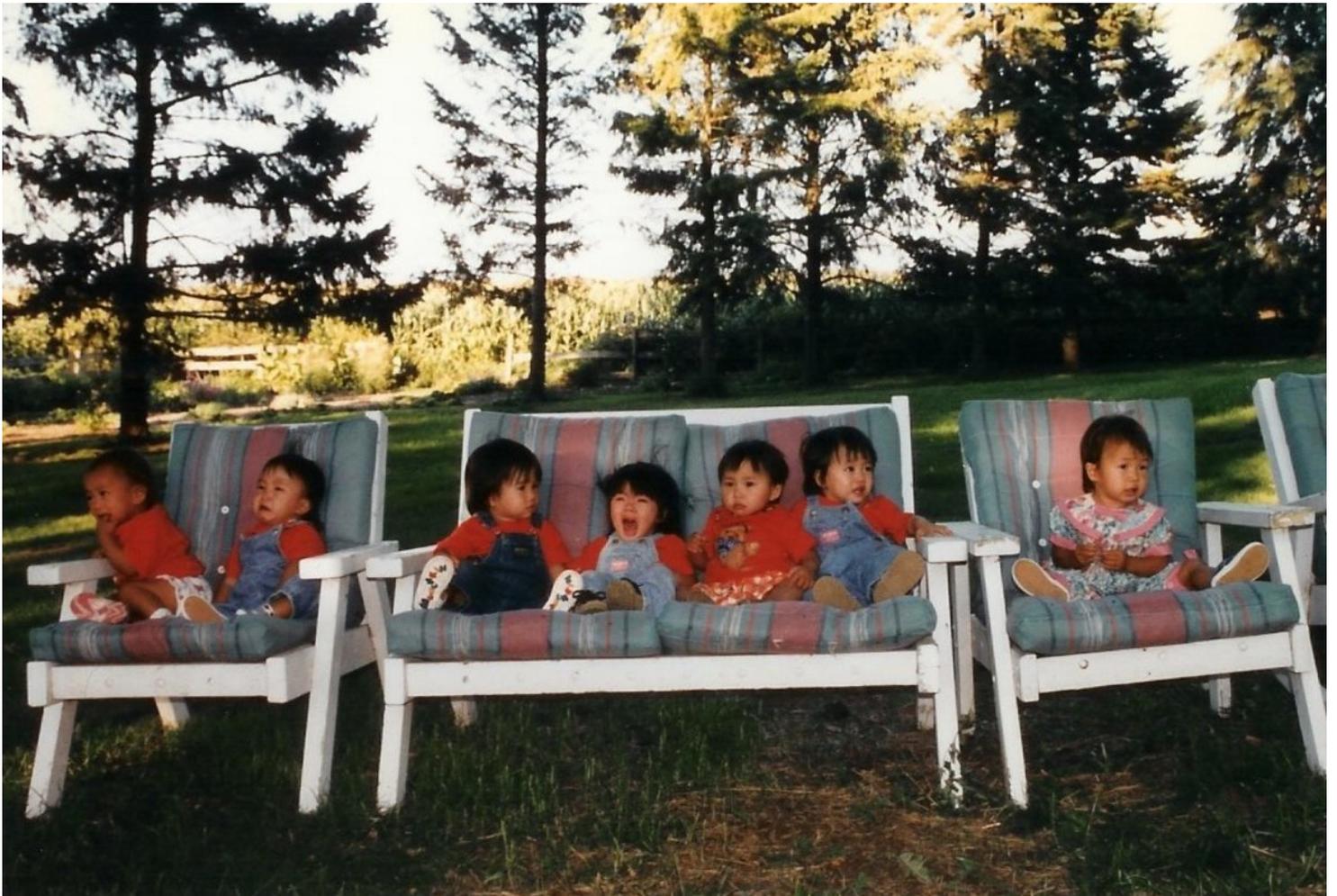


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# Adopted 20 years ago in China, girls continue to bond at annual reunion

Updated: AUGUST 30, 2017 — 8:06 AM EDT



## COURTESY OF THE FAMILIES

The China 7: Seven Chinese orphans were adopted by parents who live within a three-hour drive of one another. They've had reunions for the last 20 years. This was their first in 1997. From left: Hannah Stern, Hannah Chapman, Madison Parry, Clara Currie, Rosie Levinson, Kayla Steele and Nell Weaver.

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by [Catherine Laughlin](#), FOR THE INQUIRER

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Once again for their annual photograph, the girls posed in the backyard.

Under blue skies and a warm sun, the summer picnic was the latest reunion among five of seven families, thrown together by chance 20 years ago when they adopted their daughters in China.

