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All Families Don't Look Alike

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Though Caucasian herself, Nancy Zeitz* adopted Lionel, an African-American boy at birth. Lionel's biological parents, both African American and with children already, did not have the means to support another child. Lionel's parents handpicked Nancy from an array of family profiles. Though Nancy did think, "a female would have less of a struggle" having her as a single mother, "the minute they said 'Your son was born,' he was mine, he was my son."

More and more single moms like Nancy are adopting, and adopting without concern for race or color. "We'd look at a single person adopting in the same way we'd look at a couple," said Mike McMahon, of The Gladney Center for Adoption in Forth Worth Texas. "They have to be a stable person. They're not doing this whimsically but after a lot of thought. We want to make sure they're stable financially, where they can provide for the child. That they have support systems set up, so if they're ill, become unemployed, or have to travel a lot for business, someone is available for the child and will be an appropriate caregiver."

Nancy solved that by sharing a two-family flat with her widowed mother, Tess, who eagerly helped with childcare. Nancy hopes Lionel's birth parents will some day want to meet Lionel, and keeps a picture of the couple displayed prominently in her home for her son to see. She also writes them periodically with news of Lionel.

Prior to Lionel 's adoption, Nancy was asked by a caseworker, "Ok, so you've decided on an African-American baby. How are you going to bring in his heritage? What is your community like? Are there other African American families in your church?"

Nancy has gone on to teach members in her community about families such as hers.

"And yeah, Lionel and I might walk in somewhere and people do a double take, or say 'is that you foster child?'" Nancy told me. "I had gone to a new pediatrician for the first time when Lionel was three. The nurse sat him down and said, 'Is this nice lady taking good care of you?' I guess thinking that Lionel was a foster child. It was so offensive to me. Prior to this incident it was only I who had ever been at the end of it. This kind of behavior had never happened to Lionel directly. I said, 'She sure is, and I'm his mom.' And the nurse was, 'Oh, ooh!' and backed off. Later I told the pediatrician, 'Your nurse maybe isn't used to seeing different kinds of families, and we'll be back, but we won't be the last family that doesn't look traditional.' We came back this year and the nurse was good as gold."

Patty Hicks, of The Gladney Center for Adoption noted, "[Single adoptive moms] "use [friends, other families that have children of similar heritage], as a resource and [to] connect with other families. "They usually have a big support system and their children grow up knowing children that are part African American or whatever. More and more we are seeing that it's okay if your family looks different than the next family that walks in the door. At one time in our history (and I guess from living in Texas) all families looked somewhat alike. That's just not the world today; we've been able to bring that world view into Gladney."

Families with children who look or even feel different still feel the bond -- they understand that all families are different, not better or worse. Children need people to love them and need families, regardless of the configuration of the family. With the stigma from unplanned pregnancies having all but disappeared, adoption of newborns has now shrunk to "less than one percent of the women who have unplanned pregnancies and are considering adoption," said Patty. In her experience, which is supported by national figures, most women or their families opt to raise the baby themselves. Still, sad to say, nationwide as of March 2000, 134,000 children nationwide were [awaiting adoption](#). Half of them had been in foster care for three years or more. If we eliminate certain people as potential parents because of their sexual orientation or their marital status, it just means that some children have to wait longer or never get adopted at all. Thankfully, agencies like Gladney are increasingly realizing that single-parent families can be as good a bet as a more traditional setting.

*The data I compiled and the patterns I've observed for "Raising Boys Without Men" are presented as collective experiences. I have honored promises of confidentiality by changing names and disguising identities.