

**Congressional Executive Commission on China Roundtable;  
"China's Children: Adoption, Orphanages, and Children with Disabilities."**

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*"The Grace Children's Foundation is a New York based 501(c)(3) organization which seeks to improve the lives of China's orphans through directed health, education and humanitarian aid programs in cooperation with Chinese officials responsible for their care."*

Thank you Ira Wolf and John Foarde, Senator Baucus and Congressman Bereuter and thanks to the Congressional Executive Commission on China for including me in this timely roundtable discussion on China's children: adoption, orphanages and children with disabilities.

I am honored to speak on behalf of The Grace Children's Foundation, an organization that has as its priority the educational, medical and humanitarian needs of the children in Chinese orphanages.

Although some of the focus of today's events revolves around the issues of human rights and legal reforms within the People's Republic of China, my input will not serve to advocate for or pontificate on those topics. My presence and peripheral involvement in the political and social changes taking place in China revolve around one specific clientele, one specific special interest group: abandoned children in Chinese orphanages and foster homes.

The story of The Grace Children's Foundation really began on Christmas Eve, 1994. My husband Brooks and I arrived in Hong Kong earlier that day just as the sun was rising and flew on to Shanghai. We had begun the incredible journey to adoption and to our daughter Grace.

Christmas carols were blasting in the background when we arrived at the hotel and I was so excited I could barely contain myself. Brooks was steeling himself until the right moment, guarding me from any possible disappointment. We went to China without an agency, pretty much by the seat of our pants. We arrived at the hotel and were informed that we should unpack and freshen up and that our daughter would be there in two hours. I smiled to myself as we rode up to our room in the elevator, all the while thinking, "This is it, we are finally here!"

Then I panicked like I never have before. I told Brooks that I had changed my mind. He looked at me and said "What do you mean?" I had been the driving force. Although he was very eager, it was I who pushed everything along. I became terrified at the last minute, I imagine much like a woman about to give birth saying, "O.K. that was great but I want to go home now."

I shut myself in the bath and contemplated what I had done. What if I had ruined my marriage? This all sounded good but what would be the reality? What if I didn't like her as much as I thought? What if she didn't like me? I dressed and the phone rang and the messenger said "Hello, Mrs. Robertson, your baby is in the lobby." I said "Send her up."

Send her up? What was this, room service? I panicked further and propelled Brooks to the front door, pushing him through the crack saying "I cannot do this. You go and explain that I cannot do this." And I shut

the door. Then, I got hold of myself. I squared my shoulders and opened the door and walked out in the corridor. There I saw Brooks holding the most beautiful person I had ever seen. He walked toward me and handed her to me. I said, "I love you Grace." From that moment until this I cannot imagine my life without her. On that Christmas Eve I saw in her eyes, all of the children.

## **Why We Exist**

Inside the People's Republic of China there are thousands of children living in orphanages and foster homes. The overwhelming majority of these children are girls. Few possess more than the most basic clothing and many of them struggle with treatable medical problems.

Without formal schooling or the crucial anchor of family these orphan children face a lifetime of struggle for even the most basic employment. These are the children who wait. The Grace Children's Foundation, through its programs and relationships has been allowed passage through what had been traditionally a wall of privacy in the orphanages.

## **Organization History**

In 1994 Nancy and Brooks Robertson adopted their daughter Grace in Shanghai. Like other adoptive parents, they were moved by the plight of the orphans who remain behind, most of whom have little chance of ever being adopted. The Robertsons and like-minded parents held discussions through 1996 about the creation of an organization with the mission to improve the conditions under which these children live. The parents' group formed an organization that was incorporated in January 1997 as The Grace Children's Foundation (TGCF).

Since its founding, The Grace Children's Foundation has been singularly dedicated to bettering the lives of the "children who wait." The Foundation acknowledges that the Chinese government and its people have a plan to alleviate the dire circumstances of the children. It is China's plan and they are the architects. The Grace Children's Foundation and others are some of the builders on the team.

The Grace Children's Foundation works in co-operation with representatives of Chinese orphanages and other governmental and semi-governmental organizations who welcomed the concepts and provided access into the orphanages. This professional credibility has allowed TGCF to work with the Ministry of Civil Affairs and the China Charity Federation (CCF) which since April 2000 has joined with TGCF to assist in all three areas of the Foundation's work. In 2002, TGCF received permanent status as a publicly supported charity.

This type of cooperation fostered by a focus on children leads to better relations between the United States and China. If our two nations can cooperate on meeting pressing human needs, we can build on that and cooperate in other areas.

## **Past Program Accomplishments**

Over the past five years, The Grace Children's Foundation, with the support of individuals, foundations corporate sponsors, medical facilities, educational institutions and merchant donors, has created pilot programs to support the orphans of China.

