

Giving away 'Anatoly Z.'



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The phone rings at the ranch house in the [Horse Prairie valley of Montana](#), and Cyndi Peck puts on her headset and settles in for what is always a long conversation. Sitting in her tiny home office, surrounded by milk crates full of files on the floor and a map of U.S. time zones on the wall, she folds her hands as if in prayer and listens as yet another adoptive mother explains why she wants to return another adopted child.

Over the next hour, Peck asks the usual questions. Today the caller is a Tennessee kindergarten teacher who adopted a former student out of foster care about a year ago only to realize she cannot handle the girl's emotional and psychological wounds. But the conversation was much the same on other days with other callers: the mother in the Midwest who brought four boys from Poland who she thought were biological brothers and came to realize that one was not related to the other three at all and that he needed a home where he could get individual attention; or the mother of a 5-year-old in Virginia, born in the Congo, who killed the family pet and threatened to stab his adoptive siblings; or the mother in Ohio whose 7-year-old would not stop masturbating in public and was acting sexually aggressive toward her older brother.

Does she hurt animals? Peck asks the Tennessee mother, as she asks every caller. Have extremely different behavior inside and outside the home? Treat you worse than she treats your husband? Have eating or food issues? Bodily function issues? Irregular sleep patterns? Does she lie? Make false accusations? Hurt herself? Hurt other children? Do you hide the kitchen knives from her at night? Worry that she will turn everyday things into weapons?

Even as she asks all this, Peck is pretty sure that most, perhaps all, of the answers will be yes. Peck knows this world intimately — she is the mother of nine, and of the four who were adopted, three have tortured psychological histories. She also knows this world professionally. She is one of a tiny handful of adoption professionals in the U.S. who specialize in finding new homes for children whose original adoptive parents give them up, and she's arranged about 80 of these since she began five years ago.

Technically this is called "disruption" (if the interruption comes before the adoption is finalized) and "dissolution" (if it comes after). Those who are appalled by the very thought often call it "rehoming," as if with a pet. Those like Peck, who believe it has been the dirty little secret of the adoption world for far too long, prefer "[second chance adoption](#)," which is what Peck calls her agency.

It's her mission, she says, to make the process open, nonjudgmental and safe, rather than confused, shameful and marginally regulated, as it has been for decades.

"To shame the parents and push it underground when it happens is no help to these families, or these children," she says.

"Fifty percent of all marriages end in divorce," she continues, "and those are family ties made by adults who have years to get to know each other before they decide to be family." Why then are we surprised, she wonders, that 1 percent of adoptions, mostly of older kids who are damaged by the life they led before, also end?

That “1 percent” statistic is the adoption world’s best guess, an estimate based on data from the few states that require agencies to report re-adoptions. If accurate, that would mean that [of the 135,000 adoptions](#) finalized in the U.S. each year, 1,350 will be undone.

Those numbers are imprecise, however, because of law and stigma. Some of these children are not relinquished to agencies but rather to a shadowy black market. Add to that the fact that laws vary from state to state — in some, parents who return children adopted through foster care can be charged with child neglect; in others, all that is needed to hand off guardianship of a child is a notarized letter from the first parent to the second one, and the state need not even get involved.

And even those agencies that do facilitate official handoffs are reluctant to talk about it. Peck, officially an employee of the Wasatch International Adoption Agency in Salt Lake City but working from her home halfway between Butte and Bozeman, is also wary of speaking publicly. Parents find her by word of mouth, she says. So do those who leave hate messages and threats on the [Second Chance Facebook page](#).

"Does she hurt animals? Have eating or food issues? Do you hide the kitchen knives from her at night? Worry that she will turn everyday things into weapons?" – Some of the questions that Cyndi Peck asks callers who are seeking to give up their adopted children

She agreed to be interviewed for this story, allowing a reporter to visit her at home and listen in as she spoke to adoptive parents, because, she says, “if I don’t speak out, then the only ones talking paint the wrong picture.” She was specifically shaken by a [Reuters series](#) last year, she says, about adoptive parents so desperate that they leave their adopted children with [strangers whom they met on places like Craigslist](#) and on message boards on websites such as Yahoo, which closed those as soon as Reuters brought them to the company’s attention.

