

Creating a happy marriage is possible and this site is dedicated to providing resources to help couples who want to stay together. By providing information about qualified marriage counseling, we hope to encourage couples to get the help they need. The site also features articles, other websites, books, and workshops which offer the tools needed to create happy, lasting marriages.



Adoption and Marriage

This is Episode number 30 of Stay Happily Married, "Adoption and Marriage."

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Lee Rosen: I'm Lee Rosen. I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. I'm here in the studio with Parker Herring. Parker is an adoption attorney in Raleigh, North Carolina. She's also the co-director of A Child's Hope, which offers domestic adoption services throughout the state.

Welcome to the show, Parker. How are you today?

Parker Herring: I'm fine. Thank you.

Lee Rosen: Well, I am really glad that you could be with us. Now, you're an adoption attorney and you've practiced law for how long?

Parker Herring: Twenty-three years.

Lee Rosen: A long time. Okay. And so I know in that period of time you know -- I guess you've seen everything in the adoption arena. You sort of know it all, you've done it all, yes?

Parker Herring: Pretty much.

Lee Rosen: And we're talking everything from I guess adoptions in the United States, you deal with folks adopting people internationally, just everything.

Parker Herring: That's right. In international adoptions it's called re-adoptions.

Lee Rosen: Okay.

Parker Herring: And then sometimes you get some disruptive placements in international and then domestic adoptions.

Lee Rosen: Now, one of the things that I find intriguing about your background and resume is that in addition to be an attorney that handles adoptions, you are also the director something called A Child's Hope, which I love the name. What is that?

Parker Herring: Thank you. It's a domestic adoption agency. It's a small agency that focuses on matching North Carolina birth mothers with North Carolina couples.

Lee Rosen: Okay. So North Carolina birth mothers with North Carolina couples.

Parker Herring: That's right.

Lee Rosen: And so you're out in the community finding the moms who need someone to help take care of their child and then you're also finding the folks that really want to have children in their lives.

Parker Herring: That's right.

Lee Rosen: How long has A Child's Hope been around?

Parker Herring: We're just starting our 10th year and we're about to have our 200th placement. We just had our 199th placement last week.

Lee Rosen: Wow. Is that going to be like a celebratory event when you hit 200?

Parker Herring: I think so, yes. We're excited about it.

Lee Rosen: And I would imagine that working in that field has got to be an incredibly positive -- it must give you a lot of really good feelings, yes?

Parker Herring: It does. In a small way I feel like I'm making a difference.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, 200 families I would say it's more than a small way. That's a pretty big way. I've always thought that the folks who work at the hospital where babies are being born have a really neat job, but it seems to me that you get all of the benefit of that without the mess. That's terrific.

- Parker Herring: Yes, that's true. That's true. That's one way to look at it.
- Lee Rosen: Now, are there more folks trying to find children or more people who need to have someone take care of their child?
- Parker Herring: More people by far who are trying to find children to parent.
- Lee Rosen: There's sort of a shortage of children available.
- Parker Herring: Yes. It's not quite clear why, but in the United States fertility is in very high rates and there are a lot of people who want to parent but they're not able to have children biologically.
- Lee Rosen: Right. So do you spend more of your time with A Child's Hope tracking down folks on one side of that equation or the other?
- Parker Herring: Birth mothers, yes.
- Lee Rosen: You do.
- Parker Herring: We're recruiting birth mothers. We spend over \$100,000 a year in Yellow Pages ads; we do a lot of work on the Internet trying to reach out to women with unplanned pregnancies.
- Lee Rosen: Right. Now, how did you -- I'm just very curious to know how you got attracted to this area of the law and this whole field in general. What triggered that for you?
- Parker Herring: It really came out of my own personal experience. I was divorced and then remarried in my mid-40s and my second husband had not had children with his first wife. He was widowed. And I had always wanted children but I think really had focused on getting my career together.
- Lee Rosen: Right.
- Parker Herring: And then my husband and I decided to adopt and so we hired the largest and the oldest private adoption agency in the United States and adopted my first child. And we have a son named MacKenzie who is 10 and he was from New Mexico. And when I went through that process of adopting him, even though I was an attorney and a professional and my husband was ex-military -- so he traveled around a lot, handled a lot of different situations -- we were very traumatized by how difficult that particular adoption was.
- Lee Rosen: Really? Why? What happened?

Parker Herring: Well, we had to go out of state to adopt and we had to go out of state at the last minute. And if you've ever stayed in a hotel room with a newborn for two weeks, it's not a wonderful way. There were three different states' laws to deal with because we were from North Carolina, the agency was licensed in Texas and the baby was born in New Mexico. Turned out the baby had -- there was an American Indian issue so we were subject to the Indian Child Welfare Act. There were two potential birth fathers. So it got very traumatic.

