

For years, shelved somewhere in the storage space of my mind was a dry statistic, a fact that had little bearing on my daily reality. The statistic was this: Millions of children around the globe were without a family. My husband and I were vaguely aware of this truth. At times we had even discussed adoption. But the statistic about homeless children was not something that kept us awake at night.

We were busy, after all, my husband, Don, teaching and coaching, and me, writing best-selling Christian fiction. Besides, we already had three beautiful children, a number we planned to stop at after our youngest, a boy, was born with a heart defect that required surgery when he was just three weeks old. And so the statistic about homeless children remained, and we did nothing about it.

Then late one night alone in my office I met EJ.

In the quiet incandescent glow of my computer screen, I stumbled upon an Internet site that had a photo listing of children available for adoption in Haiti. One of those was a darling five-year-old boy with huge brown eyes and dimpled smile. "EJ," the heading stated.

The connection between us was instant.

"EJ is a charmer," the accompanying description said. "He is the first to hug the workers at the orphanage each day and is easily one of the fastest learners in our classroom."

His photograph made an impact that was overwhelming and indelible. In a moment's time, Haiti was no longer another country with starving homeless children. Rather it was the homeland of this precious child.

I could almost hear him calling out to us: "Mommy, Daddy, I love you. I'm here waiting for you. Please come take me home. I need a family. Please"

Until then, family discussions on adoption had been brief and esoteric. All that changed the moment I found EJ. I called my husband into my office and for the next hour we talked about this sweet child. There were no disagreements. EJ belonged in our family. Now we needed to present the idea to our children.

I printed his photo, and the next morning Don and I introduced him to Kelsey, Tyler, and Austin. Setting his picture up in front of an empty chair, I asked our kids, "How would you like EJ to be your brother? He's five years old and he lives in Haiti."

"Well," our only daughter, Kelsey, 12, said thoughtfully, "he looks friendly."

"He's five?" seven-year-old Tyler chimed in. "That's right between me and Austin."

Two-year-old Austin just grinned and pointed. "That my brother? Huh Mommy and Daddy? That my brother?"

We studied EJ's picture for days until he actually felt like part of our family. At night we prayed about him, connecting, building a bond that grew stronger with each glance at his face. He was living at the Heart of God Ministries orphanage in Port-au-Prince, so we contacted workers there and learned more about him. Finally, with full hearts, we made our decision. EJ would be our son, a part of our family forever.

Over the next several months, we completed a daunting amount of paperwork for the INS and Haitian dossier. But because we took it one document at a time, we were never overwhelmed. Through every step we were driven by EJ's face. In fact, it wasn't long before we were driven by another little face as well – that of a six-year-old boy named Joshua. The photo listing said Joshua was a happy child who excelled in academics and sports. He had great leadership qualities.

"Kids, what would you think about having two brothers?" My husband asked our three children one evening. "Mommy and I think maybe EJ would like a brother who was more like him – another little boy from Haiti."

Again our kids were excited about the idea. But for reasons we didn't understand at the time, we were given wrong information about Joshua. The website description was incorrect, one of the workers told us.

"Joshua is a difficult boy. Frankly he would not blend well with other children."

With unsure hearts, we decided on a different boy, a six-year-old named Sean Angelo. Six months later, we got the call every adoptive parent waits for.

"Okay," the orphanage director told me. "Your children are ready to come home."

Haiti is widely known as one of the poorest countries in the world. It is a place rife with dangers, and there were months when I considered having our new little boys escorted home. But in the end God made it clear I was to go there. Take pictures, absorb myself in their culture if only for a short while, and bring home a piece of their heritage. Something I could share with them later.

My first impressions were exactly what I expected for a country with 80 percent unemployment and no sanitation system. Trash piled high along city sidewalks, inviting the random cow or pig that mingled amid wandering pedestrians. Wide-eyed children begged on the corners and a vacant stare masked the faces of most. Buildings and roadways were in disarray, reminding me of scenes from earthquake and hurricane disaster sites.

I was taken to the orphanage and introduced to my two new sons – EJ and Sean. The boys were dressed in their best, donated clothing, and both offered me shy smiles as they sat on my lap. They didn't speak a word of English.

This – all of it – was what I'd expected.

But I didn't expect what happened next. As I sat there searching for a common bond with EJ and Sean, a little boy walked up and brushed a lock of hair off my forehead. "Hello, Mommy." His voice was clear, his English perfect. "I love you." Then – while the noise from forty-two orphans faded away – he sang to me, "Lord, I give you my heart. I give you my soul. I live for you alone"

My heart was hooked and snagged in a matter of seconds. "What's your name?" I asked the child.

"Joshua," he told me. "My name's Joshua."

This was the six-year-old Joshua we had considered adopting before finding out about Sean Angelo. The child we were told might not fit into our family. An hour later I knew the whole story. Joshua was still up for adoption. The orphanage worker who had given us misinformation about him no longer worked there. Joshua was a wonderful child, outgoing and confident, brilliant in his studies and good with the little ones at the orphanage. He and EJ and Sean were buddies – inseparable.

I called my husband that night and wept. "Joshua belongs with us. I can't imagine leaving him here."

My husband's answer was something I'll never forget. "Two ... three ... what's the difference, Karen? If you feel that strongly about him, bring him home."

Of course in the world of international adoption the process is never that simple.

Six months after EJ and Sean came home, Joshua followed. Only then did we truly feel our family was complete.

