

Sweet Truth & Hard Truth

Felicia's Favorite Story Tells the Sweet Side of Guatemalan Adoption

By JUDITH BECKETT

Lesléa Newman became a trailblazer as an author of books for LGBT families when she wrote *Heather Has Two Mommies*, published in 1989 by Alyson Publications. Still a best seller, her book was the first depicting a child growing up with same-sex parents. Often the object of "book banning" and controversy, it continues to spark debate and bring our LGBT families out of the closet and into the public forum.

Newman must also be credited with paving the way for the writing and publication of a rich and growing selection of books depicting positive LGBT images for our children, including *Saturday Is Patty Day*, *Gloria Goes To Gay Pride*, and *Belinda's Bouquet*. With the writing of *Felicia's Favorite Story*, she turns her attention to lesbian adoption.

She's a talented and prolific writer who has published books and short stories for adults as well (see our interview with Lesléa Newman in the May 2002 *OITM*).

Felicia's Favorite Story is a gentle little book. Every page is illustrated with Adriana Romo's soft pastel watercolors. It is a bedtime story, the lovingly told story of how Felicia was adopted. We learn that Mama Nessa, who was born in New York, and Mama Linda, born in Puerto Rico, loved each other so much that they wanted to "find someone else who can share our love and be part of our family."

Newman's way of bringing out this information makes the book fun to read. Mama Linda tells the story of Felicia's adoption by asking her questions. For instance, when Mama Nessa asks, "So who do you think became a part of our family?" Felicia guesses, "A giraffe? ... A mouse?" Since this is Felicia's favorite story, we can assume that her playful answers are a game she loves as much as she loves the tale of her adoption from Guatemala.

Newman's book is published by Two Lives Publishing, a new publishing house launched in 2001 by Bobbie Combs and Sally Lindsay in Ridley Park, Pennsylvania. Both women have extensive experience in the publishing field. They became aware of the growing need for children's books depicting positive images of gay and lesbian parents when they attempted to start a family of their own. No longer lovers, they continue to work together to publish the books they couldn't find when they needed them.

Because I am a birth mother, and I had to surrender my

Felicia's Favorite Story

By Lesléa Newman
Illustrated by Adriana Romo
Two Lives Publishing, Ridley Park PA
2002

daughter for adoption when I was homeless, my perspective on adoption might be different from theirs or Newman's or even that of illustrator Romo, who was born in Chile. This perspective led me to do some research on Guatemalan adoption.

Guatemala is a tiny Central American country of 12 million people. Sixty percent of the population is indigenous, mainly Mayan in descent. Seventy percent of the rural population is illiterate and lives in extreme poverty. The children are undereducated and undernourished and have little opportunity to improve their situation. It is to the women of this population that most adopted infants are born.

In 1960, the indigenous Guatemalan Revolutionary National Unity Movement (URNG) began a guerilla war that lasted for thirty-six years. Over 200,000 people were "disappeared" during the conflict. The long war resulted in a breakdown of indigenous communities and family life.

Some orphaned children were treated as "war booty" and sold abroad or used as servants. Government officials abducted others to punish "subversives." Many children ended up in orphanages. Adoption began as an effort to quickly place orphaned and abandoned children in homes.

Mayra Gutierrez was a Guatemalan women's rights activist and professor at the University of San Carlos where she founded a gender studies program. In 1999, she presented visiting UN officials with a report on her research on the illegal adoption market in Guatemala. Her report received considerable publicity only days before she was reported missing on April 7, 2000. Her family insists she was "disappeared" because of her activism including her role in exposing illegal adoption.

That same year, the United Nations Children's Fund sent Special Rapporteur Ms. Ophelia Calcetas-Santos to Guatemala on a 12-day fact-finding mission. Calcetas-Santos concluded that the sale of children and infants for adoption exists on a large scale in Guatemala. Guatemala is the fourth largest "exporter" of children in the world with 1,332 inter-country adoptions in 1998. Sixty-two percent of these infants and children came to the United States, the largest receiver.

Legal adoption is the exception. Criminal offenses include the falsifying of docu-

ments, the kidnapping of children, and the buying and selling of children and infants for profit, usually in the range of \$20,000 to \$25,000, most of which goes to lawyers.

In Newman's book, Mama Linda tells Felicia: "Sometimes ... when a woman has a baby, she isn't able to take care of the child. So she does the most loving thing she can do: she allows the child to be adopted by parents who can take care of a baby and want a child to love."

But the hard truth revealed in the United Nations report is somewhat different. Hospital employees falsify records, social workers declare infants abandoned, and lawyers buy infants still in the womb. Birth certificates are issued in the name of the adoptive parents, eliminating the need for the adoption process. A large percentage of infants are born to prostitutes, some of whom are only children themselves.

A small percentage of infants come from families living in extreme poverty who surrender them for economic reasons. This *could* be Felicia's story.

In *Heather Has Two Mommies*, Newman wrote honestly, simply, and accurately about the alternative insemination that results in Heather's birth: "After the doctor examined Jane to make sure that she was healthy, she put some sperm into Jane's vagina. The sperm swam up into Jane's womb. If there was an egg waiting there, the sperm and the egg would meet, and the baby would start to grow."

I believe it is possible to write a book for children about adoption that truthfully answers the questions a child asks about her identity and cultural heritage. I wonder whether this information would be appropriate for a preschool child. And if so, would it still be Felicia's favorite story?

In 1988, I located my then-twenty-five-year-old daughter. Today I have the privilege and joy of knowing my three-year-old grandchild. *Felicia's Favorite Story* will find a place on her bookshelf because we need these books, even when they tell only the sweet side of a hard truth. Kudos to Newman and Two Lives Publishing for producing another book that reflects the cultural diversity of our many families. ▼

Judith Beckett is a birth mother, grandmother, nurse, writer, and feminist lesbian who lives in Bradford.

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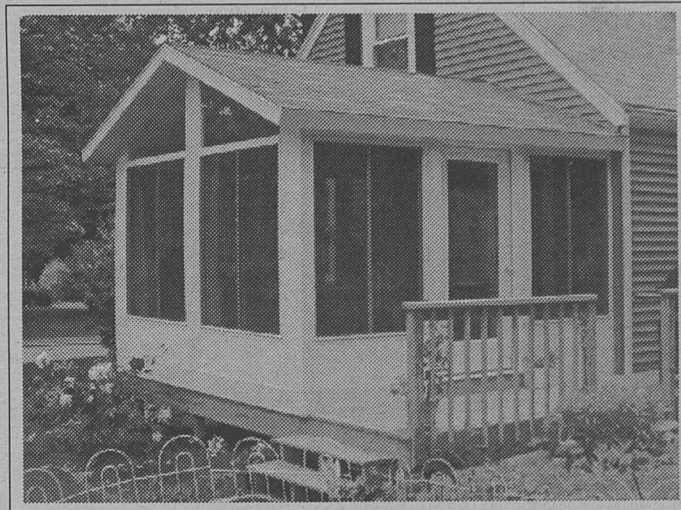
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Route 12, Hartland Four Corners, Vermont.

Saturday June 7, 2003 at 8 pm
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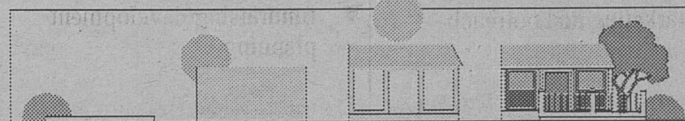
Sunday June 8, 2003 at 3 pm
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