

Concluding Comments Conference
Adapted from the speech of Gary Gamer
President and CEO
Holt International Children's Services
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As the *Looking Forward* conference comes to an end, special thanks go out to Susan Cox and the rest of the Holt team of staff and volunteers for enabling this event to take place.

I would also like to single out the Advisory Committee to the conference, particularly Jeff Miller and Janice Ross for their dedicated efforts as well.

We are indebted to adoptees & adoptive families for the privilege of being able to listen and learn about your life experiences—allowing us to cry and laugh with you.

Thank you to the outstanding speakers and moderators of our conference.

Our two conference priorities were to encourage collaboration and promote best practice services and systems for children to address this world crisis of children in need of families.

Over the last three days we have had some most vivid memories. Who will forget those images left in us by speaker Jolly Nyeko from Uganda on the subject of collaboration do's and don'ts. She talked about:

- Hippos making waves and drowning out things in their path
- Snakes sneaking around, biting those in the way
- Chameleons changing colors to fit the need
- And then the story of two goats tethered to a line who must figure out how not to cross their lines and get tangled up to get to the clump of grass together. Goats working together in this way is not easy...collaboration is not easy.

A second important set of comments on collaboration I want to remind us of came from our speaker, Victor Groza from Case Western Reserve University. He said we will fail unless vital sectors to work together; these include:

- Secular groups and faith-based groups: given the power and pervasiveness and effectiveness of both sectors.
- Government and NGOs: I have not seen one country where the government does not need the NGOs, and NGOs do not need the government. They are absolutely dependent on each other for creating system change for children. NGOs are vital in developing skills and models and advocacy, while governments are necessary to ensure sustainability of work and effective monitoring.

This leads us to best practices & systems... and back to animals. Eric Malanga used the image of the bureaucratic elephants with the long birth period: such long birth periods are too long for human children. We know all too well of courts & administrative bureaucracies that make children wait, and they suffer as a result. Justice Luciano from

the Philippines and Judge Howze from Washington D.C. personify the legal and government courage and commitment we need. Judge Howze told us of how U.S. regulations require review of foster cases every 3-6 months; but she makes a point of far more frequent reviews to put greater pressure on chances of permanency—to ensure young people’s voices are heard.

No less than the children’s futures are at stake. They fall victim in the absence of inefficient bureaucracies not committed to children.

Indeed, it was Ambassador Charles Ray who said, “Nothing less than the future of the planet is at stake if we don’t get it right for children.”

Getting it right means transforming ourselves as adoption agencies. Hans von Loon, Secretary General for The Hague Convention, in his soft voice said something very important that needs repeating: As agencies become accredited under The Hague, they become actors of international law that are empowered to be agents of change for children. This is a most unique instance in international law where agencies are recognized to do this. Over the last decade, Holt International has really taken this to heart. It has moved the agency I direct to make changes—some not easy—and step to the plate for children in a variety of ways.

I urge adoption agencies not to look to the burdens of The Hague Convention...but the opportunities associated with it:

- to make sure the utmost of ethics are attached to every international adoption placement, so intercountry adoption can continue and flourish as needed;
- to do everything possible to ensure the release of a child is not a financial transaction, but a social service in the best interest of the child.
- and where possible, to contribute to the so called principle of subsidiary; to invest in services and training to enable children to stay in their birth families and countries if possible and in their best interest - including promotion of domestic adoption and other family-based alternatives.

Let’s remember what Alexandra Yuster from UNICEF told us, that old cliché, “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” We can help so many more children be in families through the many interventions as described by orphans and vulnerable children consultant John Williamson in his presentation.

Preventative services have the benefit of being so very cost-effective. In many cases, it doesn’t take huge or costly interventions to enable children to stay in families.

Speaking of cost-effectiveness, Molly Holt, from Holt Children’s Services in Korea, told us of Holt Korea’s study that compared the cost of foster care to institutional care. Without even quantifying the better physical and emotional health of a child, the cost is about ½ for those children in foster care. John Williamson told us that other studies have shown much greater savings.

At this conference, we were staggered by the dimensions of the crisis facing children in need of families:

- about 140 million orphans as estimated through UNICEF
- millions of children in orphanages and institutions
- the impact of disasters, in the first four months of 2005 alone, 100,000 people were killed in disasters; imagine the impacts of this on families and children.

