

# Adoptive parents find rewards in raising tribal children

■ For some tribal children, love and security is what they need the most.

By Tracy Dugan, Editor

It is never an easy decision for a couple to make a commitment to adopt a child. For a married couple who work at Spirit Mountain Casino, though, it has been a dream come true. The couple, who are both tribal members, have almost completed the adoption process. They started out as foster parents for a tribal child who lived with them for several months before his biological parents decided to terminate their parental rights. It was then that they (foster parents) decided to make their foster son a permanent part of their family.

"My husband and I spent the weekend with him, and just fell in love right away," said the mother, 36. (For confidentiality and privacy issues, she chose to remain anonymous.) "He has been with us ever since. He couldn't be more my son if I carried him for nine months and gave birth to him."

The decision to adopt a child is one of the most serious commitments any potential parent can ever make. But Carmen Mercier, who works in Community Resources, along with other Indian social service workers across the country, are making an increased effort to get interested tribal families to adopt.

There are many questions adoptive parents face: Do we want to adopt a newborn? An older child? Do we want our child to be the same race and nationality as we are? Do we want to have a relationship with our child's biological parents? Can our child still see her biological parents? Finding out the answers to these questions and many others is an important step in determining whether you would like to adopt a child.

It's a step some tribal parents are willing to take.

Right now, the Tribe is beginning to facilitate adoptions that take place between parties who are both part of a tribal household. Currently, there are two families in the process of adopting tribal children, but there is a need for more.

Since 1989, the Grand Ronde Tribe has successfully held tribal court proceedings for Indian Child Welfare (ICWA) cases, and has placed children in foster care in tribal homes. Most of the time, the Tribe's Community Resources staff works with the biological parents of a tribal child with the ultimate goal being reunification of the family. If the parents need counseling, drug or alcohol treatment, or anger management, the caseworkers at the Tribe work with these parents to complete their programs.

But there are times where parents choose to terminate their parental rights. So far, the Tribe does not have

a lot of experience in handling adoptions, but has been working with the state to oversee the process. The Tribe does have the ability to process adoptions, but none have been done yet.

"The adoption of Indian children is done through the state," says Carmen Mercier. "But when a tribal member child needs a permanent home, the state contacts us and asks us to help find adoptive parents who are also tribal members."

Mercier says that the Tribe advocates for open adoption so that the children may have contact with biological parents through letters and photographs, or when old enough, if a child desires to meet and get to know her biological parents.

"In some cases," says Mercier, "a close relative will legally adopt a child. It works out well that way, because we know the child is keeping her tribal ties, and is still raised in her family."

So even though an adopted child may not live with her biological parents, if she is adopted by a relative, chances are she will have a relationship with one or both of them.

Obviously, the decision to adopt should not be taken lightly.

The state of Oregon and other states with a history of placing Indian children in non-Indian homes have for a long time recognized the importance of keeping Indian children connected to their Tribe, and if possible, with tribal families.

The Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) of 1978, was specifically

designed to prevent the alienation of Indian children from their culture and heritage. For many years, Indian children adopted into non-Indian families suffered a loss of identity and many times found themselves in church, school, or other social settings where there was no other person like them.

Known as "Split Feather Syndrome,"\* this loss of identity has manifested itself in adult Native Americans who were placed in non-Indian homes before ICWA was passed. Recent studies have been conducted among adult Indians who lived in these homes, and the findings were recently published in *Pathways* magazine. Factors contributing to Split Feather Syndrome include: loss of Indian identity; loss of culture, language, heritage, tribal affiliation, and tribal ceremonial experiences; and the experience of growing up being and feeling different.

But ICWA gave tribes a voice in state court proceedings, and allowed these proceedings to be transferred to tribal courts.

The mother recently completing the adoption of her foster son says that she and her husband utilized Grand Ronde Legal Services to satisfy the state requirements, and papers have just been submitted to the state. He is only two years old, but this boy is being adopted into a traditional tribal family who has large gatherings and celebrations, attends pow-wows, and other functions within the Tribe.

"We would do this all again in a heartbeat," she says. "Tribal chil-

dren need to be with tribal families. They need to be taken care of. My husband and I feel that way. And our extended families feel that way, too."

The couple says that they will eventually try to adopt another tribal child. But the rewards that come from having a complete family circle are not achieved easily.

"The adoption process itself takes a long time," says Mercier. "It begins with pre-adoption and foster care classes through the county in which the parents live. Then there is an application and assessment process."

Mercier's job is to identify potential adoptive parents and help guide them through the process. She helped this family in their adoption, and wants to help other tribal parents do the same. It is important to remember, though, that adoptions, unlike foster care placement, are sometimes done through the state. The Tribe and its staff in Community Resources make the assessments and recommendations.

"Tribal members who want to adopt must agree to some serious self-assessment tests," says Mercier. "Some of the questions people are

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## CHILD'S ETHNICITY

The ethnic background of the 849 children adopted in Oregon this year break down like this:

- WHITE: 618
- AFRICAN-AMERICAN: 106
- HISPANIC: 78
- NATIVE AMERICAN: 28
- ASIAN: 7
- MULTIPLE MINORITY: 12

## 1998 Adoption Trends

THE 849 CHILDREN CAME FROM:

- METRO REGION 338
- WESTERN REGION 212
- EASTERN REGION 77
- SOUTHERN REGION 222



Data courtesy of SCF.