Peck recognizes that desperation. But missing from coverage like that, she says, is the message that “all the parents who give up these children are not monsters, all the parents who give them a new home are not pedophiles, and there is a legal, safe, loving way to do what is best for the child.”

Most of all, she says, “These children are not doomed. Just because they cannot live with a first adoptive family doesn’t mean that they can’t have a happy life with a second one. I see success stories most of the time.”

Peck’s caseload is the closest thing there is to a database of what works and what does not when placing a child in a new home. She is, she admits, a self-taught and solitary expert, and she would like to change that, too.

“We need to talk about this, study it, share experiences, regulate it,” she says. “To do that, we have to first remove the shame and stigma and admit that it happens.”

The cascade of wrenching events that would eventually lead Katherine Z. to call Cyndi Peck began when Katherine and her husband welcomed a Russian brother and sister into their sprawling suburban home. Katherine recently spent hours talking with this reporter in that home, describing what happened in intricate detail (and later sharing documentation from a family therapist and psychiatrist to support key pieces of her story on the condition that they not be quoted directly in this article).

The Russian siblings first entered her life in 2007, she began, when the couple’s biological children were 6 and 8, and Katherine felt ready to “give another child a better life,” she says.

A stay-at-home mother married to a banker, she first thought of becoming a foster parent, but says she feared she would “fall in love with a child and then the judge would give them back to their parents.” So she chose to adopt internationally instead, where “there’s no taking a child back.”

Her life’s wish was always that she would have four children, and when the adoption agency asked if she would be willing to consider biological siblings, it felt like fate. The agency had a program that arranged for children to live with prospective families for a trial run of sorts, and over the summer of 2007 Katherine and her husband hosted Anatoly, who was then 5, and Alexa, who was then 4. (The names of all children have been changed for this article to protect their privacy. Katherine’s name is also a pseudonym; the other adult names have not been changed, though some last names have been omitted at their request.)

It was a rocky few months, Katherine recalls, noting that the children arrived with physical marks of abuse — bruises and burn scars — and signs of psychological ones. The youngsters had eating issues (Anatoly would throw his dinner on the floor then lick it up; both children hoarded food), behavioral challenges (they learned profane finger gestures even before they could speak English) and impulse-control problems (Alexa tried to jump out of a moving car). But when the agency asked whether the family wanted to move forward with the adoption “I would have felt like a monster to say no,” Katherine says. “I had two living breathing children in front of me. Plus, I didn’t see any violence that summer. It turns out they were on their best behavior.”

The violence, and worse, would come later.

The children had to return to Russia for eight months while the international adoption bureaucracy went through its paces. After numerous delays and added expenses, the entire family flew to Moscow, then traveled 12 more hours to the orphanage. Anatoly and Alexa, who had been told the news only the night before their new family arrived, “acted like animals from the moment we took them back to the hotel with us,” Katherine says. “They were literally climbing up the walls, throwing things, hitting and running round and round and round in circles. They kicked me if I tried to hold their hand crossing the street. They threw rocks at the animals when we tried to visit the zoo.”

There was, she stresses, some progress in the months and years after the adoption was finalized. The two learned English quickly. They also learned manners, gained needed weight, looked healthier. Alexa proved to be a good student and Anatoly a committed athlete. Between rages, he in particular “could be very loving and sweet,” Katherine says. “He would get up early when it snowed and shovel a path for his [adoptive] sister to get to school. He worked so hard. He really did want to be part of our family, and he attached to us as much as he was capable of attaching. The problem was that when he felt cornered he went back to that animal instinct.”

But the progress was often overshadowed by the crises. There were tantrums that lasted six to eight hours. Anatoly swallowed the contents of a bottle of anti-seizure medication prescribed for his adoptive sister. Alexa “kept telling me she wanted me dead,” Katherine remembers. Once, she chased Katherine around the kitchen with a butcher knife, threatening to “stab me in the chest, cut open my heart,” Katherine says, “and if that doesn’t work and I don’t die, she’d find someone who will take a car and run me down.” After these incidents, the knives and medicines were put in a locked cabinet.

