

A pair of matching stories

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PEMBROKE PINES · The curious similarities. Photos traded by e-mail. Excitement and worry when DNA tests proved the daughter she adopted in China had a twin sister living on the other side of the country.

Carol Requejo had already been through all that. Then it happened again. In the same Pembroke Pines neighborhood. To her best friend.

"It really was shocking. At first you don't believe it," said Requejo. "Then you realize that it's just a gift for all of us. How else do you explain it?"

It's not easy to explain what happened to the Requejos or their friends, Carlos and Diana Ramirez.

Some of the details -- the Ramirezes named their daughter Mia, as did a Chicago couple that adopted her twin -- are just plain weird. Most are happy stories of reunited twins holding hands and total strangers coming together to form extended, second families.

And all show how a growing number of American families are turning China's national problem into a chance for orphaned baby girls to live happy, healthy lives.

There are an estimated 1 million babies in Chinese orphanages, and about 95 percent of the 7,906 babies adopted by Americans last year were girls, according to the U.S. Consulate in Guangzhou, China.

Carol and Tony Requejo adopted Dominique nearly five years ago, and soon after that, Taylor, now 3. Inspired by their friends and the adorable little girls, Carlos and Diana Ramirez decided to adopt last year.

Sitting in the Requejos' Pembroke Pines living room this week, the two South Florida families talked about the stunning coincidences, their adoptions and the challenges of raising one-half of a set of twins. Both families have already reunited the daughters with their twins, and both said they plan to make regular visits to keep the sisters close.

Last weekend, Mia Ramirez, 3, traveled to Chicago for her first visit with her sister, Mia Funk.

"For a few minutes, they were just looking at each other. Then they started holding hands and wouldn't stop," said Diana Ramirez, who has two sons, aged 10 and 13. "They have a strong connection, but Mia's too young to understand what's going on."

As the families talked about the meeting this week, Dominique sat on the floor looking at a photo album of her twin sister, Sydney, who lives in San Diego.

"I want to go live with Sydney," she tells a visitor. Then she thinks about Taylor and her older brothers and sister and comes up with a better idea. "I want her to come live with me."

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Dominique and Sydney have visited three times and have grown very close. "They really are like magnets when they're together; you can't pull them apart," Tony Requejo said.

The separations are sad and painful, the Requejos said.

The family already had four children when they decided to adopt. They went through a Texas agency and, after a lengthy screening process, traveled with eight couples to China in 2001.

Abandoned on the streets of south China, Dominique was 9 months old and weighed just 10 pounds when the Requejos arrived at the orphanage to pick her up.

In hindsight, Dominique seemed especially close to another bald, quiet infant girl who was adopted by the Jordan family of San Diego, Carol Requejo said.

Carol stayed in touch with Sandi Jordan, and the mothers exchanged photos. After a while, the girls grew more alike.

"They had so many similarities, things you can't see in photos, and we started wondering," Carol Requejo said. "It's a big decision to take a DNA test, because you have to commit to a relationship not just with the baby, but with a whole other family."

The tests were taken in February 2005 and proved conclusively the girls were sisters, very likely twins.

Two months later, Dominique and Sydney met for the first time since they were infants.

By then, the Ramirezes had begun the adoption process. In October they headed to China to pick up Mia. Back home, Diana Ramirez started joining Internet chat groups with other mothers who had adopted in China.

One particular chat partner had a daughter from the same orphanage as Mia. Their ages were also the same, and then the couples exchanged photos and, eventually, got DNA samples.

The tests showed the girls were almost certainly sisters and, in all likelihood, twins. "We couldn't believe it. Who could believe something like that could happen to Carol and to us?" Diana Ramirez said.

Both families are adamant about teaching the children about China and the culture of their ancestors.

Dominique already has a book of Chinese language symbols and games, and the families plan to visit China when the girls get older.

"What they are learning now is just the tip of the iceberg, and we want to make sure they learn about their traditions and customs," Tony Requejo said. "It really is amazing what's happened so far, but as they become young adults, then it's going to hit all of us even more."

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