

CHAT ROOM



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This graduation advice is meant for the parents

A few years ago, copies of a speech allegedly given by author Kurt Vonnegut at a college graduation circulated on the Internet.

The infamous "Sunscreen" e-mail, Vonnegut's best advice about living life to the fullest, landed in millions of computer terminals throughout the world, including mine. It was a darned fine message, too, chock full of adages like, "Do something that scares you at least once every day," "Sing," "Floss" and "Stretch."

His first words of advice: Wear sunscreen. It has scientifically proven benefits, while the rest of what he had to say did not.

Couple of problems with the speech. First, it was written by a Midwestern newspaper columnist nobody'd ever heard of before she laid claim to those words of wisdom. And no matter how much sunscreen you slather on your skin, you just never know when you're going to get burned. I mean, let's face it. Life happens. You can apply Coppertone SPF 127 before you leave the house and sweat it off while you're sitting for an hour on the freeway behind some nut who signaled right and turned left.

Words of wisdom

No matter where I've been, I've always written a column at this time of year brimming with wisdom, helpful advice and hope for the future, targeted at high school graduates whose futures stretch out before them like endless ribbons of interstate asphalt.

Couple of problems with the columns.

No high school graduates ever read them, at least not to my knowledge. I'd get complimentary calls from parents, but no kid ever walked up to me and said, "Wow. You're really wise." And I didn't necessarily believe everything I'd written, even though it all sounded pretty good.

Oh, I still have hope for the future. My Best Friend often describes me as a "glass is half full" kinda gal. There's usually a little edge in his voice. I have the feeling it annoys him sometimes, but the fact of the matter is, I'm an eternal optimist. I can't understand why anyone would want to live life expecting the worst to happen.

You should prepare for the worst and expect the best.

That's the only advice you're getting out of me, graduates. We both know you aren't paying attention, so I'm going to direct the rest of my comments to the only people who may still be listening: your parents.

For you beleaguered survivors, I have no advice. You already know too much. I just want you to stop for a few minutes and reflect upon your lives.

Thinking back

Remember that last day of high school or college? What were you thinking?

Has your life turned out the way you expected? Do you have all you wanted?

Look around you. Look at what's important to you, who is important to you.

Have you done The Right Thing or just what seemed right at the time?

Are you living your dream? If you are, be proud, no matter what anyone else says. If not, don't settle for this. You don't have to settle for this.

Is the partner who shares your life your One, True Love?

Are you happy? Don't just say "yes," because you want it to be. Carefully consider the question.

You've probably done a lot of thinking about your child's life and a lot of forgetting about your own. It has been enough to go to work every day, bring home a check every week and pay the bills every month.

Once upon a time, you had the rest of your life ahead of you, too. You still do.

Every day you watch the sun come up, you have another chance to enjoy your life as it is or change it. Don't waste that chance because you feel disappointed or cheated or stuck.

Okay, so your job is just a job and

Please see CHAT ROOM, B1



BY MARY RODRIQUE
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Cindy Champnella couldn't possibly have known to what degree her life would change after sloping in St. Thomas with her husband, Rick.

Not only would she gain three college-age step-children and later give birth to a child of her own, she also would adopt two daughters from China and help other families by volunteering with Great Wall China Adoption, a non-profit agency headquartered in Austin, Texas.

"My husband and I both were interested in the Holocaust and involved in the (Holocaust) center in West Bloomfield. What we found very troubling is that many people here knew about it at the time and did nothing."

"When our daughter was 2, we saw a special on '60 Minutes' about the orphanages in China, where the mortality rate is between 60 and 90 percent. We shut it off, but the kids' faces kept haunting me. We wondered, is there some place we can send money?"

That was four years ago. Champnella, who works full time as an administrator for Ferndale Public Schools, got busy educating herself using the Internet. She learned how China's policy since 1978 is to allow only one child per family, and how that has resulted in the abandonment of children, particularly less desirable girls.

Her 'little boy': Jaclyn's orphanage charge is being adopted by Laura and Jeff Hewson, relatives of the Champnellas. Laura is shown holding her soon-to-be son.

(since it is the male in China who takes care of the aging parents).

On the Internet, she met a Chinese woman, Snow Wu, who had recently moved to Texas with her professor husband. Wu was just launching Great Wall China Adoption and thus was willing to work with families like the Champnellas, who weren't considered prime candidates to adopt by other agencies since they already had four children and her husband was in his 60s.

