

Help is available to navigate adoptions

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6, were adopted from Latvia and Russia.

"Our family went through a very challenging time," Gittleman said, recounted her older son's bout with reactive attachment disorder, which often affects children who spent time in orphanages or the foster care system while they were very young. Children with the disorder often have difficulty bonding with their new adoptive family and sometimes feel rage toward their adoptive mother, but also at siblings, teachers and schoolmates.

"During that time I had a lot of support through this group, by praying for us, by understanding and also taking the time to bring in educated counselors who are familiar with" reactive attachment disorder, Gittleman said.

"I can stand by and sympathize with and support a family that's waiting for their child coming from Romania that isn't quite here yet. And yet, my ears are also listening when someone's talking about their 18 year old who's struggling with issues with their identity."

Grafted Families was founded by Dody Lucarini, herself an adoptive mother, for the purpose of bringing families together to share fellowship and information.

"The whole adoption industry can be overwhelming," Lucarini said. "There's a variety of families at Grafted Families - domestic adoptions, private adoptions, biracial adoptions, sibling group adoptions, Department of Social Services adoptions and international adoptions. It's a good place to talk to other people."

RADical Healing, another Charlotte adoption support group, focuses specifically on helping families of children with reactive attachment

disorder heal, said a spokeswoman for the group.

Guest speakers at RADical Healing's monthly meetings have included physicians, social workers, parenting specialists, and advocates for children's educational rights from the Exceptional Children's Assistance Center in Davidson.

The emphasis is on teaching parents therapeutic parenting skills - specific ways they can overcome their child's misbehavior and help the child learn to form a healthy bond, said the group's spokeswoman.

Nancy Thomas, a leading national expert in reactive attachment disorder, will present three days of seminars to the public during March 18-20, 2004, at Covenant Presbyterian Church in Charlotte. Advance registration is required by e-mailing radicalhealing@adelphia.net.

Another adoption support group, Adoptive Parents Together, meets monthly at the Family Center on Elizabeth Avenue in Charlotte.

Adoptive Parents Together has a two-fold mission, according to clinical therapist Ann Dodd, who teaches adoptive parenting sessions at the family center.

"It affords adoptive families opportunities to meet each other and socialize with each other, and to help them normalize their experiences - they're not alone in the challenges they face."

On the third Saturday of each month, adoptive families are invited to come to the Family Center for parenting classes on a range of topics specific to adoptive families and separate sessions for children, pre-teens and teenagers, Dodd said.

The parenting sessions help parents address challenges of rearing adopted children.

"More and more of the children who are entering adop-

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- **Carolina Adoptive Families** (704) 846-7348
- **Grafted Families** (704) 892-8005
- **Hannah's Heart** (704) 643-5241
www.hannahsheartnet.org
- **RADical Healing** radicalhealing@adelphia.net
- **Southern Piedmont Adoptive Families of America** (877) 772-3292

tion are older and come from a backgrounds of loss, neglect, abuse or institutional care," Dodd said. "Because of that, the adoptive families sometimes have more challenging behaviors to deal with. Adolescence is an especially challenging time."

Like Grafted Families, Adoptive Parents Together serves a diverse range of families.

There are married couples and single adoptive parents and many African American families.

Many of the families at Adoptive Parents Together have older children who spent time in the foster care system, Dodd said.

Another local support group, Southern Piedmont Adoptive Families of America, also offers help to parents struggling with adoptive childrearing issues. But SPAFA also wants to lend a hand to folks trying to navigate the complicated legal and financial issues of a first-time adoption.

Guest speakers at SPAFA meetings have included tax lawyers, social workers, and adoption agency representatives. New families tell their adoption stories to the group at the monthly meetings, and parents share ideas and

resources about navigating the adoption process and parenting, said 2004 President-elect Ed Cazel.

"The other thing that's important that we do is a mentoring program," Cazel said. "We match up (new and prospective parents) with somebody who's been through the process."

A lot of people find that the paperwork issues are almost overwhelming."

Informational sessions help prospective parents determine whether they should opt for a domestic or international adoption, whether they should maintain contact with the birth parents (open adoption), and how to acclimate a child adopted internationally to life in the United States.

SPAFA also has a spin-off support group specifically for single adoptive parents, Cazel said.

Cazel, 64, is an adoptive father of two young children

from Bulgaria and Russia.

SPAFA's 150 members serve as a great resource to parents considering adoption or struggling with childrearing issues, and meetings are open to anyone.

"People have to just come and check us out," Cazel said. "We offer a great resource to people getting started."

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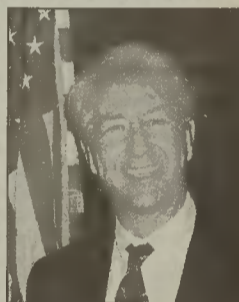
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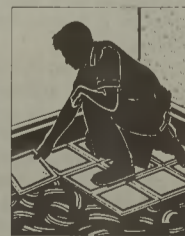
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