

HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS

The magic of the holidays for two young north Mississippians is a gift they didn't even know existed a year ago.
by Melanie Crownover



◀ Michael and Karyn Brown with their adopted son Diwas, left. Lauren Steward and Channing with her adopted daughter, right.

Christmas 2011 promises to be more joyful than last year for Diwas Brown of Starkville and Channing Steward of Tupelo.

Last year, the two Nepalese orphans spent Christmas Eve like every other night – Channing sleeping diaperless in a crib-filled room, and Diwas clad in hand-me-down clothes on the floor of a crowded, unheated orphanage.

Meanwhile, in America, inquiries and documents were being finalized for two families praying for Christmas miracles.

STUCK IN THE PIPELINE

Lauren Kitchens Steward and Michael and Karyn Brown met up with their adoption coordinator in July 2010 for their first flight to Nepal with one purpose: to bring their children home. After multiple layovers, the prospective parents got to meet their children for the first time before heading to the U.S. Embassy to finalize paperwork for their visas. The process usually meant at least a two-week stay in country, but not for them.

As the families had prepped to cross continents and oceans to retrieve their

promised children, U.S. threats to shut down international adoptions in Nepal had brought the system to a halt.

“The first question they asked us at the embassy was what we were doing there,” Karyn Brown said. “Then they said we would most likely never see our children, and we should just start over and find another country to adopt from because this adoption probably would never happen.”

It was a devastating response after two emotional years of background checks, red tape and almost \$25,000 in fees and expenses to become parents. Steward and the Browns were just two of 80 families confirmed for adoption – 11 were already mid-flight or in Nepal to pick up children when the process shut down – caught in the middle of a political battle over whether, due to alleged ministry document fraud, some Nepalese adoptees were legitimate orphans. Officials deemed unsettled adoption cases “caught in the pipeline” until further investigation. Eighteen of the 80 pipeline clients relented to governmental pressure and headed elsewhere to find a child.

But both of these families resolved to stay and fight.

CHANNING

▶ Lauren Steward and baby Channing with Bobby, their adoption liason in Nepal who also runs New Beginnings orphanage there, and Indra, their lawyer.



▶ Pamela Russell, who has been like a mother to Steward, traveled with her to Nepal to help her bring her daughter home.

▶ Channing makes her first stage appearance with her mother and grandfather, W.L. Kitchens.



▶ Months after the adoption process began, Channing arrives home with mother Lauren Steward and friend Pamela Russell.



▶ The Steward family with New Beginning's Adoption Services Director Marcus Dav-empont on Channing's official adoption day, Oct. 19.



▼ Since starting the adoption process, Lauren Steward has married and become a stepmother. Pictured are Olivia, Miller, William, husband Robin, Channing and Lauren Steward with Steward's father, W.L. Kitchens.



PORTRAITS PHOTOGRAPHED BY MIKE WEEKS; FAMILY PHOTOGRAPHS CONTRIBUTED BY LAUREN KITCHENS STEWARD

LAUREN STEWARD

For Steward, the call to adopt began long ago.

“My parents were married 11 years and didn’t think they could have children. They were lined up to get an adopted child in three months when they found out about me,” she said. “I begged for siblings for years and hated being an only child, so I knew I wanted lots of children. I guess hearing them talk about almost adopting all those years made me want to early on.”

Steward’s mother, Ruth, died in 2005, and it made Steward think more about adoption, despite being unwed and traveling back and forth from her home in California, to help her dad, W.L. Kitchens. Steward, a former American Family Radio personality, Nashville morning show host and Christian motivational speaker, decided the time was right when family friend “Mama Jean” Pettis put her in touch with New Beginnings President Tom Velie in 2008.

“He told me he thought I’d be perfect for adoption in Nepal because they favored single women... I

was one of the first to sign up for their new adoption program,” she said.

The Nepalese government matched Steward with a child from its list of adoptable children, and she received a picture and background file on Channing in July 2010. The 1-year-old girl had been found abandoned under a bridge with pneumonia that required a transfusion-filled hospital stay before she was brought to the orphanage.

