

Puzzle Pieces

You know, there is just something to me about the challenge of fitting all the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle together into a complete picture. Recently, I came to the conclusion that this challenge could be one of the reasons I love to write. Instead of fitting pieces of a picture together, I place words together to come up with a complete and hopefully meaningful story.

How many of you are thinking my epiphany came from me recently working a jigsaw puzzle? Sorry, but that wasn't the case. It came after I interviewed Darren and Kim Jones about their amazing story on how they came to adopt their daughter, Emmaline. The more they told me, the more I realized this story was not a simple one, as I had first envisioned. Or better yet, it wasn't an easy jigsaw puzzle with a few pieces. Oh no. This one was the handiwork of The Lord in that He fit the pieces of many lives together into a beautifully crafted masterpiece as only He can do.

Normally, when I start working a puzzle, I begin with the edge pieces that frame the outside border of the picture. I guess you can call them the foundation pieces. For this story, I realized the Christian Faith of everybody involved is not only the foundation, but that faith is also woven throughout the picture.

The next layer of pieces for this puzzle actually begins with Kim's brother and his wife, whom I will refer to as Mr. B and Mrs. B. They were unable to have their own children, so they did what a lot of people do, they had a baby placed into their home. Six months later the baby was taken away from them. Of course, Mrs. B was devastated. She even went as far as to tell her husband that she didn't want to talk about adoption.

Now, it's time for a faith puzzle piece. Mr. B had heard about international adoptions and brought it to his wife's attention. He told her this was a completely different situation, and then he asked her to pray about it. Being a minister's wife, she couldn't turn down his request. That being

said, she knew it wasn't right to ask for a sign, but she had to have something because she couldn't go through the pain of having another child taken away. So, in her prayers, she asked God to make His answer perfectly plain to her.

The next day, they went to the Macon mall. The first thing they noticed was a public service billboard about immunization. It read: "Give her a shot at the stars." In the picture was a little Asian girl. It struck such a cord with Mrs. B that she told her husband that was the sign. She immediately started journaling. The first entry was the date she saw the billboard.

Hang on to your hats for this. After they started the adoption process, they received a picture of the little girl they were trying to adopt. First, the little girl was Asian. Second, Mrs. B was amazed when she saw the date of the girl's birth. She looked into her journal and realized the girl's birthday was the same exact day that she had seen the billboard. Working as only The Lord can do, He had reinforced His sign to her. I'm talking the exact same day, exact same month, and the exact same year. I don't know about you, but that gave me goosebumps. Isn't it awesome when God shows off?

Our next layer of pieces didn't fall into place as Darren and Kim or anybody else had planned. Or better yet, the pieces they expected were not the ones God intended to use for His masterpiece.

Not only did Mr. and Mrs. B adopt the little Asian girl, but they also adopted two more children from China and one from Guatemala. Knowing that Darren and Kim wanted to adopt as well, they put them in contact with the international adoption agency. You see, Darren and Kim were also unable to have children. When Kim was thirty-two years old, she underwent emergency exploratory surgery, which resulted in her having a complete hysterectomy.

Expecting the same amazing experience, Darren and Kim eagerly started the adoption process with the same agency. They were told up front by the agency that this isn't something that they

could jump in and out of. If they continued on, all money paid in was nonrefundable in that it went toward the adoption expenses. Agreeing with this, Darren and Kim decided to continue on with the adoption process.

For the next few months, they filled out mountains of tedious paperwork, as well as paying in thousands and thousands of nonrefundable dollars. When they were more than halfway through the process, a lady from the adoption agency called and inquired as to why they were wanting to adopt. Kim told the lady about her surgery that had resulted in a complete hysterectomy. The lady informed them they were ineligible to adopt a child from China due to Kim's surgery. She gave them no explanation as to why. It was a fact they would have to accept. That absolutely blew their minds. There were many couples who adopted due to that reason.

Naturally, they didn't want to just give up and walk away from the adoption process after their investment of time, money, and hope. So, Darren and Kim asked about adopting from other countries. Just because China prohibited their adoption, it didn't mean they couldn't adopt from somewhere else. Any child would be fine with them. This lady replied that China was the leader in this area and other countries the agency worked with would follow China's actions. When Darren and Kim asked her where that left them, she didn't have an answer.

They were in a state of shock and didn't really know what else to ask or where to turn since they had been relying on, as well as paying for, the agency's expertise. While they both were now devastated, it was especially hard on Kim. She couldn't give Darren a child because of her surgery and now she couldn't give him a child through adoption. She was so deeply heartbroken that she literally cried herself to sleep every night.

