

Watch Closely

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We stared down at the fax showing a solemn toddler with soup-bowl hair grinning from ear-to-ear. My wife, Lynda, and I had been eagerly waiting this first glimpse of our future daughter. Below the photo was a one-line description from the Venezuelan orphanage of the girl who would change our lives forever: *She's a scrapper.*

Three weeks later a package arrived with a half hour video of a confident-looking – and still solemn -- cherubic child toddling among toys in a multi-colored play room. She looked like a mini-Michelin man with her pudgy limbs extending below diaper and skin-tight shirt. We watched closely as she fiercely toddled across a lavender tiled room to bang buttons that made Bert and Big Bird appear, then scooted across the room to hastily stack rings on a plastic cone. We rewound the tape again and again, searching for clues. Was she really deaf, or had caregivers simply misread her behavior?

Before reaching for the toys again, her face tilted up expectantly to the adult whose legs jutted into the video frame. We recognized the voice of Anna Belle, the adoption agency director we'd talked to on the phone.

* Deaf with a capital D indicates a cultural identity for people with hearing loss who share a common culture and have a shared sign language, while deaf with a lowercase d is primarily used when the focus is on the medical hearing loss.

"This is Ariana," she said, by way of introduction. "Ariana arrived at Fundana about six months ago when her grandmother brought her and her older sister, Oriana, here to Caracas from western Venezuela."

Anna Belle turned her attention from the unseen audience to the youngster at her feet.

"Walk over here, Ariana," she beckoned with upturned hands. "What's this, Ariana?" she asked, pointing at a rocking horse.

Silence.

“You see, she doesn’t respond when we talk to her,” came the voice. “We don’t think she hears what we’re saying.”

We were delighted. Lynda was Deaf* herself from a long-line of Deaf ancestors and we looked forward to bringing this child into a vibrant Deaf community. As we watched the video we saw a typical three-year-old who had not yet had access to a language she could understand. Thinking we knew all we needed to know we booked a flight for Simon Bolivar Airport.

A few weeks later we stood outside our modest pension, already damp from the morning sun and our nerves, waiting to be picked up by our adoption lawyer. A short ride later we arrived at an address blanketed by tropical plants that looked more like the entry to an affluent casa than an orphanage. The large bronze sign on a tall white iron gate was encouraging. Los Chiquitos – the little ones – Fundana. As we entered, we were buoyed by the fresh pastels in lemon yellow and teal mixed with crisp white tile. We smiled at cartoon murals of children, animals, and animated foods. Armed with a folder full of lists and documents we crossed into a marbled reception area to meet Rachel, the director.

“You’re here to see Ariana,” Rachel said, standing to greet us. “First let’s take a quick look to see where she is before we begin our discussions.”

We walked briskly passing rows of child-high sinks lining bathrooms plastered with cartoon illustrations of hand-washing technique before moving through dorms with sturdy bunk beds. Tiled benches too close to the ground for adult comfort surrounded by rows of high chairs for the youngest residents filled the dining area. We continued to a lush courtyard filled with young children squirming excitedly in front of a low stage. There we paused to watch a lively puppet show backed by loud merengue music. Rachel pointed to a child sitting front and center. “There. That’s Ariana.” We spotted her immediately. She was the one looking right, left and, once in a while, at the puppet stage, seemingly unsure of just what was happening. Part of the crowd, yet not part of the crowd. As I stood transfixed, already in love with this little girl, Lynda shifted to her best problem-solving mode. “Does anyone have a balloon? she asked. “If we blow it up she’ll be able to feel the vibrations.” With no balloon in sight, we circled back to the office to continue our conversation.

“Do you have any questions?” Rachel asked.

“What can you tell us about Ariana’s history?” Lynda asked.

“There’s not much in the records,” replied Rachel. “They say when she was a year and a half her birth mother was put in jail after throwing hot water on the father. Ariana and her sister went to live with neighbors. When their mother was released she didn’t come for the girls. Eventually their grandmother picked them up, then travelled across the mountains to Caracas, here to Fundana.”

