

The Boston Globe, Life at Home

At Home with Filis Casey

Adoption agency founder puts families first

By Lisa Zwirn | October 30, 2003

Growing up an only child in what she calls a “very sheltered garden apartment life” in Clifton, N.J., Filis Casey knew she wanted to have at least six children. She has only three, but it feels more like thousands – 5,000 to be exact. For that is the number of children Casey’s international adoption agency has placed since its inception in 1974.

Casey, a lawyer and founder and executive director of the Alliance for Children, started the nonprofit agency after looking into a friend’s bad experience with an adoption in Mexico. She helped another friend adopt a child from Colombia. Nine years later, and while her two children were still young (Matthew was born in 1972 and Sarah in 1973), Casey and her husband, Bob, decided to adopt a child of their own.

She jokes that wanting to take in a child who needs a home is an “occupational hazard,” but Bob, too, was sold on the idea. His impetus was experiencing how difficult it was to say goodbye to a child he had escorted home from Bogotá, a child destined for another family. For Filis (pronounced Phyllis), it was the success of her Wellesley agency and the hundreds of adoptions she witnessed.

“I saw the kids we placed doing so beautifully,” she remembers. “Most adoptive families want babies because they want to experience the baby years, but we already did that.”

In 1983, they adopted a 3-year-old girl, also from Bogotá: Marisa, now 23, is a photographer in New York.

The Caseys live in Newton in a stately, turn-of-the-century, Federal-style home. The burgundy-colored brick façade is partially hidden from the street by 10-foot-high, scraggly lilac bushes (which Casey likes that way).

They moved in 15 years ago after Bob fell in love with the place, but it took Filis a few years to appreciate what she insists is an “impractical house,” especially in regard to how people live now. The lack of a large family room forced the couple to arrange two sofas and a television in the back third of the long dining room, and what was originally a screened-in porch off the dining room was converted into an all-season sunroom and home office.

Bob Casey is a collector of old things and his passion, evident throughout the downstairs rooms, is antique tables. (Another antique, a 1935 Ford, sits in the garage.) Once, when Filis accompanied him to an auction in New Hampshire with the sole intent of blocking the purchase of yet another table, she ended up buying a painting that now hangs over the living room sofa. It’s a captivating portrait of a young woman Casey says clearly resembles their daughter Sarah.

Also scattered throughout the house are knickknacks and souvenirs from Casey's travels, particularly to China. There are Chinese bowls, beautiful, hand-painted snuff bottles (which she stopped collecting when the wooden cabinet hanging on the wall was filled), and porcelain boxes made from the shards of vases that were destroyed during China's Cultural Revolution in the late 1960s.

Casey's career has taken her around the world, to Russia, China, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru, yet she acknowledges being a reluctant traveler. Two years ago, she considered retiring.

"Adoptions are crises oriented," she says. "You send a couple to Russia, they're scared, they've never been out of the country before, and they don't speak the language. The phone calls come at crazy hours."

Instead of retiring, however, she loosened the reins enough to write a book and start a foundation.

The book, "Born in Our Hearts" (due out in 2004), is a compilation of stories told by birth parents, adopted children (many in their 20s now), adoptive parents, siblings, and a man who would have been a grandfather had his daughter now given up her child for adoption. Casey wrote the introduction to the book and plans to write a section with Marisa.

The Alliance for Children Foundation was Casey's brainchild, made initially possible by a generous gift from a former client. Its goal is to improve the lives of those children living in orphanages who probably will never be adopted.

"These are the real forgotten and vulnerable kids," she says.