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Foreign face in the mirror

December 17, 2003



Very supportive... Mika Morrissey, front, with her brother Nick, mother Ruth and father Kim. Photo: Jon Reid

How do the children of mixed-race adoptions feel when they grow up? Geesche Jacobsen speaks to some of them.

Like most overseas adoptees, Mika Morrissey has come across racism. She used to call on a family friend from New Guinea when she needed to feel OK about being different. "I would go and sleep over at her house [where] I would be surrounded by those New Guinea people. It seems I just needed to be surrounded by those dark-skinned people."

Morrissey was adopted from Sri Lanka by a Hunters Hill family in 1983, when she was just a few weeks old. Like all the adoptees the *Herald* spoke to, she says her family and friends have been fully supportive.

Unlike some others, she has had regular contact with other overseas adoptees, including two cousins from her birth country.

Thea Ormerod, a project officer with the Benevolent Society's PostAdoption Resource Centre, says this sort of

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contact helps. "The people who manage it better are the ones that have some kind of links [to their country and culture of origin]."

Most adopted children feel they do not quite belong, a feeling which grows when they start school and is heightened in adolescence, she says.

Children adopted from overseas look different, yet often have no links or understanding of the culture that goes with their racial appearance.

But despite these issues of identity and cultural heritage, for most adoptees it "doesn't have an enormously damaging impact", Ormerod says.

Indigo Williams, adopted from Vietnam in 1972 when she was about one, has interviewed 13 fellow Vietnamese adoptees about identity issues for a master's thesis at the University of Technology, Sydney. She says many of them, especially those growing up in predominantly white suburbs, encountered racism. "A lot of them said they were surprised to see an Asian face when they looked in the mirror. They felt white."

Ten of the interviewees went back to Vietnam, and all felt they had benefited. "Once I got over the culture shock, I felt at home," Williams said of her own journey. Yet, there they also stood out because they did not speak the language and were so "Westernised", she says.

Lucy Burns has adopted two children from Thailand and is the president of the Australian Society for Intercountry Aid for Children, a support group for adoptive families. She says: "Sometimes adoption gets labelled as responsible for identity issues." Racism is also experienced by people from other races who are not adopted. "It's too simplistic to analyse the issues on terms of how they look."

Children come to Australia at different ages, from different cultures, with different experiences, such as orphanages, war or illness. Adoptive parents need to do more than just put posters on the wall and take their children back to their home country once as teenagers. Now parents are encouraged to maintain links with other adoptive children and the community from their child's birth country and to visit "as early and as often as possible".

Chris Warner went back to Korea, where he was born in 1985, earlier this year and met his birth mother and siblings. He says the visit helped him understand that his mother allowed him to be adopted for the best reasons, addressing years of feeling unwanted. But it left him to "fully embrace" his Korean culture and heritage.

"I felt a sense of belonging that I had yet to find," he says. "Being Asian isn't about how you speak or how you dress. You're born into it. It's your history, it's your background. The sense of Korean pride flows through my blood."

Morrissey also found her birth mother and siblings - an experience she describes as "emotionally draining". It left

her somewhat torn between two extremes, wondering what life might have been like. She might be married, might not have finished school, would be poor, and a Buddhist, and might be working in a rice field.


"It's really hard to explain. To a degree you are permanently wondering, 'What if I was not adopted?'" she says.

But she speaks of the orphanages still full of children who could be adopted. "If there's a way to get it going again, I'd be all for it," she says.

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