

Family celebrates joy of being together

By Dalton Carver
Staff reporter

Imagine that your family is miles away in another country, while you toil to bring them back home. No matter how hard you try, none of your persistence seems to pay off. For more than a year, there were minimal means to keep in contact.

It sounds like the plot for a movie. But for Jason Speegle and his family, it was a reality that they survived for more than a year.

When Speegle and his wife, Amanda, got married in 2002, they decided to move to the Dominican Republic the following year. "Our plan was to be there for about two years," said Speegle. "We ended up staying for six."

Doing mission work and directing a ministry took up most of their time. However, the Speegles eventually chose to help in another way. "While we were down there, we decided we would try to adopt a Dominican baby," said Speegle. "Since we were residents, the adoption agency just treated us like we were Dominicans, not like we were Americans."

Edwin was eight months old when the Speegles adopted him. When the paperwork was completed, he legally became their son.

Speegle, a graduate of Southwestern College, was then approached about creating a new organization at the school. "They approached me about coming back and starting the Green Team," he said. "We thought it was a good time to come back to Kansas and be close to family."

They returned to the consulate to get the green light to journey back to the United States. After signing the papers and receiving the go-ahead, the Speegles began moving out of the Dominican Republic. "We started the process of selling our stuff. We hired a new director for the ministry that we had started and we found a place to live here," he said.

What the couple soon realized is that there was an entirely different process to adopting internationally as opposed to nationally. "We went back down to the consulate and all the laws for adoption had changed between the first time we went and the second," said Speegle. "That relatively simple process was no longer an option."

Officials found themselves in a conundrum with the Speegles. The situation of Americans living overseas and adopting a Dominican child was something that they had no precedent for. "It was hard. No one seemed to know what to do with us because we didn't fit the typical mold," said Amanda Speegle. "I don't believe that they

didn't want to help, but there wasn't 'This is the form and this is the way you do it.'"

After talking to 25 different policy offices with no results, the family turned to their faith for answers. "We prayed about it and our decision was that if we step out and go ahead and go to Kansas, that God would open a door," said Jason. "I came to Winfield, started working in August of '08 and left my wife and son there in the Dominican."

Without the budget for two homes in two different countries, Amanda and Edwin relocated several times in Jason's absence. "We lived in 12 places in 12 months," she said. "Sometimes, we'd kind of go back and forth. We'd housesit for someone and then go back and stay with some other friends."

During this time period, Amanda found inspiration in Edwin. "It wasn't easy, but I had someone to take care of and that helps with your focus," she said. "That's what I was doing, just trying to make it easy for him."

The immigration situation continued to remain unsolved. The Speegle family tried to talk to each other every day. "We did either Skype or MSN messenger video," said Jason. "We tried to do that every night, at least once a day, before everyone went to bed."

Communication between the Speegle family wasn't always simple. "We were blessed by that point, because when we first moved there, we weren't texting," said Amanda. "A lot of the technology and media that we use now to communicate really didn't exist."

Jason found support and solace at work. "Southwestern was awesome," said Jason. "They told me that if I need to go, to just go. They even hired an immigration lawyer who tried to help us."

"It was nice to have the SC family. I lived about a block from campus, so I was always walking over to do something," said Jason. "That made it easier, having things to do like going to basketball games and hanging out with students."

In addition to students, Jason found care from colleagues. Three of his classmates were working at Southwestern, including Kristin Petty, assistant professor of business, Ashley Alley, former campus minister, and Lisa Braun, director of athletic training education. "We'd get together on a semi-regular basis just to catch up," said Speegle.

Dick Merriman, president, sensed Jason's strong emotions and decided to seek action through Congress. "I wrote a lengthy letter to Senator Brownback, who is now our



Family time is treasured in the Speegle household. Starting Left Top: Jason Speegle, Isaac Speegle, Edwin Speegle, Amanda Speegle, and Maggie Speegle. (Maggie Dunning/Collegian Photographer)

governor," he said. "I wrote to him and said we're having this difficulty and asked if he could assign someone from his staff to try and intervene to see what could be done to expedite things."

"I got a nice letter back, but I have no idea what took place behind the curtain," said Merriman. "It looked like right was on his side. That doesn't awfully mean a lot when you're dealing with a government bureaucracy."

As the two-year mark approached, progress was finally made. The Speegles were required to file documents that stated Edwin was an immediate relative. Once he became known as an immediate relative of a U.S. citizen, filing for an immigration visa became possible.

"With the immigration lawyer's and the Congressman's help, we were able to really push through the filing of those documents to get the immigration visa," said Jason. "I think that it took three and a half weeks, and that process could take a year

or more. We were very thankful to have the help from people trying to influence the consulate on our behalf."

Edwin, who was one-and-a-half when Jason left, doesn't have many memories of the tough situation. "I don't think he remembers much, other than through pictures and we talk about it," said Jason. "My fear was that he would forget who I was altogether at that age, but we tried to do a good job of keeping in contact."

Jason has many things to be thankful for. "We have three kids now. I'm thankful for them, except when they're waking me up at six in the morning," he said, smiling. "I'm also thankful for Southwestern. It's been a big part of my life."

"Life is crazy," he said. "But good friends and family are the things that I'm thankful for."

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