

OPERATION



Operation Reunite Sponsors Reunion for 35th anniversary of Operation Babylift
ATTENDEES at Vietnamese Heritage Camp in 2009, include, from left, Kevin Maes, Trista Goldberg, Jared Rehberg, Ethan Brady and Tricia Houston. All were panelists for second generation families who adopted Vietnamese children.

In 2000, while sitting in her Redondo Beach, Calif., home, Trista Goldberg, a 30-year-old Vietnamese adoptee had an awakening. It was time to stop wondering about her past. She and her biological brother Jeff decided to search for their birth family. Armed with nothing more than an adoption folder given to her by her adoptive mother, the Internet, and a fierce determination, she began her journey.

“I would cry just holding that file. It took me several years to actually open up the file and read what was in it,” she remembers. And less

than a year later, in 2001, thanks to some very helpful people, good luck, and old fashioned detective work, Goldberg was reunited with her family for the first time in 28 years.

Three years later, Goldberg founded Operation Reunite, a nonprofit 501(c3) organization, to provide information, support and guidance to Vietnamese adoptees. And now, in April 2010, Operation Reunite has announced a Vietnam reunion tour to commemorate the 35th anniversary of the American sponsored Operation Babylift and the End of the Vietnam/American Conflict. The emotional voyage will bring together a diverse group of adult

Vietnamese adoptees from around the globe to visit their homeland, discover their birth culture, many for the first time, and to launch a DNA project called Operation DNA.

“Operation Reunite is not just an organization assisting adoptees with finding their families,” Goldberg says. “We seek to create an awareness and understanding of the whole process, from finding connections with peers, and learning to speak the language, to going to Vietnam with a group that can support and relate to your experiences. This is an immersive experience and this trip is the culmination of years of work.”

REUNITE

By Dan Goldberg



CELEBRATING “The Babylift” premiere in Philadelphia is Trista Goldberg with her children Evan and Samantha.

Operation Reunite is one of a select few emerging organizations that is dedicated to bringing about awareness of this special community of adoptees, who have now reached maturity. The organization offers a broad range of services including: providing support and understanding to adoptees as they explore their history and culture, assisting adoptees with their searches for surviving biological relatives, and offering a networking platform for adoptees to reunite with their orphaned cohorts. By successfully leveraging social networks like Facebook.com, Operationreunite.com, blogs and even weekly

conference calls, the organization has rapidly grown and currently includes thousands of Web site visitors worldwide.

“This wouldn’t have been possible 10 years ago,” Goldberg says. “When I started Operation Reunite, there was nothing to deal with the emotions of a search and to provide the support needed. We’ve created a support group within our peer group.”

While starting the organization, Goldberg was introduced to another Vietnamese adoptee, Tricia Houston in California.

“I didn’t know the personal history of myself,” Houston said.

Houston, now 35, was on the original Operation Baby Lift in 1975. Throughout the Vietnam War, thousands of orphans were sent to Western nations for adoption and in April 1975, approximately 2,000 more Vietnamese orphans, mostly babies, were airlifted in a remarkable military and humanitarian effort known as Operation Babylift. Thirty-five years later, these adoptees are now in their prime and are actively seeking to reconnect with one another. The adoptees will visit the location of the original C5A plane crash — the first plane to depart Saigon in 1975. The plane, carrying nearly 200 adoptees, lost control in a tragic crash and more than half of the passengers died. Remarkably, a number of the adoptees who survived the crash will attend the reunion and meet with the Operation Reunite group.

The trip also provides an opportunity to give back to the greater community of Vietnamese orphans still in Vietnam through visits, volunteering, and interaction with orphanages and by showing support to Amerasians who still reside in Vietnam to this day. As a community raised in a pioneering generation of international adoption, it is a difficult challenge to bridge geographic and cultural divides while reconnecting with one another and with Vietnam. The reunion in Vietnam and the sharing of experiences with fellow adoptees will undoubtedly benefit all those who desire a connection with the past and provide a greater understanding of where their personal journey first began.

“I am looking forward to hearing, seeing, smelling and touching my homeland for the first time,” Houston says.

Houston has searched for connections her whole life. Recently, through the Operation Reunite network, she has discovered connec-

tions among the first generation Vietnamese adoptees.

“These are the human connections with adoptees who know what it is like to be a trans-racial and transnational adoptee,” Houston reflects. “These connections have become lifelong friendships. It is more than building friendships, it is establishing a family.”

The trip’s itinerary includes visits to local schools — where the group has scheduled soccer games against Vietnamese students, culture and language workshops, and visits to partner orphanages. As a “thank you” to participants, Operation Reunite and a local NGO (Non-government Organization) have worked with several Vietnamese orphanages to put together a farewell show where orphans will sing and dance to Abba’s “I Have a Dream.”

Since being adopted has no expiration date, Operation Reunite has as its goal the ongoing development and support of its community and hopes that the successful completion of the April 2010 Reunion will pave the way for many future reunions and interpersonal connections. Supporting and facilitating adoptee searches for family in Vietnam is another ambitious goal of the organization. A comprehensive Vietnamese Adoptee database along with DNA testing and record keeping is already in the works in partnership with Family Tree DNA. Through generous donations and the hard work of its members, Operation Reunite believes its “Operation DNA” project will lay the groundwork for other adoptee communities to build similar databases for future generations. The organization is confident the database can help change the often secretive way society views the adoption process and help adoptees and their families to explore these issues with openness and support.

The database will support a Web site where data entry forms can be created and adoptees can enter their own information directly into the system as opposed to having to e-mail it to an administrator to enter manually. In addition to using this database for searching, DNA matching and the other ideas, one of the first projects is a geographic data visualiza-



ADOPTÉES gather together after the Operation Reunite premiere in Philadelphia last October.

tion that plots all Vietnamese adoptees on a global map so that members of the community can see exactly where the Diaspora has settled over the years, either by way of adoption or even personal migration.

“The adoption community will no longer wonder ‘Who am I? Where do I come from? Who were my parents? Do I have biological siblings?’ Biological families will have ways to connect if the time is right for everyone,” Goldberg says.

It took Goldberg nearly 25 years to start her search. For most adoptees the challenge is when to begin. But until recently, having the desire to search was not always enough. There was simply a dearth of information and even more importantly, a lack of support and caring. Making the decision to explore one’s past and discover one’s roots has never been an easy one for adoptees, but organizations like Operation Reunite are certainly easing the process.

Operation Reunite can be found online at www.operationreunite.org. Trista Goldberg can be reached at P.O. Box 116, Linwood, NJ,

08221. Operation Reunite can also be followed on Facebook.com and Twitter.

Trista Goldberg is the founder of Operation Reunite, a non-profit organization established in 2003 to help Vietnamese adoptees learn about their heritage, deal with adoption related issues, and search for their birth families. Trista was born Nguyen Thi Thu in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam in November, 1970. Thu and her brother, Nguyen Bic, were relinquished by their mother, Nguyen Thi Thanh, during the war to protect them. Thu was adopted by an American family living outside Philadelphia, Pa., while Bic (later named Jeff) was raised by another part of the same family. Thu was named Trista Joy Kalan and grew up with a brother and sister, Trevor and Tracee. In January 2001, Trista set out to find her birth mother and siblings. With little to go on, she leveraged contacts, her foster parents, the Internet and numerous other sources. In April 2001, nearly 28 years after their separation, Trista and Jeff were happily reunited with their mother, sisters Cuc and Lan, and brothers Que and Son. Trista currently resides in New Jersey with her husband of 10 years, Dan Goldberg, and their children, Evan and Samantha.