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News
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* * * * Children & Youth nursing director
adopts child from Calcutta.

DALLAS—With two years of international red tape and \$4,000 invested in her, this tiny brown bit of a girl was assigned to her new mother at age three days.

Both mother and daughter are survivors of a sort.

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In 1975 Sharon Spears was a 25-year-old public health nurse in Houston when she began trying to adopt a child. At that time single adoptive parents were a rarity. "The private agencies wouldn't even talk to me," Spears said. The only agency that would was the Texas Department of Human Resources. And the process was terrible.

"They wanted to know, 'Don't you like men?' They interviewed my parents, my neighbors, my minister," she recalled holding her 10-week-old daughter.

After six months the Houston office of DHR finally approved Spears for a child over six. But when she moved to Dallas and her job with the Children and Youth Project of The University of Texas Health Science Center, she had trouble getting her approval transferred. The Dallas office told her they would approve a single parent only for children over 10 or multi-handicapped children. "I was not up to either of those," Spears said.

One day at the C&Y clinic she was bemoaning the fate of her adoption plans when Linda Kelly, a psychology fellow, overheard. Kelly had adopted two Vietnamese girls through Catholic Charities in Fort Worth and suggested Spears call them.

From them she got the name of International Mission of Hope headquartered in Denver.

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Calcutta is a crowded place with 78,700 people per square mile, six times the population density of Chicago. It's easy for newborn babies to get lost there.

Aimee Lyn was born Aug. 18 in a "nursing home" in Calcutta. The women who have their babies in nursing homes are usually destitute and/or unmarried. The babies' births are unrecorded. The mothers leave immediately after delivery. And the babies are left unattended. Most are not fed, bathed or touched. Many die. Those still alive after 24 hours are picked up by someone from an orphanage.

Aimee was strong for her four pounds. She survived 24 hours. At the International Mission of Hope orphanage, she was checked in, bathed, weighed, named--and fed.

The naming of the babies is almost a ceremony. The IMH staff feels that a name is symbolic of a baby's personhood and important to the baby's survival.

When Aimee was three days old, the staff decided she would probably live. And Spears got a phone call at work from IMH headquarters in Denver that she was the mother of a baby girl. She had applied to IMH two years before and had been on their waiting list 363 days. "After waiting that long, you think they have the wrong number," she says.

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The staff at the Calcutta orphanage tries to get the babies placed as soon as they feel they can survive. All the babies are born malnourished. There is a strange pneumonia strain there that kills a lot of the babies, and last summer the orphanage lost many babies in a salmonella epidemic.

The staff works under primitive conditions to save these babies. They have no X-ray machine. They always need baby clothes because the clothes are worn out with laundering on the rocks in the river.

Under these difficult conditions, Aimee was tube fed. She received blood transfusions twice. When her temperature rose to 100°, she was treated with an antibiotic as a preventive measure against pneumonia.

And Aimee survived.

When she was seven weeks old, she left this loving but medically difficult environment to come to Dallas and live with the director of nursing at the Children and Youth Project. Not only does she have a medically trained mother, but she is also surrounded by other pediatric experts of all kinds.

Aimee Lyn had a difficult time getting here though. Not only was there her problems with sheer physical survival and Spears' problems with international adoption approval and waiting, but there was also Aimee's transportation halfway around the world.

Spears got a call Sept. 28 from IMH that Aimee would be coming in the next day. At midnight the escort service called and gave her Aimee's flight number and back-up flight number.

The escort service, run by Americans for International Aid and Adoption, consists of airline employees who fly as volunteers on their days off. They fly toward India with medicines for the orphanages and return with babies and children for placement. They carry the babies in a two-handle brown wicker basket with bottles, diapers and extra clothes in one end.

Sept. 29, a Tuesday night, Spears sat at Dallas-Fort Worth Airport with a friend from 7 until 11 p.m. waiting for a baby in a wicker basket. Aimee was not on either flight.

Spears was frantic. She called the escort service. They had been expecting her call. No, they did not know why Aimee was not on the plane. They did not know where she was. The phones were down in Calcutta, and they could not get any information.

