THE BARKER FOUNDATION since 1945

Connections

SPRING 2012

18th Annual Conference to Explore "Extraordinary" Experience of Adoptive Parenting

Melissa Fay Greene

"...this messy, exhausting, life-changing process..."

That's the phrase the *New York Times* used to characterize adoptive parenting in its review of *No Biking in the House Without a Helmet* by Barker Conference keynoter and multiple-award-winning author Melissa Fay Greene. The memoir, named a Best Audio Book of 2011, describes the difficult, joyful, and moving experience of Greene and her husband as they adopted five older children from overseas orphanages – while also launching four "by-birth" children.

The Barker Foundation's 18th Annual Conference will honor and explore multiple angles of that messy, exhausting, and life-changing process in *The Ordinary, Extraordinary Experience of Adoptive Parenting* on Saturday, April 28, at the University of Maryland Shady Grove Conference Center in Rockville, Maryland. In addition to two-time National Book Award nominee Greene, the conference features a return appearance by Rhonda Roorda, co-author of three books on transracial adoption, whose presentation at the 2010 conference was received with great enthusiasm. "The breadth of perspective contained in this conference is impressive," said Barker Executive Director Marilyn Regier. "The president of the Joint Council on International Children's Concerns, Tom DeFilipo, will take a realistic look at international adoption, and Susan Branco Alvarado will be presenting a session specially designed for therapists interested in the complexities of adoption issues."

Rhonda Roorda

Tom DeFilipo

The all-day gathering will also offer breakout sessions targeted at prospective adopters, at parents adopting older children, and at parents in all stages of the "ordinary, extraordinary experience," from the early years through adolescence and launching. A plenary panel of adopted persons and birth parents will wind up the day with their own perspective on adoptive parents and adoptive parenting.

"Every Barker conference for the past 17 years has been, in one form or another, about adoptive parenting – even when the theme centered on adopted persons or birth parents," conceded conference coordinator Chris Intagliata. "This year, though, we decided to focus squarely on the profound experience that is shared by so many in the Barker community. I think of us as 'the home study graduates.' We understand each other, and we need one day a year to come together to learn, to laugh – and okay, maybe to cry a little, too."

The conference title reflects the two-fold nature of adoptive parenting: the rewards and challenges that are shared by all parents, and the aspects that are unique to adoption. "The differences are real," explains Regier. "From the beginning, adoptive parents realize that their joy comes even as another is experiencing loss; they often have to explain complex information to their child, are frequently at a loss when the pediatrician asks medical history questions, and sometimes need to grapple with their own feelings when a child reaches out to his or her family or country of origin."

For all these reasons, Barker's annual conferences are a cornerstone of its commitment to lifelong adoption education and support. As one conference attendee wrote on last year's evaluation form:

"Doing the right thing as an adoptive parent can be anxiety-provoking and full of questions (and also full of *good* stuff), so being in a safe place to hear and talk about it and be immersed in it is really helpful."

The Barker website offers on-line registration at www.barkerfoundation.org. Or call 301-664-9664 for a brochure and registration form. ■

FROM THE *Executive Director*

The term "strategic planning" has a tendency to induce somnolence in some individuals. Eyes glaze over, with yawns barely stifled. Some characterize the process as boring, others as a useless exercise which produces a plan that sits in a binder on a shelf, often obsolete before it meets the light of day.

Whatever negative connotations adhere to the term "strategic planning," Barker has been fortunate to have had quite the opposite experience. Negativity was nowhere in evidence at the recent Barker strategic planning retreat described elsewhere in this issue of *Connections*, nor at the two sessions held at Barker parents' homes, nor at Board or staff meetings with the COMPASS team who is leading us. Excitement, energy, creativity abounds. Everyone seems to understand that a re-examination of our goals, programs, and general direction is necessary.

