

Embracing Family Through Adoption with Michele Katz

Introduction and Guest Welcome

Candace Dellacona: Welcome to the Sandwich Generation Survival Guide. I am your host, Candace Dellacona, and I have a special guest for everyone today. My friend and fellow lawyer, Michele Katz, is joining us. We have Michele on the podcast today, not so that we can talk shop about being lawyers, right, Michele? Um, right, not today.

We have an amazing story to share with all of you and to talk about Michele's passion, which has resulted in the amazing Plus One Adoption Foundation. So we're gonna talk about all things adoption today, and what Michele and her team at Plus One Adoption Foundation. Is doing for people and families who are looking to grow their own family.

So thank you for being here, Michele.

Michele Katz: It's my pleasure and honor to be here with you. Thanks for the invite.

Candace Dellacona: Yeah, so excited. So let's get into it. For those of you who don't know, Michele, Michele is a brilliant intellectual property attorney. We're in two separate parts of the country. Michele is in Chicago. I'm here in New York City, as our listeners know. Michele and I have crossed paths professionally.

Aside from the fact that she's a brilliant attorney, she is incredibly passionate about the adoption world and the way in which adoption can really grow your family. So let's get into it and we'll talk about Plus One and your background.

Michele's Adoption Journey Begins

Candace Dellacona: So we know you're a mom of four.

Michele Katz: That's right. So I have two boys and two girls. It's like where do we begin in this storyline? 'Cause it is, it was quite a journey to get here. As it is for so many families. It's how are we going to create our family for those that want children, right?

If I think back to when I first started thinking about adoption, I was in college. I was walking across a field with my then boyfriend, now husband. It seemed like outta the blue, I said, I wanna adopt a child one day. Literally, I said that to him. he said cool. And he just kept walking and I was like, all right. So I just put a pin in that. And then when we got married and eventually we wanted to start a family, we started fertility treatments. My husband is a cancer survivor, so that was part of our history and I'm like, well, let's do both at the same time, and I kid you not. At 40 weeks we got a call that our daughter was ready.

Candace Dellacona: So you're about to have a baby.

Michele Katz: Well, we did, we weren't pregnant yet. Okay. That didn't happen later. That happened later.

Candace Dellacona: Got it.

Michele Katz: But I tell people like if you're, wanna increase your odds in whatever it is, right? We're goal oriented women.

Candace Dellacona: Yes.

Michele Katz: Then I just ran things at the same time and my adopted daughter came first and I got that phone call at 40 weeks, basically gestational. And we, two weeks later with a the first 12 months for dummies, we hopped on a plane and we headed to Columbia.

Candace Dellacona: Amazing.

Michele Katz: Now, she was an infant. She was only four months old. She's now, just so you get perspective, she's now 19 and turning 20

Candace Dellacona: Yep.

Michele Katz: And just this summer she interned at the orphanage we adopted her from.

Candace Dellacona: Oh my gosh. I love that.

Michele Katz: So she got to go back. She got to get her file because at 18 it becomes accessible to you. Once it's you have the wherewithal to try to figure out those steps and we thought, you know what, it's easier. Go down there. It's college, summer, let's beef up that resume, work on your Spanish. And really for so many reasons it was such a great idea for her to go down there. We've got very good friends that she stayed with and she did a month long internship there. And of course now we're at the end of the summer. She's back at school and right before she left, I did a 30 minute interview with her, which I'll talk about later. We'll get posted in the Plus One Adoption Foundation.

Candace Dellacona: So that's how your journey began

Michele Katz: that's what all began. That's what all began then.

Adopting an Older Child

Michele Katz: We have a blended family. I ended up carrying two boys after that and we joked like we wanted another girl. We clearly don't make girls, so let's go back to Columbia. All right, so that's of course we're fast forwarding many, many years. We did go back to Columbia. Just imagine it's December of 2019. We have no idea what's ahead of us as far as COVID and all the things. And we'd already done the baby bag, the bottles, the diaper. We'd already done all that and we thought, okay, let's adopt an older child. And we adopted a little girl. Well not so little eight years old. And that was a totally different experience. This is where the seeds were planted for the Plus One Adoption Foundation. So it was a very different experience when you adopt an older child. You in our case anyway, we spent more time at the orphanage and it was a different orphanage than where our eldest was adopted from.