"I held myself together really well until Friday noon when I got a call and learned that Aimee's visa approval had been lost," Spears said. The visa approval had been cabled from Dallas Sept. 16.

She had to go home from work to her Irving townhouse to get Aimee's case number. "When I got the man in Immigration (Immigration and Naturalization Service) on the phone, I started crying and couldn't talk. He couldn't understand at first. But he was very nice and comforting, and when he finally understood, he said, 'Don't worry, we'll cable the approval this afternoon.'"

If Calcutta authorities had not received the approval that day, Aimee would have had to stay in the orphanage another week because there is only one flight a week (on British Caledonia Airlines) that takes small babies. That would have meant another week of possible exposure to infection for the baby and great wear and tear on the new mother's nerves.

The next Tuesday at 1 p.m. Spears called the escort service. Yes, Aimee was on the flight. She would arrive at D-FW Airport on Eastern Airlines at 10:22 p.m. with Wendy Goodwin, her escort.

She did not want to go through the hours of waiting to be disappointed again. So she went out to eat with Aileen Edgington, assistant professor of Clinical Pediatrics. They got back to Spears' house at 8:30 p.m., and five minutes later the phone rang. It was Wendy Goodwin with Aimee at the airport.

"Aimee is probably the only baby to arrive in this country with no brass band to greet her," Spears said.

After rushing to the airport, they found Aimee sleeping peacefully in Goodwin's lap, oblivious to the importance of the occasion.

Aimee was in reasonably good shape. She saw her pediatrician, Dr. Sharon Rae, the next day. In addition to being nutritionally depleted, the baby arrived with thrush mouth (oral monilia), an ulcerative infection of the mouth but a minor problem compared to problems many of the babies bring with them.

She weighed 6 pounds, 5 ounces, and she was seven weeks old Oct. 6, the day she "came home," as her mother puts it. She also suffered from jet lag, Spears said. She was "limp as a rag doll" the first few days.

On the third day came colic.

"And you know, for nine years as a public health nurse, I've been telling mothers to just let the baby cry. I can't do that!"

How will her advice be different in the future?

"I'll tell them to 'hold that baby: don't put that baby down.' I don't think you can spoil a baby, and these babies have been passed from hand to hand with the different work shifts in the orphanage. Then three sets of people on three different airlines brought her here."

After all this, Spears feels that Aimee needs the reassurance of being held by one or two people. She took three weeks leave when Aimee arrived, and yes, her mother came to help for a few days. "That first colicky night, we took turns rocking all night."

Aimee has worked up to sleeping four hours straight. When she is awake, she is screaming, eating or sucking a pacifier. "These babies are so deprived that the agency people say they want to be sucking something for about six months until they begin to feel secure about food."

Spears had the baby christened Nov. 1, All Saints' Day, at her church, St. Stephen's Presbyterian Church in Irving. Aimee wore her great-grandmother's christening gown.

The next day Spears went back to work. She had a hard time leaving her with someone else.

It's hard, too, being a single parent. "The main problem is--in the middle of the night there ain't nobody to hand the kid to."

Spears dreams of going to work in Calcutta as a nurse for six months--maybe when Aimee is five or six. "Nobody will ever know anything about her biological parents. But I want her to see and know the culture she came from."

As a single mother in an international adoption, Spears has been asked some stupid questions: Will she speak English? Won't she know she's adopted? What are you going to tell other people?

Her answer to the last is "The people who need to know anything know. I don't care about the others."

"I've always wanted a daughter. It's not a matter of not being interested in marriage. I just feel that I have something to offer a child, and it sounds corny but there are a lot of kids out there who need parents."

"If you want to adopt, you have to persevere. At every step somebody tries to convince you it's not what you want to do...your family, Immigration...and the waiting. You are always waiting," Spears says.

"But after six years of waiting and \$4,000, all I have to say is--she's worth it."

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At her Oct. 30 checkup, Aimee Lyn Spears weighed 7 pounds, 5 ounces, showing a weight gain about double what was expected of her. That was also the day she smiled for the first time.

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