Much has changed since our last strategic plan was formulated in 2000, several years before I joined the Barker staff. Our organization must adjust to a number of realities, including a tough economy, changing world views toward adoption, differing staff talents, new research that informs our clinical practice, emerging populations with compelling needs (such as the older children in foster care), new technology which must be harnessed in the service of our mission, and much more. Change is everywhere; the adoption landscape is shifting rapidly, requiring Barker to stay nimble and to make course corrections as needed.

You probably intuit where I am headed, of course, which is that despite the many changes in the world of adoption, our mission remains unchanged, namely, to secure a permanent loving home for every child whose life we can possibly touch. So let us use change to our advantage, adapting in ways that bring new opportunities for children and families.

When we put children at the heart of our strategic planning process, each of us finds ourselves engaged in something that is anything but boring.

Marilyn Regier

Telling Your Child's Adoption Story

Licensed Professional Counselor Susan Branco Alvarado offered information to more than 50 adoptive parents of young children at this popular Barker workshop, Saturday, January 28th. Attendees gained skills that will assist them in talking with their children about adoption at various developmental stages.

Ms. Alvarado explained the immeasurable value of sharing adoption stories with children, even at an early age. Adopted youth face the challenge of making meaning of their beginnings, which may be unknown or unclear. Understanding why and how they were adopted enables young persons to develop their identity, have self-esteem, and feel comfortable sharing thoughts about adoption with family, friends and the outside world. She wrote in her workshop materials: "Kids can't go forward without their past!"

From evaluations following the presentation, one participant remarked, "She did a great job modeling the words and tone of voice one might use…that will help us when speaking with our son about his adoption story." Another added, "Talking about the ages at which children can process different pieces of information was very helpful and practical."

Ms. Alvarado also encouraged parents to "initiate the conversation," pointing out that too often, adoptive parents wait for the *child* to ask. She added, "Parenting means teaching children the meaning of family and that they can count on a parent to talk about adoption's 'tough stuff.'"

Susan Branco Alvarado, Licensed Professional Counselor, was the featured presenter at a recent workshop sponsored by Barker's Department of Family & Post-Adoption Services.

Also adding to the lively exchange was a discussion of Smalley & Schooler's "10 Commandments of Talking," that appeared in the February issue of *Adoptive Families* magazine. The points included the use of positive adoption language, the importance of never lying, allowing the child to express anger (without joining in), and giving a child control of his/her story.

The audience participated in a discussion about "What parents fear the most" and had an opportunity to ask specific questions about challenging or difficult adoption stories. Ms. Alvarado reminded guests that outside support and guidance, such as that provided by counselors at Barker, is sometimes needed as parents make the adoption journey with their child.

This workshop was sponsored by Barker's Family and Post-Adoption Services Department which plans to offer a similar program in the fall of 2012. For more information, please contact Abbe Levine, Director of Family and Post-Adoption Services, at alevine@barkerfoundation.org. ■

Help us bring Barker into the 21st century!

We're revving up Barker's presence on social media. Check out our revised Facebook page, "Barker Adoptions." We're posting updates on the Annual Conference and the Spring Benefit, as well as opportunities for you to comment on articles and questions. **"Like"** us to stay informed, and **"Share"** our posts to spread the news!

Family: Something to Sing About!
Barker Foundation 2012 Benefit on Saturday, May 5

In the lovely new Founders Hall at George Mason University's Arlington campus, Barker friends and families will gather to renew old friendships, begin new ones, and celebrate family at the 2012 Benefit. Please respond positively to the invitation which was mailed in March.

Beginning at 6:30 p.m., guests will enjoy drinks and substantial hors d'oeuvres while bidding on fabulous items in the silent auction. Benefit co-chairs **Trish Warner** and **Mary Jaffe** have announced an outstanding array of sports tickets, spa packages, original artwork, getaways and many more gifts that will please the most particular person (don't forget Mother's Day is May 13th!).

