

For Susie Reeder, Thanksgiving Is a Day to Celebrate Family

By Rodger Mullen
Staff writer



Staff photo by Andrew Craft

Susie Reeder went to Vietnam to adopt 5-year-old Hannah, left, and 20-month-old Ella. Today is their first Thanksgiving as a family.

Susie Reeder always wanted a family. But life wasn't cooperating. "I always thought as a child growing up that I would get married and have children," she said. "But I was approaching age 40 and I realized marriage wasn't in sight." Today, Reeder, 43, will celebrate her first Thanksgiving as the mother of two children — Hannah, 5, and Ella, 20 months. She finally has the family she dreamed of. It just didn't happen the way she envisioned.

As she sits in the gathering hall at Snyder Memorial Baptist Church, Reeder's children play nearby. Hannah and Ella romp through the hall, their laughter echoing. Hannah asks for her mother's help in boosting her little sister up to get a drink from a water fountain. Before they came to live with Reeder, Hannah and Ella were in orphanages in Vietnam, left there by mothers who were unable to care for them. Now, Hannah attends kindergarten while Ella adjusts to a new life half a world away.

The idea of adopting first occurred to Reeder seven years ago. In 1999, Reeder, a youth minister at Snyder at the time, chaperoned a group of teenagers on a mission trip to Kenya. She saw the need for loving families to care for children who lived in orphanages there. A couple of years after that, Reeder chaperoned teenagers at a church camp in Kentucky. An offering was taken for Dillon International, a Christian adoption agency.

Founded in 1972 by Jerry and Deniese Dillon, the Tulsa, Okla.-based agency has placed about 5,500 children, according to the group's Web site (www.dillonadopt.com). It also supports hospitals, orphanages and schools in Korea, India, China and Vietnam. "I thought, 'This is God's way of saying go ahead,'" Reeder said. "I knew that I could be a mom to a child I hadn't given birth to." Reeder got in touch with Dillon International. She asked about adopting a Chinese child but was told it would likely take several years.

Then Reeder turned her attention to Vietnam. Dillon International had recently begun handling adoptions from the country after providing humanitarian aid for several years. At the time, Reeder

said, "I didn't know anything about Vietnam except we had a war there." Reeder began the lengthy process. She had to get police clearances, submit references and make financial reports. Adoption officials visited her home to make sure it was suitable for children. The process was expensive. Reeder said the church helped her financially.

Reeder's first glimpse of Hannah was in a photograph Dillon International provided. "Once you have a picture," Reeder said, "You fall in love with a child you've never met." Two trips to Vietnam were required. Reeder first met Hannah in March 2002, and then had to endure a separation from the child she had begun to think of as her own. Later that year, Reeder returned to Vietnam. The adoption was completed on July 3, a day Reeder celebrates as "Forever Family Day." At that point, Reeder said, "I thought my family was complete."

"Reeder had adopted Hannah just in time. Shortly after that, Vietnam shut down its adoption program," said Jynger Roberts, Vietnam program director for Dillon International. But Reeder wanted to adopt again. She came from a family of five children, and she didn't want Hannah to grow up an only child. With Vietnam closed to adoptions, Reeder again looked to China. But in June 2005, Vietnam resumed its adoption program. Reeder began the process again, this time more familiar with its intricacies. Her adoption of Ella was completed in September.

This time, complications forced Reeder to stay in Vietnam for a month, although only one visit to the country was required. The extended visit gave her an opportunity to explore a country that Americans still associate with a long, divisive war. "It really is a beautiful country," Reeder said. "They're a very warm and friendly people. They don't seem to hold a grudge against the United States at all."

Roberts said Reeder and another parent were the first to adopt Vietnamese children through Dillon International. "To date, nine families have adopted Vietnamese children through the agency," Roberts said, "with another nine adoptions in the works." Because the program is still new the process is not as smooth as it is in other countries. Vietnam has 59 provinces and adoption requirements can differ from province to province.

"I tell them international adoption is a roller coaster, so put on your seat belts," Roberts said.

Reeder, who is now Minister of Missions and Senior Adults at Snyder, is glad to have put the complicated process behind her. Now, she's focused on being a single parent of two energetic girls. "Despite the similarities in their backgrounds, Hannah and Ella could hardly be more different," Reeder said. Ella is strong-willed, much more so than Hannah, who loves to dance and make up songs. Hannah speaks English fluently, while Ella is still learning. But every day, she gets a little more adjusted to her new home.

After nearly an hour of playing in the Snyder gathering hall, the girls are getting restless. Hannah runs to her mother and throws her arms around her.

"You love me," she says. "Yes, I do," Reeder responds.

"They've brought more joy and love into my life than I could ever imagine," Reeder said. "I feel like I'm the lucky one."

Staff writer Rodger Mullen can be reached at mullenr@fayobserver.com or 486-3561.