

Eight Is Enough

By Jillian Schlettler

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A blended Winnipeg family heads to China to welcome their second adopted child.

Imagine a world where an unwavering pride for tradition meets cutting-edge technology, where corn-on-the-cob sold from bicycle carts meets McDonalds, and where mansions and privilege meets squatters living in dilapidated shacks they call “home.” This is the paradox of China, and it’s where my family found itself last March 23. “Big Family,” as we were known, led by my father and stepmother, Bryan and Julia Schettler of Winnipeg, would soon change the life of a vibrant six-year-old boy named Jian Kai. The year-and-a-half process ended all in one morning when Kai was legally adopted with full Canadian citizenship and gained a raft of siblings: Jordan (Moffatt), 27; Jillian (me), 26; Aubrie, 24; Matthew (Moffatt), 22; Brittany, 16; Katelynn, 14; and Phillip, 8.

After a week in Shenyang it was off to Beijing to meet up with Family Outreach International (FOI), an adoption group based in Ottawa that assists Canadian families with international adoptions, and with whom we had worked in 2007 to adopt Phillip. It was in this group that we earned the nickname “Big Family.” China offers no universal health care and if a son is born with medical needs – as is the case with Phillip and Kai – they are often abandoned. In March alone, FOI assisted 16 Canadian families with international adoptions of children from infancy to age eight, most with medical needs. Phillip was abandoned at the local police station at two days old and spent his first six years in an orphanage. Kai was abandoned in a market at two years old and was placed in a large orphanage with more than 250 kids, then later in a foster village. “People will wonder why we didn’t choose to help the children in our foster care system,” my stepmom said. “Being a nurse, I wanted to help a medical needs child who would not receive medical care in their homeland. We both care about children who are victims of circumstance.”

In the beginning, Phillip didn’t speak, due to a cleft palate, and had moderate hearing loss. Kai was ill when we adopted him, and still needs medical care from our pediatrician. Both boys have transitioned exceedingly well in school and in their home life in Canada, and they have been taught to honour and treasure their heritage, attending Chinese school every Saturday. But they are not the only ones learning. “Our sons have taught us the true meaning of bravery, determination and self preservation,” says my stepmom. “Our goal and our job is to lay the foundation for independence, create memories, provide opportunities to think and to feel, and at times to challenge in the interest of growth. The journey of life has few knowns and it’s basically a leap of faith.”