There were attacks on the other children too. Anatoly pushed his older brother down the stairs after a fight over a video game, Katherine says, and later bit the boy in the neck after a scuffle over a pair of sunglasses.

By this time the family calendar was filled with experts. The first of what would be a successive chain of therapists had told Katherine “you have to give them back,” she says. “I thought she was a horrible person to even suggest that, but over the years I realize she had seen where this kind of thing goes.”

The night that would unravel everything came about three years after the children first arrived. A laptop went missing and during the search of the house Katherine's husband found 9-year-old Anatoly in his bed fully dressed, pretending to sleep, the laptop under the blankets with him. The screen was filled with violent pornography, Katherine says. Also hidden in Anatoly's bed were a large shard of glass that he'd pried from a smashed picture frame, and a coat hanger that had been bent into a weapon.

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– Katherine Z., Anatoly's first adoptive mother

Amid the tears and accusations that followed, Katherine says she learned for the first time that Alexa and Anatoly had been sexually active with each other almost since they'd arrived, both children would later tell their therapist, beginning with kisses on the mouth and progressing from there over the years. Anatoly said in therapy that he had never been sexually abused himself but he had seen adults having sex back in Russia. “I was disgusted, incredibly sad,” Katherine remembers feeling as she sat in on some of those therapy sessions. “Mostly I was angry at the adults who had damaged two little children and taught them this, angry at myself because what had I done to my biological children by bringing this into the house.”

Someone had to leave, Katherine says, because, as the children's psychiatrist confirmed, “the family was not safe with the two youngest together under the same roof.”

She still wonders if she made the wrong choice in sending Anatoly. “He had a soft side,” she says, while Alexa “was manipulative and not capable of caring about us. But I made the best decision I could at the time.”

The deciding factor, she says, was the fact that Anatoly was tall for his age and “had gotten strong enough that I couldn't physically control him anymore. I couldn't hold him in a bear hug and restrain him until he calmed down.”

But, she adds, second-guessing herself again: “At the end of the day, no matter the details when it comes to sex, you blame the boy.”

The twin landmines of adoption are [fetal alcohol spectrum disorder](#) and [reactive attachment disorder](#). The first, FASD, is rooted in a birth mother's use of alcohol during pregnancy, affecting the physical map of the brain; on a PET scan this presents as smooth surface where the folds that regulate impulsivity, reason and learning should be. The second, RAD, is a result of early neglect, withering a child's ability to form attachments. It is most often seen in foreign adoptions from countries where orphanage life means spending most of the day in a spare crib with little to no human interaction, but it is also found in domestic adoptions of older children from American foster care.

When experts talk about attachment issues, they stress three things. First, the worst symptoms affect a very small percentage of adoptees, and second, that is still a lot of children.

“There are thought to be over a million children who have some of this, and I think that is probably a low estimate,” says [Nancy Thomas](#), who runs seminars around the country for parents of children with attachment disorders and who herself has fostered nearly 100 children in the past 35 years, most of those from adoptions that were failing. “There are 600,000 children in foster care alone, and every single one has been abused or neglected in some way; every one has had their hearts ripped out.”

Finally, experts say, these children — even the percentage that develop the worst of the symptoms — can be helped, but it takes financial and emotional reserves that not all parents have. “It’s something parents should go into with eyes wide open,” says [Deborah Gray](#), author of “Attaching in Adoption,” whose therapy practice consists mostly of adopted children. “It’s not like having a child who had typical early years. Most of them had really poor starts in life, and you are doing a lot of remediation.”

Cyndi Peck’s eyes were not wide open when her own adoption story began. That was 23 years ago, after she’d had a miscarriage at the age of 40. She was a mother of four at the time, and her family had relatively recently moved to the 20-acre ranch in Montana where her husband, a pastor, was founding a small church.

Losing that unexpected pregnancy made her realize how deeply she wanted more children, she says. Every family has its reasons for adopting and while Katherine Z. wanted to provide a home to children who had none, Peck wanted to fill a home that felt unexpectedly empty.

“God put something in my husband’s and my hearts to say, ‘Your family isn’t done,’” she says now. “It wasn’t that we really wanted to do something wonderful for the world, we wanted this for ourselves.” She went on to give birth to a daughter within the year and to begin the process of adopting what would eventually be three more girls and one boy.