Steward went to the Los Angeles airport days later promising to bring her dad his first grandchild in a couple of weeks. She didn’t hear about the brewing troubles in Nepal until her layover in Bangkok.

And after the first standoffish meeting with her baby girl the next morning, those rumblings were the last thing on Steward’s mind.

MEET THE BROWNS

Mississippi State University professors Mike and Karyn Brown had been trying to conceive for 14 years when they started considering adoption in 2008.

Cold calls to local agencies led Karyn to New Beginnings, who won her over after an initial 45-minute question-and-answer session. In June 2010, the Browns got their first look at 3-year-old Diwas’ picture and a referral packet asking whether they accepted adoption of the boy brought to an orphanage by police five days after he was abandoned at birth.

After accepting, the couple quickly got their response invitation from the government approving travel.

Karyn was at Walmart the day before their flight with a cart full of baby goods when Mike called and told her to come home. She found him on the phone with news of the shut down and little instruction from the government on their trip except assurance that they’d be treated “the same as the other families prior to.”

They shouldered their doubts and boarded the plane. Their nervous energy dissipated at the orphanage.

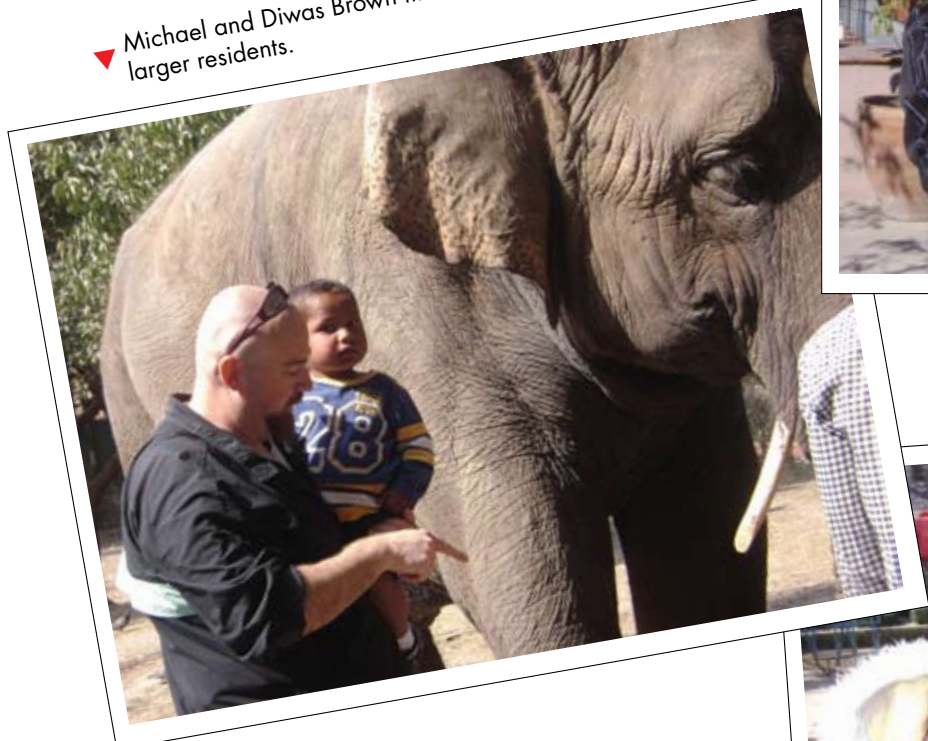
“Visiting our child was the most wonderful thing

