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Open hearts, open home

BY VALERIE MARINO, STAFF WRITER

Frolicking around the back yard of Heidi and Steve Wilson's Cary home, daughter Megan looks right at home — but that wasn't always the case.

Just seven months ago, 7-year-old Megan called Ethiopia home. She lived with her father in a small shanty with a dirt floor, cooked over an open pit and shared a bathroom — little more than a hole dug in the ground — with neighbors.

But Megan's father, disabled by a gunshot wound and unable to properly care for his daughter, decided that kind of life wasn't good enough when he placed her for adoption.

Half a world away, Steve and Heidi Wilson were looking to add to their family, which included Mark, 8, and three-year-old twins Erin and Abby.

The neediest children

"I've always wanted to adopt," said Heidi Wilson, who was also adopted, though as an infant.

With prominent figures such as Angelina Jolie and Madonna going to the far reaches of the Earth to bring home a child, international adoption has become a hot topic in American society. But it's not just the wealthy celebrities who want to make a difference in children's lives.

"When we were looking at adopting we were thinking, well where are the neediest children?" Wilson said. After some research, she and her husband narrowed their adoption search to Haiti and Ethiopia.

It was through an organization called Christian World Adoption that they found Megan, whose birth name is Mekdes.

"We started looking at the children and it was a very difficult process," Wilson said. "You look at these pictures of all these beautiful children. Sometimes there's three, four, five children in a family and the parents are dead. Some of them are dying of AIDS."

Wilson said that often she and her husband would inquire on a particular child but he or she was already chosen by another family.

"It was sort of one disappointment after another for a while," she said.

But then the Wilsons received notification that the couple adopting Megan had to withdraw. She was available for adoption once more.

"You just look at her little face and it's like, OK! She's gonna be our daughter," Wilson said.

'Shorter than a pregnancy'

Once the couple made their decision, the paperwork began.

"Ethiopia is not quite as involved as other countries," Wilson said, holding a stack of papers three inches deep.

The couple completed a home study and gave away every detail of their lives.

While the process was quite involved, it was also brief.

Megan Wilson,7, is embraced by her mother, Heidi, as they play in their in her Cary back yard.
Photo by Taylor Templeton for The Cary News

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Family Life

Keeping traditions: Smell something coming from the Wilsons' kitchen? That's injera, a traditional Ethiopian bread Heidi is learning to cook — also known as The Injera Saga. Aside from baking, Heidi has taken Megan to a local Ethiopian restaurant and has a tutor to help her keep some of her language and culture. "I want her to keep her language," Heidi said. "I want her to be able to go back someday and see her father and write him letters."

Naming rites: While the Wilsons gave Megan a more traditional first name, she did keep her birth name of Mekdes as a middle name. Megan's birth father's last name, Yohanes, was changed to Joanna for her second middle name. "I think she feels special having four names," Heidi laughed.

An American girl: Megan had no trouble fitting in when it came to American pop culture. The Little Mermaid is her favorite Disney princess, and she loves watching "Cinderella," "Shrek," and as much TV as her parents will let her get away with. Her favorite foods? Megan said it's a tie between pizza and we't, a spicy Ethiopian meat-and-red-pepper dish.

For more on Christian World Adoption, visit their Web site, www.cwa.org.

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The Wilsons signed their application in February 2006 and on June 9 the couple was represented in Ethiopian court to legalize the adoption. On July 16, Wilson arrived home with her new daughter.

"It's shorter than a pregnancy," she said.

Once everything is finalized in the United States, Megan will have a North Carolina birth certificate, U.S. citizenship and be recognized just like the Wilsons' biological children.

In all, Wilson estimated the adoption cost between $15,000 and $20,000, from application fees to travel expenses.

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The couple was helped out by a $5,000 adoption allowance from SAS Institute, where Steve works. Heidi Wilson said they will also be able to take advantage of a $10,000 tax credit.

"We're still in debt from the adoption, but it's getting manageable," she said.

Making progress

Now that Megan has been living with her new family for several months, she gets along swimmingly. Her English has progressed and she has adjusted well to American life — especially to things like Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy, Wilson joked. But the transition has taken time and a considerable amount of patience.

When Wilson arrived alone in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, the country's capital, to meet Megan and bring her home, the young girl was not very well prepared.

"She had a very difficult trip home," Wilson said. "She was not used to having to stay next to somebody and having to listen, so we had some temper tantrums and crying going on in the airports."

After their 17-hour journey from Addis Ababa to Cary, Megan got to meet the rest of her new family and settled in at home.

"First day was great," Wilson said. "Second day? The best way I can describe it is these kids when they come, they're scared, they're overwhelmed and they're grieving because they've lost everything. They've lost their culture, their family, their friends, their food. They've lost everything."

Many times, Megan would just cry, undoubtedly scared and confused. But Wilson said that after a couple of months she started to settle in and become more comfortable.

"One evening when she was feeling sad she just wrapped her little arms around my neck and cried," she said. "It was sad that she was crying but it was good that she was turning to me as a mom, and that made a lot of difference. From that point on she's made a lot of progress in our family."

She's also made a great deal of progress at school.

As a second-grader at Farmington Woods Elementary, Megan's English skills have improved greatly. She also likes using the computer to take tests at school.

"It seemed like we weren't getting anywhere English-wise for a long time, then all of a sudden after three or four months she just picked up speed," Wilson said. "She's reading, she can read simple books and she tries so hard. She has this desire to learn to read and to do what the other students in her class are doing."

One child at a time

While Wilson said that some people have questioned her family's decision to adopt a child of a different race, the couple hasn't let it faze them.

"Some people think it's upsetting we didn't adopt from the United States. Other people don't understand why in the world we would want a black child. And it's shocking to me that people even think these things, but they do," she said. "[Megan] might not be genetically related to us or look like us, but she is our daughter."

And Wilson said she hasn't forgotten about the rest of the children in Ethiopia and other countries waiting for a home.

"There are children and people in this world in desperate need," she said. "We can make a difference one child at a time. I can't go save Ethiopia, but I can help one child."

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