Her first adopted daughter arrived from Cambodia at 13 months old, making her essentially a nonbiological twin of the youngest Peck child, who was 21 days older. “We thought ‘how cool, this child would be our daughter’s best friend,’” Peck recalls, and throughout early childhood, the two were inseparable. In fact those first years went so well that Pecks adopted a 1-year-old boy from the same orphanage three years later.

A year after that, two more girls from that orphanage joined the family. Peck had been told they were both 13 and best friends. “How could we not take them both if they were so attached to each other?” Peck says of that decision.

So enthusiastic was she about adoption that she took a job with an agency and began to facilitate the process professionally for other families.

RAD and FASD don’t always become clear immediately, though, and that was the case with two of Peck’s four adopted children. The first girl to arrive began to fall behind her nonadopted “twin” over the years and their relationship became one of resentment and guilt. Eventually she would be diagnosed with FASD.

And of the two girls who were supposedly 13, it would turn out that only one was that age. The other was closer to 16 (the Pecks still don’t know for certain). Although the orphanage described them as best friends, that too proved untrue. The younger girl was actually a bully and the older girl, her victim. The bully was eventually diagnosed with RAD.

“The parents might exaggerate; the children might lie — the truth is probably somewhere in the middle. But it comes to the point where ... this is no longer a home that is working for anyone.” – Cyndi Peck, *Second Chance Adoptions*

These are diagnoses that come with heartache, and at times Peck thought they would tear her family apart. The daughter with FASD tried to run away from home, commit suicide, hurt herself. The sister who was three weeks younger felt responsible for the pain, and took to sleeping across the threshold of their shared bedroom door to keep her sister from coming to harm during the night.

The daughter with RAD, meanwhile, did run away. (Once she left, the girl she'd bullied across two continents began to thrive.) The Pecks have seen her but once in 16 years — when she called in frantic tears from a highway pay phone after being released from prison. She came home for one night and left without a goodbye before morning.

Trying to learn how to help her children — and how to best advise prospective adoptive parents to whom she was now professionally responsible — Peck found herself in regular conversation with those who ran the [Ranch for Kids](#), 350 miles north in Eureka, Mont. Founded in 1999, it is not an adoption agency, but rather a private facility designed as a place desperate adoptive families can turn to when they can no longer handle their affected children.

The ranch has been the subject of controversy over the years, most recently in 2010 when the [Russian ambassador to the U.S. condemned it](#) as an example of American mistreatment of Russian adoptees after a Tennessee mother [put her 7-year-old on a plane to Moscow](#) with a note saying she could not handle him anymore.

But many parents who have sent their children to the Ranch have said publicly that it has saved both the adoptees and their families, and Peck is among those who praise its skill in working with RAD and FASD children.

About five years ago an administrator from the Ranch approached Peck for help, knowing that she worked for an adoption agency. Might she help find a new home for a boy whose “first family” was unwilling to take him back? It was Peck's first personal experience with disruption, and not knowing what else to do, she posted a photo of the boy on the website [Rainbow Kids](#), which her agency used at the time to “advertise” children overseas available for international placement.

She found that boy a second family, and then placed the one after that, and the one after that. She arranged these placements based in part on “gut instinct in response to mistakes I'd made myself,” she says. Among her rules: A second adoption should be to a home where the adoptee is the youngest in the family, ideally by a good number of years; there should definitely not be a child of the same age in the home, mitigating the tendency to compare adopted siblings; and no details should be spared when describing to prospective second parents all that went wrong in the first adoption.

Within the year Peck specialized in this process, and would eventually have a Second Chance Facebook page with dozens of children's photos and a database full of families willing to explore taking them in. Now at least once a week, sometimes more, she finds herself at her desk, donning her headset, asking her questions, getting familiar answers.

She then tries her best to make a match, using much the same process as is used when a birth mother goes through an agency in order to find a family to adopt her infant. Prospective couples apply, pay an agency fee, hire a lawyer, submit to a licensed social worker's home visit. Only after they pass those tests does Peck send them the file documenting the troubles and traumas of the child. If they still want to proceed with the adoption, Peck introduces the first family to the prospective second one for approval.