“A family started to adopt the girls, kept Oriana, but returned Ariana,” Rachel added. “We think it was because they suspected she was deaf.”

We’d been warned that Ariana’s chaotic past would mean information would be limited. We also knew that Ariana would be unlikely to be able to tell us more of her story. We’d never know the origins of the puncture wound on her neck or the long jagged scar on her arm. Lynda and I exchanged glances, then looked away to scan our carefully prepared lists.

“What can you tell us about Ariana’s routines at the orphanage? How does she spend a typical day?” I asked.

Rachel hesitated for a moment, then chuckled ruefully. “Well. I can tell you what our routine here at the orphanage is, but it will do you no good. Ariana does whatever she wants: climbs on the tables, grabs food, runs around rooms. When she first came to us a few months ago she followed no routine. She has improved.”

As we strolled through the halls to formally meet Ariana for the first time, we had little time to consider the implications of Rachel’s statement. Since Ariana was deaf and none of her caregivers used a visual signed language there had been no directions, instructions, explanations, plans, or promises in Ariana’s past. And she knew nothing about the maelstroms that had taken her and her sister from their mother in Merida to an orphanage in Caracas.

Over the next few days of getting-to-know-you visits to the orphanage, we learned to keep all four of our Mom eyes riveted on the speedy sprite as she zipped around the playground. One day, a few minutes in a miniature playhouse quickly morphed into a quick

climb up the building's fire escape. Hands waving frantically to get her attention, Lynda scrambled up after her and dragged her down as Ariana kicked, screamed and fought to go back to the ladder. "She's a scrapper, all right," we chuckled to ourselves.

A few days later the solemn-looking three-year old vanished as we left Fundana. As we waited in Caracas over the next two weeks - for processes to proceed, inspectors to inspect, and documents to clear - we delighted in seeing Ariana splash in the hotel toilet, wiggle with Mom Lynda in the bathtub, and delight in the world. Her energy was contagious and her ever-changing facial expressions, reminiscent of Tom and Jerry cartoons, made us chuckle. Every day was discovery as we watched sloths ease hand-over hand across tree tops in the Caricuao Zoo and tramped between soaring skyscrapers and crumbling mountainside favelas as we clung to her tiny hands. At meals we learned of Ariana's love of all things dairy, including small squares of butter, roadside Cachapas –corncakes wrapping a stick of cheese, and queso in any form. We wondered if she'd lived near cows in her early days. We would never know.

I was enchanted by my new identity now symbolized by the Venezuelan sign for mother - thumb and forefinger pinching an imaginary piercing on my left earlobe, coupled with the Yiddish-English Ema we spoke in recognition of Lynda's Jewish heritage. Lynda, now 37, and I reveled in the alignment of the stars that had brought us to this chosen child. How could this new family constellation not be ideal with two mothers who were bilingual in American Sign Language and English, and Ariana who had waited three years for a language that could unlock the world for her.

While we took in the sights of the city, our hands moved continuously as we signed our way through the day while traipsed our way through the city. We signed about butter and buses, cats and cars, sloths and soldiers. We signed about feelings: "You look happy." "I think you're tired. Time for sleep." "Looks like you're mad." "You're very silly now." There was only one catch. Ariana didn't yet know that critical information came through her eyes. Though we watched her carefully for cues that would unlock her past, her attention was seldom on our hands.

The amnesia of hope was strong. As we packed for the trip home to Chicago, we quickly managed to forget the paragraph-long record of losses in her file. First mother, grandmother,

finally sister, and now country. We also forgot the evening in Caracas when we'd sat on plaza steps watching the swirl of families in the square. Suddenly, Ariana had stiffened, eyes darting as she quickly shoved her just-gifted doll behind her back. We looked across the tiny head, at first puzzled, then knowingly nodded to each other, thinking uncomfortably of the catastrophes already experienced in her young life. Convinced that surrounding her with an abundance of language from two cherishing parents was the answer, we reached for language to mirror feelings. "You look a little sad," I signed to her. She turned away, dry-eyed, clenching the doll in hiding.