Now, my son also was born with a special need; he had a cleft lip and pallet. But by far what traumatized us the most was having to have an attorney in that state, have an attorney here, and then we ended up hiring an attorney in Texas; and having to deal with the chaos of a last minute adoption and the complexity of the laws and complexity of the birth father situation; and then just all of the emotion that you have going to take a child and waiting for the birth mother to sign. And it was expensive. We spent an unbelievable amount of money, about \$35,000.

Lee Rosen: And that was 10 years ago.

Parker Herring: That was 10 years ago.

Lee Rosen: Wow.

Parker Herring: So I came back and I talked to a friend of mine, Bobby Mills, who is an adoption attorney, and I said, "Why did this happen?" And he said, "My experience is it's better if you can adopt in-state." It's less financially expensive and it's less traumatic.

Lee Rosen: Right. Now, Bobby practices with you now, right?

Parker Herring: That's right.

Lee Rosen: Now you two, you're really the gurus of adoption law in North Carolina. When hear the word "adoption," your name and Bobby's names are always associated with that. So you got MacKenzie was there a -- once it was settled after that couple of weeks was it really settled? Did you know you were good to go and nothing would jeopardize that?

Parker Herring: No. We were subject to the Indian Child Welfare Act, which is a federal law which says that Indian children cannot be released from their tribe until the tribe says that it's okay. There were just a lot of issues. And then at six weeks the DNA tests came back. Back then it took longer; you did DNA by blood test, now you do it by swab. And

the test came back and showed that the man we thought was the father was not the father.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Parker Herring: So then we had to go back and try to find the second man and couldn't find him, so we published.

Lee Rosen: So how long did this take before you really knew, okay, MacKenzie is ours. We don't need to worry about this anymore.

Parker Herring: We took him home in May and then we finalized in December.

Lee Rosen: Right. So were you stressed for that whole seven months? Plus you had -- how old was MacKenzie when you adopted him?

Parker Herring: He was newborn and we knew we were facing several surgeries.

Lee Rosen: Right. Boy.

Parker Herring: And it was our first child and so we decided my husband would stay home with him because he just retired from the Air Force. And so he was adjusting to --

Lee Rosen: Retirement.

Parker Herring: -- retirement. And about a week before we went to get the baby -- we only had two weeks notice -- I realized he had never changed a diaper or fed a baby. So I called a nurse in and it was interesting to watch him neatly put on a diaper and do all of those things.

Lee Rosen: So seven months of figuring out how to have a baby and a husband adjusting to retirement from the Air Force and legal issues and surgeries.

Parker Herring: We laugh about it now, but it was -- I remember my husband. I came home one day and he was out weeding the yard and the baby was up on the porch.

I said, "Can you hear him?"

He said, "Well, yeah."

I said, "Now, you have to take that child with you wherever you go."

And there was this look of horror on his face. He said, "Everywhere?"

And I said, "Everywhere you go."

Lee Rosen: Right. Now, MacKenzie was the first child you adopted, but there are more, right?

Parker Herring: That's right. We went back for more fun and --

Lee Rosen: It worked out so well.

Parker Herring: And what was interesting, we went back to the same agency because -- at that point, however, they would not work with us because they had an age limit and we were 45 at the time.

Lee Rosen: You were too old.

Parker Herring: Too old. So I had done a lot of infertility treatments and one day before I was to go over to the clinic I looked at a little ad pack magazine and I saw all these people advertising for babies. And I thought, "Why am I doing this? Why don't I just put an ad in the paper?"

So interestingly enough, we ended up that fertility cycle did not result in pregnancy so we placed an ad in that same newspaper and my son Michael's birth mother read that ad. She was having a difficult time and she was 21 and had already had three children. And her mother told her if she had another child she'd have to sleep in her car, which she was doing. So we were able to work with an attorney in Tennessee and I did an independent adoption with him.

Lee Rosen: So that was much easier?

Parker Herring: It was a lot easier, although it was in another state. But it was a lot easier and about a third of the cost.

Lee Rosen: Right. So you had started seeing that this did not need to be the ordeal that it had been out there in the Southwest.

Parker Herring: That's right.

Lee Rosen: So now, what's this one's name, number two?

Parker Herring: Michael.

Lee Rosen: Michael. And how old is he now?

Parker Herring: He's 7.

Lee Rosen: Okay. And there is a third story, right?

Parker Herring: There is. We had done a lot of infertility cycles around the time that we were adopting Michael and so we stopped. And we had some frozen embryos.

