

The Cohen Family: In Search of a Baby Sister **By Sharron Cohen, Lacey, Wash.**

Don and Sharron Cohen adopted two children, one from Romania and another from America, fulfilling their dream of a healthy, happy family dedicated to peace.

THE thought of having a happy family is most everyone's dream. But many of us grew up in very unusual or dysfunctional environments, contrasting the idea of happy families portrayed in television sit-coms.

My own parents rarely spoke to each other except when they were fighting. My brother and I were used as messengers. "Go tell your father this!" "Go tell your mother that!" We actually liked it better when they weren't talking. It was more peaceful.

My mother had no respect for my father and so naturally, neither did we. I learned early on to manipulate men and had poor and brief relationships because of it. I was always searching for someone or something that didn't exist.

MY husband's family suffered the sudden loss of their father at age 51 from a massive heart attack, leaving his mother with two young boys and no means of support. My husband, Don, had a strained relationship with his mom and moved away to join a band and pursue a singing career. He lived in the fast lane, only for the moment.

As we grew up, our lives yet to cross paths, I entered nursing school while Don joined the U.S. Army. I was born and raised in Boston, a total city girl, and Don was raised in Nebraska, a real country boy.

Eventually, we found our way to Los Angeles and Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism in the 70's ending up leaders in the same district—it was like Bette Midler meeting Garth Brooks. We struggled through many activities together and although we never thought twice about each other romantically, we were friends with mutual respect for one another.

I finally decided that I needed to plant roots and start a family. Coincidentally, Don was thinking along the same lines. We were sitting together talking with a senior in faith when the idea of him and me getting married suddenly came up. We both laughed nervously and I said, "Not a chance!" We were already "married" to our district. But before long we were dating, and in two months we were married. Our relationship was based on the common goal of kosen-rufu.

Almost immediately, I got pregnant but soon miscarried. Over the next two years, I miscarried two more times. They were traumatic experiences, both physically and emotionally. Finally, through our prayers, we decided to consider adoption.

We ran into lots of dead ends over the next year, but with wonderful advice and lots of support from lots of fabulous friends, we flew to Romania and adopted a beautiful baby girl. Mikayla is now 6 years old.

SHE was a dream come true. We returned from Romania with our daughter, who has been a joy and a challenge, as most children are. She is extremely bright and nothing slips past her. She is a social butterfly and loves people, especially other kids.

When Mikayla was 4 years old, she started asking for a baby sister. First, we got her a frog, then we got her a dog, Petey. Petey and Mikayla have become inseparable. He is especially fond of her Barbie dolls and we have several “special needs” Barbies without limbs floating around the house. Soon this novelty wore off and we were getting strong baby-sister signals again. Now that Mikayla was in school and more independent, we decided we could handle another child.

We took a Foster-Adopt course and received our license with only one permanent placement in mind. About six weeks went by and we got the call. A baby girl had been born the day before and was five weeks premature, but her prognosis was excellent. She weighed 7 lb. 5 oz. because her birth mother suffered from gestational diabetes. She had to be weaned off insulin and tube fed because she couldn’t suck yet. The amazing thing was that there were no other families in competition with us for this child. The social worker wanted us and only us. We visited her in the Neonatal Intensive Care unit frequently and chanted in her ear. She started sucking and gained strength and determination. On Memorial Day we took her home. She weighed 8 lb. 3 oz. and looked gorgeous. Mikayla was so happy and proud. She made sure everyone at school heard of her new sister.

Mikayla learned quickly how to hold, feed and carry the baby. She even wants to change her diapers. She takes her into the backyard on the swing and pats her so sweetly, kissing her and protecting her like a mother hen. She has never shown an ounce of jealousy—at least not yet!

Mikayla says: “I love Lili. She’s cute and lovable and I chant for her. She’s fun to play with and I like her a lot.”

THIS should be the end of the story—“...and they lived happily ever after. “ But it was really a new beginning with more human revolution that comes with no sleep, screaming babies and hectic schedules. Our little Lili has gastroesophageal reflux, which is common but very stressful. She has had a need to eat almost continuously to soothe her acid stomach and would never be awake without a bottle in her mouth. Many times this was not enough to make her happy either, and for a month only chanting daimoku would get us through the evenings and soothe her. The doctor finally found out what the problem was and gave her the correct medicine.

INCREASED frustration and fatigue compounded by Don’s recent graduation from school and my labor union campaign at work kept us apart and on edge. There were conflicts and short tempers. Egos flared. Had we done the right thing bringing a tiny baby into this madness, or was the baby creating the impetus for all of us to challenge ourselves and stretch even further?

Our relationship has always been based on faith in the Gohonzon. We resolve issues as fast as they occur. We always find the other side of the mountain with clear water and sun shining. We feel it's our responsibility to create a harmonious atmosphere for our family.

Since we've started a family, my relatives in Boston have changed their relationship toward me. After twenty years of silence, they have started calling me, asking for advice about their problems. I associate this with a deep change in the core of my life.

Don's appreciation for what his mother and father did has increased tremendously as well.

Don's dream of being a star in Hollywood never materialized, but in our family, his star shines bright. "Once I got married and became a father, I felt tremendous joy in my life and my reality now is much more wonderful than any fantasy I could dream of," he comments. As a parent, Don said that he feels extremely responsible for his behavior around the girls. He explained that when sitting in front of the Gohonzon, he knows that his daughters respond favorably—they see that he takes responsibility for his own shortcomings. When he has a conflict with Mikayla, he takes the time to listen to her side of the story.

Don said that when he was single, he didn't feel comfortable around children and didn't know how he would be as a parent. But he explained that when we went to Romania to adopt Mikayla, he came to the realization that he didn't have to be a special person to be a parent, he just had to care. "To do your best to protect that person and be there for them is what it means to be a parent," he says.

As for myself, I'm learning how to be an SGI leader with kids, work full time and take care of myself, too. Not a day goes by that I don't think about how fortunate I am—and then I think about a nap! □

Aaron Franklin, Seattle *Living Buddhism* Bureau Chief, contributed to this story.