They kept all of their paperwork after the phone call for the next two and a half years. At that point, Kim asked Darren to get rid of it. She was done. Six months later, the owner of the

international adoption agency contacted them. This lady informed them they needed to send a letter to the agency stating that Darren and Kim had decided not to adopt a baby so their case could be closed.

Darren proceeded to tell the owner what the other lady had related to them about being ineligible. The owner answered that no one would have told them that. This was another shock to them, for they knew what they both had heard. Apparently, the lady who told them they were ineligible didn't know what she was talking about. That meant Kim had suffered and cried herself to sleep the last three years for no real reason. Kim told Darren she needed to talk to the owner by herself, and she did just that.

When Kim spoke to the lady, she was stern and straightforward. She told the owner now that she knew it wasn't her fault they couldn't adopt, she would finally be able to lay her head down that night and sleep for the first time in three years. By the way, she did just that. No crying that night. Or any other night.

This was not the only communication between them. The agency phoned a few more times and sent several emails. Each time the owner demanded the letter. Darren had had enough. Not only was she unsympathetic to their plight, but she also refused to apologize for the pain they had needlessly suffered. Next, Darren called Kim's brother, Mr. B., who was now on the adoption agency's board. Immediately, Mr. B contacted the owner, and she told him the same as she had told Darren and Kim. Again, she demanded the letter. During this call, he learned she was in the process of selling the adoption agency. Every open case was going to cost her money since the company purchasing it would be obligated to finish their cases.

If everything had worked out, they would have already adopted a three-year-old girl, but at that point in time, they had not gotten to the point to even get a referral for a match-up with a child. That is when a picture is sent to the waiting parents. Unfortunately, they never received a picture.

Kim wanted to try again to adopt a child. Darren refused. He didn't want her to go through another painful ordeal. Plus, he said he was old. He was forty-one when they started the adoption process and forty-five when everything fell through. Nevertheless, Kim was persistent. She would wait for a while and ask him again about trying to adopt. He always answered, "No." That is, until one time when he answered, "Not unless God hits me over the head with a two by four!"

Have you ever seen a puzzle piece in the shape of a two by four? If not, you will, soon as you continue reading.

Kim's mother, Mrs. French, was a social worker. In mid-September, she received a call from a previous client, who I will refer to as Ms. Z. She asked Mrs. French for a ride to the doctor since she was unable to drive herself. Mrs. French asked why she needed to go to the doctor. Ms. Z replied that she had an appointment for an abortion. Now, this was not her first pregnancy. She did have a baby boy. Her parents helped to take care of him since she was unable to by herself. The next year both of her parents passed away. Ms. Z tried to take care of her son, but she couldn't do it. So the state took him away, and he was adopted by a family. In Ms. Z's mind, she didn't have another option.

Ms. French immediately told her that she couldn't take Ms. Z to the appointment since she didn't believe in abortion. She was a Christian and saw it as murder. Then she went on tell Ms. Z there were other options. Ms. Z asked what she was talking about. Mrs. French answered that her daughter and son-in-law would love to have children, but they couldn't. The only way they could was through adoption. She told Ms. Z somebody would love to give her baby a good home. A

couple of weeks later, Ms. Z called Mrs. French back and told her she didn't abort her baby and she would love for her daughter and son-in-law to adopt her baby girl. This happened in late September.

Mrs. French immediately let Kim know. While Kim was excited, she sat on the information for a couple of weeks because she was afraid of saying anything to Darren. At church one Wednesday night, she told two of her friends about her mother's phone call and asked them to pray hard since she wasn't sure how Darren would take her mentioning adoption again. She hoped and prayed he would be open-minded about it. During that conversation, Tia, one of the friends, said if Darren agreed, she had the name of an adoption attorney.

Finally, Kim told Darren the whole story of Ms. Z and how she wanted them to adopt her baby girl. His first response was, "No!" He didn't want to put Kim through the pain she had suffered the first time they tried to adopt. Instead of pleading her case, Kim asked Darren to pray on it. He agreed and told her he didn't want to talk about it anymore, and he would give her an answer when he could give her an answer.

Five days later, Darren told Kim this situation with Ms. Z was his two by four. He knew this was a situation where the birthmother wouldn't seek to take the child back. Plus, the birthfather probably wouldn't either. He told Kim if the adoption went through and there's the three of them, then they would have a wonderful family. If it didn't and it was just the two of them, then they have a wonderful family. This was it. He didn't want to be asked about adoption ever again.

Kim agreed. Next, they looked into their financials. Not only had they spent a lot of their savings on the ill-fated international adoption, they hadn't saved back for another adoption attempt. They realized they had no choice but for Kim to continue working full time after they received the baby girl, but at the same time, Darren didn't want her to go into daycare. At that point, they

weren't really sure what to do, so they mentioned this dilemma to some of their friends in Sunday School.