And when I was 49 my husband was paying the bills and we were paying our storage bill for our annual storing the embryos that we had and I said, "How long are we going to do this?"

And he said, "Well, we can call."

So I called the clinic and they said, "When you're 50 we'll destroy the embryos." And I felt pretty traumatized by that. And it wasn't that we were planning to have another child, but you do all of that work. And so I asked them if they could donate and they said no. And I said, "Well how about stem cell research?" And they said no.

So I went to an adoption conference in Tennessee and then drove over and had the embryos implanted. It was sort of a last minute decision. And figured it wouldn't work; it hadn't worked six times before. And then I got pregnant. So I was 50 and pregnant. And that was interesting, but we were blessed with a little girl, which was fun after two boys.

Lee Rosen: What's her name?

Parker Herring: Mary Parker.

Lee Rosen: Mary Parker. How old is she now?

Parker Herring: Five.

Lee Rosen: Okay. So you have really learned the ins and outs of everything that a person would want to know about having a baby and every method we can imagine.

Parker Herring: Yeah. I should write a book at this point.

Lee Rosen: Right. Or maybe a few books.

Parker Herring: That's right.

Lee Rosen: Is this a good time for folks to be thinking about adoption? In the history of adoption are we at a good place for parents to find children?

Parker Herring: It is a wonderful time. If you compare this to 20 years ago where if a young couple came into an office -- or even a middle aged couple -- their choices would be very limited. But now there's a plethora of ways to adopt. You can go internally or you can adopt domestically in the United States. And within domestic adoption you can choose an agency or you can hire a facilitator or you can network yourself and do an independent adoption.

Lee Rosen: And I would assume if someone were seeking to adopt a child that A Child's Hope -- your agency -- can walk them through everything that they need to do?

Parker Herring: Well, our agency is good for certain situations. And what we like to do in our law firm, when someone inquires either through the agency or calls me, we encourage them to come in for a general consultation. And we spend about an hour, an hour and a half, and I talk to them about their situation and how they want to build a family and how they see building a family. What type of children are they interested; ages, newborn, older? Is race a factor? Do they want a child that looks like them? And I look at their age and their health issues.

And then we discuss all of their adoption options. And our particular agency might be a good fit for them or it might not be. For example, I had a couple that came in a couple years ago. She was 31 and he was 60. It was his second marriage. And our agency was not a good fit because in our agency birth mothers are choosing you from a list of families and they are probably not going to be chosen. But I helped them adopt domestically. Actually, they went to Arizona to adopt and some ways that we were able to assist them in finding a child that way.

Lee Rosen: Now, the whole objective of this show is to help people to say married and to be happy in their marriages. I'm wondering -- you went through a lot, especially with MacKenzie's adoption; it sounds like that was probably the most stressful. Although, when you went through the pregnancy with Mary -- it's Mary Parker, right?

Parker Herring: That topped it, yeah.

Lee Rosen: But does adoption -- first of all, for you, did your marriage work the way it needed to work? How did it affect you going through the adoption?

Parker Herring: It tested our relationship and the infertility tested our relationship. You have a lot of disappointment in infertility. And an adoption,

you have to roll with it because you can't control what the birth mom is putting into her body. But then when you hold this child and you have this child, you immediately start bonding. And basically it's really true.

It may sound like a cliché, but I fell in love all over again with my husband each time. And I remember seeing him -- because he was staying at home. And he just had this wonderful way -- not the traditional way -- I taught him how to sing because he wasn't really comfortable singing to a baby. And we still laugh about his swaddling because my swaddles were sort of loose, but he's ex-military so we call it the burrito wrap. I mean, this child would just be tucked in and folded and the diapers would be perfect.

And I saw him just really immerse himself in each child and he's very close to each one of our children. And to me that is such a wonderful quality, to be able to completely give yourself to someone else.

Lee Rosen: Right. It makes your marriage even stronger.

Parker Herring: Yes. Well, you have this tie. And it doesn't matter that the children aren't biological. And I can look at this from both sides; I mean, I have one biological child and I have two that were not brought into our family biologically, they were adopted. And you don't feel any differently.

Lee Rosen: Right. Now, have you seen -- in your experience are there couples that go through the adoption process and they really can't keep it together? This is just too hard for them, that the marriages start to melt down?

Parker Herring: I really don't see that and we have had -- we're actually going to do a survey this year because we're coming on 200 families. But out of those 200 families -- well, 199 now -- I know of three divorces.

Lee Rosen: Well, that's fascinating because we know what the divorce rate is for families that are just out there in the universe generally and it's just so high. I wonder if adopting children -- maybe it is what you say about that test and you're having to figure out how to deal with each other and grow the marriage stronger, if that doesn't sort of immunize you against divorce.

