



'Operation Babylift'

pioneer inspires

thousands

through her

courage to leann ❖ thiemann share

ARTICLE & PHOTOGRAPHS BY KERRIE FLANAGAN ❖ JOURNEY CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

LeAnn Thieman's life-long dream of adopting a child catapulted her in 1975 into a war-ravaged country in an event that made history.

Instead of escorting six babies from Vietnam for an American adoption agency, LeAnn became involved in 'Operation Babylift,' helping to bring 300 orphans to the United States in an event that changed her life – and the lives of thousands she speaks to every year.

The co-author of six "Chicken Soup for the Soul" books draws on the lessons she learned in the course of her 'Babylift' experiences to encourage others to balance their lives physically, mentally and spiritually.

"What I tell everybody is to listen to that deep inner voice – deep inside in the peace and quiet and the silence, when you're deciding how much to work, how much to be gone, what to buy, how much to spend," she told *Journey*. "Pay attention and listen deep to the truth. I really think we all have that inside us. We just don't hear it in all the chaos."

LeAnn's interest in adoption stretches back to the age of 8, the result of the courage, faith and compassion instilled in her as a child by her parents Paul and Berniece Duello.

Growing up on a 300-acre cattle farm in Iowa, LeAnn and her four brothers and three sisters were happy. Although the Duellos did not have a lot of money, they were rich – a loving family with a strong faith and a productive farm that provided them with all they needed.

"That simple and honorable lifestyle established the principles and priorities that guide my life today," she said.

LeAnn learned early on to appreciate her blessings, and she still smiles while recalling one of her mother's favorite phrases: "Eat your peas. Kids in Korea are starving."

Berniece's focus on others helped LeAnn form one of the mottos she abides by today: live simply, so that others may simply live.

"It is not old-fashioned," she said. "We live in a world of excess, and we should care that kids in Korea are starving."

LeAnn's compassion for others surfaced at a young age. She remembers seeing pictures of kids from other countries with bloated bellies. When she learned 2 cents could buy a carton of

milk and save a child's life, she took action by trick-or-treating for the United Nations Children's Fund – UNICEF.

At 8, she decided she would help even more someday by adopting a child. Little did she know the enormity of that decision and the number of lives it would ultimately affect.

LeAnn and her husband Mark were married less than a year after their first date.

"It was love at second sight," she said. "We went to a movie – 'Oliver' – the first night. It was nice. But on the second night he took me for a marshmallow roast in the snow in the park and he sang to me the song 'Warm' by the Lettermen."

Mark embraced the idea of adoption and it became the couple's dream.

Soon after the birth of her second daughter, LeAnn's trip to a local mall started the adoption wheels in motion.

While at the mall, she ran across a bake sale booth raising money for the Friends of the Children of Vietnam. The organization provided relief for children abandoned or left orphans by fighting in Vietnam.

Hung from the booth were photos of orphaned children, their eyes tugging at LeAnn's heart. She knew she had to do something, so she bought cupcakes and picked up a brochure.

"That's all I ever intended to do," she said. "Buy one dozen cupcakes. But God had a bigger plan."

First, she joined the sponsoring organization. Then she became its president, operating its Iowa headquarters out of her basement.

"Within a year, the big question came," she said. "Would I travel to Vietnam and escort six adopted babies back to their assigned families?"

At that time, in the years following America's cease-fire in Vietnam, battles in the country left thousands of children orphaned. Humanitarian groups such as the Friends of the Children of Vietnam were pleading for American assistance to take the children to new homes.

When LeAnn was asked to travel to an orphanage in Saigon to pick up six orphans, it seemed like a safe time to go. The war wasn't escalating and the battles were still far from the South Vietnamese capital. But the decision to leave Mark and daughters

Angela and Christie, she wrote later, was one of the most difficult of her life. Weighing into the decision was the fact she and her husband Mark had applied to adopt a son from Vietnam who was expected to arrive in the United States in one to two years.

"I thought it might mean something someday for him to know his mom had been to his homeland," she wrote in a piece for www.beliefnet.com. "I agreed to go."

But new fighting suddenly erupted, and as LeAnn prepared to leave, she saw television reports that showed troops battling just three miles from Saigon.

"I knelt in church on Easter Sunday, crying, begging God for a sign I did not have to go," she wrote for www.beliefnet.com. "I pleaded, 'Please let this cup pass me by.' Suddenly a strong, courageous, powerful spirit filled me and my tears subsided. I knew God was not only sending me, but that He would protect me there."

The strength and faith LeAnn learned so long ago on the farm gave her the confidence she needed to say goodbye to her family the next day and board a 747 headed for Saigon.

While she was in the air, then-President Gerald Ford approved 'Operation Babylift,' an ambitious plan that would ultimately see about 2,000 Vietnamese orphans flown to the United States for adoption.

As she explained to Beliefnet: "The minute I arrived, my (Friends of the Children of Vietnam) contact greeted me with, 'Have you heard the news? President Ford has okayed 'Operation Babylift.' You won't be taking out just six babies. It'll be 300!"

LeAnn was also given the opportunity to choose the baby she had always dreamed of adopting.

To this day, she gets choked up when she describes the moment: "A baby boy literally crawled into my arms, into my heart and into my family."

With her new son Mitch close by, LeAnn and a handful of others on a jet bound for the United States worked diligently to prepare the little ones for their long journey.

"Gunfire, bombs, explosions and government delays stalled the fruition of 'Operation Babylift,' she wrote. "But soon

hundreds of babies laying three and four to a cardboard box, strapped in the belly of a gutted cargo jet, finally soared to safety and freedom."

On their joyful arrival home, LeAnn introduced Mitch to his dad and his sisters. The Thieman family was now complete.

After the initial media attention surrounding the airlift died down, LeAnn devoted herself to Mark and the kids and worked as a part-time nurse.

"I do believe there is a time for every purpose under heaven," she wrote. "I happily dedicated the next phase of my life to raising the kids. While we took them to wheelchair dances at the nursing home and put coins in every red kettle at Christmas and sponsored an African orphan with their allowances, I didn't take on any more big causes until they were in their teens."

Twenty years after the airlift, at the urging of friends, LeAnn finally wrote about her part in 'Operation Babylift' in a book called "This Must Be My Brother."

When a portion of this story was published in "Chicken Soup for the Mother's Soul," LeAnn, now a Fort Collins resident, was encouraged to write other people's stories for the "Chicken Soup"

series. This propelled her career in a different direction and eventually landed her the job of co-author for "Chicken Soup For the Nurse's Soul."

She resigned from nursing after 30 years to pursue a full-time career in writing and speaking. When "Chicken Soup for the Nurse's Soul" hit the New York Times Best-Seller List,

LeAnn went on to co-author six more "Chicken Soup for the Soul" books, with more planned in the future.

For the past six years, LeAnn's inspirational stories and speeches have touched the lives of thousands. A discussion about young women today, especially young mothers, sparks a passion in her.

"The biggest struggle I see today with young women is living their priorities," she said. "I think too often they let the world and its materialism guide their life choices."

Her advice for others?

"You need to decide whether you are making a living or making a life."

LeAnn is definitely making a life and inspiring others to do the same. ❖

"Pay attention and listen deep to the truth. I really think we all have that inside us. We just don't hear it in all the chaos."



Photographs courtesy of LeAnn Thieman

- ❖ LeAnn and Mark live in Fort Collins in the same-house where they raised their three children.
- ❖ They own Alpine Arts in downtown Fort Collins and their daughter Christie is the manager. The store celebrates its 25th anniversary this year.
- ❖ To learn more about LeAnn and 'Operation Babylift' visit www.leannthieman.com.