This is where Kim's friend Tia comes back into the story. She offered to keep their baby for them. Recently, she had left a full-time position at a local bank. They were downsizing and her job was eliminated. Instead of going back to a teller position, she decided to take the severance package and go back to school to be a nurse.

Kim and Darren didn't initially respond to Tia's offer, so she continued offering to watch the baby for them. They thought she was just being nice. Plus, they knew she had started back to school and had a lot to deal with. One day Tia told them, "You all keep asking for help and I'm telling you I will keep her. Is there something wrong with me? Is there some reason you all don't her to be with me?" After that, Darren and Kim agreed.

Are you seeing the puzzles pieces fall into place? Maybe they are. Or maybe God is about to toss in a few pieces from right field that nobody saw coming. Including me.

Soon after they had agreed, Tia called Darren and Kim and invited them over for supper because she needed to tell them something. After that, they would have to decide if they still wanted her to keep their baby. Naturally, Darren and Kim were worried that she was going to back out. Why else would Tia need to talk to them?

Tia began her story by telling them the attorney she recommended to Kim had helped her when she gave her baby up for adoption. When she was in high school, her mother asked her why she was sleeping all the time. Was there something going on and could Tia be pregnant? She answered that she wasn't. Still unconvinced, her mother asked if Tia was 100% sure. Then she went on to ask if she had been doing something she shouldn't be doing. Tia admitted she had, but

at that point she would be seven and a half months along. Nothing about her had changed since she was still wearing her same clothes.

Still undeterred, Tia's mother showed up at her part-time job and asked Tia to go the bathroom with her. Tia agreed. There, her mother handed her a pregnancy test. Tia intentionally botched the test, causing it to be inconclusive.

After work, Tia walked through the front door to see her mother holding another pregnancy test. Tia looked at the test and immediately became very sick. She threw up so much that she burst the blood vessels in both of her eyes.

She told her mother, "I don't want Dad to know."

To which her mother replied, "He already knows." That sent Tia into another bout of sickness.

After she finished being sick, Tia asked her mother, "What am I going to do?"

"What do you want to do?"

Tia honestly answered, "I can't do it. I want to go to college to be a nurse. Besides, it wouldn't be fair to the baby."

"The first thing we need to do is get you to a doctor," her mother answered. They did, and when he performed an ultrasound, it confirmed that Tia was indeed seven and a half months along.

Her mother worked for an attorney who handled divorces. He agreed to represent Tia and suggested an attorney who worked with adoptions. We will refer to her as Ms. D. She told Tia that she had options and asked, again, what she wanted to do. Tia told her the same as she had told her mother. Plus, there was the fact that she and the father were not together. Most of all, it wouldn't be fair to the baby, so she decided to put it up for adoption. The attorney had Tia go through counseling and speak to a therapist. Next, Tia looked through the profiles of families who were hoping to adopt. Finally, she picked a family.

Soon, she was seeing her doctor because of her elevated blood pressure. Her high stress level and the lack of prenatal care had taken a toll on her. At this point, it had only been a month since she had discovered that she was pregnant. She literally only had a few weeks to process everything. On top of that, nobody at her high school knew she was having a baby, and she wanted to keep it that way. She constantly feared going into labor at school or having her water break there.

Tia went to her doctor appointment on a Wednesday. He told her that her blood pressure was too high and it was too risky. He induced her, but she couldn't have the child naturally. So the doctor had to perform an emergency C-section. Early Thursday morning on March 14th, her baby son was born. She only missed that Thursday and Friday from school. Fortunately, the next week was spring break. When school started back, she went to school and told her friends that she had missed that Thursday and Friday because she wasn't feeling well. Her doctor told her if anybody asked about her C-section scar to tell them she had an emergency surgery for a ruptured ovarian cyst.

But, while she was still in the hospital, the baby was in the room with her. At one point, her parents had left. That's when the nurse came to take the baby. Tia asked her why, and she responded there were people there to see him. It was the family who was adopting him. That would have left Tia in the room all by herself. She told the nurse to wait. Concerned about her emotional well-being, the doctor released her the next morning, which was a Friday. Before she left, she met with the adopting family down in the chapel area. Her parents spoke to them as well. She did receive a few letters from her son's new family.

Over the years, only Tia and her parents knew about her baby. Even her grandparents were unaware of it. When she was dating her future husband, she didn't tell him until they were getting

serious. So, Darren and Kim were the only other people to hear this story. Her own son and daughter didn't even know yet.

