

With a laugh

BY PHILIP FINE

Montreal freelance writer Philip Fine, *BFA 86, GrDip 94*, recounts how for him and his wife, Stephanie DeBono, laughs, and not tears, pervaded the first two weeks of being with their daughter, Hailey Gemma Yi.

When we were in China last summer, our newly adopted daughter, Hailey, would wake up in the crib next to our bed every morning. Like a periscope, the 13-month-old would pop her head up and look around at her new parents. And every morning, all through our two-week adventure, we would laugh.

Before we left from home, we thought the trip would be full of precious, solemn moments. After all, our first child would soon be put in our arms and our lives would be forever changed. We even needlessly included in our two enormous suitcases a 10-pack of pocket Kleenex.

Sure, there were a few tears. But mostly we laughed.

While we could now wax poetic about how cozy we felt as a new family and the

It started with currency. We had taken with us Japanese yen instead of Chinese yuan. It continued with slapstick. On our first night, we sat down to noodles and curried squid on a skewer. But when Stephanie tried to pull the fish off, spice squirted into her eye. She was wearing contact lenses and had no cleaning solution — and it burned. After a bit of bottled water and perseverance, the crisis ended.

New-parent fear also provided laughs. We decided to take a stroll on our own, in the bustling city of Guangzhou. With the baby in a Snuggli, we saw six lanes of non-stop traffic separating us from the market we wanted to check out. A group

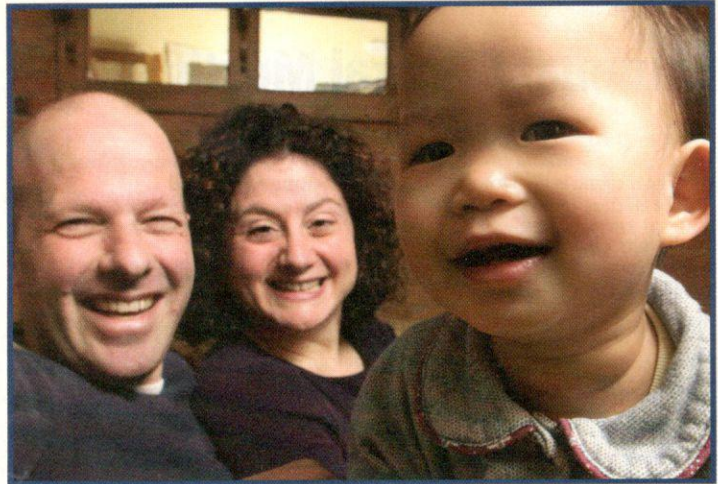
yelled after us by our first names. And we laughed at cultural confusions, like the picky eater from Cape Cod asking for “chicken fingers,” with her waitress slowly realizing she was not referring to actual chicken fingers.

Other funny bits, like having to mix baby formula with a swizzle stick at the hotel room’s minibar or discovering that a couple of days earlier we had eaten snake — and loved it — still play around in our heads.

Maybe it was because the humour was embedded in an important time that the funny details stick, like rice to a baby blanket.

On our second day with Hailey, when she was still looking a bit stunned from all the changes, we were swinging her in front of the mirror. Close up and then back. She smiled for the first time in front of us. Back with her in Montreal, one day we were goofing around, tossing a pair of socks at her. She let out what I believe were her first belly laughs.

Laughing was part of our trip and now seems to be a measure of Hailey’s integration. Aside from its ability to connect her to us, laughing is also connecting her to the rest of this world that, for all its perils, can sometimes be a very funny place. ☺



Philip Fine, Stephanie DeBono and their daughter, Hailey, born July 30, 2002, and adopted August 31, 2003.

ANDREW DOBROWOLSKY

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way a tired Hailey would fall deeply into our arms, there was nothing that could beat the humour. Our memories are coloured as much by the moment Hailey was put in our arms, thinner than her seven-month-old picture and wearing a cotton dress and pink plastic sandals, as by the funny image, from an hour earlier, of 19 excited Quebecers, walking along the wide airport concourse, stacks of luggage and wrapped strollers in tow — a parade of sorts.

of hand-holding youngsters, led by an eight-year-old, went ahead of us. As they snaked across the street, missing a bus by inches, they kept on waving back at us. We never did cross.

We laughed at how we thought we had made useful diplomatic preparations. The more reserved Chinese do not take easily to being touched, we read. But we experienced the opposite at a favourite outdoor market. Vendors tugged at our sleeves, put a friendly arm around us and