Those early days together hold dozens of moments we'll never forget. The time when EJ and Sean first entered the bathroom to wash their hands. Slowly the water grew warm and as it did, they began speaking loudly in Creole, pointing to the water and jumping up and down. It wasn't difficult to figure out why they were excited. They'd never felt warm running water.

Then there was the day our family visited the zoo. EJ and Sean were mesmerized by the animals, but the experience was nothing to what came next: A trip to the grocery store. It was a starving little boy's paradise.

As their English improved, we learned more about their past. Our boys had lost parents to starvation or illness and had gone without food for days at a time. They customarily ate something called "dirt cakes," which looked like cheap pottery made from clay, dirt, and water. Village women mixed this recipe, baked it, and gave it to the children to ease the pain in their empty tummies.

Meals came only after great effort. Our boys were adept at using rocks to knock mangos from trees, or to kill wild birds. In the early months, Sean, especially, would see a bird and nearly go ballistic, pointing and motioning toward the nearest rock. His message was simple – "Please, Daddy, this is something I can do let dinner be on me tonight." Politely, and with a full heart, my husband dissuaded him from killing birds.

In those first months, we dealt with the basic cultural adjustments. Sleeping in beds instead of on the floor, using bathrooms, table manners. But miraculously, the boys almost never needed to be told twice about issues of obedience. They are constantly cleaning their room and remain thrilled with their new toys and beds (they share a large bedroom with Austin and sleep in two bunk beds). "Please, Mommy, can we vacuum?" is a question I field weekly.

"Well, okay, since you've been so good this week I guess so."

Often people comment on the blessing we are to these little boys. But we correct them every time. The blessings have been all ours.

One has been watching our three biological children embrace their new brothers. This is especially obvious when the kids play together, or do homework. Because of the efforts of Kelsey, Tyler, and Austin, our new sons have already learned basic reading. On the school front, our sons have been welcomed by their classmates. Their school even took on the Heart of God Ministries orphanage as a service project and collected two suitcases of school supplies for the Haitian children.

Adopting has also made me more compassionate in my novel writing. That much is evidenced by my mention of adoption topics and the intense emotion in several of my recent novels, including *Halfway to Forever*.

Another blessing has been realizing the depth of faith these children have. They had nothing in Haiti, not even a chance to live. But they had a deep love for Jesus, and prayed and sang throughout the day. In a culture ridden with voodoo, it was especially comforting to know that a Christian orphanage in Haiti had given these children so strong a foundation. Even now, the children love singing for God, and sometimes cry during worship time at church.

"Are you sad, honey?" my husband will sometimes ask.

"No, Daddy. I'm just so happy when I think of everything Jesus has done for me."

The boys are very loving, hugging us often and telling us – first in Creole, then in English – exactly how much they love us. The other day Sean said, "Mommy, when I get big I'm going to get a job and make lots of money. I'll send some to the people in Haiti and give the rest to you."

I was puzzled by this. "That's very nice, but why do you want to give me money?"

"Because ..." his eyes glistened. "You and Daddy have given so much to me."

People ask us about the transition. How do you bring children into your home who have nothing in common with you, they wonder. You have different skin colors, different cultural understandings, different languages – even different food preferences.

We tell them this: With much prayer.

A few times we've had conversations about skin color.

"Why do I have black skin and you and Daddy and Jesus have white skin?" Sean asked once during a break from playing with his brothers in the backyard.

"Well," I said. "Jesus didn't have white skin. He had brown skin. And God gave everyone a special color, a color he loved for that person. All the colors of skin are the same to Jesus, and they're all beautiful." Sean thought about that for a minute. "What color skin will I have in Heaven?"

"I'm not sure." I pulled him into a quick hug. "But I hope it'll be just like it is now. Because you're skin is beautiful, Sean ... and you're such a handsome boy. I wouldn't want you to look any different than you do right now."

Sean's smile stretched across his face. "Thanks, Mom." Then he ran out of the house to join his brothers in the backyard once again. I'll never know if that was the perfect answer, but I know this: God alone will need to provide the answers as questions like that come up. For our part, we welcome the discussion.

Other than curious moments like this, adding three Haitian first-graders to our family has been nothing but wonderful. None of the problems we feared have materialized. As for skin color and race, all people are unique, God-designed individuals. The color of our current tent is not important to God.

Still, we are aware that their Haitian background will one day be important to our sons. As such, I've learned how to cook Haitian beans and rice. We eat that way at least once a week and marvel at the platefuls of food our new boys put away. To help the boys maintain their Creole, we sometimes spend the dinner hour asking the boys to teach us various phrases. In addition, we have networked with a small Haitian-American contingency not far from our home.

More than that, though, we stress this fact: Our primary heritage is found not in our ancestors or family genealogies or birthplaces.

But at the cross, in Christ alone.

There is a story often told of a particularly rough storm that came up one night and left a sandy beach strewn with starfish. The next morning, a child walked along the shore, stopping every few feet to pick up a starfish and fling it out to sea. An old man watched the child and finally shouted at him. "Why bother, son. There's too many starfish to make a difference."

With that, the boy picked up another starfish and looked at it intently before heaving it out to sea, then turning to the old man he said, "It makes a difference to this one."

The statistics on homeless children in our world remain daunting. But our family has seen this truth at work: Adoption makes a difference.

Just ask our three sons. EJ, Sean, and Joshua.