Parker Herring: Well, if you not able to just easily get pregnant and have children, having a child through infertility or adopting is a lot of work. And that is stressful on a marriage. But I've actually seen people say adoption is less stressful than infertility because with infertility you

have the added complexity of the woman taking in a lot of hormones into her body and a lot of treatments, and I've known a lot of men who don't like giving their wife shots, who don't like to watch the suffering. And that was how my husband was. He hated to watch me go through the ups and downs of it.

Lee Rosen: That would be terrible, yeah. We're not very good at that stuff -- guys. We don't like to watch anybody suffer. Now, I'm curious, you've watched these 200 families go through this. What's it look like from the perspective of the birth mother? What are the things that go on in her life that you're watching and dealing with in your role?

Parker Herring: Well, you have to remember that women who place for adoption, their pregnancies are unplanned. And when their pregnancies are unplanned, they usually are not in a point in life where they're in a position to parent. And although we do have some married couples who come to us and this is their third or fourth child and they're just not able to take care of it, you see a lot of chaos with a lot of birth mothers. They tend to be younger, although we work with birth mothers as young as 14 and as old as 42. But without a steady partner and especially in today's financial climate you see a lot of chaos, a lot of homelessness, a lot of evictions. You see some struggles with addictions. You just see a lot of turmoil.

Lee Rosen: Right. Very interesting. Well, I just am fascinated to hear your story. And it really does sound like adopting children has resulted in your being a happier person and your marriage being happier. It just sounds like an amazing and wonderful thing that you've been through.

Parker Herring: Looking back on it -- and I can look back on it now because we just put our youngest in kindergarten, so that sort of helps.

Lee Rosen: Frees up a few minutes.

Parker Herring: That does. But it has really cemented us. I was watching my two youngest play last night and they're just -- I can't imagine not having siblings for each one of them.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Parker Herring: And we struggled with whether to adopt again after my first son because my first son was born with some special needs and has had to have four surgeries and will have to have a few more. But it has been a good experience for him to have siblings. He's learned how to share, he's fit into a circle, and he adores his brother and sister.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, it is a really uplifting story and I appreciate you sharing it with us. Now, folks that are interested in adopting children, or birth mothers who are looking for someone to help them, the best way for them to find you is how?

Parker Herring: Well, you can go to the Internet, www.AChildsHope.com.

Lee Rosen: And I will make sure we put a link in the show notes for this program to A Child's Hope. And are there other ways?

Parker Herring: Thank you. Well, you can call my law firm, Herring, Mills & Kratt, at (919) 821-1860.

Lee Rosen: And Herring, Mills & Kratt is in Raleigh, North Carolina, right?

Parker Herring: That's right. And we have a website, ForYourLife.com.

Lee Rosen: Great. And are there -- it sounds funny, but are there literally operators standing by? If a birth mother -- I assume she might call at any time of day. How does that work? If she's calling in on the weekend is there a --

Parker Herring: We have a toll-free 24-hour birth mother hotline.

Lee Rosen: You do. Okay.

Parker Herring: We have an English-speaking hotline which is 1-877-890-HOPE (4673).

Lee Rosen: Wow. Great. I would assume when someone calls in you've got to really be there to support them and walk them through a birth mother that's looking for help, really.

Parker Herring: Yeah. We have adoption counselors. They talk to her for about 15 minutes, learn a little bit about her situation. And then we try to three-way her into the phone of a counselor throughout the state. And we have seven counselors spread throughout the state.

Lee Rosen: Wow. You've really got it all covered. Well, that's why when the word "adoption" comes up your name is always associated with it as being the guru in that field. And love that not only are you an expert in the law and you have experience with these 200 families so far, but you can empathize and understand what the family is going through because you've lived it. And that really does I think make a tremendous difference. You're in a position to really help people in a way that very few others are.

Parker Herring: Well, as I said, unless you've been in a hotel with a newborn for two weeks, it's hard to relate.

Lee Rosen: Yeah, it really is. Well, thank you so much, Parker Herring, for joining us. And we look forward to having you back another time. Thank you.

Parker Herring: Thank you.

Lee Rosen: If you would like to find out more about adoption or get in touch with Parker, you can visit www.AChildsHope.com; that's their website.

Thank you so much for listening today and I hope you'll join us again next week. We would love to hear your feedback, your comments. We've set up a comment line that you can call in and leave a message at. It's (919) 256-3083. Or feel free to send us an e-mail at comments@StayHappilyMarried.com. We'd love to know your thoughts on future topics and suggestions about this show or any of our shows. We very much would appreciate hearing from you.

I'm Lee Rosen. Until next time, stay happily married.

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