

New Adoption Advocacy Group Launched in Washington

Dedicated to equality, EACH to give voice to adoptive parents

By John Towriss, Adoption Today Washington Bureau

A veteran Washington insider has launched a new adoption advocacy group dedicated solely to the issues faced by adoptive parents and families. Using the acronym EACH, which stands for Equality for Adopted Children, the organization has a mission statement that should catch the attention of every present and prospective adoptive parent.

EACH's Mission: "To achieve equal treatment between adopted and biological children of American citizens under federal and state laws."

While D.C. based advocacy and lobby groups are as thick as the crowded office buildings on Washington's K-Street, EACH has a significant advantage in its founder. EACH is the brain-child of J. McLane Layton, a 15-year veteran Capitol Hill senior staff member. During her years on the hill, Layton worked as a Legislative Council to Sen. Don Nickles of Oklahoma on energy and environment issues. She achieved a reputation, as a well respected and effective legislative operative. During her time working for Nickles, Layton and her husband completed a life-long goal when they adopted three siblings from Eastern Europe.

"In the course of going through my own adoption, I found out my children were not going to be U.S. citizens and I would have to naturalize them. I didn't think that was fair," Layton says. "Many people are surprised to learn that a child adopted by an American family is not accorded all the same rights and privileges under some state and federal laws as



SURROUNDED by congressional support is J. McLane Layton, left center, and her family: husband Rusty and their three adopted children, Lex, Sabine and Uly. Some of Layton's biggest supporters are Reps. James Oberstar and Bill Delahunt and Sens. Edward Kennedy and Mary Landrieu, pictured with the Layton family.

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Changing "Irrational" Adoption Laws

While the Laytons were not the first adoptive family to wonder why the laws were written that way, Layton may have been the first in a position to do something about it. Often working on her own time and finding a few like-minded staffers on the Hill, Layton was

part of a small group of legislative aides who set about to change adoption law with the help and support of their bosses. By any standard they were effective and resourceful. The group was instrumental in writing the groundbreaking Child Citizenship Act of 2000 that allowed adoptive children to become citizens as soon as they entered the United States, saving parents money, time

and bureaucratic hassle to attain citizenship for their children. The group also shepherded the Cambodian Humanitarian Initiative that brought home more than 700 Cambodian children — the so called “pipeline” cases — that were created when Cambodian adoptions were shut down.

Before leaving the Hill, Layton and her colleagues were responsible for drafting and finding sponsorship for two more important pieces of adoption legislation; the ICARE Act of 2003 and the Natural Born Citizen Act of 2004.

If passed, the ICARE Act would go a long way toward removing some of the inequalities Layton sees in the law and would guarantee that children adopted overseas are treated the same as children born to American citizens overseas. For example, adopted children would be issued an American passport at the nearest embassy and thus would no longer need the immigrant visa and health check-up required for immigrants. Layton points out, “All the paperwork, time and expense that the family goes through to get their foreign adopted child an immigrant visa is simply for an international plane ride home.” ICARE was passed by the Senate in 2006 but stalled in the House. EACH is working to get ICARE re-introduced in the present congressional session.

Another inequality cited by EACH is the inability of children adopted from foreign countries to run for the highest office in the land — the President of the United States. “I wanted my children to have that opportunity,” Layton says. “Whatever the rationale 200 years ago, such a prohibition is irrational today. All children whether adopted or born into the family should have the same and equal opportunities to serve their country, including serving as Commander in Chief,” Layton says. The Natural Born Citizen act would remedy this problem.

Since neither piece of legislation has been passed by both houses of Congress they have

given EACH one of its first goals and a clear mission going into the new year.

EACH in Action

Even though just launched, the organization already has shown the voice it can offer adoptive families by solving a significant issue among parents adopting HIV-positive children overseas. After being approached by a group of parents complaining that attaining a medical

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waiver from the Department of Homeland Security was taking upwards of three months to process, EACH was able to bring together the parents, the Department of Homeland Security and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services representatives to get the waiting period cut down to a few days. Layton says the issue was another example of “irrational, unequal treatment of adopted children.”

Endorsements

EACH has already attracted a couple of significant endorsements from Capitol Hill. Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-La., who is perhaps the strongest voice for adoption in congress says, “After many years of working on adoption legislation I am so glad to know that an advocacy group is now available to advocate on behalf of adoptive families and their adopted children. I totally support the mission and goals of EACH.”

Similarly Sen. James Inhofe, R-Okla., says, “As the grandfather of an adopted child, I understand the importance of ensuring that all children, whether adopted or biological, receive equal treatment under federal and state laws. I look forward to partnering with EACH to further their mission.”

More Voices, More Power

Layton says EACH is different from other adoption advocacy groups because it is the first group on the ground in Washington that is dedicated to elevating the influence and voice of adoptive parents. But, she says, any advocacy group can only be as effective as the number of voices it represents. Layton says her immediate need is for parents to go to the Web site www.equalityforadoptedchildren.org and sign-up.

There is no charge to be a member of EACH, however EACH is supported almost entirely by donations.

For Layton, EACH is a culmination of her passions. She says that while working on passing adoption legislation she often wished there was an advocacy group that represented adoptive families as they could be useful in generating grassroots efforts aimed at persuading congressmen.

“There were no groups to turn to and so often we worked through groups representing agencies or other adoption interests.” But that should change now with EACH and Layton promises to be just as effective working as an advocate outside the Hill as she was on the inside.

Parents and other interested parties can sign up to join EACH online by going to the organization’s Web site at www.equalityforadoptedchildren.org.

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