When the bidding closes, guests will move to the auditorium for an electrifying performance by the renowned Duke Ellington School of the Arts Show Choir. Organized in 1986 by Musical Director Samuel L.E. Bonds, the Show Choir has performed in China, England, France and Germany as well as all over the United States singing with artists including Stevie Wonder, Earth, Wind & Fire, and Anita Baker. Their repertoire covers a wide range of musical genres from jazz, spirituals and gospel to Broadway and Motown. First Lady Michelle Obama refers to them as *"DC's own version of the hit TV show Glee."*

The Duke Ellington School of the Arts Show Choir is pictured with one of its famous graduates, internationally acclaimed mezzo-soprano, Denyce Graves (center). The Show Choir will be featured on stage at Barker's Spring Benefit May 5th.

The Duke Ellington School of the Arts provides high school students with high quality college preparatory academics and pre-professional artistic training.

Coffee, desserts and farewells will close the evening as guests leave humming!

All proceeds from the 2012 Benefit will help The Barker Foundation continue its essential services to all members of the adoption circle. *"This event provides important financial support for Barker's valuable programs,"* said Development Chair John Freeman.

Co-chairs welcome anyone willing to join the committee, offer an auction item, or secure a sponsor gift. Please contact Mary Reyner in the Barker Development office at 301-664-9664 or mreyner@barkerfoundation.org if you have any questions. ■

Pictured are some of the volunteers working with Mary Reyner, Development Director, to ensure that the Spring Benefit will be one to remember. From left: Board member and Development Chair, John Freeman; Linda Duncan; Madeleine Longano; Shelley Hutchins; Pauline Calomiris; Benefit Co-Chair, Trish Warner; Mary Cabriele; Lisa Jacobs; Jean Diamond; Connie Rhind Robey.

Envisioning a Bright Futu

Barker Foundation

By Mary Reyner, Director of Development

On Saturday, February 25, an extraordinary group of 44 current and former Board members, staff and other Barker community members convened in the conference rooms of the Wiley Rein law firm ready to work. Led by **Dao Nguyen** and **Brad Nestico** of the Compass team, attendees kicked off the strategic planning process which, once the plan is determined, will align the work of the Board and help guide Barker's activities for the next three years. Board Chair **Kathryn Bucher**, who hosted the event at her firm, was master of ceremonies. **Cherisse Robinson** and **Abigail Wiebenson** are co-chairs of the strategic plan for the Board.

The morning began with Compass team members outlining expectations of the retreat and explaining the results of their in-depth interviews conducted with 40 stakeholders of the Barker community. Not surprisingly, comments indicated overall themes: Barker has a strong history and tradition of success; there is a need now to refocus our direction to help meet the challenges of a changing environment. Using this observational data, participants were asked to reach consensus on the mission, vision and strategic goals in five breakout groups.

The commitment of participants gave great energy, humor and thoughtful answers to exercises. Vision statements ranged from "Becoming a national model for building and sustaining families through adoption," to "Barker 'rocks' adoption!" Strategic goals mentioned ranged from increasing the endowment significantly, to strengthening our Internet presence and website resources.

Over the next few months, Compass team members will work with the Board and staff to fine-tune the mission, vision and strategic goals and clearly identify action steps to achieve measurable outcomes. Barker leadership will incorporate the steps into a three-year strategic plan.

Barker was selected among hundreds of applications by Compass, a non-profit which provides high-quality, pro bono consulting to other non-profits. Compass is providing support of our strategic planning process. Other members of the Compass team included: **Carlie Bissler**, **Kara Fisher**, **Sonya Sbar**, **Elodie Slawinski**, **Heather Thompson**, and **Matt Yacco**. ■

ure

Strategic Planning Retreat

The COMPASS team, Left to Right: Matt Yacco, Carlie Bissler, Brad Nestico, Heather Thompson, Sonya Sbar, Elodie Slawinski, Dao Nguyen, (not pictured) Kara Fisher.

