and Austin."

Austin, 2, just grinned and pointed. "That my brother? Huh Mommy and Daddy? That my brother?"

We studied EJ's picture for days until he actually felt like part of our family. At night we prayed about him, connecting, building a bond that grew stronger with each glance at his sweet face. He was living at the Heart of God Ministries orphanage in Port-au-Prince, so we contacted workers there and learned more about him. Finally, with full hearts, we made our decision. EJ would be our son, a part of our family forever.

Over the next several months, we completed a daunting amount of paperwork for the INS and our Haitian dossier. But because we took it one document at a time, we were never overwhelmed. Through every step we were driven by EJ's eyes. In fact, it wasn't long before we were driven by another little face – that of 6-year-old Sean. The photo-listing said Sean was a happy child who excelled in academics and sports. He had great leadership qualities.

"Kids, what would you think about having two brothers?" My husband asked our three children one evening. "Mommy and I think maybe EJ would like a brother who was more like him – another little boy from Haiti."

Again our kids were excited about the idea.

Haiti is widely known as one of the poorest countries in the world. It is a place rife with dangers, and there were months when I considered having our new little boys escorted home. But in the end God made it clear I was to go there. Take pictures, absorb myself in their culture if only for a short while, and bring home a piece of their heritage. Something I could share with them later.

My first impressions were exactly what I expected for a country with 80 percent unemployment and no sanitation system. Trash piled high along city sidewalks, inviting the random cow or pig that mingled amid wandering pedestrians. Wide-eyed children begged on the corners and a vacant stare masked the faces of most. Buildings and roadways were in disarray, reminding me of scenes from earthquake and hurricane disaster sites.

I was taken to the orphanage and introduced to my two new sons – EJ and Sean. The boys were dressed in their best, donated clothing, and both offered me shy smiles as they sat on my lap. They didn't speak a word of English.

This – all of it – was what I'd expected.

But I didn't expect what happened next. As I sat there searching for a common bond with EJ and Sean, a little boy walked up and brushed a lock of hair off my forehead. "Hello, Mommy." His voice was clear, his English practically perfect. He smiled at me. "I love you."

Then – while the noise from forty-two orphans faded away – he sang to me, "Lord, I give you my heart. I give you my soul. I live for you alone."

My heart was hooked in a matter of seconds. "What's your name?" I asked the child.

"Joshua," he told me. "My name's Joshua."

An hour later I knew the whole story. Joshua was a wonderful child, outgoing and confident, brilliant in his studies and good with the little ones at the orphanage. He and EJ and Sean were buddies – inseparable.

I called my husband back in the States and wept. "Joshua belongs with us. I can't imagine leaving him here."

My husband's answer was something I'll never forget. "Two ... three ... what's the difference, Karen? If you feel that strongly about him, bring him home."

Of course in the world of international adoption the process is never that simple.

Six months after EJ and Sean came home, Joshua followed. Only then did we truly feel our family was complete.

Those early days together hold dozens of moments we'll never forget. The time when EJ and Sean first entered the bathroom to wash their hands. Slowly the water grew warm and as it did, they began speaking loudly in Creole, pointing to the water and jumping up and down. It wasn't difficult to figure out why they were excited.

They'd never felt warm running water.

Then there was the day our family visited the zoo. EJ and Sean were mesmerized by the animals, but the experience was nothing to what came next: A trip to the grocery store. It was a starving little boy's paradise.

As their English improved, we learned more about their past. Our boys had lost parents to starvation or illness and had gone without food for days at a time. They customarily ate something called "dirt cakes," which looked like cheap pottery made from clay, dirt, and water. Village women mixed this recipe, baked it, and gave it to the children to ease the pain in their empty tummies.

Meals came only after great effort. Our boys were adept at using rocks to knock mangos from trees, or to kill wild birds. In the early months, Sean, especially, would see a bird and nearly go ballistic, pointing and motioning toward the nearest rock. His message was simple – "Please,

Daddy, this is something I can do! Let dinner be on me tonight." Politely, and with a full heart, my husband dissuaded him from killing birds to feed our family.