The Grace Children's Foundation **Health Initiative** has brought ten orphans to the U.S. for life altering surgeries. The children and their caregivers were provided transportation through an ongoing partnership with Northwest Airlines and its *Friend of China* program. The first five children from Louyang and Beijing Children's Welfare Institutes were brought to the United States in April 2000 to the University of Virginia

Medical Center where they received craniofacial surgery. In January 2001, TGCF and Medical City Dallas Hospital and the North Texas Hospital for Children made possible the treatment of five more children from Shanghai Children's Welfare Institute by surgeon Jeffrey Fearon, M.D. (who has since become the Chair of the Medical Advisory Board for the Foundation). All ten of these surgeries resulted in permanent and dramatic improvement.

In August 2001, TGCF began work with Orbis International to link the orphan children to adequate ophthalmic care in China. The Foundation is preparing for four more children from Tianjin, Chengdu and Louyang Children's Welfare Institutes to receive highly specialized treatment in orthopedics, ophthalmic and craniofacial care at Children's Hospital of New York Presbyterian, St. Luke's Roosevelt Hospital and NYU Hospital for Joint Disease in November 2002. All of the above medical staffing (the children who have come to the United States have benefited from the services of 15 physicians and dozens of adjunct medical personnel) surgery, facilities, housing, food and transportation were donated to TGCF.

One of the children coming to New York this year is a little five year old girl from Tianjin. She has been waiting a lifetime to have an operation for severe scoliosis . TGCF is preparing for her medical care and foster care. We await her arrival with much enthusiasm!

Seven of the ten children who were taken care of in U.S. hospitals have been adopted and the other three are now in foster or specialized care in China.

One of the children who came to the United States for surgery now lives in Richmond with her adopted family, recently visited New York. She is now five years old and lives with her mother, father and sisters and brother. She helped to unveil the aircraft at the launch of Northwest's *Friend of China* program when we left from Shanghai on our first medical mission to UVA in Charlottesville. When I carried her up the stairs to the aircraft, I whispered in her ear that she would never be lonely again. I know that her life is good and she has brought so much joy and happiness to everyone who knows her.

TGCF is currently collaborating with American based Chindex International, Inc. and its newly formed foundation American Education and Health Foundation (AEHF) in Beijing. The combined efforts has yielded a rotating medical service to serve the orphan children directly in China at United Beijing Family Hospital which is owned by Chindex. American medical personnel from across the United States who have been touched by the plight of the orphan children, have pledged their support to travel to China on a rotating basis with services in orthopedics, internal medicine, craniofacial, cardiac care etc. With core medical staff residing in China, the children's care is ongoing rather than episodic. AEHF believes, as we do, that "...improving the health of people in other countries makes humanitarian, strategic and moral sense."

We are also grateful to Jennifer Weippert who has joined TGCF with her The Red Thread Project. The proceeds from Red Thread's beautiful gift baskets directly benefit the children coming to the United States for surgery.

The Grace Children's Foundation's **Education Initiative** is supported by the Department of Education at Brown University. Dr. Cynthia Garcia Coll, Chair, Department of Education and Jin Li, Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Brown University are acting as advisors on the design and implementation of a curriculum K-8 with an emphasis on special needs education. Sally Deitz, Ph.D., (in special education) co-author of *Learning Activities for Infants and Toddlers: An Easy Guide for Everyday Use* and Chair of the Education Advisory Board for TGCF, is heading the Education Initiative. Dr.Deitz is an experienced trainer for Children's Resources International (CRI) whose curriculum 0-8 has been widely used for the newly and independent states of the former Soviet Union. This curriculum includes a component on inclusion of

children with disabilities and is being considered for adaptation by TGCF. Dr. Elizabeth Irwin, Ed.D. of Queens College will assist Dr. Deitz in planning, adapting and training.

During the summer of 2002, Brown University student Yaniv Gelnik obtained the Andrea Rosenthal and Mimi Sherman Grants. Mr. Gelnik traveled to China for a month's educational assessment of orphanages in Langfeng, Tianjin, Chengdu and Lijiang, where he studied the approach to teaching and learning in the orphanages.

Education is the key to liberating the children to a place where they can flourish. We are working to help provide this essential tool that will give the children a chance to elevate themselves beyond survival. We believe it's their chance for a life with dignity.

In an ongoing effort through its **Humanitarian Aid Initiative**, The Grace Children's Foundation with its sponsorship from United Cargo has sent hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of donated clothing, shoes, bedding, wool and fleece accessories and other necessities to the orphan children in China. In October of 2002 TGCF began shipping \$400,000 worth of in kind donations. Kathy Korge Albergate, Senior Vice President, Interstar Marketing and Public Relations, heads the Humanitarian Advisory Board.

The Grace Children's Foundation has won a Telly Award for an eight-minute film *Children Who Wait*.

I was honored to carry the Olympic Torch sponsored by Chevrolet and Coca-Cola on December 23, 2001 representing the Foundation's work.