With each step, she says, she hopes she is choosing right. She knows that despite all the facts and files and documentation, it is possible — even likely — that she never knows the whole story of what has gone wrong in a first adoptive home. “Everyone has their own view of the truth,” she says. “The parents might exaggerate; the children might lie — the truth is probably somewhere in the middle. But it comes to the

point where the details don't matter as much as the fact that this is no longer a home that is working for anyone."

Anatoly didn't cry when Katherine told him he'd be going to live at the Ranch for Kids. "He didn't really seem surprised," she says of the conversation nearly three years ago. "That was the first that I really understood RAD. He could only attach so much. The fact that 'now it's time for me to go' felt normal to him."

At first Katherine and her husband thought his time there would be temporary. "We explained that there were unsafe behaviors and he was going to this place so he could work on some of the things he had to work on," she says.

His stay lasted about 18 months and he appeared to be his best self at the Ranch. Katherine believes that the way of life in the facility was a perfect fit for his needs and weaknesses. "There was no competition, no comparing with siblings, all the kids were on equal footing," she says. "There was a ton of outdoor stuff, the academics weren't as hard, and most of all no one was trying to get too close. RAD kids are smothered by closeness, and I'm a mama bear."

Back at home, meanwhile, Alexa was getting worse. Seeking attention, she began to injure herself, pulling out two of her teeth and stapling her finger. Fearing she would run away in the night or steal things while her parents slept, they put an alarm on her bedroom door. She seems to have poisoned and killed the cat.

It became clear, Katherine says, that either Anatoly or Alexa would have to leave for good. Fees at the ranch were close to \$4,000 a month and, cost aside, it was not meant as a permanent home. Nor was having both children at home an option. "I just couldn't keep them safe from each other," she says. "I am only one person, my husband works long hours, I can't do all four."

She contacted the New York agency that arranged the original adoption of the two from Russia and found it "unreceptive." Then the ranch put her in touch with Cyndi Peck. Briefly Katherine and her husband agonized over whether Anatoly or Alexa would be the one to find another family.

"Which of my kids do I throw to the alligator that's really hungry?" is how she describes her choice.

"If we sent (Alexa) I thought she would fail, because in her warped way she is very attached to me and no one else," she says. Anatoly, on the other hand, "I thought he would be OK, he would adjust. For him it would be 'this is just what happens to me in my life.'"

Gina Sampaio does not know Katherine, has never even heard of her, but she feels threatened by her. "The idea that a child is someone to be given back, that hurts my family, hurts the whole world of adoption," she says.

"The idea that a child is someone to be given back, that hurts my family, hurts the whole world of adoption. Normal people don't just un-adopt their children." – Adoptive mother Gina Sampaio

Sampaio is the mother of five, including three adopted siblings from New Jersey foster care, and she blogs about her family's open adoption at sisterserendip.com. When a (former) friend recently gave up two children adopted from the Congo, Sampaio wrote about [why that was a betrayal to all adopted children](#).

Adoptive parents have long faced the public notion that "I'm not my adopted children's 'real' mother or they're not my 'real' children," she wrote. The idea that one can sever an adoption "chips away at the public's perceived validity of my family."

She concluded: "Normal people don't just un-adopt their children."

Katherine, in turn, does not read Sampaio's blog, but she does recognize her anger. She knows that others judge her for severing Anatoly's adoption, which is why she asked not to be identified in this article. The condemnation is strongest, she says, from those who are closest to the adoption process.

"This decision gets to the heart of adoption," she says. "It makes it look like you were lying when you said you would love them like your own."

Some in the adoption world, however, are suggesting that this anger toward first adoptive parents is also hurting all adoptive families. It isolates parents when they most need community, and leads them to take desperate, clandestine actions rather than measured, beneficial ones.

The fear that they will be judged combined with the feeling that they have no place else to turn leads them to put children on planes back to Russia with a one-way ticket and a note that says "I can't parent this child anymore." It leads to online rehoming message boards like the ones shut down by Yahoo last year after [Reuters wrote about children](#) who had been left with new parents who turned out to be felons and pedophiles.