DIWAS

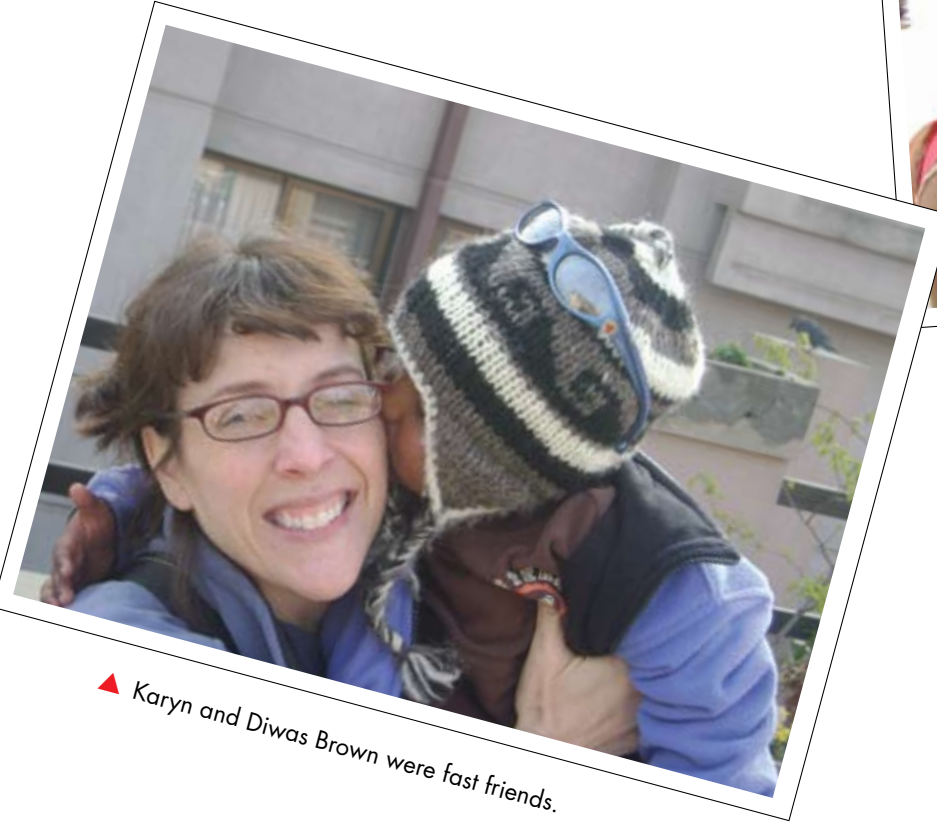
▼ Karyn and Diwas Brown got time to bond and to explore Nepal as they awaited finalization of the adoption.



▼ Michael and Diwas Brown meet some of Nepal's larger residents.



▼ Karyn and Diwas Brown with Diwas' Nepalese caretaker.



▲ Karyn and Diwas Brown were fast friends.



▲ The Brown family prepares for the trip home.

▼ Karyn, Diwas and Michael Brown are ready to celebrate their first Christmas together as a family.

PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHED BY MIKE WEEKS; FAMILY PHOTOGRAPHS CONTRIBUTED BY MICHAEL BROWN



ever. He was shy at first, but he sat in our laps, and we bonded immediately. It just confirmed he was the child we were meant to be with,” Karyn said. “Then we went straight to the embassy from there, so it was going from one extreme high to the opposite.”

SUPPORT STRUCTURE

The two families spent the next five weeks in Nepal fighting for their children, and Adoption Services Director Marcus Davenport was literally right beside them.

Davenport had served as their liaison and confidant from the beginning, and although overseas accompaniment isn't company protocol for every adoption, Davenport ensured he was onboard to oversee New Beginnings' first two independent international adoptions from Nepal.

They were far from the first cases the Tupelo-based Christian agency had handled, though. New Beginnings placed 500 children in permanent homes all over the country through their domestic program since they opened in 1988.

The agency's Hague-accredited international service started in 2008 and includes countries like Haiti, Poland and the Ukraine as well as a new partner program to China and Russia.

The Nepal shut down caught New Beginnings off guard, but it wasn't the first time they'd seen one. Similar situations developed in countries like Guatemala and Cambodia while adoptions were pending,

Twenty New Beginnings client families were signed up for the Nepal program, but only four were pipelined because of approved referrals. All four were from north Mississippi and got their children in the end.

“We tell all our families up front we can't guarantee an international adoption because you never know what a country may do,” Davenport said. “It really kind of worked out that I was there to keep things in perspective and be the neutral person helping plan and keep everyone calm while we researched the best next step.”

Things got more complicated when the cases were turned over to the “mothership” homeland security office in New Delhi for further investigation after week five.