“We became connected through this amazing journey,” said Valerie Parry of Cinnaminson, an elementary schoolteacher who, with her husband, Jack, adopted Madison at 10 months. The couple already had a daughter, now 40, and a son, now 37. “I still find it a marvel that each girl fits perfectly into her family as if it were meant to be.”

Early on, Valerie said, when the families came together, the parents talked about the “normal stuff” – potty training and sleeping through the night. What was different – and still is – were discussions about whether there would be a lasting impact from the girls’ experiences in the orphanage and their adoptions.

“Madi had terrible nightmares when she was little,” said Valerie. “It was good to talk to everyone about our fears.”

Meanwhile, the girls over the years would splash in the hot tub, put on talent shows, or get manicures at a salon. At this year’s reunion, the year they turned 21, the young women’s talk centered on boyfriends, college life, job internships, and career choices.

It’s only for a few hours that they see one another, said Madison, now a rising senior at Princeton University, but they’ve “traveled a common path.”

“When we were growing up, there was the one question we all would be asked: ‘Why don’t you look like your parents?’



In April 1996, the girls, born days apart, were abandoned by their birth mothers in a country that had a one-child policy and that favors boys. As newborns, they were placed in the same orphanage in Zhenjiang, in the southwestern end of Guangdong province.

On the other side of the globe, their lives would knit together further when, in February 1997, their new parents, all with the same adoption agency, became acquainted during the long airplane ride to China.

An instant bond developed. Friendly discussions gave way to commonalities. All except for one couple were in their early 40s, and they all lived in small suburban towns. They also realized they lived within a three-hour drive from one another.

In China, they spent more time together, going on tours, taking walks, and waiting for the adoption process to finalize — what eventually led to the emotional baby exchange as tearful Chinese foster mothers handed over each girl, in turn, to her new parents.

Sally and Bill Currie of Boiling Springs, Cumberland County, have hosted each reunion at their house, the midpoint in travel for everyone.

“At the first picnic, the girls were holding sippy cups. This year, they were drinking wine,” said Sally, an occupational therapist.



**📷 COURTESY OF THE FAMILIES**

This year's reunion included (from left) Madison Parry, Clara Currie, Nell Weaver, Hannah Chapman, and Hannah Stern.

That first night in China with her daughter Clara, Sally leaned on the other mothers for support. "I didn't even know how to make a bottle," said Sally, who'd never been pregnant. The couple later adopted another daughter from China, Emma, now 14.

The young women characterize their lives as anyone growing up in America might: good sometimes, not good other times, always loved.

Kayla Steele, who grew up with five siblings — including a brother who was adopted from Taiwan and two sisters adopted from Vietnam — missed this year's reunion because she had to work.

She always felt American, but over the years, she said, she could also be the target of ignorant comments in their hometown of Millerstown, Perry County, population 700.

“I’ve heard, ‘Are you Asian or Chinese?’ or, ‘Hey, Kayla, how’s the dog meat?’ ” she said, referring to the controversial Chinese Dog Festival. “It’s annoying.”

Her mother, Patricia, said she and her husband, Bob, lost some friends when they returned home from China with their first adopted child.

“They questioned why we did it. So it’s been nice to have our friendships with these other families,” said Patricia, a retired legal secretary.

For Clara Currie, a nursing student at the University of Delaware whose best friend growing up was adopted from India, said whenever she sees the China 7 — the parents’ nickname for the group — she picks up where they left off.

Nell Weaver, who also attends the University of Delaware, said she considers her girlfriends like cousins.

“I don’t see them often, but I can depend on them,” said Nell, who thinks about adopting her own child one day.

Through the years, the families tried to heighten awareness for their daughters’ birth country: Lance Chapman would take Chinese food into his daughter Hannah’s Pittsburgh elementary school during the Chinese New Year and read books aloud about the country.

He recalled the time a classmate kept asking Hannah, now a student at California University of Pennsylvania, why she was adopted. Hannah’s teacher turned it into a lesson and said Hannah had been specially picked by her parents.

“Some of the kids went home and told their parents they wished they’d been picked, too,” said Lance, a Presbyterian minister who has been wryly tagged as the girls’ future marital officiant.

Virginia Clifford, of Olympia, Wash., moved to the West Coast when her daughter Rosie Levinson was 4, but they stay in touch with the rest of the group on social media.

For most adoptees, a common question they have, researchers say, is: “Why me?” At 14, Madison Parry returned to China when her niece was adopted. There, she learned of two 13-year-old girls who’d spent their entire lives in the orphanage.

“Seeing girls who’d never been adopted — that was hard,” said Madison. “That could have been me.”

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**Published:** August 30, 2017 — 5:00 AM EDT | **Updated:** August 30, 2017 — 8:06 AM EDT

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