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Global Search for Family Has Happy Ending

By Virginia Anderson

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Thomas Brooks grew up in a Pittsburgh ghetto with an adoptive single mother but ended up with a family of hundreds on three continents.

Now a father of two with an MBA, an author, businessman and advocate for children in foster care, Brooks credits his mother and adoption for giving him a loving home and saving him from the challenges of being a foster child.

"My mother did a very good job," said Brooks, who is in town promoting not only a recent book, *A Wealth of Family: An Adopted Son's International Quest for Heritage, Reunion and Enrichment*, but also speaking up for children in foster care as part of National Adoption Awareness Month.

"Even the poverty drove me to work hard. I responded by working my tail off. It gave me the drive to do what I've done."

Brooks' adoptive parents were divorced when he was a toddler, so his mother Joan raised Brooks, now 39, alone.

He did her proud. Brooks was high school valedictorian and a scholarship recipient at the University of Pittsburgh. He received his MBA from the University of Maryland.

And though an only child growing up, Brooks now has more family than he can count.

As a young man, Brooks wanted to find his birth family. His biological mother was in England, and his biological father was in Kenya. As a result of his search for his family, he was united with his mother and siblings in London and his father and an extended clan in the Kenyan village from which his father hailed.

His recent book, *A Wealth of Family*, chronicles his experience from childhood in America to finding his birth parents.

He hopes the richness and joy of his experiences might help others understand the importance of adopting foster children, particularly those who are multi-racial, as he is, African American, Hispanic, or those with special needs.

We talked to Brooks, who is in the process of adopting a child, about his experience growing up as an adopted child, finding his birth parents and his efforts to help the nation's 114,000 children in foster care.



Q: Your birth parents were on two different continents. How in the world did you find them?

A: My mother had left a note in the [adoption] file that if I ever wanted to find her, that she would be willing. The adoption agency actually helped to facilitate the reunion with my biological mother, who was living in London by then. Once I found her, she told me the name of my biological father from Kenya. So I thought, OK, I could just go to Kenya. On my first trip, I found some uncles and my half-sister, but my biological father was out of the country. So I had to go back to meet him.

Q: And what was that like, when you met him for the first time?

A: I landed at the Nairobi airport at 3:30 in the morning, and there were 50 or 60 people waiting there for me. I was euphoric. They are very inclusive. They had not even known about me, so to hear about the existence of me made them very happy. They had two cakes for me there. One said "Thomas, we love you," and the other said "Welcome Home." Subsequently, on my third trip to Kenya, we went to my family's original village and 500 people were waiting for me. It was amazing to feel that connected. They would look at me as a white person but they also looked at me as someone they totally accepted. It was wonderful.

Q: You obviously have very strong feelings about adoption of foster children, based on your positive experience. What would you like to share with people who might be considering adopting a foster child?

A: I just want to make more people aware of the need for adoption, and that they can do it. People often assume they can't do it, that they don't have enough money, that they don't own a home or whatever. My mother and I struggled financially, but I think I turned out to be a pretty OK kid. My message is that you don't have to be a celebrity, under 40, rich or a home owner. If they have the love and willingness in their hearts, I hope they would consider adopting one of the 114,000 children in foster care.

Thomas Brooks will speak at 12:30 p.m. today at Georgia State University's Urban Life Building. He also appears at 7 p.m. Nov. 10 at The Grape, 999 Peachtree St., Atlanta. For more information on adopting foster children: www.nacac.org