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Separated at birth, united by chance

Thanks to a Web site and DNA tests, two adopted girls named Mia find they have far more in common

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The Funk family of west suburban Lyons went to China two years ago to adopt a baby girl who had been abandoned on a sidewalk near a textile factory. They named her Mia.

Last year, the Ramirezes of suburban Miami went to China to adopt a girl who had been abandoned on the same spot a week later. As it happened, they also named her Mia.

This May, Diana Ramirez wrote about her daughter's upcoming birthday on an Internet site for parents who had adopted from the orphanage in Yangzhou.

Holly Funk saw it and wrote back, "Diana, I have a Mia as well and she is almost 3."

A flurry of breathless e-mails followed. Then DNA testing provided evidence of what the families had quickly come to suspect: The girls were fraternal twins, separated hours after their birth.

Friday, the girls were reunited, when Diana and Mia Ramirez flew to O'Hare International Airport.

The girls, whose parents had dressed them identically in Chinese-themed outfits, shyly surveyed each other. Urged a little closer, they finally reached for each other's hand.

"I'm just awed," Holly Funk said as she looked at the tiny girls, a little island in the flow of travelers crowding the luggage claim area. "Grateful to God. To me, it's a divine thing. It's a miracle. In the sea of humanity, these kids found each other."

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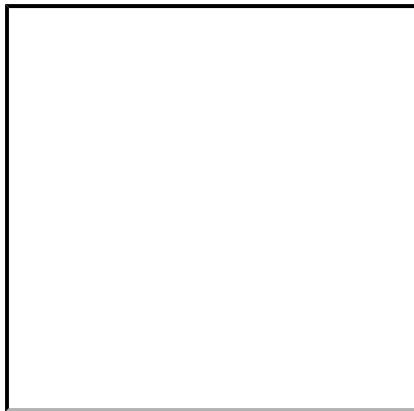
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If it is a miracle, it is one that is increasingly happening to families



Chicago Tribune video

nationwide as international adoptions abound, the Internet reunites people and DNA technology establishes evidence of blood ties.

Such discoveries--made possible in part by Web groups centered around orphanages--are pulling back the curtains that separated previous generations of adoptees from their past and their biological kin.

The news can change children's lives, linking lost family members and perhaps even providing a lifelong soul mate.

One Web site geared toward linking adoptees with their biological kin is maintained by Jim and Susan Rittenhouse of Lisle. The site has a membership of 137, with 15 sets of twins and seven sets of siblings who have been confirmed. Members have adopted from Cambodia, Nepal, Guatemala, Russia and China.

The Rittenhouses themselves are on the list. In 2004, they discovered that their daughter, now 6, appeared to have a twin sister in Alabama, a matter strongly indicated by DNA tests. These twins also were independently given the same name: Meredith.

"They're best friends, in the deepest sense imaginable," Jim Rittenhouse said. "I didn't believe in twin bonds until I saw these two together."

The relationships provide a fertile area for observation of child development, said Nancy Segal, director of the Twin Studies Center at California State University at Fullerton.

"This offers us a wonderful window into so many questions about nature and nurture," Segal said, "because we can see the perspective unfolding of development in genetically identical and non-identical kids in their different homes."

Abandoned outside factory

Mia Diamond Funk first became known to the world at 6 a.m. June 14, 2003, when workers found her on a broken sidewalk outside a textile factory in a poor district of Yangzhou, a city near the central coast.

The factory is a shabby building on a narrow street crowded with linen shops, taxis, street vendors and the tricycles that peasants use to haul loads. In China, with its one-child policy, boys are preferred and girls sometimes abandoned.

Officers from the Fuyunmen District central police substation, who picked up the baby, concluded she had been born the night before. They took her to the 200-bed Yangzhou Children's Welfare Institute.

One week later, Mia Hanying Ramirez was found on the same spot. Whoever abandoned the girls may have thought it would be less conspicuous to drop them off separately. Mia Hanying also went to the orphanage.

The girls were made available for adoption. But because Mia Hanying had a correctable heart defect, she went onto a separate special-needs list.

Far away, in a middle-class neighborhood in Lyons, Holly and Douglas Funk were preparing for a baby. They had five biological children, ages 6 to 21, but they had been touched when they saw a TV special on orphans.

