BORN INTO an American Indian family 30 years ago, Kristin Ernst Wolf (center) was just 3 months old when adopted by Matt and Karen Ernst.

JONATHAN M. ERNST

Cross-cultural adoptees need love and awareness of their heritage

Three-month-old Kristin of the Lakota Sioux Nation found herself living with my white family in a mostly white neighborhood.

She was born during the late 1960s movement toward increased cross-cultural adoption, which was nurtured by the zero population growth effort, an abundance of Asian refugees and a realization that the majority of children needing homes were not Caucasian.

Unfortunately, social service agencies initially didn't offer much advice about how to include a child's birth culture into family activities.

Now these children are becoming interested—some for the first time—in their birth families' culture. They are not only trying to find their parents but are joining social and support groups for adoptees, moving into communities where many people from that culture live, or even incorporating their culture into their careers.

My parents, Karen and Matt Ernst, adopted Kristin in 1968. The following year Kathryn and Norm Braatz, a Caucasian couple, welcomed 2-month-old Tanya, an African American.

Both families' faith and attitudes toward social responsibility and service played an important part in their deci-

One of the

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family

BY HEIDI ERNST

JONATHAN M. ERNST

PRODUCING POWWOWS is one way Kristin Ernst Wolf and her husband, Chipa Wolf, keep American Indian culture alive for her family—daughter Cecelia and son Josh (not pictured)—and share the legacy with others.

sion to adopt. Norm and Matt, my father, are ELCA pastors, while Kathryn is a high school teacher and Karen, my mother, is an occupational therapist.

"All the talk at the time about zero population growth made me know even more that it wasn't responsible to add to the number when there were children who needed homes," Karen says.

Kathryn adds, "There had been articles in the newspaper telling how so many babies were being abandoned, and we thought we could help."

The Braatzes had love to offer—as well as strollers and cribs. So they opened their home to foster children. Tanya was the first. After three years with the Braatzes, Tanya's birth mother released her care to them. "That's how we became an interracial family," Norm says. "We didn't set out to adopt children of another culture."

My parents had discussed the idea of adoption even before I was born, but what triggered them to action was a 1966 issue of *The Lutheran Standard* (see box, page 28). After completing the requisite home study, Lutheran Social Services called about Kristin, who was born to a woman on the Rosebud reservation of the Lakota Sioux Nation. My parents brought her home.

At the time, Tanya and Kristin would have been considered "hard to place" because of their racial backgrounds. That is not the case today. In 1999 the children who have the most difficult time finding a home are those with "special needs"—usually health problems or other disabilities—and older children.

The Braatzes, in fact, took in an older child after Tanya. Mark, also African American, was 7 when they adopted him. "But he never quite adopted us," Norm says. At 14, he moved to foster homes in the African American community. "But we do still see him," Norm says. "We are his family."

Love isn't enough

Some members of the African American community and most American Indian tribes are opposed to allowing children to be adopted by families of other cultures, believing the best environment for a child is one of the same ethnic background. (Federal legislation says people cannot be denied the opportunity to become an adoptive or foster parent on "the basis of race, color, or national origin of the person, or the child, involved." But states are still required to diligently recruit foster and adoptive families that reflect the child's ethnic background first.)

Both the Braatz and Ernst families lived in areas where Tanya and Kristin were a minority, which made it difficult for them to be fully in touch with their heritage. Sociologist Rita J. Simon, a professor at American University, Washington, D.C., studied transracial

adoptees for 20 years, starting in 1968. Her research showed that a few years after a family first made the decision to adopt, they realized that love was often not enough in raising the children. Simon says parents have the responsibility to make adoptees aware of their racial background and history.

"Over the years we tried to be honest about Tanya's culture," Norm says. "We did reading, movies, that sort of thing. There just wasn't much available in a small town in Arizona. One reason we later moved to California was to expose her to more black culture."

My family also read books about American Indians, and we were lucky to have found the Indian Education Program in Baltimore. The program shared culture, handiwork, history and camaraderie with children who didn't live on reservations, along with their families (some of whom were American Indian, some who weren't).

Both Tanya, 29, and Kristin, 30, wish they had learned more about their respective cultures when younger but are trying to make up for lost time.

"I do want to find my birth mother," says Tanya, a preschool teacher at The Learning Tree, Fresno, Calif. "I used to be kind of angry, but the older I got, I understood how the world is. Then I was happy she gave me up." Tanya has attended some African culture events and wants to learn more about African American history.

Kristin also attends cultural events —it's her job. She and her husband, Chipa Wolf who is part Cherokee, produce powwows in the Southeast and lead programs in schools. "It lets me share the culture with kids and adults and show them that we're people just like they are," says Kristin of Jasper, Ga. "I think it's good for my [two] children, especially Josh, who is 10, because it helps him look at the world a little differently."

We look at the world a little differently than we did 30 years ago. The civil rights movement has given way to affirmative action backlash, and some people are turning inward to preserve their culture, fearing it's fading away.

Zero population growth hasn't been reached. Almost half a million children in the U.S. foster care system await permanent homes (nearly 60 percent are minority). War and tyranny account for some of the 13,000 children from other countries who were adopted in 1997 by American families.

And we now know more about cross-cultural adoption. Parental love and faith is essential, but in most cases a responsibility to experiencing the birth culture of adopted children is important to helping them establish a cultural identity and come of age. ■

Ernst is copy chief for Your Company, *a Time Inc. magazine, New York City, and a member of St. Luke Lutheran Church, Manhattan.*

ERIC PAUL ZAMORA

TANYA BRAATZ, 29, grew up in a white family in a small Arizona town, somewhat isolated from other African Americans. Now a teacher at an integrated preschool, she's looking for her birth mother.

A question of identity

"Indian Children Find Homes." The November 1966 article in *The Lutheran Standard*, the magazine of the former American Lutheran Church, profiled a family who had adopted two American Indian girls from Lutheran Social Services of South Dakota. An excerpt:

"It is a moral law that a responsibility exists to provide for the minimum needs of any people dispossessed by another people when territory is taken by force. Lutheran Social Services of South Dakota intends to face that responsibility by trying to answer the needs of their Indian neighbors—not with a preaching ministry, but reaching out as an arm of the church with a service of love, they offer the same social services that are given to Caucasian families in the area. They begin by finding foster and adoptive homes for Indian babies and small children, and by helping teenagers."

The story also said 500 American Indian children were available for adoption. In the past two years, Lutheran Social Services of South Dakota has facilitated only one American Indian cross-cultural adoption—reflecting that tribes nationwide are now much more reticent to allow children to leave their culture through adoption than they were 30 years ago.

The federal Indian Child Welfare Act charges agencies to first try placing a child with relatives on a reservation before looking to other tribal members or tribes. If the original tribe approves, only then can the agency open the adoption to another family. Depending on the circumstance, a tribe will often serve as a cultural resource for a child who is raised in a family with a different ethnic background.

"I have had a lot of adoptees that have grown up in white culture calling because they have lost their identity and are having so many struggles," says DiAnn Kleinsasser, adoption program specialist for the South Dakota Department of Social Services. "The tribes believe, and we believe, that children grow the best in their own culture." ■

HEIDI ERNST