AGENCY *News & Notes*

On a snowy Saturday morning in January, **Bob and Eleanor Long** hosted a fabulous brunch at their Alexandria home for a group of Barker parents interested in Barker's future and in the strategic planning process. As with a similar October event at the home of Allan and Shelley Holt, the gathering included parents from many decades and programs. We are grateful for the hosts who open their homes and for the guests who take the time to become invested in Barker's future.

Welcome to new foster parents, **Jim and Genie Murphy** of Annapolis, Maryland. The Murphys were introduced at the foster parent training and luncheon on March 22rd.

Mark your calendars now for the always popular **Barker Family Picnic**. This year's picnic is scheduled for Sunday, June 3rd, at Cabin John Regional Park. If you have questions or would like to help in any way, please contact Beth Kirby at bkirby@barkerfoundation.org.

Congratulations to Our New Adoptive Families

Bertus & Benjamin welcomed Grayson

Don & Lea welcomed Connor

Victor & Melissa welcomed Shira

Derek & Deidre welcomed Brendan

John & Michelle welcomed Kyden

John & Kelly welcomed Lorelei Ann

Douglass & Elizabeth welcomed Grace

Andre & Sara welcomed Gavin

Steve & Jack welcomed Eitan

Yehuda & Yael welcomed Temima

Ganesh & Marjorie welcomed Kathryn

Kyo & Denise welcomed Johnie

John and Jennifer welcomed David

Duane & Kristen welcomed Chaltu

William & Alison welcomed Karlina

Brian & Johanna welcomed Tahlia

Alan & Lindy welcomed Xiao Ya

Paul & Amy welcomed Grace (home 3/21/12)

Peter & Amy welcomed Quinn (home 3/22/2012)

Pregnancy Counseling at Barker: Empowering Women

By Nina Aplebaum, LGSW

Though my time as a Pregnancy Counselor at The Barker Foundation just began one and a half years ago, I can confidently say that there is only one constant – and that is that there is no telling what each day, what each situation may bring. Each pregnant woman who calls us has a unique set of circumstances. She will react a certain way about these circumstances, her feelings will change as her pregnancy progresses, and she will require different things from the counselor with whom she works.

Whether she found us through a friend, the internet, or a brochure handed to her at the hospital, we respond to each call with haste and respect. Some of our clients call with the positive home pregnancy test in hand, scared at just 6 weeks pregnant, while others call from the hospital having just delivered a baby for whom they have no plan. We see women of all ages, of all races, and from many cultural and religious backgrounds. In our work, we can make no assumptions about any woman who calls on The Barker Foundation for help. However a woman presents herself, or whatever her social background, there is no way of telling what she will need from us. There is no standard situation.

The standard is only in the services – the dedication and support – we can offer our clients.

This is best illustrated by describing a few recent events that took place during a typical day in the domestic infant adoption department at The Barker Foundation:

I arrived at work and after completing my case notes from a meeting the night before with a pregnant woman and her fiancé, I met with Cecilia Racine, Director of Domestic Adoptions, to discuss the plan. While this is a couple that is committed to the adoption plan they are making, we were discussing how best to support both the birth mother and the birth father in the discussion about what family is best for their daughter. She is a 24-year-old woman with whom I have been working, along with her 27-year-old boyfriend, since her seventh month of pregnancy, and her expected due date is in two weeks. Whenever possible, we encourage the biological father of the child to be involved in the counseling and decision-making process. Supporting this couple over the past two months has involved financial planning for them, including assistance with medical costs, and helping her with the location of prenatal care once she was forced to relocate due to eviction.

Pictured from left to right: Cecilia Racine, Director of Domestic Programs; Nina Aplebaum and Lisa Hughes, pregnancy counselors.

While Cecilia and I were meeting, Lisa Hughes, another Barker Pregnancy Counselor, called to let us know that a hospital social worker had called our emergency hotline. A 33-year-old woman had just delivered a baby boy and wanted to make an adoption plan. She is currently a working, single mom to two children, one with special needs, and she had come to the hospital alone. Lisa immediately went to the hospital to respond. Lisa listened to her talk about her life and how she loves this little boy and only wants what is best for him. Later, Lisa reported that after speaking with the woman, supporting her through her hospital stay and in making an adoption plan, she said to Lisa "I feel like I can breathe now."

