



Ben and Evie Apfelbaum with their adopted children, Hannah (second left) and Leah (right).

Abandoned *no more*

There are approximately 15 million orphaned and abandoned children worldwide. Some, but far too few, are fortunate to find loving parents who offer them a new life, a new home, a new family – and in some cases, a new country and a new religion. To mark National Adoption Awareness Week, *The A/JN* spoke to adoptive mother Evie Apfelbaum and adopted children Leah Apfelbaum and Adam Brisson about their experiences.

EVIE APFELBAUM

IT is difficult to impart the emotion on receiving that phone call in November of 1988 informing us that we had been allocated a five-month-old baby girl and had to be in La Paz, Bolivia, within the week to pick her up.

We had waited three years for this moment. The intense emotional ups and downs we had experienced during those years can probably only be understood by other adoptive parents and the ensuing

years have been unbelievably rewarding.

In 1991, we were once again blessed to be allocated a baby girl from Bogota, Colombia. Watching our babies growing into the amazing young women they are today has been a privilege we have been grateful for every day.

Unfortunately, there is no real preparation for parenthood or a reliable manual to help one along the way.

Although the “conception” and “birth” of our kids were different to most, as parents we muddled along the same

way as everyone else with the blur of nappies, netball, bat mitzvahs, teenagers and the HSC – it all passes far too quickly.

We have a strong family unit and our girls have grown up in an extended family of grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins who were just as excited as we were when they arrived and have surrounded them with love.

Like all parents, we wanted to give our children the best of ourselves.

As active and committed members of the community we were determined to

instill a Jewish identity into our children and they have both been educated in Jewish day schools.

At the same time, we felt it essential that they also value and accept as part of their identity every part of their story.

They have been enriched by elements of South American, Australian, Jewish, Polish and Hungarian heritage – quite a mixture.

In turn, I believe both our Jewish and the wider Australian community will be enriched by the contribution they will make to it.

LEAH APFELBAUM

I WAS adopted when I was five-and-a-half months old, in La Paz, Bolivia, by Australian Jewish parents.

Through my adoption, I have been able to accumulate four different parts to my identity: I am an Australian, Jewish, South American and an adoptee.

I was abandoned by my biological parents and was estimated as being 10 days old when given to the orphanage, so my approximate birthday is June 21, 1988.

On February 7, 1991, I was converted to Judaism by attending the mikvah at the beth din in Sydney, and even though I have no recollection of this, I see this as a key moment in my life.

Judaism has allowed me to be a part of an amazing group of people, my family. My mother’s and father’s parents are Holocaust survivors and I have heard and witnessed how strong and amazing they are. I treasure my Judaism a little bit more with this knowledge because their families died because of their beliefs and I will never forget the toll they paid to allow me to be a Jewish girl in Australia.

When I was three years old, my family and I went to Colombia to pick up my sister who was six weeks old. This was one of the best moments of my life.

I have always been very open about my adoption. Some people do not understand it and say, “so your mother isn’t really your mum”, and “you and your sister are not related”.



The Apfelbaums 15 years ago with Leah, aged six and Hannah, aged three.

I always get very defensive because my mother is my mum. We argue and drive each other crazy like other families because there is no difference between a biological child and their mother to the relationship I have with mine. This also applies to my sister. We bicker and annoy each other just like any other siblings.

I am no more special than anyone else. My dream is to go back to Bolivia and see where I came from and people who look like me.

I am currently in my last year of my social work degree, and have been working for JewishCare and I participate as much as I can in adoptive activities and camps. I hope to continue to interact with both Jewish and adoptive organisations as they are a huge part of who I am today.

ADAM BRISSON

WHEN people find out I am adopted, usually the first questions that follow are: “Do you know your real parents?” and “Have you ever been back?”

Personally, the first question can be somewhat insulting because I have only ever known my parents that I live with.

Although some adoptees can take the view of labelling parents as biological parents and adoptive parents, the people I have called mum and dad for the past 27 years are my parents.

Did I ever fantasise about meeting my birth parents? Yes, there were times, but as I grow older and start to think about starting my own family, the reasons have changed.

The reasons now would be more related to finding out if I had siblings or finding out about my genetic medical history.

I was privileged enough to go back to La Paz, Bolivia, where I am from, when I was 15 and 17.

The first time will always be an experience I will never forget. Being raised by a Jewish family in the Eastern Suburbs and then going to a Third World country where you were born can only be summarised by one word – grateful.

On both occasions, I was lucky enough to visit my orphanage where my life began and where it changed.

To look into the innocent eyes of young boys or girls puts your



Adam Brisson with his mother Ricky.

life into perspective very quickly.

I truly believe that after my first visit I was a changed person. Any opportunities or luxuries I had taken advantage of before I would never again.

Fast-forward 10 years and I have now decided to take a more hands-on role with adoption.

I am heavily involved with TeenZ Connection, a monthly program for teenage adoptees and Camp Connection, a yearly camp for adoptive families.

Both initiatives were started by Australian Families for Children.

The most important thing I believe about Adoption Awareness Week is that it raises awareness among adoptees of all ages that there are others out there that have experienced many similar situations. It is to ensure they don’t feel like they are ever alone.