

# Finding Charlotte

## A family's tale of adoption

Kate and Harry Hamernik, of San Marcos, wanted to adopt before they ever had their first child. Kate's love for her family and passion for adoption is evident within the first few minutes of talking with her. She explains that after their daughter was born it was only natural for them to begin the adoption process for their second child.

"I don't have any biological need to adopt a child," says Kate. She sometimes finds herself justifying her ability to have her own children. "Silas was a choice, not a plan B," she says firmly of her adopted second child, whose life expectancy as an orphan would have been less than 30 years in his native Russia.

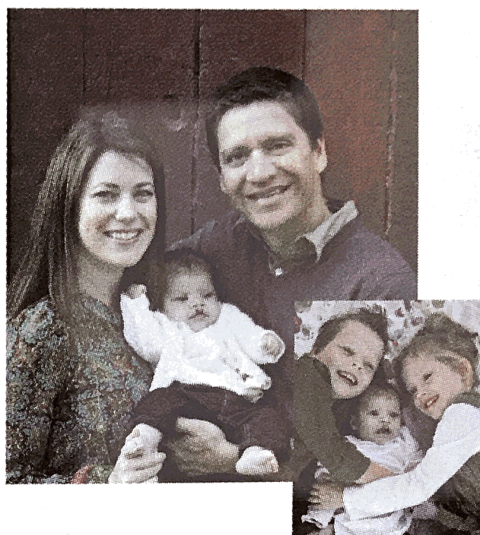
Kate and Harry's journey of adopting from an Eastern European country was typical. Together, and sometimes individually, the couple made three trips to Russia to meet their future son. They were thrilled when they finally brought him home at 14 months old. Their daughter was just 20 months at the time, and Kate laughs at her memories of suddenly having two children so close in age.

"It was crazy," she says. "We already had a toddler, but two toddlers are a lot of work!"

They quickly adjusted and soon felt the desire to complete their family with a third child. Having two healthy children already, they chose to seek out a special needs child, because their chances of being adopted are the lowest. They turned to the organization "Reece's Rainbow."

Kate and Harry were touched by picture of a little girl from the Ukraine and began the process of sending in the paperwork for her. It took months, and although the little girl was available when they requested her, she was adopted by blind referral by another family.

With their heartbreak still fresh, Kate received a message through her website [SanDiegoDealsandSteals.com](http://SanDiegoDealsandSteals.com), where she also



blogs about adoption. A reader told her about a baby that was to be born soon in Southern California that had yet to find adoptive parents. Kate and Harry were told that this baby had a cleft palate, a heart condition and might never walk or talk. Their hearts reached out to this baby who would become their daughter, Charlotte.

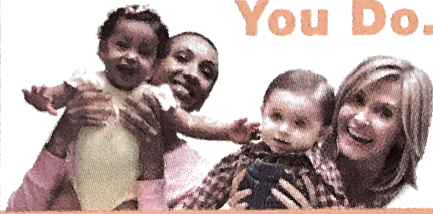
"I look at Charlotte knowing literally thousands of families had access to her file before we did, and she was personally presented to dozens, and she just wasn't good enough for them. I know she isn't perfect, but neither am I," says Kate.

At 5 months old, Charlotte underwent heart surgery—the first of many. Kate explains that people often say that Charlotte is lucky, which bothers Kate because she sees a child having caring parents as a birthright, not something that happens out of luck.

Kate and Harry are now familiar with the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU), and offer advice for other families facing the same trials. Kate suggests getting through one day at a time and preparing for the worst-case scenario while remembering that the outcome is flexible. She advises talking with the doctors as often as possible and educating yourself about your child's condition.

"We ruffled a few feathers in NICU, but every time a doctor left, a nurse made a comment about how we were doing the right thing, that any

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### Kate's Tips for Affording Adoption

- Ask for workplace adoption benefits
- Use federal tax adoption rebates
- Research adoption grants and loan programs
- Remember that foster care adoption is free!
- Fundraise creatively with supportive friends
- Create an adoption fundraiser-sharing site online
- Good old-fashioned cutting back and saving
- Finance (like you would a car but with greater reward!)

doctor with a child in NICU would have done the same thing. They reminded us that we were our child's best advocates," says Kate of their tough decision to refuse a gastric feeding tube for Charlotte before exhausting all other options.

Kate and Harry often think of the road that led them to Charlotte. Had they not lost their potential daughter from Ukraine, they would not have found Charlotte, yet the loss is still very present.

"You can't just swap them out. I think of her every day," says Kate.

Many people consider adoption, but feel that they cannot love a child who isn't biologically their own.

Kate believes that it's important to "step out in faith" that there's more to bonding than simple DNA.

She also feels that kids are very resilient and the scary adoption stories aren't the norm. "Our son bonded beautifully, and we know many people with much older children who had been institutionalized for years and do well in school, are bonded with their parents and siblings, and just are a perfect addition to their family."

Charlotte, who is sitting with us in her high chair, imitates her mom using baby sign language to ask for more yogurt snacks. Her beautiful eyes are alert and full of wonder as she watches people coming and going out of the busy café. I can't help but think that Charlotte is right where she has always belonged. ❖

*Laura Pardo is a freelance writer. She lives in South Park with her husband and their children.*