

Adopted daughter a â¢perfect fitâ¢ for Hamilton pastorâ¢s family

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HAMILTON—Maya Sitota grabs her mother's hand and leads her to the bedroom, instructing her in 2-year-old babble to turn on the music.

“Oh, oh, oh,” she says, pointing to the radio on the window ledge.

Last year, Maya Sitota of Ethiopia joined the Felton family of Hamilton—mother, Sharon; father, Keith; and brothers, Carter and Dakota. (PHOTOS/Russ Dilday/Buckner International)

“She loves this song,” Sharon Felton replies, turning on Beyonce’s hit ‘All the Single Ladies’ as Maya bounces up and down to the half chanting, half singing lyrics, “oh oh oh oh oh oh oh oh.”

It’s hard to believe the happy toddler who loves hair bows and football, dancing and wrestling with her big brothers, might never have lived to see her first birthday.

When Maya arrived at [Buckner International’s](#) baby home in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in June 2008, she was malnourished and starving. Malnutrition is the cause of half of all deaths among children 5 and under in Ethiopia, a country where extreme poverty and AIDS has left 4 million children orphaned.

But just as Maya was abandoned, God’s redemptive plan for her life began.

Thousands of miles away, Keith and Sharon Felton began the adoption process in Texas. And now, after being home with her family for six months, it's as if she's always been a Felton.

"It's amazing how much love you can have for someone you didn't give birth to," Sharon Felton said. "She's the perfect person for us, a perfect fit for our family."

Ten years and waiting



Maya Sitota loves music, including the sounds she makes on the Felton family piano.

Ten years ago, Keith Felton, now pastor at [First Baptist Church in Hamilton](#), went to Ethiopia on a mission trip to lead basketball camps for children.

"While I was there, I fell in love with the Ethiopian people and learned about the percentage of orphans and the need for adoption," he said.

He came home from that trip and talked to his wife about adopting, but they were a young couple without children.

"We always talked about adopting one day," she said. "You know how you just throw things out over the years. But I always had so many excuses. I would say that I didn't want to adopt internationally because I couldn't

keep them connected with their culture. I thought that was so important.

"But one day I was talking with a friend, and he responded (sarcastically) saying, 'Yeah, that's more important than having parents,' It was like a knife in the heart."

His words became a wake-up call that changed her heart toward adoption. But it was their children, Carter, 9, and Dakota, 6, who helped them move forward.



Keith Felton, pastor of First Baptist Church in Hamilton, plays with his daughter, Maya Sitota. He and his wife, Sharon, adopted their daughter from Ethiopia last year. (PHOTOS/Russ Dilday/Buckner International)

Dakota had been asking for a sister since he was 3, but his mother always told him no. But once they discussed adoption with the boys, they were both excited to have a new member of the family. One day, Dakota walked out into the living room and dumped his piggy bank in a large jar of change the family had started collecting to pay for the adoption.

"He said, 'OK, I'm ready to help bring my sister home,'" Sharon Felton recalled.

The boys' support made the process that much easier, her husband added. "They are the very best big brothers," he said.

Much of the Hamilton community, a rural town of about 3,000 people, pitched in to bring Maya home. Strangers would come up to them and want to help. Even Carter's second grade class collected books for orphans of Bantu, Ethiopia, where Buckner operates a school and community center.

"Ninety-nine percent of the folks here didn't know about the cost," Keith Felton said. "But when they found out, they all wanted to help. Almost every time we had a bill due, the money was there."

Maya's adoption was "more or less a fulfillment of what was put on my heart so long ago," he added. "God has taught me that he will complete things in his own timing. He who began a good work in me would be faithful to complete it."

Long-term effect



Keith Felton, pastor of First Baptist Church in Hamilton, plays with his daughter, Maya Sitota.

The Feltons were matched with Maya in January 2009. When they received

the paperwork about her, the first thing they noticed was her name. Sitota means “gift,” and the day she became available for adoption—June 24—was Sharon Felton’s birthday.

“Seeing my birthday on her paperwork was definitely an ‘aha’ moment,” she said.

The couple was first scheduled for court in Ethiopia in July 2009, but their date was postponed due to a three-month delay in adoption proceedings in Ethiopia. In Ethiopian adoption, the court date is when a judge declares a child legally adopted. Families typically travel several weeks after their court date to pick up their child and finalize their adoption at the U.S. Embassy.

The Feltons finally traveled to Ethiopia to pick up Maya in September 2009, one year and three months from the date they started the adoption process.

“That’s short in the adoption world,” Keith Felton said.

Sharon Felton was most surprised by the quality of care and love provided to Sitota at the baby home. They receive plenty of individualized care and attention, and a registered nurse visits them every other day.

“All the kids were so great, beautiful and healthy,” she said. “They are so well cared for and loved. The caregivers cried and kissed her when we left. The older kids did, too.”

The shared bond of adopting from the same baby home in Ethiopia has brought together a group of adoptive families living in Texas and Tennessee in a very special way, she said. The families meet regularly to celebrate birthdays and holidays, and share life via Facebook and e-mail. “We will always be connected. We’re like family,” she said.



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Maya's adoption has profoundly affected the community of Hamilton, too, Keith Felton said.

"We could not be in a better town. They all love her," he said. "I think having Maya here in Hamilton will impact people in ways we may never see. I'm hoping it will plant a seed in their hearts toward adoption."

The Feltons get a lot of questions about being part of an interracial family, but the obstacles they will face "are not insurmountable," Sharon Felton said. "I know there will be issues with race that we will face along the way, but it's really a non-issue right now. We have had more positive encouragement and support than I ever expected."

The Feltons agree adoption isn't for everyone, but they think more families are capable of adopting than do.

"Adopting is hard. Kids are hard. Parenting is hard," Keith Felton said. "But it's not so hard that you can't handle it."

"It's not as scary as you might think," Sharon Felton added. "Don't let anything get in your way—money, culture. It's so worth it, and it's so fun."

She makes us laugh every day. You just don't know what you're missing."

To learn more about adopting from Ethiopia through Buckner International and the agency's affiliation with Dillon, visit www.dillonadopt.com.