



LOOKING through a legal deposition during an investigate trip to Guatemala is author Erin Siegal.



DURING an interview with her mother, Mildred, Fernanada scribbles on a notebook.

Journalist traces corruption

As a tourist in Guatemala in 2007, journalist Erin Siegal was surprised by the number of Guatemalan children departing the country with their new American adoptive parents. Watching those children with their new families intrigued Siegal. So when she was looking for a thesis project for a specialized investigative journalism program at Columbia University, Guatemala adoptions seemed like the perfect topic.

“We were surrounded by adoptive families,” Siegal said. “That’s what got the ball rolling for me.”

In late 2008, Siegal launched herself into the inner workings of the adoption process from Guatemala. During her initial research, she was surprised to read a handful of articles about concerns with the Guatemalan adoption process and possible unethical activities happening there.

“It was supposed to be a really dry, boring thesis topic,” Siegal said. “But I do believe in the old adage that money does bring corruption.”

As Siegal started looking closer at the process, she was shocked at what she discovered. While some countries are partners to The Hague Adoption Convention on the Protection

of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Inter-Country Adoption, an international agreement between participating countries on adoption best practices, non-Hague countries have few safeguards.

“In non-Hague countries, non-Hague agencies can pretty much do whatever they want and nobody is keeping tabs on them,” Siegal said. “It’s not black or white — it’s very grey.”

While Siegal was researching, Guatemala was not a party to the Hague Convention. Although Guatemala became a signer to the Hague Convention, adoptions from that country continued for the most part unchanged until the Hague Convention entered into force April 1, 2008 in the United States. At that time, adoptions from Guatemala came to a standstill until Guatemala establishes a Hague-compliant adoption system.

“Since the Hague was implemented there haven’t been any new intercountry adoptions,” Siegal said. “So the implementation of the Hague in Guatemala has reduced the corruption.”

Up until that point, adoptions from Guatemala were filled with unethical, corrupt practices. Through more than three years of research, Siegal followed the story of one adoption and the two mothers impacted by

unethical practices in Guatemalan adoptions which Siegal chronicles in the book, “Finding Fernanda: Two mothers, one child, and a cross-border search for truth.”

“In Guatemala, corruption exists in all levels of government,” Siegal said. “Guatemala signing onto the Hague is a small step forward.”

With a glimpse inside the adoption process, Siegal said she was amazed at how little protection there is for prospective adoptive families. In addition, Siegal said families have few ways of finding out information about their adoptions in process and to find out if the process was ethical.

“I don’t think I realized how hard it was for adoptive parents to get credible adoption information,” Siegal said. “It’s helpful to do your due diligence in doing background checks on your adoption agencies. Just give yourself a couple of hours to research. The stakes are high and it’s better to ask questions at the beginning.”

Siegal encourages prospective adoptive families to do research online before launching into any intercountry adoption. From reading message boards to looking through archived articles, Siegal said much can be learned from the Internet about agencies and the countries they work in.



MEETING with the Alvarado family is Erin Siegal during one of her investigative trips to Guatemala.



AUTHOR Erin Siegal visits with a Guatemalan journalist on an investigative trip to the country.

in Guatemala adoptions

By Kim Phagan-Hansel

“Before you get started, make sure you understand the basics of intercountry adoption corruption,” Siegal said. “There’s been issues in each country.”

And the concerns about adoption practices in Guatemala have existed for a number of years. When researching, Siegal was startled by all the concerns United States officials had about corruption in Guatemalan adoptions for years.

“The U.S. knew the same issues were popping up again and again,” Siegal said. “Those concerns never went away.”

Now Siegal is in the process of posting on her website at <http://findingfernanda.com/> more than 700 pages of Embassy documents regarding Guatemalan adoptions online, including some of the concerns government officials expressed about the corruption in Guatemala.

With the release of the papers, as well as “Finding Fernanda,” Siegal said she hopes adoptions in Guatemala and other countries will improve.

“It’s going to take a different type of collaboration to have a clean and ethical adoption system in Guatemala,” Siegal said. “Creating an ethical adoption process...comes down to transparency.”



THE EMMANUEL FAMILY includes a mixture of biological and adopted children. When in the process of adopting from Guatemala, Betsy became instrumental in helping a Guatemalan woman find her daughter who had been kidnapped and made available for intercountry adoption. Right, the Alvarado children — Susan, Fernanda, Ana Cristina, Fernanda and Mario are reunited after Fernanda and Ana Cristina were taken from their mother and made available for intercountry adoption.

