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Tom and Melissa Conway, parishioners of Notre Dame of Bethlehem, share a joyful moment with 19-month-old son Fikire, who they adopted from Ethiopia in October 2008 through Catholic Charities, Diocese of Allentown. (Photo courtesy Melissa Conway)

Adoption with Catholic Charities: 'We made the right choice'

By TAMI A. QUIGLEY  
Staff writer

Fikire Conway was born across the Atlantic from Tom and Melissa Conway of Bethlehem, but is as close in heart to his parents as if he were born to them naturally.

The Conway family has grown in number and in love with the help of Catholic Charities, Diocese of Allentown, as the Conways adopted their 19-month-old son Fikire from Ethiopia in October 2008 through the diocesan agency.

"We never had children, and always wanted children. We decided to adopt a baby – it was kind of out of the blue," Melissa Conway explained in a recent interview.

Parishioners of Notre Dame of Bethlehem, Tom Conway, 48, works for UPS, and Melissa Conway, 43, is a District Manger for the Disneystore.

Once the couple had made the decision, Melissa Conway made many phone calls to various adoption agencies seeking information. Why choose Catholic Charities?

"We're Catholics, so that appealed to me," Conway explained. "But Catholic Charities made me feel most comfortable; the people there were easy to talk to. As soon as I talked to the caseworker, I knew she was the one," she recalled.

Conway especially appreciated that she could phone Catholic Charities anytime, noting, "I had a lot of questions!"

The caseworker, Conway said, "was not judgmental and easy to talk to. She was a terrific partner in the process.

"She had a great way about her. They were very accommodating to us."

The most challenging part of the adoption process for the couple was the length of time it took – close to two years from start to finish.

"The time never seemed to go fast enough at the time, and now I think 'where does the time go?'" Conway said.

The amount of paperwork required was also challenging. "It seemed every weekend we had more paperwork to fill out," Conway said.

She noted, for example, the couple had to each write an autobiography of themselves for the Home Study. But even that had an upside. "We got to know each other better even after being married more than 15 years. There's so much they want to know."

Conway said the most wonderful part of the adoption process was, of course, "the end result," but also traveling to Ethiopia to bring their new son home.

"We had a choice to pay for an escort or travel there," Conway said. "There was never any question we would go. We thought we had to see where Fikire was born and understand his culture."

Though she never wavered on the decision to fly to Ethiopia, Conway acknowledged she is not at all fond of flying, though she boards a plane once a quarter to travel to the Disneystore's home office in California. But Fikire was more than worth the trip.

Conway explained she and her husband first chose Ethiopia because the wait was shorter.

"But we came to find out how they nurture their children in Ethiopia – no matter whose child it is, they nurture them," Conway enthused. "So even though Fikire was in an orphanage, he had a lot of love, attention, kisses and hugs."

Reflecting on thoughts she'd share with families considering adoption, Conway said, "From day one when we met Fikire we knew we made the right choice."

Conway lauded adoption as a wonderful alternative, underscoring the joy it brings to be able to "give a child in life a chance to have a wonderful home and family, and opportunities they may not otherwise have."

Conway said faith did not play a big role in the beginning of the process, but certainly did by its conclusion.

"We were Catholics, but didn't always go," she recalled. "Now it's an important part of our lives. We want to see this child is raised in that environment and has a strong faith."

"During the challenging times I prayed all the time, and I found a lot of comfort in that," Conway shared.

"From the moment we met Fikire he took to us. He's extremely well-adjusted and fit into his new family immediately," Conway said, adding his extended family on both she and her husband's sides have embraced Fikire as well.

"He's a very funny, active little boy who is curious about everything," Conway said with a laugh. "He's amazing."

As Conway spoke the family was gearing up for a vacation to begin the first weekend in June. "It will be Fikire's first time going to the beach. We'll see how he likes it!"

As Father's Day approaches, Tom Conway reflected, "Becoming a father to Fikire has become a life-changing experience. He is a fantastic boy who is always trying to comprehend new things. He has endless energy and I never get tired of chasing after him.

"To Fikire, everything is a new experience. Our son Fikire, which means 'my love' in Ethiopia, has brought a lot of joy and love to our family. We cannot wait to see what tomorrow brings!"

Explaining the international adoption process, Teresa Dakuginow, Catholic Charities' Program Administrator of Children's Services, said Catholic Charities completes the Home Study for the family. The family then works with a "Placing Agency" on the actual placement of the child.

After the child is placed with the family, Catholic Charities completes the Post-Placement Services. The placement of the child is completed by other agencies with whom Catholic Charities enters into a Cooperative Agreement.

Currently Catholic Charities has two existing Cooperative Agreements. One is with Children's Home Society and Family Services, located in Minnesota. It offers

placement from China, Taiwan, Nepal, Thailand, India, Russia, Uzbekistan, Ukraine, Ethiopia, Mexico, Ecuador, Honduras, Columbia and Peru.

The other agency is Family and Children's Agency, Inc., located in Connecticut. It offers placement from China, Korea and Taiwan.

"Additionally, we are able to enter into a Cooperative Agreement with any placing agency that holds Hague Accreditation and that is willing to enter into an agreement with us, on a case-by-case basis. This may then expand the country choices for any interested families," Dakuginow said.

For more information, call Dakuginow at Catholic Charities' Lehigh-Northampton County Office, Allentown, (610) 435-1541.

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