

A SECOND CHANCE

Chosen ones: A couple adopts albino orphans from China, providing the love and support they deserve.

Story by Elizabeth Simpson

Photos by Preston Gannaway



Language of Touch. Kim works with Paul on a Braille lesson. She decided to homeschool the boys in order to give extra attention to their special needs and also to protect them from the taunts of public school kids. Photo by Preston Gannaway.

A newsletter gave Kim Anderson her first glimpse of a boy who would change her life.

The boy was pale as snow in a world of olive-skinned, dark-haired children.

His hair was white, almost luminescent. Kim, 45 at the time, remembers thinking: “That is our child.”

The boy had albinism, a condition in which pigment is lacking in the hair, skin and iris of the eye.

It was 2002, and Kim and her husband, Steve, saw an empty nest looming in their Smithfield home. The youngest of their two children, Jonathan, was a sophomore in high school; their oldest, Aubrey,

was in college.

Like many women her age, Kim wondered how she could best use her time in the years when her children went off to college. Volunteer work? Something in her profession as a nurse? A church project?

She and her husband prayed for guidance and discussed the question with

members of their church, Bacon’s Castle Baptist in Surry. The answer was obvious.

People have different passions, and Kim’s is raising children.

She talked with friends who had adopted children, and one shared a newsletter about orphans in China.

One boy spoke to her from

across the miles.

In China, he stood out in a jarring way, but in their family, Kim thought, his pale complexion would fit right in.

The Christian agency that did volunteer work and published the newsletter called him Elijah, and he looked about 2.

Kim showed the photo to her husband,

and he, too, thought this could be the one.

With those few scraps of information, Kim began to search for the boy.

She called adoption agencies across the United States with his description. She joined e-mail groups of adoptive parents and agencies.

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Conditional Triplets. Micah (bottom right) plays with his brothers on his first morning at the Andersons' home in Isle of Wight county, Va. Both Elijah and Paul were adopted at age 4. The brothers, who are not biologically related, are often mistaken for triplet. **Sunscreen.** Elijah waits for his mom to finish applying sunscreen during the Andersons' family beach trip to Outer Banks. The boys dislike sunscreen, but have to have it if they spend any significant amount of time outside. **Culinary Traditions.** Paul (left) and Micah (right) eat noodles for breakfast shortly after Micah was adopted. While Paul and Elijah still prefer an Asian-influenced diet, they have lost most of their Chinese customs and language since moving to the United States. Photos by Preston Gannaway.

The boy fell into a special-needs category because of his poor eyesight and albinism, and agency officials told her that papers probably had not been submitted to free him for adoption.

In China, some people considered babies with albinism bad luck. Kim felt just the opposite.

While she waited to hear more about Elijah, she received an e-mail about a 13-year-old Chinese girl with serious leg deformities who was about to age out of the adoption pool. If someone didn't adopt her, she'd likely remain at the orphanage, helping to care for the younger children.

It was December of 2002; the girl would turn 14 the following Feb. 6.

The couple prayed about it over the weekend, and Kim called the agency that Monday. By January, Abigail had joined their family.

Being older, she had a hard time adjusting to life in America. She needed several surgeries to correct the problems with her legs. She struggled with the language and felt distrustful of Americans.

"I was scared for a whole year," Abigail remembers.

Even though they had their hands full addressing Abigail's health issues, the couple did not forget about the boy in the newsletter. Before the year was out, Kim received a call from an adoption agency: "We found Elijah."

This second round of family life for the Andersons was about to grow.

Kim and Steve returned to China the following March.

The orphanage workers brought Elijah, then 4, to a hotel room to unite him with the Andersons.

"I traveled on the train," remembers Elijah, who is now 10. "I didn't know what was happening. They never told me." Steve and Kim gave him a few toys, but

he had never seen any like them and didn't know quite what to do with them. Twenty minutes later, while he was preoccupied with a puzzle, the orphanage workers slipped out.

After a while, Elijah looked up, saw they were gone and started crying.

