THE LAWTON CONSTITUTION MAY 12, 2002

Abandoned baby becomes senator's granddaughter

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A baby abandoned on an old soccer field in Africa a few days after her birth has become the adopted granddaughter of a United States senator.

Molly Rapert, an award-winning business professor at the University of Arkansas, says she doubts the adoption process was any easier because her father is U.S. Sen. Jim Inhofe, R-Okla.

The senator often pulls out pictures of 17-month-old Zegita Marie Rapert. He has backed efforts in Congress to make the adoption process easier.

Rapert, associate professor of marketing at the University of Arkansas' Walton College of Business in Fayetteville, Ark., and her husband, businessman Jimmy Rapert, have four children, ages 6, 5, 3 and 1. The faculty at the school recently named her the "University Teacher of the Year."

The couple already had three boys when they chose to adopt another child. They looked first for a baby from the U.S., but the waiting times were long, and the Raperts wanted a younger child close to the age of their other children.

Children are available internationally for adoption from many countries, but the Raperts felt an affinity for Africa because the senator has been doing mission work there for years. A family friend told them that Ethiopia has babies that need a home.

Zegita was found a few days old at an old soccer field in Addis Ababa, the capital city. Poor people in Ethiopia live in huts on the site, Rapert explained.

Rapert said she was able to meet the man who had found Zegita, who explained that he found the baby lying on the ground.

"He said he finds about five children a month. Normally out of this five, one has already passed away and four are living," she said.

After she was found, Zegita was placed in an orphanage with 42 other children. The orphanage lacks food and basic medicines, Rapert said. "They said they probably lose one a month," she said.

After Zegita had been selected for the Rapert family, she contracted pneumonia and was taken to a makeshift hospital.

"It's certainly not one by our standards," Rapert said. "It was pretty questionable whether she would live."

She did recover, although when the Raperts flew to Africa to get her, they found that Zegita had received an IV treatment through her head.

Because AIDS is a terrible problem in many African countries, the Raperts were worried about whether Zegita had been infected. They were relieved when Zegita tested negative.

Zegita is now a healthy toddler with huge eyes. Inhofe often brags about his new granddaughter and pulls out photographs of her.

"Ethiopia is famous for beauty, like the queen of Sheba," Inhofe said.

"She did not have a birth name. We have a great friend from Ethiopia who named her Zegita," Rapert explained. "Dad normally refers to her as 'the Z girl'."

The Raperts' other children, who had been told about the Biblical story of the queen of Sheba, assumed that Zegita was royalty and gave her a crown, Inhofe said. "She wears her crown around, age 1, and struts around," he said.

JEFF DIXON/STAFF

During a recent meeting with The Lawton Constitution's editorial board, Sen. Jim Inhofe pulled out pictures of his granddaughter.

Ethiopia is one of the oldest countries in the world, and became a Christian country very early. Christian missionaries reached the area in the early fourth century. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church is one of Christianity's oldest denominations. "Christianity saturates the country," Rapert said.

Several languages are spoken in Ethiopia, including Amharic, a Semitic language spoken by about one-third of the country's population.

"Two of our boys can speak some basic Amharic," Rapert said. "It's such an interesting country."

The adoption process included a home study, FBI fingerprinting and interviews with the Immigration and Naturalization Service, Rapert said. "It's amazing what you go through."

Rapert said that the paperwork for adopting their new daughter was heavy. She had to fill out the same information in forms over and over.

"There's got to be a way to streamline the process, while keeping the interests of the child a priority," she said.

Inhofe said that he did not intervene to try to make the process easier, although officials knew she was the daughter of the U.S. senator. If being a senator's daughter helped cut through paperwork, "it sure didn't cut through much," he said.

Rapert said she avoided mentioning her father, fearing that it would make the process more difficult. The Raperts were afraid of being asked for bribes, so "we actually made an effort to never bring it up."

The Raperts went to Ethiopia and got their daughter on Aug. 12 and brought her home Aug. 17.

PHOTO COURTESY MOLLY RAPERT

Sen. Jim Inhofe and his wife, Kay, greet their granddaughter.

"Dad brought her home with us," she said. "He met us in Germany."

Rapert, who says that she never thought she would be part of an interracial family, said she wanted to stress that both of her parents and her mother-in-law were "strong, strong supporters of ours throughout the process." (Rapert's father-in-law is deceased.)

"I think this is probably a side of Dad that folks don't see very often, but it's the side of Dad that has had the strongest influence on my life and the way I cherish being a parent," she said.

Inhofe said he wants to make the adoption process easier.

"If that hadn't happened, that little girl would be dead," he said, referring to the adoption of Zegita. "Number two, there are hundreds of thousands of young couples who want to adopt, but it's become a racket."