

A LETTER YOU SHOULD READ

By Steven M. Kirsh*

In response to a recent news story which appeared after a very unfortunate incident involving a child and his parents, the following letter was written by Mia Hinkle to the newspaper which carried the story. Take just a minute to read her letter!

Media Shapes Public's Perception of Adoption

Is the media a reflection of views, or does the media shape the views of citizens? This is an age old question, and one which is colored with shades of gray. I would like to suggest, however, that the media should try to be more sensitive when reporting stories involving persons who have joined their families by adoption. A recent example is the October incident involving an Indianapolis adolescent who killed his parents over a curfew dispute. To headline this story by making reference to the means by which he joined his family is not only ludicrous, it's down right harmful!

Harmful to whom, you ask? This irresponsible and sensational style of reporting is harmful to all individuals touched by adoption; adoptive parents, birth parents, adopted children, and the family and friends of the above. The public needs to know that virtually all adoptions are successful, and that only a minuscule few end in some kind of tragedy or disruption. Only when you compare that number to the total number of children from so-called "normal" families who become involved in some kind of crime or tragedy, are you able to see the big picture.

The biggest losers, however, from this type of "from the hip" journalism, are the children who are available for adoption. November is National Adoption Month, and there will be some media attention (though not nearly enough) to this noble cause. TV and newspaper reporters will use their, "We're so concerned and you should be too" tones, as they describe children who, through no fault of their own, do not have permanent homes. But the damage is perpetually done throughout the rest of the year each time some arm chair psychiatrist/journalist decides to arbitrarily tie the adoption issue to a crime, and some sensationalist editor lets it pass his editors desk.

If adoption is such a relevant factor, I wonder why we didn't read the headlines after Gerald Ford assumed the Presidency of the United States, "Adoptee Gerald Ford Reaches Highest Office in the Land." Why didn't the sportscasters introduce Adoptee Jim Palmer when

* Steven M. Kirsh and Joel D. Kirsh are attorneys who practice exclusively in the area of private adoption. They practice together as Kirsh & Kirsh, P. C., throughout the State of Indiana, and as counsel in adoptions between the states. Steven was graduated from Dartmouth College, *magna cum laude*, with high distinction in history, and from the Indiana University School of Law with honors. He served as President of the American Academy of Adoption Attorneys in 1992-1993. In May, 1993, he participated in the negotiation of The Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption as part of the official United States delegation. Steven has also testified before the Indiana General Assembly on proposed changes to the Indiana adoption laws. Steven and Joel are frequent lecturers and spokespersons about adoption issues. Inquiries about adoption and further information or suggestions for additional topics to be included in "Adoption Briefs" should be directed to Steven or Joel at 2930 E. 96th Street, Indianapolis, Indiana 46240 or skirsh@kirsh.com. Comments are welcome in writing or to (317) 575-5555 or fax (317) 575-5631. See also www.kirsh.com.

giving the starting line up for the Baltimore Orioles. How about “Adoptee Dave Thomas opens a new Wendy’s Restaurant in your town.”

My point is, that the media reports adoption as a relevant factor only when the story is negative, thereby shaping and perpetuating the public’s view of adoption built families as risky and second best. And each time a story like the October tragedy airs, adoptive parents have to sit down and explain to their kids that being adopted doesn’t cause that kind of behavior. Each time a birth mother reads the same story, she doubts her decision to make an adoptive plan for her baby years ago, and wonders if in some remote way she isn’t somehow responsible.

Meanwhile babies and children wait in foster care for the permanent homes they deserve, but cannot have. Though there are various reasons for our country’s foster care overload, the media needs to take responsibility for perpetually dropping subtle (and not so subtle) messages to the public, that adoption is always second best, and sometimes dangerous.

Please think twice next time a story breaks involving a potential adoption angle. Think about the children that will be harmed or protected by the choices you make in reporting the story.

Mia Hinkle
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Mia Hinkle is an adoptive parent who lives with her husband and son in the Indianapolis area. Mrs. Hinkle is not an adoption professional, but simply desires to make a difference by helping to enlighten and sensitize the public to adoption issues.