Coca-Cola has generously arranged for an Olympic Torch to be passed at the end of this year from The Grace Children's Foundation to the Minister of Civil Affairs, Douji Cairang, in Beijing in a ceremony to thank the Ministry for the outstanding work they have done on behalf of the adopted children from the United States and the children who wait.

## **The Future**

The Grace Children's Foundation is well situated to help China's orphans immediately and into the future in a way that bridges the complex divide that often separates China and the West. Through its constructive work with the orphan children and the concerned Chinese agencies, the Foundation can add substantially to the well-being of the orphan population while serving to forge new understandings and cooperation in a shared humanitarian endeavor. Individuals and corporations who support the efforts of the Foundation stand to gain unique rewards in China—the satisfaction of helping children in need, and the appreciation of a grateful nation.

The positive though unintended diplomacy these children have generated is remarkable. In what other venue between our two countries do we continuously work with a feeling of hope and accomplishment? No one who has had the privilege of meeting or working on behalf of these orphan children has remained untouched by their spirit and poise.

The children have unwittingly become ambassadors, bridges actually, between our two great nations. The hope they represent, the cooperation between representatives of our two countries that they have engendered, the mutually acknowledged respect for life they embody...they continue to serve as catalysts for understanding, compassion and respect between our countries. I have been truly honored to stand with these children, see their love, beauty and inextinguishable courage...to work hand in hand with those responsible for their care and well being...to realize that true diplomacy and hope can be born out of such meager beginnings. When I am overworked, perplexed, frustrated at the pace of our undertakings, I recall the words of a friend who said to me when you are feeling overwhelmed, "Go to the children." I do and in their eyes I

see the hope for our two countries, indeed for humanity itself. These children, the thirty-five million orphans worldwide, all of our children...they are the future.

Again, thanks to the Commission for inviting me here to share some thoughts on China's children and the wonderful spirit of cooperation between our countries that they represent.

Please visit our website at [www.gracechildren.org](http://www.gracechildren.org) where you will see photos and information associated with TGCF.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to acknowledge my husband Brooks Robertson, my mother, Joanne Lepp, my sisters Kathleen J. Lee and Robin Small and my brother Bradford Chapman Lepp and thank them for their loving support. My father Joseph R. Lepp, ret. U.S.M.C., who passed away the year before we traveled to China whose message to me was "Do the best you can Nan, for the true test of a man or woman's character is not in their final achievement in life, not whether they succeed or fail, but rather the means they employ to achieve their goals...honesty, kindness, love and consideration for those who have less than you and understanding of those who have more, so do the best you can, we will always be near to help."

Thank you to all of the individuals and friends including Brian and Renee Luwis, Jay and Julie Lindsey, Ed and Barbara Salvesen, Chi Ming Kan, John and Claudia Sherwood Servidio, Christine Fahey, Eric Mortensen, Msgr. Thomas P. Leonard, Yo-Yo Ma, Vance and Pamela Aloupis, Victor and Kathryn Creech, Joanne Roberts, Alan and Sherry Renne, Robert and Gail Kantor, Joan Frost, Scott and Margaret Roche Ballin, Claire Gruppo, Ben and Pat Reid, Michael and Rebecca Young Lesh, John Foarde, Don and Marieve Young, Nicholas J. Howson, and Suzi Hilles who have contributed their time, expertise and financial support to this endeavor. Without these people, none of what we have accomplished at The Grace Children's Foundation would have been possible. And most important of all...I am grateful to the children.

I would like to commend the medical institutions and Jeff Fearon for opening the doors wide to let the children come in. I would like to acknowledge Northwest Airlines and the NWA family, and John Watkins, our champion there. United Airlines and Connie Bello, Rich Pannulo and Anthony Serraro are also true friends of the Foundation. Even in this time of economic struggle, both airlines have found room in their aircrafts for the children and supplies for the benefit of the orphans,

I would like to acknowledge organizations, such as the Philip Hayden Foundation, Families With Children from China, Amity International, Half the Sky Foundation and many more which have as their mission, to serve the children. In addition I commend the adoption agencies and social workers whose work is detailed and must be filled with stories of joy and compassion

I would like to commend the agencies responsible for the adoption procedures in China, the China Center for Adoption Affairs and the Ministry of Civil Affairs responsible for the well being of the children. I commend the caregivers in the orphanages and foster homes in China. I would like to thank Yan Ming Fu for his personal message of friendship and support in a dark hour in September 2001. Thank you Wu Yijing for always helping me to convey my thoughts when I am in China.

And Grace Kathleen Ayres Robertson who has given me the greatest honor I will ever know, to be her mother.

*The Foundation solicits funding and goods and services, both domestically and internationally, from corporations, foundations and individuals. The Grace Children's Foundation is not an adoption agency and does not make cash donations to China's orphanages or the Chinese government.*