"The stigma pushes parents toward options that are unguided and under the radar," says Dr. [Jane Aronson](#), founder and director of the [Worldwide Orphans Foundation](#), which works to better the lives of orphaned children around the world. "There are too few legitimate paths, so they take the less legitimate ones. Most people in the social work realm don't want to help someone disrupt. We judge them instead of helping them."

Instead, Aronson says, the adoption world should embrace struggling parents because it is better for the children. "We should tell these parents, 'Thank you for coming forward. How courageous of you to ask for help.'"

That is what Peck believes, too. "The parents who call me are all crying," she says. "These are not parents who wake up one day and simply decide, 'Oops, this isn't what I'd planned.' They are *not* giving up on their children. That is the biggest fallacy. They've longed for these children, and dreamed of them, and gone to another country, gone to Russia and Africa and China, spent tens of thousands of dollars and tried everything they could think of to help them heal. But there comes a point where being that family isn't good for anyone, not the parents, not the other siblings, and definitely not the child."

As Katherine remembers saying during her first emotional conversation with Peck: "They are suffering. And all I can do is watch them suffer. I have done everything I could to save these children. I would cut off my right arm if I knew it would help them find peace in their hearts. There has to be a better place, a better family."

Peck believes there almost always *is* a better place. Stressing, as she regularly does, that her sample size is limited and her data is not rigorous or scientific, she estimates that over 90 percent of the children for whom she helps arrange Second Chance placements do well in their new homes. In the dozen

interviews of “second” parents of such children for this story (most, but not all, arranged by Peck), all reported that the behavioral problems described by first parents and chronicled by therapists, schools and physicians while the child was in the first home, improved or even disappeared when the child reached the new home. Medications for such things as ADD and anxiety were sometimes able to be discontinued.

The new mother of the girl who masturbated constantly in public says that the child, now the youngest of four adopted sisters instead of the middle child between two biological brothers, has stopped that behavior. The new mother of a deaf boy, herself deaf, says that the tantrums her son was described as having in his previous home, where his first parents had normal hearing, have not been an issue in his new home. The boy who killed the family pet is now on a farm where the animals are bigger than he is — cows and horses — and he is diligent in caring for them.

Why do these children do better the second time around? Peck thinks it's more complicated than the fact that a new family is not surprised by problems, though that is part of it. She has come to believe that there is something in the dynamic of RAD that leads certain children to focus their accumulated rage against their adopted mother. “They all hate their first mothers,” Peck says. “I don't think I've seen a case where that isn't true.” So when a second mother comes in, she effectively “rescues” that child from the first mother, who the child has cast as wicked, Peck says.

Aronson says she has seen that dynamic repeatedly as well. “The second parents often succeed just because they are the second parents,” she says.

Aronson also speculates that there is something different about the personality and expectations of a second parent. They tend to be more flexible, she says, which is a quality necessary in raising children most severely affected by RAD.

“Most parents want to be loved,” she says. “But if you are trying to parent an extremely damaged child, that just has to go. You can't be loved by a child who doesn't know how to love. Instead you have to get over your expectation of adoration and be satisfied with restructuring this human being to exist in society.”

Carol A. did not deliberately set out to provide a second home for a child. In fact she had not set out to adopt a child at all when Anatoly first came to her attention. Now 70, she was well past the age when most people are thinking of enlarging their families. But she was in the habit of wandering through websites with photos of pets in need of new owners and gradually that led her to spend time on adoption websites as well.

“Pets are cute. Kids are cute,” she says, then adds, “I know some people think it's horrible to say it that way. It sounds like you are comparing children to animals. But there are similarities. They both need a place they can belong.”

Carol knows more than she would like about not belonging. She was raised by her grandparents after her mother up and left to travel the country. “She really couldn't take care of me, so someone needed to come along who could,” she says. “Families deal with issues any way they can deal with them.”

Married while in college, she worked in auto sales and insurance; her husband taught art in the public schools, and together they raised two children, who are now in their 30s. Their son is off on his own but their daughter, diagnosed with autism at the age of 12, still lives with her parents in their small bungalow in a rural town (Carol asked that the exact location remain private) and does janitorial work when she can get it.