A review of “Finding Fernanda” can be found on page 40. For more information about the book and Siegal’s research of Guatemalan adoptions, including the upcoming release of the Embassy papers, visit <http://findingfernanda.com>.



resource reviews

Finding Fernanda: Two mothers, one child, and a cross- border search for truth

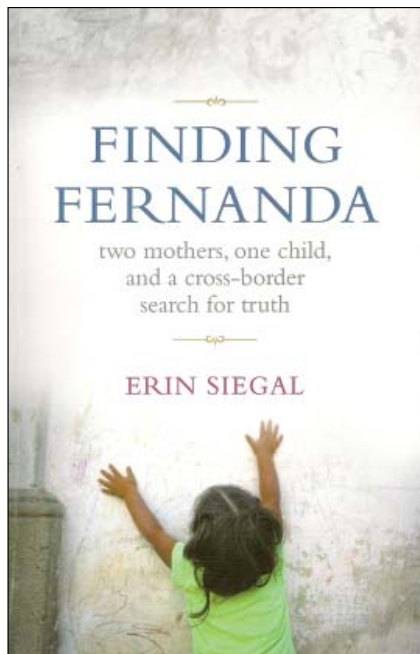
By Erin Siegal
Cathexis Press, LLC,
2011, ISBN: 0-98388-
450-1, 317 pages, \$18.75

Stumbling across the world of intercountry adoption by accident while visiting Guatemala on vacation, Erin Siegal returned home eager to research the Guatemalan adoption process. More than three years of her research is presented in “Finding Fernanda.” While exploring the background and the process of adoptions from Guatemala, Siegal not only uncovers the stories of happy adoptions, but also the accounts of kidnapping, government corruption and unethical adoption practices. “Finding Fernanda” follows the journey of two women who love the same child — Fernanda. Betsy Emmanuel is an American mother attempting to add another child to her family and is given the adoption referral of Fernanda. Mildred Alvarado is a Guatemalan mother whose two children are stolen from her, one of them is Fernanda.

Siegal’s investigative journalism chronicles the journey of one mother’s fight to find her children and another’s quest for truth and transparency in adoption. With the story of these two mothers who both love the same child, Siegal also uncovers a corruption that runs deeply into the adoption community — through government entities, judicial systems and beyond.

“Finding Fernanda” is an incredible piece of investigative journalism. The amount of time, depth of research and commitment to this story is evidenced on every page of this book. The book is a page turner and a jaw dropper as the evidence of corruption runs deep and the story unfolds. Siegal should be commended for her bravery in bringing this story to light in the hopes that adoption processes will be improved to protect both children and families. Siegal took a courageous step to bring this story forward. It is my hope that with this story available for every government official, prospective adoptive parent and anyone involved in adoption to see positive changes can be made to protect children. “Finding Fernanda” is a must-read.

— Reviewed by Kim Phagan-Hansel



Before You Were Mine: Discovering Your Adopted Child's Lifestory

By Susan TeBos
and Carissa
Woodwyk
Zondervan, 2011,
ISBN: 978-0-310-
33103-2, 192 page,
\$14.99 soft cover

Written by an adoptive mother and an adoptee daughter, “Before You Were Mine”

offers a unique Christian perspective on creating a Lifebook that commemorates your child’s birth story. Creating a lifebook for your child sounds interesting enough, but just what is a lifebook and what makes this model unique?

A lifebook is a storybook that acknowledges, celebrates, explains and honors the life of an adoptee prior to adoption. It gathers the bits and pieces of our adopted children’s lives before they joined our families and gracefully organizes it all — Words, pictures, documents and photos — in the form of a story. A traditional lifebook has its roots or foundation in social work and psychology. Professionals from these fields initially identified the need of adopted children for something tangible to hold onto that connected them to their beginnings.

What makes “Before You Were Mine” unique is the inclusion of Scripture that pertains to adoption, sharing the good news that we do not have to make this adoption journey alone.

“Before You Were Mine” is a resource that makes remembering and celebrating your child’s history fun, rewarding and even redemptive. Divided into three parts with questionnaires, worksheets and even homework assignments in each chapter. You will discover how to uncover and organize details of your child’s birth story, make the story both truthful and positive, and use the lifebook to trace God’s faithfulness.

This powerful concept takes the guesswork out of how and when you will talk about your adopted child’s beginnings — and offers him or her a lasting memento that helps them overcome uncertainty and fear to rest in Christ’s unconditional love.

“Before You Were Mine” you will help you relax and rejoice in the beautiful story God is writing for your child. “Before You Were Mine” is an easy-to-read and follow roadmap to capturing, preserving and presenting the historical beginning of your precious child.

— Reviewed by Richard Fischer