So we we'd already done the paperwork all that, but you end up spending more time there. Okay. She being eight years old, we were working on certain, language barrier, acclimation, things like that. It's different. It's a little bit different as you can imagine. If you were an 8-year-old girl and you're meeting these people for the first time.

But I will tell you then we, when we met her, she ran and jumped into our arms. We were able to do like a call before like a Zoom type call before. And we sent her a book of pictures of the family, that you can make online. And we sent that down. And so she was able to get to know us a little bit. Just to give people a little bit of, in insight

Candace Dellacona: Yeah,

Michele Katz: into how that works, at least for in our situation. And then we were in country working on the rest of the paperwork and court, getting everything official. Everything's quite official there in Columbia, and so

Candace Dellacona: And what's the timeframe for that, Michele? So you arrive in Columbia and how long were you in country?

Michele Katz: Only two weeks. So, you know, I let, that's not very long.

Candace Dellacona: no.

Michele Katz: And so we were, we got home December 31st, 2019. And she'd never seen snow before. She'd never been on a plane before. When we left the orphanage just to get to the hotel we were staying at, she asked, are we in Chicago?

I'm like, no, honey. And we showed her the map and everything. And it's just so hard to understand as a child sheltered, like really hadn't had that kind of exposure to anything international. And contrast that to our first adoption where there was a strike. We speak Spanish in the house, but at that time with our first adoption, my Spanish, I was new.

I was definitely newer, much newer to Spanish and I knew the word huelga, like who knows the word strike in a form. You know, we're like that word. I knew the first time around because there was a strike and I was there for nine weeks.

Candace Dellacona: Wow. Okay.

Michele Katz: With a baby. And that, that's a whole nother, that's a whole nother podcast. But all that is to say is I do think the universe evened itself out with this two week in and out. Okay. And we made it home before New Year's, and it was snowing. So if you could imagine, we pull up in the taxi to the house, and as we're walking up the stairs to get to the front door, she's grazing her little fingers along the stairs to touch the snow, and then went in and then we showed her to her room, like her room. I don't know if she had ever had her room before. She was sharing with my eldest. The two girls were in the same room together, but we, that was also intentional, so she didn't feel alone.

Candace Dellacona: Yeah, what a beautiful picture that, that, sort of an image that conjures for me and probably for all those listening.

Founding Plus One Adoption Foundation

Candace Dellacona: And you've made this very intentional decision to have adoption for you be a choice as opposed to the quote last option. And I know that that was the origination of Plus One Adoption and the foundation so that you could flip the switch and really change up the dialogue about adoption.

Can we talk a little bit about that piece and how, your mission with the foundation is to provide the resources to the family. So let's talk about maybe how you founded the foundation and what you do for families now.

Michele Katz: Absolutely. So it was because of that time spent in the orphanage that I was seeing other children that were available. Not everyone's available for adoption. Some are working out certain family dynamics and, but many are. And do people know that they're there? Is there a way we can streamline this so that these kids don't wait as long as they do?

And then and same with parents, prospective parents or parents who are trying to expand their families via adoption. Make a choice. And so I'm, and I'm seeing this, I'm seeing all these kids running around and doing, like arts and crafts projects and playing games and all that, all the things. And I thought there's gotta be a better way, there's gotta be a better way to ensure that the process can be faster and cheaper and to get these kids in forever homes. So we get home, she starts school. Then it's shut down. Everything shut down.

Candace Dellacona: COVID, right.

Michele Katz: right? COVID, so she was in school, not that long. Couple months, everything shuts down and she's back at home. She was a non-reader. She hadn't gone to school. She's eight years old. She hadn't been to school. Not in the way that, that she needed to be on par with the other students.

And course she didn't speak English yet. Now it's a fight to get her to speak Spanish. I kid you not, but, and we do. I still, I'm like I don't know what you're saying. She's you understand me, and I'm speaking her in Spanish and she's responding to me in English. That aside, of course, back then, now, five years ago, almost six, yeah, almost six years ago. That was not the case. And so it was really tough, but, and I'm working from, I've got now four. She's my fourth and final. So I've got four kids at

home. My husband's a first responder type, and I am running my law firm Advitam IP, the intellectual property for my day job from home.

And what, every 15 minutes I gotta figure out what she's doing next. But that being said, when the plate's full, you pull out the platter, right? This is, this is survival guide, right?

Candace Dellacona: So true. How do we survive the sandwich generation? This is how we add more to our plate.

