

Beautifully real and perfect for each other



Jen Tripp was in the 2nd grade when the show *Unsolved Mysteries* played an episode about a man looking for his long-lost little sister. They had been separated decades prior when a family adopted the infant girl and left the brother in foster care. The heartbreak from severed family bonds in this story particularly struck Jen as she is a little sister who even to this day, adores her big brother. Jen recalls how impactful this story was, imagining what her life could have looked like had she been that little girl. "I cannot imagine my life without him in it. It was at this pivotal moment in my childhood, nearly thirty years ago, that I made the decision I was going to adopt a sibling set," she stated.

Flash forward to March of 2021. After settling down in Maryland and taking some time to adjust and find stability in her new job, Jen began her adoption journey with an initial training followed by a home study. In December of 2021, she really began looking into potential sibling sets within foster care once the licensing process was finalized. Jen's organization and drive kept her grounded in this lengthy process. "My agency told me you want to inquire about 10 families a week," Jen stated, "so I made a whole spreadsheet of children I was interested in."

On a crisp January evening, Jen came across the [Connecticut State Department of Children and Families Adoption webpage](#) and [The Heart Gallery](#); which features profiles of youth who are currently living in foster care. At this point, she already had compiled multiple spreadsheets of research and inquired about forty sibling sets. She distinctly remembers reading Isaish and Eli's profiles on The Heart Gallery. "I thought their profiles captured such key aspects of their identity, their spirit, their cleverness and curiosity, their quirkiness; especially for Eli..." Jen stated. "But I also really saw this caring connection between two brothers, the affection they have for each other." The boys' social worker, Brittney Kilfeather, reflected upon creating this posting with the boys noting that their photograph was the two of them hugging.



When asked about the process of making the posting with Brittney, Isaiah recalls how being placed without his brother Eli was the only 'dealbreaker' for him in addition to staying connected to family.

Getting adopted with a sibling, and as an older youth, can be difficult. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Children's Bureau notes that as of September 30, 2021, there were 114,000 children and youth waiting to be adopted who were at risk of aging out of foster care without permanent family connections. In addition to that astronomical number, more than one in five children waiting for adoption are aged 13-17 and the average age of all children waiting to be adopted was 7.5 years old.¹

¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau. "National Adoption Month 2023: Outreach Toolkit." *Child Welfare Information Gateway*, www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/nam-outreach-toolkit.pdf.

Despite the odds stack against them, Jen moved the boys to the top of her spreadsheet and inquired immediately. Then she had to wait and sit with the anxiety in the unknown..."The choice was out of my hands," stated Jen. "I needed their team to make the choice on who would now be best to adopt the boys. Would they approve me?"

It wasn't until March of 2022 that DCF decided to move forward with Jen. It was around this time that Jen also began working with Brittney to learn how she could best prepare for the boys. "If you could clone Brittney, we would fix all the problems going on. She made the whole process super easy. What really stood out to me was transparency," Jen stated about her relationship with Brittney. Brittney facilitated their initial meetings with the boys' foster parents and asked direct questions so that Jen could fully understand their situation, background, and needs. Jen feels this transparency allowed her to fully prepare and ultimately made their placement into a smooth transition.



But approval did not just stop at the boys' team, Jen also needed to gain the boys' approval. From the moment Eli learned about Jen, he was apparently ready to move in with her. On the other hand, Isaiah, both older and wiser, was hesitant. He had already been aware of the disruptive nature of past placements.



Jen found meeting them initially on Zoom to be difficult, for many of the same reasons we've experienced during the pandemic - long periods of silence while waiting for the internet to buffer, youth's attention span is harder to gain after so much screen time, and it's simply just harder to feel that in person connection. "Brittney was also paramount in helping with our visits," recalled Jen, which began around June of 2022. "We did two visits a month and she would bring the boys down here to Baltimore once a month and I would drive up there to Connecticut."