“Back then, nobody had ever heard of autism,” she remembers of the years when everyone from teachers to social workers accused her of being a bad mother. “I had this beautiful curly-haired little girl who acted as weird as weird could be.”

At first it was another little boy who caught her attention on Peck's Second Chance website. "A boy in a yellow raincoat," she remembers. She went through Peck's entire application process, but the boy's family chose other parents for him.

The interaction impressed Peck, however, who came to see Carol as the kind of "roll with the punches" parent that children like those she was placing need. "You raise an autistic daughter like mine, and it's pretty difficult to get embarrassed by your children and pretty difficult to get upset by things," was Carol's response when warned that these children come with challenges. So after Katherine had rejected several other Second Chance families that applied to adopt Anatoly, Peck thought of Carol.

As is Peck's procedure, she sent Carol Anatoly's case history, which was filled with interviews with Katherine and her husband along with paperwork from Anatoly's schools, therapists and doctors.

"I was absolutely shocked," Carol says. "I read it and reread it and thought, 'There's no way this kid is ever going to get adopted.'"

In the end, Carol's conclusion was that "the file was so unbelievable that I just decided I couldn't believe it," she says. Someone — the mother, the doctors, the therapists — were simply overreacting, she thought. She remembered all the experts and strangers who had misunderstood her daughter over the years and firmly decided "There's just no way that a kid could get this bad this young."

"I have done everything I could to save these children. I would cut off my right arm if I knew it would help them find peace in their hearts. There has to be a better place, a better family."

– Katherine Z., Anatoly's first adoptive mother

She did her own research online, reading about "the kind of problems of children from that country" and thinking "they sound a lot like my daughter's." She asked her family doctor whether a 9-year-old could physically have sex with anyone and was told that it was possible but unlikely. (When Katherine asked her family pediatrician the same question she was told it was entirely possible.) Then Carol called Peck and said she wanted to apply for the boy because, she says, "If I don't adopt this kid then nobody's going to."

Katherine and Carol remember their subsequent phone conversations differently. Katherine recalls being impressed that Carol was so skilled at handling her disabled daughter, while Carol doesn't remember talking about that very much. Carol remembers being offended on Anatoly's behalf that his mother was saying so many cruel things about him. "I just kept my mouth shut and tried to be very nonjudgmental toward her," Carol says. "I listened and sympathized, and listened and sympathized until she finally stopped talking."

Katherine says she was pleased that Carol did not have any other children Anatoly's age because, she says, "he can't be around other children because he's not safe with them." What Carol heard, however, was "She seemed to like it that we were so old that we wouldn't be having any other kids. I kept my mouth shut, but of course he's going to be in touch with other kids. How could I raise a child without being around other kids?"

Most significantly, Katherine says she remembers a promise from Carol that Anatoly could keep in touch with his first family. "The No. 1 reason I picked them is because of that," she says. "I thought it was important that we were a part of his life because he's never had anyone in his life who's stayed."

Carol remembers that coming up, but says she didn't agree to the arrangement. "I talked to them by phone with my attorney on the line," she remembers. "During the last conversation, (Katherine) said she wanted to stay in touch with me through Facebook and email. I thought he should stay in touch with his biological sister, but (Katherine) didn't want that. She thought he should stay in touch with her, and with the two other children, but why would he want to do that? My attorney interrupted then and said it was something we would have to consider but it probably wasn't a good idea."

Katherine and her family chose Carol and her husband as Anatoly's second adoptive parents. Katherine, who'd had weekly calls with Anatoly while he was at the Ranch, used the telephone to say her goodbyes, too. "It would have been crueler in person," she said. When she'd first dropped him at the Ranch nearly two years earlier she had kissed his palm and told him, "You will always have that, and if you ever get sad and lonely you squeeze right here and it's like mommy giving you a kiss." During their farewell call Anatoly said, "It's OK, Mommy, because I have your kiss in my hand with me."

That was three years ago. How is Anatoly doing today?

During a recent visit by a reporter and another by a photographer to the cramped cottage that is now his home, his school uniform was clean and seemed to be pressed; his hair was cut short. The scene could not be more different from Katherine's pristine, structured home. Rather than the perfectly cut up fruit salad Katherine served her guest, there was the overpowering smell of the dogs and cats that share the house — so many that Anatoly and Carol have lost count.