Davenport headed back home with the families and encouraged them to hire counsel.

CONCERNED EFFORTS

The five-week brawl in Nepal was intense for the families. Steward lit up Facebook and Skype for U.S. support and contacted every politically connected person she knew to get the government involved. By the time she was done, U.S. Sen. Roger Wicker and U.S. Rep. Travis Childers added influence to the push, and she unexpectedly reconnected with an acquaintance from high school, Robin Steward, who'd become integral support.

The Browns finally opened up online to the MSU community. A letter and e-mail chain kept senators

and representatives in several states motivated to help. At one point the couple's private blog on the adoption drew 2,400 hits from 16 different countries.

“We had students and colleagues contacting their church and friends and family back home for support. It was amazing how many people we had writing letters and praying for us that we didn't even know,” Brown said.

Between the midnight calls back home to spur action over a 13-hour time difference, the families made daily visits to their respective children.

When the trio got back to the U.S., the Browns hired Irene Stessas of Atlanta, an acclaimed immigration adoption attorney employed by several of the pipeline families, along with a Nepalese private investigator to uncover evidence that Diwas was truly an orphan. By New Year's Eve, their findings were in.

Steward got a Nepalese lawyer associated with New Beginnings to handle her case. Her paperwork went out in February, and she had an e-mail from the embassy in Nepal by March inviting her back to get her daughter.

HOME COMING

The Browns brought Diwas home to Starkville Feb. 12. Two months later they threw a party for his fourth birthday attended by the friends and family whose fundraising helped bring him home.

Steward came home with “Cha-Cha” in late March, packed up the remains from her sold house in Los Angeles and headed to Mississippi with Robin Steward, who'd been by her side since visiting her in California after she returned to the states. The couple became engaged at a homecoming party thrown by old friends in June and married in August. So when Channing's adoption became official in October, she also got a new father.

“That's the way it had to be,” Robin Steward said, noting she's just like one of his three biological children. “When you're around her you can't imagine one day without her. People say we're such a blessing to her, but she's the blessing to us.”

Both children blossomed in their new environments. Diwas loves playing with the children at his playschool and is speaking in English sentences now. His personality meshes so well with the Browns that his teacher thought they picked him for adoption themselves. Davenport attended his baptism and signed on as his godfather.

“Professional boundaries are usually our norm, but you can't help but get close to the family in this

FROM: NEPAL
TO: MISSISSIPPI



PHOTOGRAPHS CONTRIBUTED BY LAUREN KITCHENS STEWARD



NEPAL AT A GLANCE

- The approximate distance from Tupelo to Kathmandu, Nepal, is 8,150 miles.
- Located in the Himalayas, Nepal is home to eight of the world's 10 tallest mountains, including Mount Everest.
- The population of Nepal is 30 million.
- About 650,000 child orphans live in Nepal, according to UNICEF statistics.
- Since 1999, 409 Nepalese children have been adopted to the United States, according to the U.S. Department of State.

kind of situation,” Davenport said. “They’re the reason I’d do it all over again if I had to because I know these kids are where they belong.”

Channing follows 8-year-old brother William around like his shadow, cracks up 16-year-old brother Miller, and has girly days with 20-year-old sister Olivia when she’s home from college. She and her “Papoo,” W.L., are two peas in a pod, Lauren Steward said.

The prospect of a holiday filled with presents and family fills the days.

“We’re so excited to have a normal family Christmas with him that it [was] almost too hard to wait until Thanksgiving to put up the tree,” Michael Brown said. “It’s a 180-degree change from knowing we had a child we couldn’t be with last year, and we’re so thankful. Everyday is Christmas with him.”

While Cha-Cha thinks the perfect Christmas gift is a play kitchen, and Diwas is sure it’s a ride on a toy motorcycle, the new parents know it’s the joy of seeing the excitement build for Christmas morning.

They are excited to share family traditions and create new ones together – like filling Karyn’s memory-laced advent calendar with Diwas’ favorite chocolates and taking Cha-Cha to the mall to see Santa and ride the carousel.

For both families, it’s been a year of firsts that don’t require shiny, red bows to recognize them as gifts.