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Testimony in Favor of AB 28

My name is Nancy Petersen. I am here today wearing two hats. I am a social worker, with my clinical social work license, and during the day I am an assistant professor at the School of Social Work at UNR, where I administer the state's in-service training program for all social workers with the three major public child welfare agencies. I provide training in all aspects of child welfare, from child protective services to foster care and adoption. I am also an adoptive mother, with two adopted children, a daughter, 14, and a son, 10. I would like to testify in support of Assembly Bill 28 from both of these perspectives, for I believe that open adoption is in the best interests of the child. Open adoption means that the adopted child knows as much truthful information about his birth family as possible, up to and including varying degrees of personal contact with them.

Both of my children are in open adoption situations. We demonstrate the wide range of open adoption possibilities. With my daughter, we have what could be described as a Very Open adoption, on the continuum of openness - we met and visited her birth mother even before the baby was born, we were present at the birth, and we have maintained an open and ongoing relationship with her birth mother since then that includes frequent phone calls and visits, in her home in Fresno as well as our home in Reno. In addition to her birth mother, my daughter knows her husband, their daughter (her half-sister), her parents, and many aunts, uncles, and cousins. With my son, we know the identity of his birth parents and talked to his birth mother on the telephone before he was born. We were in the hospital to see him two hours after his birth. However, his birth mother chose not to meet us in person, as she was not comfortable with the idea of accidentally bumping into us around town. She also chose not to stay in touch with him after his birth, at least not until he is grown. My son knows her name, has a picture of her, and knows the reasons why she chose to place him for adoption. We hope that we will be able to meet her when he is older.

We have realized many benefits from the ongoing relationship with my daughter's birth family. To begin with, my daughter is Hispanic and although we do our best to provide her with exposure to Hispanic culture, it is simply not the same as standing at your birth grandmother's side making tortillas, visiting your birth grandfather's fruit packing plant, or experiencing the wealth of a large, extended Hispanic family that seems to have more aunts, uncles, and cousins each time she visits. As she has gotten older and adolescent pressures have increased, including her understanding of her own identity, she has been able to talk to her birth mother directly and ask her such questions as why she made the decision to place her for adoption. My relationship with her birth mother has also helped me understand my daughter better, such as why she hates or avoids particular school subjects, why she might be a "noncompliant" child, and why she loves to go shopping! I'm discovering more and more how much of our personalities and likes/dislikes seem to be genetically-based and I'm able to be more understanding of some behaviors that seem to be a mystery to me.

Every adoption is built on loss and feelings of rejection, failure, guilt, and unworthiness. The birth mother struggles with an extremely difficult decision when she decides to relinquish a

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child for adoption, whether made voluntarily at the time of the baby's birth or later if she has not been able to provide a safe or consistent home for her child. Knowing where the child is being raised, by whom, can make a huge difference in the ability of the birth mother to make that decision. And for the adopted child, I've been reading anew books about adopted children and they all advocate openness, whenever possible, as being in the child's best interest. In particular, four important books about adoption that are a major influence on current adoption practice are: *The Primal Wound*, by Nancy Verrier (1993); *The Open Adoption Experience*, by Lois Melina and Sharon Roszia-Kaplan (1993); *The Spirit of Open Adoption*, by James L. Gritter (1997); and *Twenty Things Adopted Kids Wish Their Adoptive Parents Knew*, by Sherrie Eldridge (1999). Openness enables children to know why they were placed for adoption, enables them to know their history, and enables them to talk directly to their birth families when possible and agreed-to.

I often encounter confusion or misunderstanding about open adoption from people when they first hear about my adoptions. They think that it must be confusing for the child, wondering if they might not know who their mother is. They believe that it must be a real threat to my parenting, that I am fearful that my children's birth mothers will want to "take back" their children (even after many years), or that their birth mothers will interfere with our family functioning. Or, they wonder if my children don't love me as much because they know their birth mothers and they feel torn between me and them. For all of these reasons, I think that they believe it must make it more difficult for the adoptive family to come together and be a family when there is an open relationship with the birth family.

Actually, many of these fears are an inherent part of any adoption, whether the adoption is open or not. If the child doesn't know their birth mother or their story, they make one up. They may feel even worse without openness because they have these feelings but have no permission to express them or no way to find out the answers to their questions. If they are older, they still have feelings about their birth parents and would rather know how they are doing or where they are then not know at all. Adopted children will always feel torn between their birth mothers and adoptive mothers, even if they don't know their birth mother. But it is important to realize that it does not mean that they are confused about the parenting relationship with their adoptive parents, for that is where the attachment exists based on day-to-day caretaking. As a friend of mine has said, "You are the parent they fight with." And I am the parent they ultimately rely on and feel secure with. But an open adoption does allow the child to explore their feelings about being adopted openly, honestly, and over time.

Making the plans for post-adoption contact would benefit from counseling, both when the plan is initially made and later on, if needed, as the child grows and issues change. I also believe that the benefits and importance of openness should be taught to both adoptive parents and birth parents, especially since it is a practice that is not yet fully embraced by our society and is still regarded as somewhat strange or suspect. If all parties enter into this arrangement with the goal of "doing what is best for the child," I believe that many, if not most, of the difficulties can be worked out.

Open adoption won't erase the pain and challenges of adoption, but it does enable children to deal with those pains honestly, directly, and, in the long run, more effectively. It also enables adoptive parents to have better information and better understanding about their adopted children. All of these benefits will strengthen, not weaken, the adoptive families who are raising these children.