

# ADOPTION ADVOCATE

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## International Search and Reunion: A Conversation with Susan Soonkeum Cox

**E**very adoptee has their own personal and unique adoption story. That history is a part of who they are, and remains a part of them as they move from childhood through adolescence and into adulthood.

As intercountry adoption has changed over the years, more international adoptees have become interested in searching for information and trying to learn more about their families, countries, and cultures of origin. An adoption search and/or reunion for an intercountry adoptee may look very different from one undertaken by a person adopted in the U.S. Typically an international adoption search will require working with officials in another country and dealing with complex legal issues, language translation, and cultural differences. To better understand the international search and reunion process, NCFCA asked Susan Soonkeum Cox, Vice President of Policy and External Affairs at Holt International and a Korean adoptee, to share some of her own personal experiences.

### **NCFCA: When did you search for your birth family, and why did you make that decision?**

**Susan Cox:** I began my “official” search for my birth family in 1992. Looking back, it is clear that a variety of circumstances and moments brought me to that decision. In the late 1980s, I was leading a family tour to Korea, my daughter was with me, and I wanted her to see my records. I had seen them many times before, but part of the information was written



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in Chinese characters – which are often used in Korea as well – and on that trip the person reading the file was able to read Chinese and give me additional information that I had never known before—including that I was from Inchon, and the name of the director at the time I was there. She arranged for me to meet him, and that answered many questions, but also created more.

Around the same time, I helped a young adoptee with leukemia look for his birth mother, and that process was very illuminating. My search happened when I was going through a divorce. I was also turning 40 years old, and I knew if I was ever going to find my birth mother, time was critical because she was getting older too. It was a very tumultuous time for me, and I was considering many things in my life—including my desire to find the woman who had given birth to me, and connect with that part of my history.

## **What was the search and reunion process like for you? What were the steps you needed to take?**

When I was adopted in 1956, the concept of searching for and being reunited with your birth family was not even a consideration. No one was thinking about it or anticipating that far ahead. When I decided to initiate a search in 1992 there was also no social media, none of the resources that are available today. I did have my Korean name and my passport photo, in which I am about 4 years old. I put an ad in the newspaper in Inchon that said “Hong Soon Keum, born 1952, adopted to U.S. in 1956. Anyone with information please contact...” This was a weekly not daily paper, and the first day a woman who said she was my stepsister called the Holt office and identified me.

## **What kind of support did you have while going through your search?**

Since I work at Holt, I was very familiar with adoption and knew it was important for me to go through this with a lot of thought and care. I worked with a therapist who had experience with adoption and tried to consider all the various possibilities and to particularly look inside myself to try and understand my motivations, expectations, hopes, and fears while navigating the process. I told my adoptive mom about my search and I was grateful that she supported me, and of course close friends were also with me at every step.

Ultimately, no matter how ready you think you are or how supported you are, the feelings belong to you, and you have to feel them and take in the pain and uncertainty on your own. That part of the search was a solitary journey that was mine alone.

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### **What was the most surprising part of the search, for you?**

It was astonishing how quickly I got a response. I was unprepared for that, and it was clear that I had not really expected my search to be successful. I was prepared for the searching part; I had not fully prepared myself for the finding.

### **What was the most surprising thing you learned in reuniting?**

I always knew that I am half-Korean and that my father was a soldier. I assumed he had been a U.S. soldier. What I learned was that my father was actually British. I also discovered that my birth mother had died, and that I had two half-brothers who did not know of me.

### **Search and reunion in intercountry adoption is obviously rare in comparison to closed domestic adoptions, but it seems to be becoming more common. Why do you think that is?**

It is a natural evolution. Search in intercountry adoption is now becoming quite common. This mirrors how domestic search and reunion evolved. As adoptees grew up, we became more open and interested in connecting with our individual histories. Like many domestic adoptees, international adoptees experience the same longing to know about themselves, especially as increasing number of adoptees return to their birth countries on visits. Adoptive parents are now educated about the importance of records and the possibility of searching, and told that they need to be supportive if this is something their son or daughter ever wants to pursue. Sending countries are also more enlightened about this practice, and are oftentimes more prepared to assist in the process. Social media plays a huge role in search and reunion, as does DNA testing, which is accessible for adoptees as well as birth family members in many countries.