Holly Funk recalls her husband telling her, "I feel like we're supposed to adopt a little girl from Asia."

She agreed. And she felt she heard the Lord tell her, "You're going to name her Mia."

The Funks are not wealthy. He is a machinist and she occasionally performs as a clown. But an inheritance allowed them to buy the bungalow next door for their older boys, and so there was room for another child at the family compound. With the help of a second mortgage, grants and a 401(k) loan, they came up with the \$22,000 for Mia's adoption.

Holly Funk cannot say why, but before she adopted Mia, she found her thoughts focusing on the number "two." They applied to adopt twins, and she bought everything in twos: two cribs, two blankets, a tandem stroller, two fuzzy musical lambs that play "Jesus Loves Me."

After a home screening and months of waiting, they were told they had been approved for one girl. They got rid of the tandem stroller and extra crib. But for some reason, Holly Funk kept the second lamb.

They decided to call their new daughter Mia Diamond, and in July 2004, they traveled to China to pick her up.

They returned to Lyons overjoyed by their new treasure--their diamond--but nagged by the feeling that something was missing.

"I always felt there were twins," Holly Funk said. "Even when we brought her home, I felt led to pray for the little girl that was left behind. I thought, 'This is silly, but I'm supposed to do it,' so I prayed."

There was a twin, of course, who stayed in China.

Longing for a girl

In Pembroke Pines, a Miami suburb, Carlos and Diana Ramirez were living happily with two sons, now 13 and 10.

But Diana Ramirez, who had had her tubes tied years ago, found herself longing for a girl. She was the only female in a house where ESPN was constantly playing and boys' basketballs, baseballs and karate outfits were underfoot. A girl would change the mix.

"We had always talked about it," Diana Ramirez said.

Carlos Ramirez's business, Amazing Pavers, was doing well, and in February 2005, they decided to apply to adopt a Chinese girl with special needs.

Last October they brought the family to Yangzhou to pick up Mia Hanying. More than a year after Mia Diamond came to the States, Mia Hanying arrived in Miami. She was 28 months old.

When the two families found each other by e-mail in May, they compared photographs and biographical details. Then they swabbed the girls' mouths and sent the samples off to a lab.

DNA testing established that there is an 85 percent probability that they are at least half-sisters. (To reach greater certainty, they would have had to test a parent, an impossibility in this case.) Given all the parallels and their ages, it is most likely that the girls are fraternal twins.

Diana Ramirez was stunned.

"I was in shock," she said. "I was like, `OK, well, now, this is for real.'"

In one sense, it should not have been a complete surprise. The Ramirez family lives two blocks from good friends Tony and Carol Requejo, who adopted a Chinese daughter in 2001. Two-and-a-half years later, the Requejos found that the girl also has a sister living in California--apparently a twin, according to DNA and other evidence.

"Wanna play?"

The unlikeliness of such discoveries, even the nature of their relationship, is still beyond the 3-year-old Mias. Mia Diamond calls her twin her "special friend."

The Funks have since adopted a 4-year-old boy from Taiwan. Holly Funk hopes to visit Miami with her Mia in October, and both sets of parents say they are committed to visiting and staying in touch--becoming extended family for the girls.

The mothers often let the twins talk to each other on the phone. A few weeks before they met, they chatted, unaware that a reporter was listening in.

"Wanna play?" said Mia Hanying.

"What do you want to play?" her twin replied.

"Baby doll. Want to play with my baby doll?"

But on Friday, when the girls saw each other at O'Hare, they hung back, suddenly shy.

Mia Hanying brought two baby dolls, one of them for her sister. And Mia Diamond had brought along one of the musical lambs as a gift.

Then, finally, the girls took each other's hands. Mia Diamond fingered her sister's outfit, then her own. Mia Hanying played with her twin's fingers, as if recognizing something.

And they would not let go. For the half hour it took Diana Ramirez to claim her bags, the sisters stood clutching each other.

"Are they twins?" an airline worker asked.

"Yeah," Holly Funk said. "It's their first-time meeting."

"First-time meeting?"

"Yes," the mother said. "They were separated."

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