Because it can be an extremely stressful and scary experience, it is important that women facing an unplanned pregnancy have a trusted, unbiased person with whom to share, and that is what we, as pregnancy counselors, are here for. Pregnancy counseling is a very specific kind of counseling provided to women who want to discuss their options or who need advice on how to pursue those options.

After meeting with Cecilia, I did some mailing: pediatrician bills for babies that were recently in Barker foster care, a book of photos and updates about an 8 month old from her adoptive parents to her birth parents, and a request for medical records from a hospital so that the adoptive parents have all of the important information about their new baby. Then I went through some of my email and saw that I had received an email from a woman who placed her child with an adoptive family 11 months ago. She was writing to let me know that she has continued to think about the conversations we had both during her pregnancy and after she delivered her baby. She writes, "And now after all of this time, I have told my family about my daughter. I was nervous but I keep remembering that you never judged me, and I finally took a chance that they wouldn't either. So I finally do have a huge support group now! I am so happy that they all agree with what I have done for my daughter to better her life. As I have said numerous times, I love my daughter enough to give her the life she deserves, even though I will not be the one giving it to her."

Pregnancy counseling can empower a woman in her decision and give her the conviction she will need to remember when coping with the emotional effect of whatever decision she makes.

I want to underscore that we are not making decisions for the women. Some days are difficult and frustrating. We cannot always help, and we cannot undo the series of events that have led them to The Barker Foundation in the first place. We cannot make the decision disappear. But what we can do is see every woman as an individual and treat her accordingly. We can listen to what she has to say and help find the best path for her and her child.

It is a privilege to work with the women and their families who call us in crisis, and we always remember that a child lies at the heart of the process. ■

[Some information has been modified to protect the identity of our clients.]

Party of 2: An Interview with Sam

[Below is an adaptation from an interview first published in the PWNL News, Vol. 1, No. 11, and excerpted by permission.]

How did you decide you wanted to adopt?

I always told myself that if I wasn't married by the age of 50, I would adopt a child. I went on www.adoptuskids.org and was sure I would find my child. A friend warned me about the sugar-coated profiles that would appear on adoption sites, but I felt inside that I would find my child. I contacted Barker, and the rest is history.

What was it like to visit with your future son?

When I arrived at our first meeting, I was so nervous that I thought about turning around. To my surprise, DeWayne met me at the door and was very excited! We spent three days together, and it was wonderful. At the second visit, DeWayne came to visit me. At the time, I was working at the White House, so he got to meet President Obama, Mrs. Obama, Malia, Sasha, and even Bo the dog! He sat down with the President and asked lots of questions. He was very confident and talked like they were old friends! Although the visit went well, I was still nervous and continued to pray throughout the process.

What was life like when DeWayne first came home?

