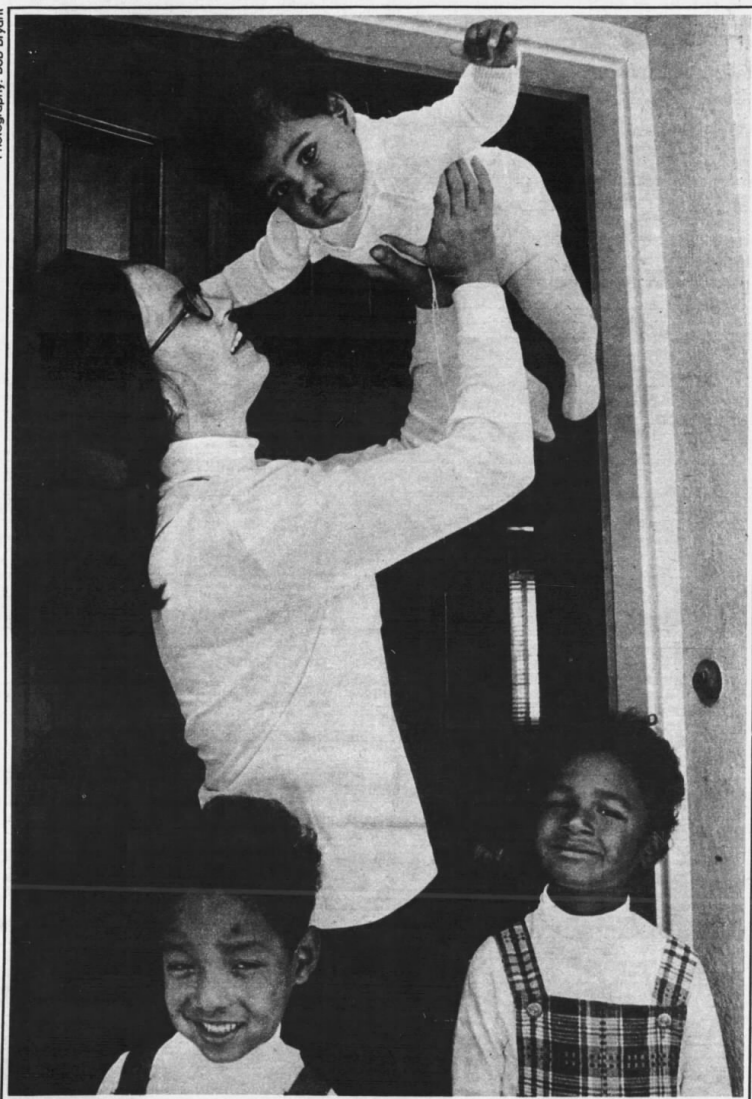


## Behavior

Photography: Bob Bryant



## A Mother With A Mission

By Arlene Silverman

■ I probably would not have met Maria if it hadn't been for Jonathan.

The streets of the West Portal district of The City do not make for good neighbors in summer. The insistent fog is in from morning till night, and we either flee to sunny Marin in July and August, or run downtown to fairer Montgomery to work, or stay indoors to keep warm. And the children of our block are hidden in toasty playrooms or drafty garages.

So Maria had to walk Jonathan down the street, parading him for other children to see, like the new arrival that he was.

I heard him before I saw him. His language was staccato, with clicking noises — like none I had ever heard before.

"This is Jonathan," Maria said, as I looked up from my winter-in-summer gardening. "He has just arrived from Vietnam."

He was a beautiful brown-skinned child, seemingly without shyness, anxious to share my daughter's company and to smell the wet primroses.

Since that day almost two years ago, two more children have come to the home of Maria Eitz. Jonathan was two and a half when he arrived. Nicholas, now three, joined the household last spring. Moki was brought here by Maria herself just this past January.

Moki is a sober, big-eyed seven month old. Like Jonathan and Nicholas, she is the child of a black American soldier and an Asian mother. All three had been abandoned. All three, because of their color and their background, would have had a tough time surviving in Vietnam, for the children of mixed parentage are rarely accepted in Vietnamese homes. Even in most orphanages, they are at the bottom of the pecking order.

Their adoptive mother is single. She is white. She has always known, however, that

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## Behavior *continued*

the events of her life would run in this direction.

"Hell, for me, is living in an orphanage," the soft-spoken Miss Eitz said as we sat in the living room of her neat rented bungalow.

