

## Truth, Consequences and Reform: Rethinking Adoption in the 21st Century—Reflections from the Experts

APRIL DINWOODIE, PANEL CHAIR

In order to truly understand the many dimensions of adoption past, present, and future, it is critical that the expert voices of those closest to the experience have a forum and are heard. Certainly research, education, and professional development—listening and learning from historical successes and failures—are important elements, but so much of the future of adoption is rooted in listening to the personal experts as they lead conversations about connections and professional commitments.

With this in mind, The Rudd Adoption Program continued to keep its promise to advance knowledge about the psychology of adoption by making space for a panel discussion during its 10th annual conference—“The Future of Adoption: Beyond Safety to Well-Being.” It was my great honor to collaborate with Dr. Hal Grotevant, Rudd Family Foundation Endowed Chair; Keynote Speaker, Dr. Gary Mallon; and panelists representing of the extended family of adoption that also work as professionals and advocates in the field of adoption and foster care, as the Panel Chair for “Truth, Consequences and Reform: Rethinking Adoption in the 21st Century.”

We began our discussion by centering on a few key concepts:

**Adoption is not a one-time transaction but rather a transformational journey for everyone involved throughout their lifespan.** Although the day a parent finalizes the adoption of their child is a powerful one, adoption will always be more than one moment in time. Recognizing this powerful idea as the starting place sets the tone for the realities of the experience.

### **We must recognize the basic human rights of everyone in the extended family of adoption.**

Adoption is in urgent need of a cultural shift; this shift requires us first and foremost to make decisions in adoption through the lens of human rights and to practice adoption in a way that primarily and fundamentally respects and upholds the humanity of all who are connected to this rich and complex experience.

### **There will be no reform without education.**

One of the greatest impediments to meaningful reforms in adoption and foster care is the societal misperceptions and general lack of knowledge surrounding the realities. A lack of understanding surrounding adoption has plagued families and individuals for many decades. In some cases, it has held families back from healthy and fulfilling experiences, and in others, it has hindered wellbeing and contributed to serious challenges.

With these key concepts in place we began a conversation drilling deeper with our esteemed panel of experts. We started with the idea that adoption is a life-long journey and we deconstructed the many layers and dimensions of this reality. I began with former foster youth and advocate **Amnoni Myers** and we explored the hard truth that not all young people who are in foster care transition to adoption and this can set up a very complex life-long journey. Specifically for Amnoni it was not only the pain and difficulty of being separated from her mother but also separation from her siblings that she would have to process and manage. She also shared that being a bit older; she had the distinct feeling that she was “unadoptable”. With these experiences

deeply embedded within her, Amnoni shared her motivation surrounding her work today as an advocate and how important it is to share her personal journey of aging out of foster care. Specifically, how the experiences associated with being separated from her family of origin, what she did and did not receive as support from professionals, and the deficits of the system related to mental health resources overall, have manifested into a driving force for her education and professional endeavors.

Next, adoptive/foster parent, advocate and author **Sue Badeau** and I explored the commitment she and her husband Hector have made to authentically valuing the truth about their joy of adopting being connected to someone else's loss and pain as well as the importance of how one perceives adoption as a basic idea. It was clear to Sue that one of the central challenges in adoption then and now is rooted in a false idea that children in foster care did not have families. Sue quickly realized she and Hector's belief that there was no such thing as a child without a family and rather that adoption in their family was never really simply adopting the child but rather extended their entire family, was truly radical. Sue also shared the importance of understanding and exploring her identity in supporting the healthy identity development of the children she and her husband parent as well as how her skills as a parent evolve and continue to evolve in order to meet the changing needs of her children. Ultimately, it is Sue's belief that adoption changes the whole sense of a family's identity

As an adopted person, a birth parent, filmmaker, and educator, **Ridghaus** explored how his unique experiences of learning he was adopted at 35

years old as well as relinquishing his son to adoption have intersected and how the element of the truth has impacted and inspired him. Today, truth is a central theme of Ridghaus' very existence and something he holds sacred. When deconstructed, we get the strong sense that the competing interests of adults can often lead to a lack of truth or a denial of the truth in adoption, which certainly impacts the life-long journey of adoption and can present serious challenges for children and young people who do not have access to their full truth. While we ultimately determined that there is no easy way to avoid conflicts of adults that arise in highly emotional and sometimes contentious realities of adoption, there was something valuable in bringing this idea into this dialog, as we rarely see it explored.