Darren said the funny thing for him and Kim was how Tia thought her story would turn them against her. Instead, he and Kim immediately saw God's hand in all of this. To them, this was the completed circle of life. They didn't even have to talk about it. As they stepped out of Tia's front door that evening, they knew she was to watch their child, and that was the way it was supposed to be.

When we first began placing in the pieces of this puzzle, did you envision it as having a square shape? This puzzle is in the shape of a circle. Read on, and we will see how The Lord made it a complete circle (a complete one.)

Darren and Kim started the adoption process from scratch. First, they retained Ms. Z an attorney in Georgia. That is where she lived. Next, they retained Ms. D as their attorney here in Knoxville. Ironically, before they went to Tia's home, Darren had contacted a lawyer that he knew he could trust and got the name of an adoption attorney. Yes, it was the same Ms. D. They went through Bethany Christian Services to obtain the adoption approval. As Kim said, the lawyer from Bethany hit the ground running.

At this point, it was early October. The Bethany attorney warned them it was going to be tight since Ms. Z's due date was January 11th, but they could do it. If Ms. Z were to have the baby early and they were close to the adoption being finalized, he could have them named as an emergency foster family. That way they would be able to take the baby home. They had all the tools they needed to make it happen. He reassured them he was there to facilitate the process and not to throw up roadblocks. Also, he didn't want them to worry about him trying to disqualify them.

He put Darren and Kim through the gambit. They were fingerprinted, went through background checks, and they had complete physicals. Their financial records were thoroughly examined. He gave them paperwork and advised them they needed a fast turnaround time. Darren and Kim took their paperwork to their jobs and they stayed up till two a.m. The next day, they gave the paperwork back to the attorney.

Some time around Christmas, they received a call that Ms. Z was in the hospital and in labor. Darren and Kim told their places of work they had to leave for Georgia. By the time they had reached Chattanooga, they received word it was a false alarm. A couple of days later she had another false alarm. The doctor told her if she didn't have it by the first, he would induce her. On December 28th, they received a call from the Bethany lawyer. He asked if they wanted good news. Of course, Darren and Kim did. He said that he submitted everything to his boss yesterday. She had reviewed it the night prior and today she signed off on the last approval she had to do. They were completely green-lighted, and all they needed was a baby. Ms. Z gave birth to Emmaline on January 1st, 2013. She weighed in at eight pounds and nine ounces.

Do you see Emmaline as the last piece and center of the puzzle? Actually, she's not. The last three pieces of the puzzle are: sacrifice, love, and healing. While they are three separate concepts, they are also intertwined with each other.

Like any new parents, Darren and Kim's world was the never the same after they brought Emmaline home. Now they were a complete family of three. Instead of stress and heartache, they now had a home full of a new kind of love. The Lord had indeed blessed them.

As Emmaline grew, they noticed some things about her. For example, she had some of Ms. Z's mannerisms and yet, she had not been around her. They knew that because Kim had talked to Ms. Z on the phone a few times prior to Emmaline's birth. Also, Darren and Kim met up with her

face to face on the Thanksgiving prior to Emmaline's birth. To be honest, some of that was to be expected, but what really surprised them was how much she was also like them. Kim said she doesn't like for her feet to be covered up while she sleeps. Emmaline is the same. Also, she has their love of music and chocolate.

Kim began to talk about her late father. He became ill after their failed adoption attempt and passed away. Ms. Z wasn't in the picture at this point. Obviously, this was a painful and emotional time for Darren and Kim. Before he passed, Kim said her father told her he was praying about their adoption. She believes when he entered Heaven, he personally asked the Lord to help them adopt a child.

As for Tia, keeping Emmaline was a Godsend in so many ways. Of course, that was a blessing to Darren and Kim, but it was also an even bigger blessing to Tia and her family. Even though she had told Darren and Kim her story, she still had not found a way to tell her children, but that was about to change.

Tia had always wondered how an adopted child could become such a part of the parents. How they could really love a child so much that they didn't give birth to. By keeping Emmaline, she could not only see the love Darren and Kim had for their daughter, but also Tia and her family grew to love Emmaline as well. I think Darren expressed it best. He said all Tia knew about adoption was how hard it was to give up her son, but now she was realizing how great adoption could be. Since Tia had now experienced both sides of the adoption process, she could now explain everything to her younger son and daughter.

As Darren and Kim previously stated, this adoption story is indeed a complete circle. They and Tia have all been healed through their love of Emmaline. You see, true selfless love is often expressed through sacrifice, which brings about healing.

“But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.” Isaiah 53:5 (KJV)

Our adoption puzzle is now complete. Obviously, it is an exquisite picture that only the Lord could create. Think about it. How many times have you dropped a jigsaw puzzle and every piece fell into place by itself?

“And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.” Romans 8:28 (KJV)