

How adoption made our family complete

Jamie Stanley* and his husband, Graham Murphy*, thought they'd never have kids. And then they had two. As told to Kate Rae.

By **Kate Rae**

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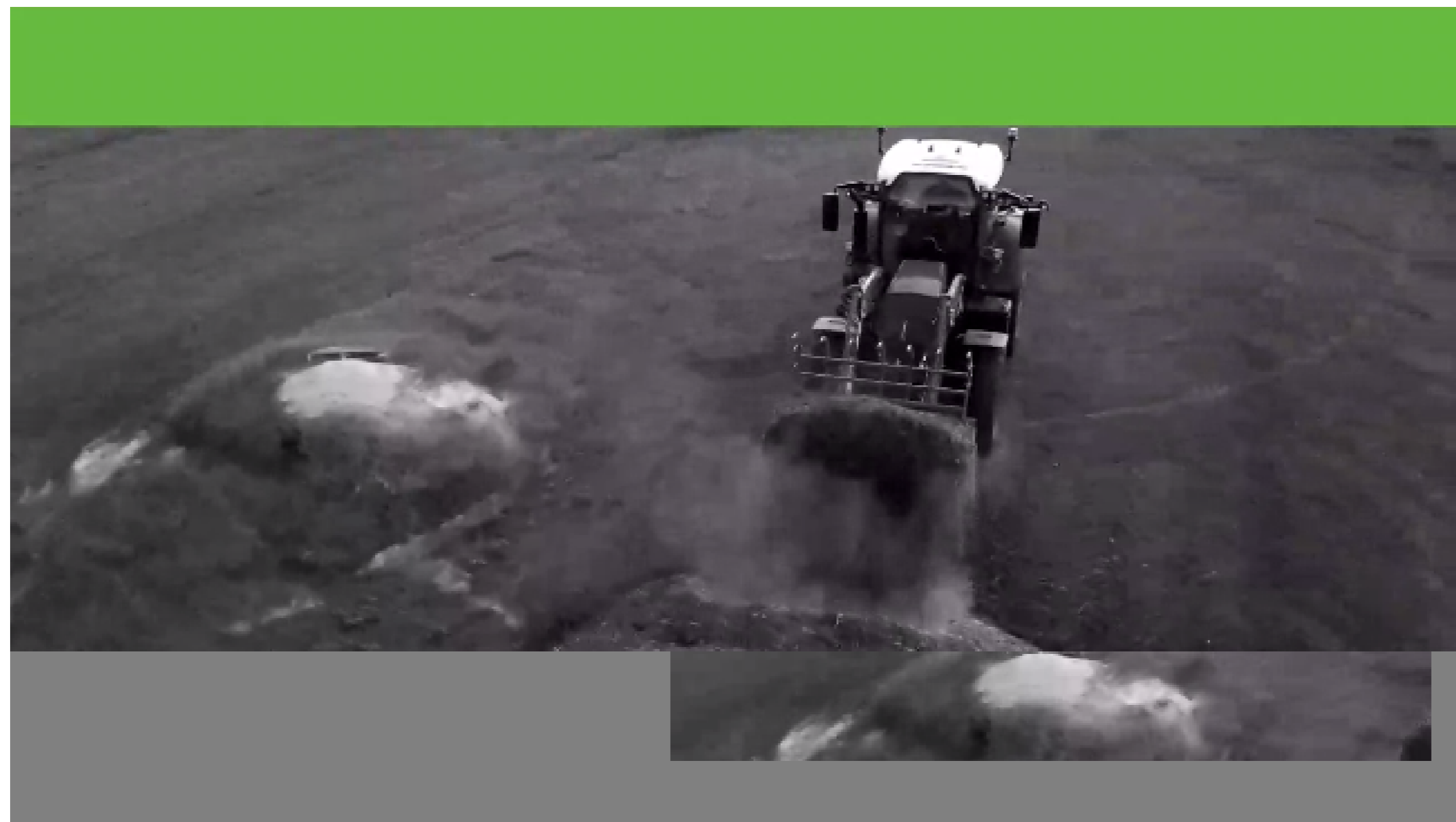


Photo: Tony Lanz

I always knew I wanted children. My husband, Graham, was more hesitant. Five years into our relationship, I casually started researching our options. As a gay couple, we had three: use a **surrogate**, go private (which included international adoptions) or use a Canadian public adoption agency. Neither of us felt a need to continue our genes, and surrogacy just seemed complicated, so that was out. There aren't many countries around the world that will let gay couples adopt, so that was out, too. Public was the best option for us.