Professor and parent **Dr. Elliotte Harrington** was able to touch on a very important aspect of adoption and foster care that is not discussed nearly enough; the very beginning of the journey of adoption related to an unplanned pregnancy and the realities for expectant and birth parents. As a single expectant parent faced with an unplanned pregnancy, Elliotte shared how difficult that process had been for her and her realization of the importance of impartial pre-adoption counseling and the need for adoption competent, unbiased, psycho-educational pre-placement counseling. Elliotte's experience has fueled her work specifically related to her dissertation focused on the counseling experiences of first mothers where she was able to uncover that many expectant mothers did in fact feel they were part of "commodified" transactions surrounding adoption. In addition, the idea of openness in adoption and connections post-adop-



tion were also challenges for first mothers that may have been promised contact and were denied after the finalization and/or the lack of understanding and clarity of the level of openness that would be welcome/allowed by the adoptive parents.

**Dr. Dana Johnson**, adoptive parent and Professor of Pediatrics/member of the Divisions of Neonatology and Global Pediatrics at the University of Minnesota reminded us that exploring the life-long adoption journey ultimately begins with pre-adoption education and transformational conversations. He also shared his thoughts on the importance of formulating appropriate expectations prior to adoption in order to avoid the risk of family stress and placement disruption/dissolution as well as the fundamental challenges of doing this effectively. One very basic element related to this that Dana shared was that when adults begin thinking about having children whether by birth or adoption, part of the brain goes to sleep. The cognitive part of the brain where we can analyze things nicely is overwhelmed by the emotional part of the brain and we often revert to the narrative that everything is going to turn out ok. With this in mind and as an adoptive parent and professional, Dana believes that with our current knowledge of the effects of early deprivation, virtually every intercountry and foster care adoption should now be considered special needs and that we must deconstruct the idea that nothing more than love and food will be needed to support the needs of children with early childhood trauma.

**Dr. Gary Mallon** punctuated the discussion with his thoughts on the need to be provocative and not avoid the difficult and uncomfortable realities of adoption and foster care. He reminded us that the work is urgent given all that we know is needed to truly support children and families.

As a group we then tackled the consequences and dangers of failing to recognize the basic human rights of everyone in the extended family of adoption. We all agreed that adoption is in urgent need of a cultural shift; and that this shift requires us first and foremost to make decisions in adoption through the lens of human rights and to practice adoption in a way that primarily and fundamentally respects and upholds the humanity of all who are connected to this rich and complex experience.

Highlights of our conversation touched on many different facets related to human rights and the experiences of those closest to adoption and foster care. Elliotte reminded us that truly operating with a sense of humanity means that we must make quality post-placement counseling available to birth parents. **Ridghaus** shared his motivation for capturing the humanity in our shared experiences of adoption via his “Six Word Adoption Memoir (6WAM)” film project (see <https://vimeo.com/211568644> and <https://vimeo.com/161846105>). Dr. Johnson highlighted the very real factor of time in achieving permanent placement and how the length of time to get to placement can impact a child’s well being. Amnoni helped to raise a very frank conversation about supporting LGBTQ youth who may be tethered to the system and how critically important it is to provide resources and support to address these specific needs of young people today. Sue discussed the brutal lifelong impact of the legal process of terminating parental rights and suggested further exploration of models such as those found in Native American and indigenous communities where such drastic measures are not required in order to safely meet the best interests of a child.

Our conversation was brought to a close as we explored the need for more education at all levels in order to positively affect the future of adoption. We recognize that too often, general lack of knowledge surrounding the realities and societal misperceptions could be the greatest impediments to meaningful reforms in adoption and foster care today. While all of the panelists have different life experiences related to adoption and foster care, we all share many of the same beliefs and a passion for positive change on behalf of children and families. I left the conversation buoyed by the energy in the room, inspired by an audience of individuals committed to meeting the needs of families and children and grateful for Hal, Gary, Amnoni, Dana, Elliotte, Ridghaus, and Sue for being champions of change!

*Note: The full video of this panel discussion may be found here:*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B0GMg3vdc3k&t=13s>

## Panel Chair

**April Dinwoodie** is a nationally recognized thought leader on adoption and foster care. As former Chief Executive of the Donaldson Adoption Institute (DAI), April was committed to improving laws, policies and practices through sound research, education and advocacy. She is also a co-founder and Vice President of the Board of Fostering Change for Children, a progressive nonprofit that helps drive innovation in the child welfare system. Before her tenure at DAI, April created a specialized mentoring program called "Adoptionment," in which adults who were adopted and/or spent time in foster care serve as mentors to youth in care. As a trans-racially adopted person, April shares her experiences at workshops and conferences to help potential adoptive parents and professionals understand both the beauty and complexity of adopting children of another race.