Michele Katz: Exactly, and by the way, the grandmothers did appear on both of these Columbia trips, so we're talking about sandwich. So they were involved the, so we had three generations involved in this. By the end of 2020, I had laid the foundation for the foundation. Name, branding, all the things, launch plan. And then we launched in March of 2021. And the mission exactly right, like you said, is to change the mindset. One, change the mindset around adoption. It's not a last resort. It's a choice. A choice you make. And one of the ways to do that is to dispel fear. So there are a lot of misconceptions about adoption. Let's get real with it. You don't know what you're gonna get no matter what. Okay? We put in as many parameters, we can. And when we're trying to make these decisions, and I've had kids, it feels like you know every which way. Maybe not every which way, but more than one way. That is something we really focus on. And we even have a whole series on Instagram called Plus One MythBusters that comes out, basically every Tuesday on Instagram. So that was important to me. The other aspect was credible and vetted resources. How do we cut? There's too much on the internet.

Candace Dellacona: Yes, yes.

Michele Katz: There's way too much. How do you know? Word of mouth. We trust friends. Can we create a network or a database is another way to look at it, of, resources that people can trust. And that's what we've done.

Candace Dellacona: Right. And so let's talk about that a little.

Navigating the Adoption Process

Candace Dellacona: You've made the decision to expand your family and the path that you're choosing, that you've decided to embark upon is adoption. And I think, as the Sandwich Generation Survival Guide podcast, what we try to do is provide resources to people, and that is what your foundation is doing, where you're trying to level the playing field and make sure that the information that people are actually accessing, is reliable and vetted. Let's say you're a person who's about to start your adoption journey. Where do they begin? I've just, you know this personally. I've had family members that have expanded their family through adoption and great friends who have done the same.

And it seems like the. Pool is so full and getting through the noise is so complicated. There are consultants, there are agencies, there are attorneys. So can you talk about a little how a family could come to the foundation and try to help them figure out where to begin and where do you begin?

Michele Katz: Contact us. That's the first step. You can DM us through social, you can email us through the website. So that's the first thing. But I'll tell you once we're talking, it's me, another board member who's adopted, who's quite knowledgeable in the area as well. So what we do is the first question is, what are you looking for?

What are the pros of adoption is that to some extent you can decide. So some people are like, I want an infant. Okay, if that's what you want, then there's certain channels that are easier to get to reach the goal. You wouldn't, we wouldn't necessarily recommend going international right now.

Candace Dellacona: Oh, so that's great. So knowing a little bit about what you're seeking helps you forge the right path.

Michele Katz: Exactly. And budget, let's not kid around. Just like anything, you wanna know in advance what the cost might be.

Candace Dellacona: Yeah,

Michele Katz: And some would argue like international versus domestic at this point, they may be on par as far as expense and others would say not necessarily. So there are some of the depends, but there's also a whole foster to adopt, which is very low cost in comparison to maybe hiring, a private consultant and things like that.

And there's a hybrid of things. You can do multiple things. So people work with an agency, they might also work with a consultant. And not all consultants and not all agencies are the same. Just like when you're hiring, if someone was hiring an IP lawyer, you've gotta find the right match for you.

It would be the same for consultants, for example, or agencies. And having a consultant I think is quite helpful. To hold your hand through the process because we actually don't broker adoptions. We provide resources that you can rely on. That's what we do.

Candace Dellacona: And that's really important, because when you enter into the picture of the adoption journey, you're the guide holding the person's hands to help them find vetted professionals. And I assume that you also unfortunately know about agencies, lawyers, and consultants who maybe are not exactly on the up and up. Is that fair to say?

Michele Katz: That is just as valuable, knowing who not to go with than who to go with.

And yeah, when I do talk to people and if they're frustrated. They've already been through the process. I would like to know who they are. We're not out there to bad mouth, but we certainly wanna know that we're not recommending anyone on the bad list. So far so good. But it's true and that is critical because our whole mission is to cut through it, there's so much out there.

You gotta cut through everything to get to the jam because people can spend years on research. You don't wanna wait year. No. And you don't wanna spend, money unnecessarily. Who does? That would be, ridiculous.

Candace Dellacona: Absolutely, and I think, from the perspective of starting a family, it's such an emotional process and I think as with any decision that you're making that is so intertwined to emotion and love and wanting to expand your family, sometimes it's hard for people to see the forest through the trees.