And amid the chaos, despite Carol's apologies for the rotted planks in the floor and her matter-of-fact description that "every time we fix something around here something else breaks," Anatoly seemed completely happy.

"A lot of things he did, I wonder if they would have bothered other people — they didn't bother me that much. Obviously I'm not anywhere near a perfectionist." — Carol A., Anatoly's second adoptive mother

He runs around the neighborhood with his favorite dog. He visits GameStop in a mall a few blocks over and chooses video games with his allowance money. He does his homework at the kitchen table, where Carol quizzes him and checks his work. He loves puzzles, especially small three-dimensional plastic ones that form animal shapes, and he likes to spend time constructing words with scrabble tiles — which he also uses to help teach his new sister, who has autism, to spell. His bike was stolen recently, so now he gets around on his skateboard and jumps for fun on his pogo stick (his record is 630 without stopping). A voracious reader, he visits the public library regularly to check out and return books (right now his favorites are the "Big Nate" series). Math is his favorite subject. He doesn't like science all that much.

"He's a lot like us, to tell you the truth," Carol says. "He'd been in an institution so long that he began to act the way my daughter did. The constant chattering. The rocking — well, he doesn't do that anymore. All his things are familiar to me."

It's not that he didn't arrive with quirks and problems, she says, but "they were things that another mother might have made a big deal of" — consistent with Aronson's view that the best quality in a second adoptive parent is the ability to let many things go. "A lot of things he did, I wonder if they would have bothered other people," Carol continues — "they didn't bother me that much. Obviously I'm not anywhere near a perfectionist."

For instance, Carol says, “He had eating problems that I thought were hilarious.” He refused to eat, or else he binged and gorged — literally eating every bit of food in the house. “I mean, we all do that sometimes, right?” Carol says.

Her solution? “He would clean me out of groceries and I got tired of going to the store over and over again, so I just stopped keeping food in the house beyond the meal I was cooking. And he started eating regular meals.”

Similarly, she says, he was, at first, afraid to go to sleep in his own bedroom and would crawl under his new parents’ bed instead. “That went on for months,” Carol says. “We didn’t pay too much attention to it, just encouraged him to sleep in his own bed, and eventually that’s what he did.”

Most recently, she says, she told him it was time to stop destroying the furniture. “He tore up my slipcovers, jumped on the couches like a 2-year-old,” she says. “I let that slide for about a year and a half. Then when he turned 13 I told him, ‘You’re a teenager now. I’m not having teenagers jumping on my furniture.’ So he stopped.”

He called Katherine and her husband “Mommy” and “Daddy,” but he calls Carol and her husband by their first names. “That was just what he wants to call us,” she says.

When asked, he says he has few memories of his previous family, other than the fact that “they had a great big kitchen, which was funny because there wasn’t any meals cooked in that kitchen the whole time I was there.”

He prefers to think of that time in his life as one he spent “with foster parents after I left my Russia parents and before I came to live here,” he says.

Carol asked that he not be asked directly about his sister, because the subject makes him sad. “We understand the sister isn’t living with the family anymore, but that’s all we know,” Carol said when Anatoly was out of earshot. The very limited communication between Anatoly’s former and current parents has been through attorneys.

Katherine says that Alexa is in fact living in the latest of several residential facilities. Katherine visits regularly, though less than she used to, she says, it just hurts too much. “I can’t really take any more heartache. And although I have done everything I possibly can for both these children, it brings up tremendous feelings of failure. It is not fair to my other children or husband because it takes me a day or two to recover emotionally after visiting her.”

And, particularly at this time of year, she still wonders if she did the right thing. Or, as Peck has suggested to her several times, whether there is a right thing for cases like these.

“Starting with Thanksgiving I start to mourn,” she says. And this year, as she has every year since Anatoly first arrived, she will buy him a dated Christmas ornament then carefully pack it away. Maybe one day she will see him again, she thinks, and she can give him the collection that shows he was always on her mind.

“A friend of mine lost a child, her child died, and everyone was at her house,” she says. “They brought love and support, they had a church service, it was OK for her to have those feelings. When (Anatoly) left, nobody said anything. No one knows what to say.”

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