It is easy to look at our glass as being half-empty with these numbing statistics...but we choose to look at it as being half-full. Progress is being made.

Dr. Lee, Hong-Koo from Korea told us that about 58% of adoptions in that country are through international adoption; but he was very proud of the 42% children now being adopted by families in Korea, so different than 20 years ago, with greater governmental and agency efforts in this regard.

With all of this input, we know what inspires us the most...

- Smiles on children's faces; smiles we have all seen that remind us of a child's psycho-social development...not just the physical development of children through more conventional medical models of care but the importance of sustained and caring interaction with children through families, connecting up and relating one on one.
- And we love to see the sparkle in children's eyes; having hope and something to strive for. At this conference we learned about the resilience of children—particularly if we get to them early with intervention--as discussed by our speakers Dr. Dana Johnson and Dr. Lisa Albers.
- We rejoice when we witness unconditional love given by adoptive parents and other family-based adult caregivers of children...we are reminded how absolutely essential these parenting figures are - as is our support to them - if we are to really impact this global crisis. This includes...
 - Recruiting, preparing and supporting adoptive families, and not having onerous, but safe and efficient processing of adoption for children.
 - Support given to foster families, it's not just the financial support, this is minor, it is case managers being there to help them resolve issues and problems
 - Tending to the needs of *all* caregivers, including those in institutions, the emotional needs they have...the trials and tribulations they face
 - And with birth parents or extended families who need support through crisis situations...how important counseling and support is to bridge the difficult times and enable children to be in safe and loving and enriching families.
- We must also invest in local communities. We are inspired when we see local communities actively involved in care for vulnerable children in need of families

vs. the all too pervasive scene where children in need of families are closed off to communities...behind the bars so to speak, hidden away.

- Compare this to the realities of transformed orphanages into community centers of social workers going out to assist in family preservation, such as what we have heard about from our Romanian colleagues
- Community centers and mobilization in African villages full of AIDS orphans, where there is mentorship and education and support being provided by community leaders and citizens, as described to us by our speaker from Nairobi, Fr. D'Agostino.
- We are inspired when we see community associations of parents who have children with disabilities, mutually supporting each other with one net result being these children staying out of orphanages. Often times this is with the help of day care centers and a variety of community services under one roof for these children, as described by our speaker from Russia Maria Ternovskaya.

These are the components in our work that inspire us: children in safe, loving family environments...parents (adoptive & biological) and other family-based adult care givers providing unconditional love...and communities actively engaged in the crisis of children needing families.

What this adds up to really is a very basic declaration that I believe we can all subscribe to (and take with us out of this conference) – either as individuals and/or as organizations and promote in our own special ways...

The need and right for a child to grow up in a family

I have in my hand a very simple document and a very simple act that we are naming, The Eugene Declaration. If you feel so moved, I invite you to sign this declaration.

I believe the declaration in its simplicity speaks for itself...

Recognizing, as stated in the Preamble of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, “that the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding;”

Recognizing that children face tremendous challenges and obstacles in achieving their potential as human beings when faced with institutionalization, homelessness, abuse and other factors where children are not in safe and supportive family environments;

Recognizing there is a tragic crisis involving millions of children around the world who are outside of family care, or are at extreme risk in vulnerable family situations;

Recognizing that cost effective supports and preventative services can be provided to parents and communities to better enable them to deal with family crises and support for children to remain in families; and

Recognizing there are a variety of family options around the world of benefit to children separated from birth parents including adoption; kafala; and variations of foster, kinship and other family-based care;

We hereby, commit ourselves to the recognition and principle, and its implications for improving the lives of children into the future, that

Every child has the need and a right to grow up in a family

Promulgated at the International Conference:
Looking Forward, A Global Response for Homeless Children
Eugene, Oregon U.S.A.
October 21, 2006

This declaration goes beyond a number of international conventions relating to children by stating emphatically their right to a family.

I thank you for signing on to this declaration, and taking it with you as a rededication of our efforts.

In closing, let me say how honored Holt International and our colleagues here in the Eugene/Springfield metropolitan area are that you came to the Looking Forward conference and shared with us your challenges and dreams for children.

By working together we can do so much more for children in need of families. We have both the faith and the technology that can make this happen.