During their second in person meeting, any anxiety leftover from their initial Zoom meetings dissipated and everything changed. "I drove up to Connecticut," Jen stated. "We spent the day together and ended the evening at a trampoline park. We were all bouncing together when Isaiah turned to me and said, '*Jen, look at me.*' I did. In that moment, there were no more doubts for me." Jen could feel that Isaiah was opening up and that he was ready to give her a new chance as his forever mom.

Both boys were ready to give it a go.



Then, they all had to wait for their placement date which would end up being January 7th, 2023. During this waiting period, Jen focused on preparing for the boys by learning as much about their past as possible so she could continue to nourish connections to their roots while she built new connections and opportunities for the boys. "The other side they don't talk about is how the support of the adoptees' care team makes all the difference," Jen notes while reflecting upon the significance of nourishing connections. She met with their social worker, grandmother, and foster mother. She went to school and

interdisciplinary meetings. Jen even spoke with their therapists and their psychiatrist to help better understand their needs.

"I learned more and more about them and what to expect. It did not scare me to know what their needs would be," Jen stated. "It empowered me. I knew what I was getting into. I had months and months to prepare. The transparency of the team allowed me to be ready for the reality of becoming a parent overnight."

In addition to her own preparations, Jen found it key to figure out how she could make the boys feel comfortable in a new home. She ended up moving locally and purchased a new home before their placement, including them in every step of the way to empower them in the process of making a new home together. They were able to tour the home before Jen bought it, they picked out their own rooms, chose their room colors, beds, and furniture. Jen's deliberate decision to include Eli and Isaiah in making decisions on their new home allowed them agency in this transition. The boys were grateful for this inclusion, Eli noted how "it just made everything feel right."



Finally, after almost two years of research, training, meetings, and preparations the anticipated wait was over! The boys moved in, and their adoption was official on August 18th, 2023.

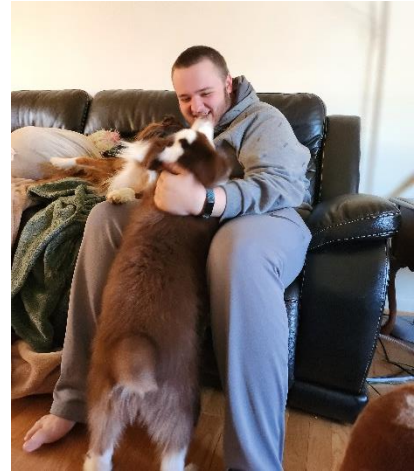
Jen continues to learn their interests and finds joy in nourishing the boys during this phase of identity development - a big reason why she was excited to adopt teens.

"There is something really special about the adolescent phase," she stated. "The core job of a teenager is self-identity to be a part of that journey is something I'm so happy and so proud to get to be a part of - to be able to create a safe space for them to figure out who they are, especially in the context of everything that they've gone through in the past."

As a single mom, Jen also notes how the independence of teens is another perk for adopting older youth. "Isaiah is already driving me around," Jen exclaimed with a smile. "He does an excellent job and was really responsible from the get-go." In addition to Isaiah's help with driving, the boys function as a team. They're great at taking care of and supporting one another because they are so bonded. If Jen is still at work and Isaiah gets home first, he will take care of Eli making sure the house runs on the same schedule.

When asked what his favorite thing is about his adoptive Mom, Eli reflects upon how he loves watching *Dr. Who* and having movie night with his forever family (both dogs included). Isaiah notes how appreciative he is of Jen's priority to embrace his friendships by always leaving time to see friends during family visits. Jen even hosted family and friends for his birthday last year. "I firmly believe that the more family that we have the better," stated Jen.

"It was absolutely important for me to maintain connection and what I told their biological family from the get-go is my job was not to replace anybody. My role is to add, not to take away. Maintaining those family connections has been very important to me."



When asked what she wishes other prospective adoptive parents could know, Jen wrapped up the interview with candid reflections upon how despite their many successes, they are not perfect. "From the moment they moved in, they threw my life into chaos," says Jen. "I've never in my life been more tired, but I've also never been more content and more happy. I can't imagine my home without them in it. Go into this process for you and know that you're going to change a life and it's going to be beautiful."

While they may not be perfect, the Tripp family are beautifully real and perfect for each other.