But he quickly adjusted to life with the Andersons. In six weeks, he was speaking in short English sentences. His vision was poor — a common ailment of people with albinism — but he compensated with various adaptive tools to magnify print.

Kim remained in e-mail groups of people who adopt from China and one specifically for those with an interest in children with special needs. She saw a photo of another boy with albinism.

She was becoming familiar with handling the vision issues and thought the boy would make a good brother for Elijah.

Steve was uncertain, questioning, as he now puts it, "when enough is enough."

Kim won him over, and in June of 2006, she traveled to China to get Paul, who was 4, the same age as Elijah when he was adopted. The rest of the family met them at the airport on their return.

It was the first time Elijah had seen someone else with albinism.

"He looks like me," he told Aubrey, the couple's oldest child.

Paul would prove difficult. He was further behind developmentally than Elijah had been. He didn't know how to hold a pencil, and he barely talked. His vision was much worse than Elijah's, and he needed to hold things right before his eyes to see.

He'd cry every morning when he got up and wouldn't let Kim out of his sight. He didn't speak in a regular conversation with his new family for a year.

Kim started home-schooling both Paul and Elijah. Besides wanting a Chris-

tian curriculum, she also thought Paul would benefit from one-on-one attention. His language and writing skills were far below his age level, but his math abilities were pretty good. His needs, she thought, would be easier to juggle at home than in a classroom. She also wanted to teach Paul Braille.

By last year, Paul had settled into the Anderson household, and Kim came to her husband with yet another photo, saying this one would be "absolutely the last one."

This boy was 8 and had albinism as well. Steve, a civilian lawyer with the Navy, laughingly remembers that moment. He says by that time his attitude was, "What's one more?"

When Kim and Steve went to get the boy they would name Micah late last year, Paul and Abigail remained behind. Abigail was a freshman at Christopher Newport University; Paul stayed with his grandparents.

Elijah traveled with Kim and Steve because Micah's orphanage was in the same province where Elijah had lived. Elijah might be a comfort to the boy, and the visit would be an opportunity for him to reconnect with his homeland.

Elijah filmed family members meeting Micah in late December.

Micah wore several layers of clothes — everything he owned, including pajamas. He sat down in a chair, looking a little confused and frightened.

Soon his face was wet with tears, but he didn't make a sound, not even a whimper.

"I think he was told not to cry," Kim says. "I know he was scared to death, being ripped away from everything he knew."

Micah needed a physical exam before



PEOPLE INVEST IN THEIR INHERITANCE; WE INVESTED IN KIDS. WE HAVEN'T LOST, WE'VE GAINED. -Kim Anderson

being cleared to come to America.

An X-ray showed a dark cloud in his lungs. The health care providers thought he probably had tuberculosis, so they asked for tests.

He gave several spit samples, but Kim's nursing background told her he hadn't coughed deeply enough to provide evidence of TB. All the tests came back negative, and he was cleared to go.

Kim called their local health department to let them know about the TB possibility, and days after Micah arrived in the United States, he went to the Andersons' family doctor for another look.

Dr. Donald Soles examined the X-ray. "There's definitely something going on there," said Soles, holding it up to the light. "The last time I treated TB was in residency."

He pulled out a stethoscope and showed it to Micah.

"Are you ticklish? You've seen this before, right?"

Soles pressed the instrument to the boy's

chest.

"His little heart is just ticking away," he said.

"It looks like he's getting ready to cry," Kim said. Then to Micah, stroking his face: "It's OK."

Tears slid down the boy's cheeks, and he wiped them away with the back of his hand, but still made not a sound.

"Do you want something for your lips?" Kim asked, making a motion across her mouth to see if he wanted balm for his dried lips. He shook his head.

Are you thirsty, she asked, motioning with a cup. Again, no.

Even though Abigail could speak to Micah in his own language, he wouldn't answer her, preferring to stick close to Kim and rely on hand gestures.

The tests eventually would reveal he did indeed have TB, even though he wasn't showing outward symptoms. Health department officials came to their home to go over protocol, and Micah was put on six months of antibiotics.