### **These searches tend to be most common in Korea, but where else have you heard of intercountry adoptees searching for their roots?**

There have been successful searches in Latin America, since many of the adoptions were private adoptions through a facilitator – the birth family was often known to the adoptive family, making it easier for families to either continue to stay in contact or reconnect at a later time. Adoptees from Vietnam, India, Thailand, China and the Philippines have also been searching and reuniting with their biological families. Korea and Vietnam are doing some open adoptions, and some other countries are gradually becoming more comfortable with this idea. I predict that searches for information and birth relatives will become an even more common practice in the future.

## **Are there countries in which it is simply impossible to find information about a specific adopted person's family of origin – where that information is sealed by law, even to the adoptee?**

As in the U.S., access to accurate information is often difficult. Looking back twenty years ago and certainly in the years prior to that, the importance of birth family information was not given the attention that it is today. In many countries, where circumstances of poverty or conflict were overwhelming, the priority was simply the immediate care and safety of children. Thankfully, attention to establishing and preserving accurate records for adoptees is more broadly understood and practiced today.

## **What are some of the reasons why international adoptees would undertake a search *apart* from reunion with their birth families?**

While the reality is that international search and reunion with one's birth family is not always possible, it is possible for many international adoptees to search for and be reconnected with the country and culture of their birth. I personally think that process needs to happen prior to initiating a search for relatives, because it can help adoptees better understand and accept some of the nuances that come with working within another country and culture. Language alone is a barrier in family searches – add to that the different social practices, which may not be understood at first, and it is easy to become confused and discouraged with the process.

## **What do you think adoption agencies and staff need to know about international search and reunion? How can they best advise and serve adult adoptees going through such a process?**

Prepare adoptive families and help them understand that search and reunion is a natural process that many adoptees will want to initiate at some point in their lives, and their role as parents is to be understanding and supportive. Adoptive parents should also keep and ensure the safety of documents so that if an adoptee *does* decide to search, the information they need is readily available. Families should keep in contact with their adoption agencies so they know if anything changes regarding their overseas programs and will still have access to information as it becomes relevant.

## **What do you think adoptive parents need to understand about international search and reunion?**

I feel strongly that the decision to search belongs to the adoptee when they are developmentally old enough to understand the decision and initiate a search. This is an incredibly emotional process, even when it is positive, and the adoptee should be the one to decide if they want to embark on this journey.

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If you are lucky enough to be reunited with your birth family, it is not the end – it is just the beginning. Adoptive parents need to ensure their children know from an early age that some adoptees decide they want to search for birth parents when they are older, and some adoptees have no interest in search – both decisions are natural and valid, and either decision will be supported unwaveringly by the adoptive parents. This decision is not about the adoptive parents or their wishes; it is about their son or daughter.

### **What are some cultural concerns adoptees need to take into account before beginning a search or traveling to their country of origin?**

Language is a huge issue, and if you are not fluent in the language primarily spoken in the country to which you are traveling, you need a translator you can trust to give you accurate information, have your best interest at heart, and refrain from inserting their own biases or opinions. Don't travel until you have done your homework and have as much information as possible; otherwise you will spend much of the time doing things that could have been done before you got there.

### **What sort of support or counsel should adoptees seek out when considering or going through an international search and/or reunion?**

I'm a strong believer in working with a therapist or mental health professional with experience in adoption – someone with whom you can be as frank and open as possible without worrying that it will hurt their feelings; someone who will never try to talk you into or out of something based on their own thoughts and feelings. A good therapist with knowledge of adoption, search, and reunion can provide support and information that is crucial as well as neutral, without any of the angst.

### **What practical advice do you offer adoptees considering an international search and/or reunion?**

Take your time in making the decision and talk with others who have already had the experience to gain their insight. Keep a journal – it is a good way to document your thoughts feelings and experiences, since over time it is often difficult to remember when things happened and exactly what was said. It also is helpful to go back later and see how your thoughts and feelings may have changed. When you are having a rough period, it can be comforting to review how far you have come.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Susan Soonkeum Cox is Holt International's Vice President of Policy and External Affairs, and has worked on international adoption and child welfare issues for more than 25 years. Adopted from Korea in 1956, her life experience as an early international adoptee gives her a unique and personal perspective. Susan is a frequent presenter and trainer and has testified before Congress on issues related to adoption, child welfare and foreign affairs. She was a founder of the First International Gathering for Korean Adoptees in 1999, editor of *Voices from Another Place: A Collection of Works from a Generation Born in Korea and Adopted to Other Countries*, and has participated in The Hague Special Commission on Intercountry Adoption since 1993.



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