Born in 1940 in what was then the Polish Corridor, the fair-haired, blue-eyed young woman has bitter childhood memories. She was orphaned as an infant and spent part of her early life in the home of a grandmother who virtually ignored her. From age eight until fourteen, she lived in an orphanage on Amrum, an island in the North Sea.

"I was called the idiot child in the orphanage because I would not speak," Maria recalled. "I had braces on my legs from malnutrition. My eyes are still affected. I would do absolutely anything to spare a child such an experience."

Luckily, Maria was befriended by a professor who had met her at the orphanage. This man saw to it that the bright youngster attended the Gymnasium on the Mainland and later went on to Teachers College at Flensburg, a town near the Danish border.

From college she was hired as a governess for an English family in Sussex. Ten years ago she came to the United States, where she attended Marquette University and received a Master's degree in theology.

Today, in addition to caring for a home and three children, she teaches psychology and theology at St. Rose's Academy. Her modest home is also a residence for a roommate (who shares the rent), in addition to two young women students (one of whom serves as baby sitter while Maria is at work), a dog named Kippy and a cat named Dominic.

During the past six months, dozens of Vietnamese children have stayed overnight at the Eitz house en route to adoptive parents in places like Denver and Iowa and New York City.

Maria brought out a photo album and showed me pictures of some of these infants and young children. "I'm now working with Rosemary Taylor, Overseas Director for Friends for All Children."

Maria is West Coast representative for Miss Taylor's organization, and it was in this capacity that she went to Vietnam right after New Year's. She brought back little Moki ("It would have taken eight or nine months otherwise," she said) and escorted two more children bound for other American homes.

"I went to the Far East to make connections there with people like U.S. Army personnel in Thailand and to find out



what the chances are for the survival of the remaining orphans in the event of a Viet Cong attack," Maria said. "Rosemary has gotten 2000 out, but there are many thousands left."

Moki's cries for attention from her room — a large walk-in closet that has been converted to an immaculate nursery — brought us back to immediate problems.

"It is difficult being a single parent," Maria admitted. "The worst part is that all the responsibility rests on me alone. I feel that I must not only do a satisfactory job — I must do an excellent job. I sometimes feel that people are judging me. They wonder about me: What's this single woman doing with all these kids. Is she a loose woman?"

She made it clear that the remarks of neighbors or observers were unimportant compared to her desire to have a family. "It's simple. I've wanted children for a long time."

Having been turned down locally, she wrote letters around the world. Finally, she contacted Father Joseph Turner, an old friend from Marquette who was then serving as a GI priest in Vietnam. He put Maria in touch with Rosemary Taylor. Pictures arrived. Jonathan was chosen. One year — and tons of paper work later — Maria had her first child.

"Jonathan's name means 'God gives a son,'" she said with a smile. "My main worry before he came was: will the child whom I have chosen to be my son choose me to be his mother? From the time he came here, there was no doubt in my mind, or in his."

Maria can talk endlessly about her children. "The boys are very different. Jonathan is the introspective one. He's the worrier. When he first came, I used to find him asleep at the bottom of my bed during the night."

Today, Jonathan is a charming four-year-old with inquisitive eyes and a fine command of English. He even reads and

writes a bit, but mostly enjoys anything that moves, including his toy motorcycle.

Younger brother Nicholas is also active, and his adopted language is put to constant use in chatter and banter. His only problem seems to be an insistence on calling everyone "Sir," a reflection of the impeccable manners both boys have learned. ("Sir," he asks me, "may I please have a drink of water?")

"Nicholas is an outgoing, physical child," said Maria. "He's a child of the moment. Jonathan I call my moon child. You have to assure him many, many times. You have to cuddle him with words."

"Also, Jonathan is very aware of his blackness, while Nicholas is far more easy-going. They do have some 'adopted' uncles and aunts who are black."

She sighed. "I guess I hope to teach them to grow up to accept all people — even the non-tolerant ones."

"I want to show the world that it's possible to bring up children that are the fruits of war to be carriers of peace."

And what of Maria's future? While she does not rule out marriage entirely, she admits that it would be difficult to find a man who would be willing to share her life style. The boys have male companions, as does Maria, but she said, "I vowed a long time ago that I would have an open door policy — would turn no one away. A husband would have the right to say no to this and to insist on his privacy."

As she showed me around the house, Maria mentioned that she would not be adopting any more children until she would be able to move to larger quarters and until Moki was a little older.

But somehow I wasn't surprised when she said, "I have another girl child picked out. She's three months old, and I've named her Aiyana, which is an African word meaning 'beautiful flower.'" □