

**Minnesota Now (MPR) | Minnesota Now Minnesota Now - 'Defining Diego' podcast explores the complexity of international adoption and one adoptee's journey of identity 01GJDW9PW39SXD6J3CB0V031FD**

CATHY WURZER: If you have adopted children, this next conversation might get you thinking. Laurie Stern is a reporter living in St. Paul. Now, back in 2000, she read about a first-of-its-kind report from the United Nations about finding the international adoption system set up to help wealthy white people buy Indigenous babies from poor families. She was appalled.

But the thing is she read this report when she herself was in Guatemala, adopting her own little boy from a Mayan woman. So she thought, well, what are we going to do now? The mom had sought this out, the baby was in transit, and there she was.

Well, now 22 years later, Laurie and her son Aa Tiko are telling their story about how international adoption has shaped their lives. They're both on the line right now.

And Aa Tiko, I want to begin with you. Wow. What an incredibly personal story in this podcast. Did you have reservations about sharing your life like this?

**AA TIKO:** Yeah, there were definitely some reservations about it. From my point of view-- and I've said this a lot-- is I just think this is my life. I just live it every day. It was only through talking to other people, and people in the adoption community and the medical community, and just realized the power of stories. It wasn't really my idea to share it, but I had a lot of help and support to do that.

**CATHY WURZER:** When you found out about the story, I mean, what were some of the emotions that bubbled up at first?

**AA TIKO:** I guess, looking back on it, I think the realization that adoption has shut down, that it is a time period that's over. We are now coming of age, all the Guatemalan adoptees from the boom, and that we really haven't told our sides of the stories, and that it's just as important as those who adopted us.

**CATHY WURZER:** Laurie, I've known you for a long time. You're an excellent storyteller. Why was it important for you to tell the story?

**LAURIE STERN:** I felt like it was something I knew a lot about and I wasn't hearing a lot of conversation, or even reminders, that we who adopted internationally, there were women who gave birth to these children. We didn't just get them because we had a few thousand dollars in the bank. Circumstances made it so that Diego and I were stuck in Guatemala for the first 15 months of his life. And I got to know his biological family. I got to know the people who worked in adoption. And there was an economy there, there were people there, there was tremendous loss there, and also adoption became a market even while we were there in Guatemala in 1999.

And that's all stuff that I've reported on a lot, that's fascinating to me. And as you and Aa Tiko have mentioned, it was tricky because it's so personal-- I mean, for both of us. How do we tell the big story and the really intimate story that we know is what gets listeners to pay attention?

**CATHY WURZER:** Well, gosh, Laurie, there's a big story, right, which, as you say, you've reported on. But you were part of the story. And I don't know how that sits with you personally.

**LAURIE STERN:** Yeah, it's still kind of new. So you could ask me in a year, and I might have a different answer. But right now, it feels like a huge weight off my chest. It's like something I've been thinking about since before Aa Tiko was born because I'd been to Guatemala and I knew the consequences of the civil war. And I started this project thinking it was my story, and now I think it's his. And whatever happens next, he will be the storyteller.

**CATHY** Now, you've mentioned two names here. And this might be a little confusing for listeners-- Aa Tiko and Diego.

**WURZER:** Now, the podcast is called *Defining Diego*. But Diego, I know you're now going by a different name. Aa Tiko, so tell me what led you to that decision.

**AA TIKO:** Through the process of doing this podcast and this project, and I guess 24 years of my life, I've always struggled with this identity of trying to fit it into the American, trying to fit it into the Guatemalan, and trying to combine the two. I've been playing around with this. So I guess James would be like my American name. Diego would be my Spanish name. And Aa Tiko would be my real name, my Indigenous Mayan name.

And I think I had this responsibility to carry on this legacy of my people in my name. For me, one of the decisions was just learning about the struggles of the Indigenous Mayans and just this idea that my people didn't survive and fight and resist the Conquistadors for me to have a Spanish name. I want to take up that Mayan name.