Two weeks later we were home in Chicago, intent on filling our days with fast-paced explorations of all the city had to offer. Her eyes filled with wonder at the Field Museum's dinosaurs, Lincoln Park Zoo tigers, searching for shells at North Shore beach, and catching glimpses of deer at North Park Nature Center. But her favorite was the neighborhood dogs that befriended her. Nightly we all flopped bone-weary into our beds. As the air chilled with autumn air, we learned to grab her coat hood in anticipation of the whirlwind she became, arms flailing, twisting and turning as we crossed streets. From time to time the scrapper in her emerged unexpectedly. She threw toys and hurled shoes from the back seat of the car at Lynda's head as she attempted to keep her eyes on the road.

Fall turned to winter and the exuberant freedom of wild runs in parks disappeared. As snow accumulated beyond our windows, we decided that it was time to try indoor activities. By noon we'd already spent hours making cookies, role-playing vet (with Moms as the dogs), signing picture books, then an all-too-short afternoon nap. After dinner we settled in, wondering, in our exhaustion, how we could spend the long evening ahead.

Videos were a favorite of ours since closed captions had become common on DVD's. We had a plan. Lynda could read the captions and interpret the story in ASL. A simple, recognizable story seemed our best bet and a recently released Disney comedy-adventure, *Homeward Bound*, seemed perfect. It was the story of three pets who travel hundreds of miles across the Sierra Nevada to find their long-lost family: a classic plot full of animal antics. Perfect for a cabin fever afternoon. DVD inserted, we settled into our viewing spots, Lynda and I curled up with

comforters. For Ariana, settling in meant standing on the couch while I stationed myself close by to catch her if a fall seemed imminent.

Lynda and I laughed at the voice-over banter of the anthropomorphized animals as we watched Chance, a naïve young bulldog; Shadow, a wise aging retriever; and Sassy, a snobby cat, catch Frisbees, taunt each other, and create havoc in their human family. Ariana's eyes were riveted to the TV as she alternately sat and stood, face impassive.

Slowly, the mood of the movie shifted as the family decided to move to San Francisco, temporarily leaving the animals with a friend but unable to communicate to their pets the short-term nature of their departure. Periodically Lynda waved to catch Ariana's attention or jumped up to stand beside the TV, hoping to interpret the captioned story in ASL.

"Look, the family went away, but only for a while. They'll be back to get their animals soon. But the animals don't know that. The dogs and cat are sad." Ariana refused to look at Lynda and we quickly learned that she wanted nothing to do with ASL while focused on a movie. Clearly there were limits to our language immersion agenda. "Her eyes are busy," we thought.

The movie animals are at first confused, then determined as they set off across mountains and rivers to find their family. Ari, who seldom stayed in one spot for more than fifteen minutes, remained motionless in her stance, eyes wide. As we watched the animals faced arduous days and scary nights. Companions were lost, then found, then, finally, the animals were successful in their mission. In classic Disney style the concluding segment of the film has the family enjoying Thanksgiving Day in their new yard when first Shadow, then Sassy, and finally a tired and injured Chance race headlong over the horizon to their cherished family in the new location.

Lynda and I looked expectantly at Ariana's face, eager to share the satisfaction of the happy ending with her. To our wide-eyed surprise, her shoulders shook as tears ran down her face and she sobbed. She sobbed as Chance leapt on his owners and Shadow rolled on the ground at their feet. She sobbed as Sassy curled around their legs. And she sobbed as the family reached down to hold their pets close and buried their faces in fur.

We felt helpless as Ariana pulled away from attempts to hold and comfort her. All we could do was witness her response to the film, so different from ours. She had seen her story in this Disney classic, and seen herself among this motley collection of animal. Without a word or a sign Ari had shown us where her heart was, and, finally, we saw it.