When I found out about an adoption information session at the Toronto Children's Aid Society, I nonchalantly suggested we check it out. I assumed these sessions were basically intended to scare away fence-sitters with worst-case scenarios, bombarding you with terrifying stories of prenatal drug abuse, of fetal alcohol syndrome, of children who had been removed from homes because of abuse and neglect. I thought for sure Graham would say no to a kid, that it was crazy. Our life at that point was so incredibly happy and comfortable. Why would we risk ruining that? But he said yes. Let's do this. We were not deterred; of course, scary things can happen, but they don't always. The fact is there are some families that are so broken they are unable to take care of their children. We could help.

But first, there was paperwork and waiting and more paperwork. There was one ridiculous questionnaire laden with odd, judge-y questions: "How often do you have sex?" it asked. "Are you ever nude in your home?" We completed our home study, and put together what was essentially a brochure with photos and a letter on why our family was the one for case workers and foster families to consider. Five months later, we got the call.



We met our first son, Benjamin*, when he was 18 months old. He had been living with a foster family since he was born, and these people were astounding. They've been fostering for 40 years—about 135 newborns had been through their home, with two infants in their care at any given time. Picture that: 40 years of newborns.

We had a two-week transition, which started with visits at his foster home and the park, and worked up to a three-night stay with us. For the final drop-off, we all met at the clinic, where they performed a post-foster care, pre-adoption medical check. Benjamin's foster parents were struggling badly. They'd had him his whole life. He was screaming and reaching for his foster mom, and we had to literally rip him from her arms, all of us sobbing.

It was a very, very difficult day. I kept thinking it was similar to labour and childbirth in a way: incredibly painful, but something remarkable was born of it.

We quickly realized we knew absolutely nothing about kids—**What do they eat?** What size diaper does he wear?—but were immediately completely in love with Benjamin. We started referring to each other as Papa and Daddy, and he picked up on that right away. But there was one day pretty early on that we all felt a shift: After a loud noise came from the condo above us, Benjamin ran to Graham and clung to him. It was a definite turning point.

There was a six-month probation period, and then another six months before the adoption was finalized. That day, we all stood before a judge, who made what can be a very cursory moment into a true celebration: She gave Benjamin, then two and a half, three stickers and had him place one on each of us. "This means," she said, "that the three of you are now a family, forever and ever."

We knew pretty soon after that we wanted to adopt a second child, and Benjamin really wanted a **sibling**. We knew, too, that while the agency was trying to place older children, not babies, you should try to keep the evolution of your family in a somewhat natural birth order (your second adopted child should be younger than your first). So we waited a couple of years. Eventually, we got the call: another boy, this time two and a half, who had been in foster care since he was an infant. We went through the same process as with Benjamin, spending most of our meetings assuring the foster family that we were good people, that we would take good care of Oliver*. The transfer was just as painful. His foster mom, an incredibly strong woman, just dissolved. I had to wipe my tears away so I could see the papers I was signing. We received a "life book" his foster family had made, with photos and memories of his time with them. His foster mom had written inside: "Please never forget our family. We loved you very much."

The first few weeks were immensely challenging. When you adopt a child, especially an older one, you don't know who they are, what they need or what their cues are. Oliver wasn't yet speaking clearly, and while his foster family was able to understand him, we weren't. Benjamin was feeling incredibly displaced, as any older sibling would, being grumpy and constantly pointing out how much "better" he was than Oliver. We were all struggling. And then there was an accident; Oliver leaped out of his bed and fractured one of his femurs, **landing him in a cast** that went from his ankle up to his armpit. He was totally immobilized and completely reliant on us. In a way, it helped us recreate the infant stage. Over the next few weeks, we fed him, toileted him and cared for him and, eventually, amazing things happened: We got to truly nurture him, Benjamin felt less threatened, and Oliver's language vastly improved.

Oliver's adoption will be finalized very soon. And then we're done. Although we'd never say never....

* names have been changed.