In those first months, we dealt with the basic cultural adjustments. Sleeping in beds instead of on the floor, using bathrooms, table manners. But miraculously, the boys almost never needed to be told twice about issues of obedience. They were constantly cleaning their rooms and they remained thrilled with their new toys and beds. They shared a large bedroom with Austin and slept in two bunkbeds. "Please, Mommy, can we vacuum?" was a question I field weekly.

I would laugh. "Well, okay, since you've been so good this week I guess so."

Often people would comment on the blessing we were to these little boys. But we always corrected them. The blessings were all ours.

One blessing was watching our three biological children embrace their new brothers. This was especially obvious when the kids played together, or worked on homework at the same table. Because of the efforts of Kelsey, Tyler, and Austin, our new sons quickly learned to read. On the school front, our sons were easily welcomed by their classmates. Their school even took on the Heart of God Ministries orphanage as a service project and collected two suitcases of school supplies for the Haitian children.

Adopting has also showed up in my novels. I'm more aware that our Heavenly Father wants us to look out for orphans, to care for them and help them find forever families.

Another blessing has been realizing the depth of faith these children have. They had nothing in Haiti, not even a chance to live. But they had a deep love for Jesus, and prayed and sang throughout the day. In a culture ridden with voodoo, it was especially comforting to know that a Christian orphanage in Haiti had given these children so strong a foundation. Growing up, the children loved singing for God, and sometimes they even cried during worship time.

"Are you sad, honey?" my husband used to ask.

"No, Daddy," Sean would say. "I'm just so happy when I think of everything Jesus has done for me."

The boys were very loving kids, hugging us often and telling us – first in Creole, then in English – exactly how much they loved us. I remember Joshua saying, "Mommy, when I get big, I'm going to get a job and make lots of money. I'll send some to the people in Haiti and give the rest to you."

I was puzzled by this. "That's very nice, but why do you want to give me money?"

"Because ..." his eyes glistened. "You and Daddy have given so much to me."

People used to ask us about the transition. "How did you bring children into your home who have nothing in common with you?" they wondered. "You have different skin colors, different cultural understandings, different languages – even different food preferences."

We would tell them this: "With much prayer."

A few times we had conversations about skin color.

"Why do I have brown skin and you and Daddy and Jesus have white skin?" Sean asked once during a break from playing with his brothers in the backyard.

"Well," I said. "First, Jesus didn't have white skin. He had brown skin. And God gives every person a special color, a color He loved for that person. All the colors of skin are the same to Jesus, and they're all beautiful."

Sean thought about that for a minute. "What color skin will I have in Heaven?"

"I'm not sure." I pulled him into a quick hug. "But I hope it'll be just like it is now. Because your skin is beautiful, Sean ... and you're such a handsome boy. I wouldn't want you to look any different than you do right now."

Sean's smile stretched across his face. "Thanks, Mom." Then he ran out of the house to join his brothers once again. I'll never know if that was the perfect answer, but I know this: God alone is still providing the answers as questions like that come up. For our part, we welcome the discussion.

Overall, adding three Haitian first-graders to our family was nothing but wonderful.

Still, we were aware that their Haitian background would one day be important to our sons. As such, I learned how to cook Haitian beans and rice. We ate that way at least once a week and marveled at the platefuls of food our new boys used to put away. To help the boys maintain their Creole, we sometimes spent the dinner hour asking the boys to teach us various phrases. In addition, we networked with a small Haitian-American contingency not far from our home.

More than that, though, we stressed this fact: Our primary heritage is found not in our ancestors or family genealogies or birthplaces. And not in our skin color or nationality.

But at the cross, in Christ alone.

There is a story often told of a particularly rough storm that came up one night and left a sandy beach strewn with starfish. The next morning, a child walked along the shore, stopping every few feet to pick up a starfish and fling it out to sea. An old man watched the child and finally shouted at him. "Why bother, son. There's too many starfish to make a difference."

With that, the boy picked up another starfish and looked at it intently before heaving it out to sea, then turning to the old man he said, "It makes a difference to this one."

The statistics on homeless children in our world remain daunting. But our family has seen this truth at work: Adoption makes a difference. And when you give to the One Chance Foundation, you make a difference, too. Just ask our three sons. EJ, Sean, and Joshua.