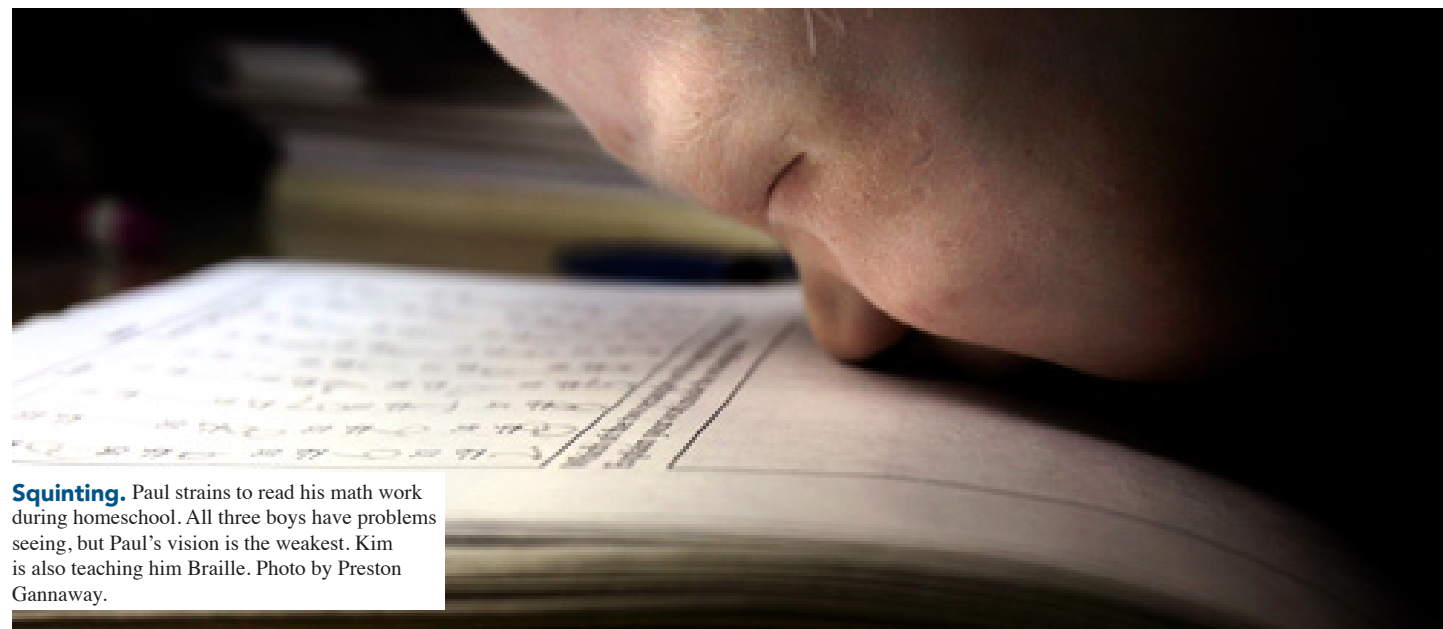
Before his medical crisis was put to rest, another one in the family began to unravel.

Even before they had gone to pick up Micah, Steve was having pain in his hip. He thought it might be related to his tennis playing.

But he wanted to get Micah home and settled before he had it checked out. Maybe it would go away on its own in the meantime.

It never did, and in March, tests showed Steve had plasmacytoma, a bone cancer that begins in a plasma cell and forms a tumor. Five weeks of radiation followed. After that, he continued to be monitored. Plasmacytoma is diagnosed when there's a single lesion on a bone, but it can be a precursor to multiple myeloma, in which multiple lesions appear in various bones throughout the body.

"It was a curveball I didn't expect," Kim says. "It's made us stronger. It's made us closer." ■



Squinting. Paul strains to read his math work during homeschool. All three boys have problems seeing, but Paul's vision is the weakest. Kim is also teaching him Braille. Photo by Preston Gannaway.