

Baylor University offers adoption assistance to faculty and staff

June 29, 2017

WACO—Five years ago, Xin Zheng Yuan was born with a hole in his heart.

Employees at the New Day Foster Home in Beijing, China, believed this heart condition may have been the reason his birth parents abandoned him. They added his name to a list of children with special needs who were eligible for adoption.

A few months later, Yuan received a package in the mail. Inside he discovered a Baylor University T-shirt, a stuffed bear and pictures of the family who awaited him in Texas, where he would have a new start and a new name, David Cates.

Steve Cates, a senior lecturer in Baylor University's mathematics department, and his wife, Cindy, had tried to adopt a child more than five years before they heard about David. When they traveled to China to meet him and bring him home, they learned from a doctor's examination that the hole in David's heart had suddenly healed.

'Doing the right thing'

Stories like the Cates' are becoming increasingly common around Baylor's campus, due in part to the adoption assistance program implemented April 1. Cheryl Gochis, vice president and chief human resources officer at Baylor, noted only a handful of universities provide adoption assistance benefits to employees.

Faculty and staff members can be reimbursed up to \$6,000 of adoption costs and take up to four weeks of paid parental leave for both biological and adoptive parents. Baylor is one of only two universities in Texas that offers paid parental leave to both faculty and staff.

Gochis worked with her team more than a year to craft the new policy. The adoption assistance benefit was a natural outflow of compassion for the Baylor family, she asserted.

“We wanted to make sure we were doing the right thing,” Gochis said. “Our thought is that this is the beginning, and that in a few years we could expand it even more.”

In the near future, she hopes to listen to feedback from Baylor’s adoption community to further expand the resources the university provides to families.

Changing the lives of children and families

Gochis’ life has been affected significantly by adoption. Her daughter, Hannah, was adopted from China, and David Cates is her nephew.

Gochis hopes the show of support for adoptive parents will encourage Baylor faculty members who are considering adoption to make it a reality.

According to the 2012 National Foster Care Adoption Attitudes Survey, 81.5 million Americans have considered adoption at some point. If just one in 500 of these adults adopted, every waiting child in the foster care system in the United States would have a permanent family.

“When we were putting the policy together, we said ‘This is for all those people that maybe just need the right encouragement to adopt,’” Gochis said. “The intent of the adoption benefit was to give a little bit of help getting there, however you choose to do that.”

A new beginning

Mark Kelly, assistant professor of economics, and his wife had talked about adoption for years, but they hesitated to start the process because of the cost.

They began researching legal-risk adoption through the foster care system, a less-expensive option than going through an international agency. When foster children are unlikely to be reunited with their biological parents, families like the Kellys can foster and potentially adopt them.

Under the new adoption assistance program, Kelly estimates Baylor will reimburse 100 percent of their adoption costs.

“We had just started seriously talking about adoption when I got the email that HR sent out to all the faculty and staff. I immediately forwarded it to my wife and said, ‘You’ve got to look at this,’” Kelly said. “We were really excited, because it’s not anything I even knew was on the radar.”

The Kellys have just submitted their paperwork to begin the legal-risk adoption process, but other Baylor employees already have welcomed a new member into their families since the implementation of the adoption assistance policy.

‘The baby’s ready to come home’



Erin Shoemake Erin Shoemake, assistant to the executive vice president and provost, began the adoption process in 2014. She and

her husband didn't specify any preference for gender in their application, but she secretly hoped for a baby girl.

Shoemake created a small book with photos and details about her family to help birth mothers with their decision, but she waited for months before hearing any news.

The phone call came April 6, only five days after Baylor's adoption assistance policy was announced. An employee from the adoption agency told Shoemake about a healthy newborn girl whose mother wouldn't be able to care for her. Shoemake gave the agency permission to show the birth mother her photo book.

Then, Shoemake heard the words that would change her life forever:

"We've already shown her all the books, and she's chosen you. The baby's ready to come home."

Less than a week later, Shoemake held Naomi, her only child, for the first time. Shoemake couldn't imagine adjusting to life as a new parent without having several weeks to bond with the child, she said. During her parental leave, Shoemake brought Naomi to campus several times to meet her coworkers in Pat Neff Hall.

"Life as a new mom is amazing. She's amazing. It's a whole new world," Shoemake said. "I'm so excited to see who she'll grow up to be and to do the best for her that we can. Looking back, it's been incredible to see how God has orchestrated the whole process."

Gochis expressed amazement at the large number of Baylor employees like Shoemake who already have expressed interest in adoption and the adoption policy.

Her nephew, David Cates, received the Sunshine Award at his kindergarten

graduation this year for his joyful attitude and optimism. No trace of a broken heart remains.