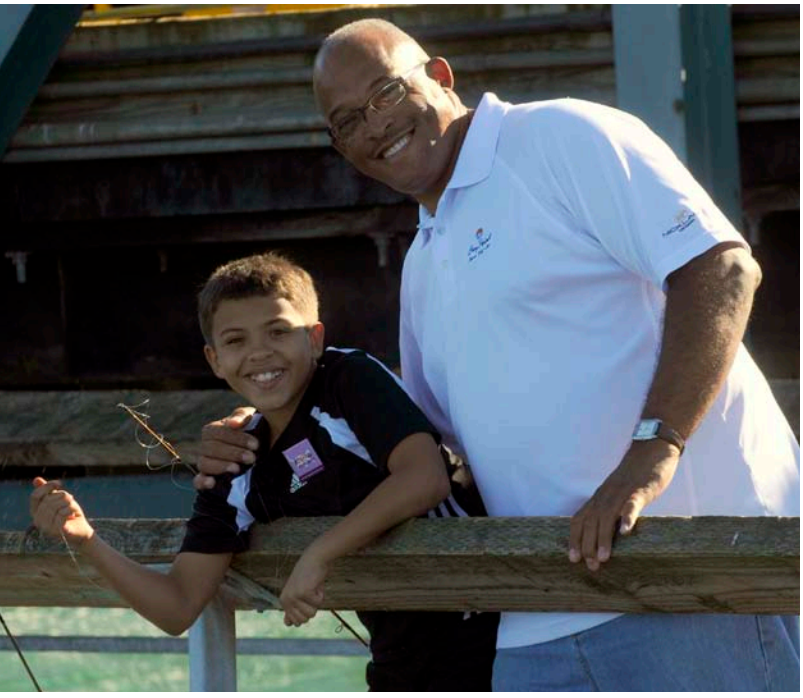
DeWayne came home for good in February, and it was not easy all the time. The first two months were pretty tough. He threatened to run away twice. We both had a lot to adjust to but eventually settled into a routine. I am now retired, and DeWayne and I are able to spend a lot of quality time together (we go fishing almost every day!). I feel like God has guided this entire journey.

How is life different now?

Life is awesome! I have a wonderful son and a solid support system. The Barker Foundation has been most helpful. Beverly, Dewanna, and DeWayne's caseworker have been there for me every step of the way. They knew what I was going through and didn't turn their backs on me. DeWayne has made my life so easy, and he inspires me. My favorite moments are when I hear DeWayne say to people, "My dad adopted me." It makes me smile on the inside every time he says it. He is proud to be adopted, and I am proud to have a son. ■

[For more information on Barker's Project Wait No Longer, *please contact Beverly Clarke, Director, at bclarke@barkerfoundation.org.]*

DeWayne and Sam on Adoption Finalization Day



Sam and DeWayne enjoying some father-son fishing.

– With Sympathy –

We express our heartfelt sympathy to the Edwards, Connor, and Sekira families as they mourn the loss of their loved ones.

Christopher Andrew Edwards, age 44, father of Morgan, beloved son of Bert and Susan Edwards, and sister to Stacey Leonard, died on December 5, 2011. We are grateful to the many family members and friends who made memorial donations in Christopher's memory to The Barker Foundation.

Sheila Connor, beloved wife of Jim Connor, and devoted mother of Ellen and Jimmy Connor, passed away at the age of 58 on January 25, 2012. Active in the Barker and FANA communities, Sheila will be greatly missed.

Donald Sekira, Sr., a beloved Barker grandfather, died on March 16, 2012, and is survived by his wife, Justine. Donald was a loving father of Donald Jr., David, Karen, and Nancy; and cherished grandfather of Henry III, Kristyn, Erynn, Christopher, Justin, Kayla, and Matthew. The Sekiras designated The Barker Foundation as a memorial gift recipient.

Save the Date

The 18th Annual Conference – Saturday, April 28, 9 AM to 4:30 PM. The Universities at Shady Grove Conference Center, Rockville, Maryland. To register, visit our website: www.barkerfoundation.org.

Spring Benefit – Saturday, May 5, 6:30 to 10:30 PM at George Mason University's Arlington Campus in Founders Hall. Reception, Silent Auction & performance by The Duke Ellington School of the Arts Show Choir. Contact Mary Reyner, mreyner@barkerfoundation.org

Annual Meeting – Tuesday, May 8, 7 to 9 PM, Maryland Office. Light refreshments served

Barker Family Picnic – Sunday, June 3, 1 to 4 PM, Cabin John Regional Park.

Parents of Teens – 2nd Tuesday of month, 7 PM

Older Child Adoption Support Group – 2nd Wednesday of month, 6:30 to 8:30 PM

Birth Parent Support Group – 2nd Thursday of month, 7 PM

Adopted Persons' Discussion Group – 3rd Thursday of month, 7 PM

THE BARKER FOUNDATION since 1945

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non-profit indicia to be added