Michele Katz: And we do tell people, you know it, we have a show that we put on via Instagram every month called the Bright Side Live. And we interview someone who can support in some way the adoption community. I'm the host. I'm the one asking the questions. It's basically this but flipped. And it could be an adoptee, it could be an adoptive parent, it could be someone who is actually working in the industry.

Candace Dellacona: Right.

Michele Katz: It could all, we had an energy healer on also to help parents and children.

Candace Dellacona: Yeah.

Michele Katz: Who've been through potentially trauma. We had a micro movement specialist. Babies don't, especially adopted ones, maybe they didn't get enough belly time. And so all of those things that we take for granted, they can stick with you your whole life from infancy. You don't even know it.

And you're stuck. And so we've had all sorts of guests and they can be found right on the grid of our Instagram, which is Plus One Adoption. And you'll know you're there if you see like a square with

that one little missing piece, like a Rubik's cube. And then, you're there and just scroll. And most of them are half screens. And we're actually paused for a moment on the Brightside lives.

I don't know if you saw this, 'cause I know you follow us, Candace, but Instagram has a rule that if you're not at a thousand, we were like at 800 something, then you can't do Instagram lives anymore. So I was just, I hit start to interview the executive director at the Illinois Adoption Center, like super helpful for the adoption community. We had to, we pivoted and we did a zoom and we were able to post that. But until we get a thousand, we actually won't be doing the live ones.

Candace Dellacona: But I think, with all that being said, I think, starting the journey is so important and getting through the noise is important and finding that support and the vetted professionals.

Post-Placement Support and Resources

Candace Dellacona: But you just brought up something that is very unique to the adoption foundation space, which is the post-placement need.

And think that is something that is really hard for a lot of parents of adopted children to talk about openly because, we all want to be parents and particularly folks who could not perhaps birth their own children, and they have been able to expand their family through adoption and there are difficulties that arise. As with any parental situation, and that's, I think, so important to get out there. To take the stigma away. Because even if you birth children, we both know you as someone who has adopted children, who are your children and your birth children. Our kids can have all sorts of issues.

And I think that there is a stigma that exists that people don't wanna talk about the difficulties that you may have with those post placement needs because we're still grateful just like we are otherwise. So tell us about those support resources that you've been able to provide for those who have already had placement and they have needs?

Michele Katz: And especially if you have multiple kids, it's also the relationship between siblings.

Candace Dellacona: Yes.

Michele Katz: think about the fact that I had three and my youngest was the youngest for a while, and then got displaced from that position. So it's not just parent to child, but also between the siblings.

I would also point out that it's not necessarily a need. We're shifting that to a, want to want to adopt, right? Because we encourage, there are a lot of children out there that need homes. Actually, there are more of them, right? There, there are fewer people adopting.

We need to increase the number of people adopting and they, you don't have to need, they just have to want. And when you.

Candace Dellacona: a great point, Michele, thank you for correcting me on that, that, just to clarify is that there are so many children that have the, their need to be with a family, and we wanna to flip the script and talk about the want. And again, changing the dialogue from an option to a choice.

Michele Katz: And when that child is placed with you, there might be some support from the agency for some time, maybe. But it may not be exactly what you need, right? If they're coming to check that the home's okay and all that, that's not actually what you, that's not what you

Candace Dellacona: Right.

Michele Katz: right? Attachment is really important. Kids that don't have the ability to attach whether they're like genetically connected to their parents or not. Have problems later in life. There's a lot of books on, on this and studies and so you want to obviously make the best situation for your children.

And so working on attachment, we actually worked on it. We worked with a Thera play expert who I actually interviewed as one of our Brightside lives. And that was actually in person and we were doing some of the activities. In front of the camera so people, live recording so people could see some of the activities. Some of it is as benign as just rubbing lotion on the child's hand, just like in a little circle right on the top of the hand and on, and then doing the same, in the reverse, right? So parent to child, child to parent. Other things were, wrapping the child in a blanket. Maybe you have one parent or guardian on each, like on each side and swing 'em like a hammock. That was some, so they feel secure, right? And so there's all these things I never would've necessarily thought to do until I actually did Thera play and it was great. And so yes. Even if it's tutoring and thinking kids need to catch up, sometimes you need tutors that are better suited, for if your child has, like mine who struggled with math concepts and reading, you need extra help.