Putting kids through college and already caring for their toddler, Kate, the Champnellas knew it wouldn't be easy financially — an adoption from China costs about \$18,000. But the Farmington Hills couple kept getting signs that it was the right thing to do. The Champnellas' daughter, Julie, was married to actor Tom Arnold. Through Wu, Cindy discovered that although western cultural influences are quite limited in China, Arnold was considered a "great movie star"

there. The actor wrote letters to Chinese officials on the Champnellas' behalf to pave the way for adoption.

On the day the couple was to sign papers for an equity loan on their house to finance the adoption, Rick Champnella, an attorney, received a check from a deadbeat client he hadn't heard from in more than 18 months on an outstanding debt. It was for within \$200 of the amount the couple needed.

Because the Champnellas were married in the Virgin Islands, a copy of their marriage license from the hurricane-flooded court house on St. Thomas almost scrapped the entire process. Amazingly, Cindy Champnella accidentally got hold of the stranger who had witnessed their marriage on the island, a woman now working in the damaged court house who intervened with a magistrate friend on her behalf and got the paperwork moving again.

Back on the Internet, Cindy found a support network of 2,000 American families in the process of adopting Chinese children. Most wanted infants, but she found one woman who became a good friend. Both had much in common and were looking for older, harder-to-place children with special needs.

"One day I had a premonition my friend would hear about her child on Nov. 7. This was in October," Cindy recalled. "I just knew it with certainty."

On Nov. 7, not only did Cindy's friend receive a call from the adoption agency that a child had been found, but the Champnellas also got their long awaited phone call. Not an older child, but a 4-month old girl with a cleft palate was offered.

"Our babies were in the same small orphanage and were sharing the same crib," Cindy said.

The families flew to China together to bring home their new children.

Life altering experience

"Once you've been there, your life is never the same. It's one thing to see a story on television, it's another to be there. A bus brought us to the orphanage and the kids came running up to see us. There was only three workers there in an orphanage with 300 children. The kids were outside playing with stones. The kids were barefoot and it was 40 degrees. They had no shoes or socks, no toys, no blankets, no medicine, no things."

The Champnellas baby, at the time 6-months-old, had lots of dark hair but was bald on the back of her head where she lay continually in her crib. She never cried, as she learned early that crying didn't bring her anything.

Cindy Champnella keeps the torn, ragged and stained shirt her baby was dressed in when presented to her. She shows a picture of the girl they named Christy, lying lifeless in her orphanage crib, blank of expression. A second photo shows a beautiful little girl grinning ear to ear clad in a bright yellow

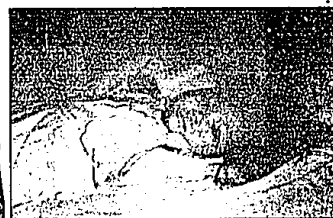
Great Wall China Adoption is a fully licensed non-profit agency headquartered in Austin, Texas, with satellite offices throughout the United States.

The agency is dedicated to finding loving homes for thousands of abandoned children in China. Married couples, couples with children, single men and women and individuals ages 30 to 60 are eligible.

To find out more about adoption of children from China, call (248) 442-0857.

Climbing the Great Wall

FAMILIES FIND CHILDREN AND LOVE IN A CHINESE ORPHANAGE



Happiness is: Above is Christy Champnella when Cindy and Rick first saw her in the orphanage. At left, Christy shows how pleased she is with her new life.

dress and wide brimmed white hat.

"That's her today," Cindy says. "That's the power of love."

Back at home, Cindy could barely stomach looking in her large closet full of dresses and shoes.

"It made me physically nauseated — all the things. It's like getting religion. I was in a store in Farmington and a woman behind me on line was buying a Halloween costume for her dog. That made me furious."

It's a journey of discovery she calls "seeing with new eyes."

It wasn't long before Cindy was drawn to a photo of another little Chinese girl.

"I didn't know her name. She was the girl in the green coat. I prayed for her for a year. In Chinese orphanages when you're over age 3, you're cast aside. Everyone wants the babies. There is seldom hope for these older kids."

Paving the way

Snow Wu, owner of the adoption agency, intervened on behalf of the Champnellas to the extent that she personally traveled to China to smooth the way with officials. Again, the famous son-in-law Tom Arnold played a role, supplying autographed photos of himself with his wife and President Clinton.

"They literally traded this girl's life for the photos," she said.

At age 4, this bright child the Champnellas named Jaclyn picked up English within only two months.

"She told me she was disappointed. She wanted a Chinese mother," Cindy said with a laugh. The little girl quickly adapted to her American lifestyle.

Please see GREAT WALL, B2



Happy family: Kate, Jaclyn and Christy play together in the yard. Inset is a picture of Jaclyn, "the girl in the green coat."