## Panel Members

**Sue Badeau** is a nationally known speaker, writer and consultant with a heart for children and families. After receiving a degree in Early Childhood Education from Smith College, Sue worked for many years in child welfare and juvenile justice systems. She serves on several national boards and was recently president of the North American Council on Adoptable Children. Sue writes and speaks extensively to public & private agencies, courts, parent groups and churches. She has worked closely with the National Child Traumatic Stress

Network, A Second Chance, Inc., Justice for Families, All Children, All Families (a program of the Human Rights Campaign), the National Council for Juvenile and Family Court Judges, Casey Family Programs and was the Deputy Director of the Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care. Sue has developed curricula and provided training in all fifty states, several Tribal nations and internationally in North America and Africa.

**Elliotte Harrington** recently completed her Ph.D. in Counselor Education at Montclair State University in Montclair, NJ. She also holds a Master's degree in Community Counseling also from Montclair State University, and has counseled children, adolescents, and adults in individual, group, and family settings. Elliotte's areas of interest include pedagogy, family studies, and adoption – particularly the experiences of birth parents. Elliotte has been a speaker and presenter on the topic of adoption at various local, state, and national conferences. She is an adoptive mother through domestic, open adoption.

**Dana Johnson** is a Professor of Pediatrics and member of the Divisions of Neonatology and Global Pediatrics at the University of Minnesota where Dr. Johnson co-founded the International Adoption Program in 1986. His research interests include the effects of early institutionalization on growth and development and the outcomes of internationally adopted children. He has authored numerous scholarly works including co-editing *Adoption Medicine* published by the American Academy of Pediatrics. He has received the



*L to R: April Dinwoodie, Annoni Myers, Elliotte Harrington, Dana Johnson, Sue Badeau, Ridghaus, Gary Mallon*

Distinguished Service Award and the Lifetime Achievement Award from Joint Council for International Children's Services, the Friend of Children Award from the North American Council on Adoptable Children and the Harry Holt Award from Holt International. He serves on the Board of Directors of OneSky and SPOON Foundations, Both Ends Burning and National Council for Adoption. He is also a Senior Fellow at the National Center on Adoption and Permanency and serves on the Editorial Advisory Board of Adoptive Families and the Advisory Board of the Rudd Adoption Research Program. Dr. Johnson has an adopted son from India, two birth daughters and three stepdaughters.

**Gerald P. Mallon** is the Julia Lathrop Professor of Child Welfare and Associate Dean of Scholarship and Research Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College in New York City. For more than 40 years, he has been a child welfare practitioner, advocate, educator and researcher. He is the Senior Editor of the professional journal *Child Welfare* and the author and editor of more than twenty-three books. In his role as the Executive Director of the National Center for Child Welfare Excellence, Dr. Mallon has traveled to all 50 states, territories and tribes to improve outcomes for children, youth, and families and to build organizational capacity with child welfare systems. Dr. Mallon has lectured and worked extensively throughout the United States and internationally in Australia, Canada, Cuba, Indonesia, Ireland and the United Kingdom. He earned his doctorate in Social Welfare from the City University of New York at Hunter College, was awarded an MSW from Fordham University and graduated with his BSW from Dominican College. Dr. Mallon has also been a foster parent and is an adoptive parent.

**Amnoni Myers** is a dynamic public speaker and child welfare advocate. A native of Boston, MA, Amnoni is recently received her Masters of Public Administration degree with the National Urban Fellows Program Class of 2017. In this prestigious program, Amnoni was placed at the California Endowment located in Oakland, CA where she worked on The My Brother's Keeper Initiative for young boys and men of color. Amnoni previously worked with the U.S. Children's Bureau as a child welfare policy consultant as well as interning on both Capitol Hill, and The White House Domestic Policy Council helping influence policy. She graduated from Gordon College with a double major in Social Work and Sociology, and completed a Social Work and Peace and Conflict Studies Practicum in San Francisco. She has also traveled to South Africa to study Race, Class and Gender. Amnoni became a ward of the state at birth, and through her experiences in foster care she became committed to helping others break the cycle of poverty. Amnoni received the 2016 Re-envisioning Foster Care Champion Award from the Treehouse Foundation, in recognition of the contributions she has made to child welfare nationwide. She also was the recent recipient of the 2017 Ron Gonzalez Memorial Fund award where she was recognized by The National Urban Fellows Program for her dedication and demonstration of Leadership that promoted Gonzalez's core values as a change

agent in the world. Amnoni is a compassionate and driven individual dedicated to reshaping policies affecting vulnerable populations.

**Ridghaus** is a birth father, father, and a Late-Discovery Adoptee. After completing a JD, he completed an MA in English Rhetoric as well as an MA in Film. For several years, he split time between teaching college courses with working on cable TV shows for National Geographic, Food Network, and Bravo. Ridghaus now produces documentaries, including *Six Word Adoption Memoirs (6WAM + 6WAM 2017)* and teaches the next generation of filmmakers.