**CATHY**  
**WURZER:** In this podcast, has there been some resolution to any lingering questions or issues that you're still wrestling with?

**AA TIKO:** Yeah. I certainly think there has been a resolution to some of the questions. And I think, like all things, more questions have come out of it as well. I've always been a big fan of history. That's what I did my undergrad in. I've always loved history, but I've never really-- it's always been loving other people's history and studying other people's history. And so this was the first time I really sat down and looked at my own history. And I really learned a lot about myself and my people and my culture.

And I think some of that did feel resolving. Because I finally felt like I got to know myself better. But at the same time, with that name, creating Aa Tiko, it's like something came out of that. And the question moving forward is, how will I carry this forward?

**CATHY**  
**WURZER:** Interesting that you've had a front row seat to your life because of the audiotape. Laurie, this podcast is full of audiotape, it seems like almost every moment of Aa Tiko's life and your life. I mean, seriously, have you been rolling constantly a recorder for 20 years?

**LAURIE STERN:** More than 20 now.

**CATHY**  
**WURZER:** Wow.

**LAURIE STERN:** And it's a podcast, so of course it's full of audio. And I'm not going to say I was rolling every minute of every event. But especially our many trips back to the village where he was born and our conversations with his biological family, those we wanted to preserve. And as I say in the podcast, I thought of them as something that would be precious to Diego-- I'm sorry, I can't-- I'm just not used to using "Aa Tiko" yet. It's kind of a recent development.

And I thought of them as kind of a love letter, like a compilation of all-- I remember a bus stop friend saying-- so it was when he was in grade school, like fourth or fifth grade-- I was telling her about some of the amazing things he was thinking and saying. And she's like, you know what you should do? You should write down, at the end of every day, the details, like which friends he talked about and which activities. And I did for a couple of years when he was in grade school.

And that, plus the audiotapes, it just felt like these stories of his life would matter not just as my memories, but as now his. And that happened I think with the podcast. Although we worked with a team, and it was a trust fall all around because the editor and producer that we worked with could see from the very beginning that it was as much, if not more, his story than mine. And you'll understand this, Cathy, but they described it as a big cross fade. So the first couple of episodes, it's my voice. And the last few episodes, it's really him taking over the story.

**CATHY** Which is appropriate. Say, because I don't know a lot about the adoption process, and you mentioned you've  
**WURZER:** been talking to Aa Tiko's birth family since the beginning, how rare is that to stay in touch with the birth family?

**LAURIE STERN:** I don't know. With DNA databases now-- and as Diego said, this generation coming of age-- there's a lot of curiosity about what biological relatives are out there. And people are finding-- and we did a fair amount of reporting on this in the podcast-- that what they were told by the adoption agencies isn't always true. And the DNA technology has allowed them to sort of go rogue and conduct their own searches. And I think this story that Diego has told about finding his way, we're going to be hearing a lot more about that.

**CATHY** Aa Tiko, I started with you. I'm going to end with you. What do you want folks to take away from your story?  
**WURZER:**

**AA TIKO:** Adoption isn't as simple as it may seem on the outside. There's a lot of complexities and a lot of traumas. But it is an important thing to understand, to go in. And just for me being clear, in the podcast, I'm not an expert in adoption. I'm, I guess, an expert in my own story. But I just want people to take the information and think about it, right? I'm not trying to tell anyone to think one way or another. It just is. And I don't speak on behalf of all adoptees. This is just one story. But I wanted to get the ball rolling on adoptees starting to tell their own story.

**CATHY** This is a fascinating podcast. I'm so glad you both did it. And thanks for talking about it to a larger audience here.  
**WURZER:** I appreciate it. Thank you so much. Best of luck to both of you, by the way.

**AA TIKO:** Thank you.

**LAURIE STERN:** Cathy, thank you so much for having us.

**CATHY** That's Laurie Stern, who is a mom and a reporter, and Aa Tiko is her son. They both live in St. Paul. Their  
**WURZER:** podcast, *Defining Diego*, is out right now. You can find it wherever you get your pods.