Candace Dellacona: And I think, what you bring up is important too, because, is a unique perspective and perhaps a pediatrician is not going to bring these things up to you, that you have a different perspective. And one of the amazing things about your foundation is that it provides parents the reason for these things. Because maybe in their own orbit, they're the first to have grown their family by adoption and they don't know things like this. So they can see a behavior or a trait or a characteristic in their child and not put the dots together that it was derived from the adoption. So can you talk about that too and how the foundation is so great at helping parents, A, connect the community and provide this insight that they wouldn't otherwise have?

Michele Katz: I'm so glad you brought this up because one of our resources that there are pediatricians that focus on adoption. I've even interviewed one, the adoption doc. She's great and she does telehealth visits, so you don't even have to necessarily be, in, in the same city. And she can help. And there are others like her. When we adopted the first time, we went to University of Chicago and there was a doctor there who focused on adoption. It is, it was extremely helpful for him to have that lens and helpful for us. Then of course, he moved away. And then it turned out that our pediatrician, who we'd been working with is, and our daughter was older anyway at this point and could, articulate and describe things as opposed to our infant daughter the first one with our first adoption. But having someone to talk to just to even bounce it, to have to take a call. Who focuses on adoption? Absolutely. So we even have resources in that category.

Community and Final Thoughts

Candace Dellacona: And that's amazing, right? Part of why I started this podcast, which you know a lot of our listeners know, is to provide resources. And in providing those resources, we're creating a sense of community. And I think that when you go through something and not everyone to the left and right of you have gone through that, it can feel lonely.

And it can feel isolating. Creating the foundation in the way that you have, especially with your perspective, Michele. And just to give you props, as a lawyer we sometimes look at things maybe more logically and solving a problem. Probably you more so than me, because you're intellectual property and definitely more science minded than I am.

But it's really this beautiful community that you've been able. To create with the platform to provide the resources also. So having this community surrounding you that will, provide perspective parents with this really warm hug of resources and the feeling of not alone is just so remarkable. And that's the best thing that you've done, with this foundation. So I really applaud you on that.

Michele Katz: Thank you. And it's a passion project. I don't, this is not a paid position. And the board members also. We have a full board, we have quarterly meetings. It's a 501(c)(3). It's legit. And we're almost four and a half years old or so now, and I feel like we're really making an impact.

We even had on one of the, mentioning the Brightside Live again, we even had someone we help. Who used one of our resources ended up adopting an infant as they wanted to, and then she came on the show to talk about her experience. And so it, it was like a full circle moment, like we did it or

we're doing it. It's not enough. I never feel like we're doing enough. And also just, it's one thing, we have a mission, we're trying to do what we wanna do, but it's also very fulfilling for me. To know that we are making an impact in this space, that we're moving the needle which is very important.

And we joke, so I have a private wine label. I don't know if we've ever actually even talked about this.

Candace Dellacona: No. No.

Michele Katz: I'm a sommelier also just for hobby. My husband too. But I really have always enjoyed wine and what pairs better than wine and parenting. So I started my own private wine label. It's called Wine for Good. Trademark registered, as well as the copyright for the label of the bottle. Unfortunately I don't have any of the bottles with me now to show you, but we're working on our next wine will be coming out and probably realistically, probably in another couple months. But if people wanna keep an eye out for it, they can actually buy the bottles, a percentage goes to, to fund the foundation. So if you're buying gifts and that kind of thing, people do care about, I know I do, if I'm gonna be buying gifts anyway, I might as well know that it's going to support a good cause.

Candace Dellacona: Yes.

Michele Katz: and yeah. So that's coming out. We have a small batch from last year. This one's a little bit bigger. And so we'll just, we'll see how it goes. And all that is to say is cheers to Wine for Good and Plus One Adoption Foundation. And I appreciate, anyone listening and thank you, for having me on to share the message on this.

Candace Dellacona: Michele, as a mom, as a partner, a spouse, the founder of this amazing nonprofit, a sommelier. You do it all. And, thinking about being stuck in the middle and trying to prioritize. You've certainly provided a great example of someone who is making their way through and trying to make it easier for those who come after us, certainly in the adoption space.

I really admire you so much and for everyone out there listening, please go give Plus One Adoption Foundation a follow on Instagram, on Facebook. And if you're feeling charitable, I know Michele would appreciate the donations and to buy a bottle of wine. Now that we know that she's a sommelier.

And for all of those families out there who are thinking about making the choice to adopt, you have a guidebook with Plus One Adoption Foundation. You have the resources now and we're so happy to share them. So thank you so much for joining us today, Michele.

Michele Katz: My pleasure. Thank you for having me.