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Two families in two nations help child burn victim thrive



Jolene, cooking with her mother, was caught in a house fire in China when she was 11. Most of her fingers and several toes were amputated in China; she had additional surgery years later in the United States. Xiaomei Chen-The Washington Post

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Every Saturday morning, Jolene C. Swartz takes a break from being a bubbly suburban teenager who obsesses with friends over SAT scores, plans to read "Twilight" this summer and can't wait to learn how to drive.

The 18-year-old goes into her bedroom in Greenbelt, pulls out a phone card and calls China.

In those calls, which can last for hours, she is Zhou Lin, the eldest daughter of a farm family in Sichuan province.

Zhou Lin was 11 when her house there caught fire during a Chinese New Year celebration. She passed out trying to escape, and flames burned her legs and hands. Doctors in an ill-equipped rural hospital amputated most of her fingers and several toes. They used skin from her arms, back and head to patch her legs.

Her parents went into debt to pay her medical bills. Soon, Zhou Lin was kicked out of the hospital.

Most days, she lay in bed. Her mother and grandmother carried her over their shoulders like a rag doll. She used two small stools to get around -- sit on one, scoot onto the next, over and over. Her feet contracted. Her bones became chalky.

The family traveled to Beijing in October 2004 to beg for help from the government -- and from strangers on the street.

"It's hard, because you see so many people passing, and you think, 'Please help me,' " Zhou Lin said. "They are afraid of me. They think I have some sickness. . . . What am I, a monster or something?"

As she sat in a sea of beggars outside a television station, Zhou Lin caught the eye of Brecken Chinn Swartz, a University of Maryland doctoral student. Swartz put her hand on the malnourished girl's leg.

"Our eyes met, and she seemed very familiar to me," Swartz, now 41, recalled. "My life changed in that moment."

Swartz gave the family her business card. The next day, she met with Zhou Lin's father. Other beggars swarmed, but Swartz told them she could help only one family. Swartz gave the father \$200 after a translator helped him write a simple contract: I will spend all of this money to send my daughters to school.

Life changes

Two years later, Swartz arranged for Zhou Lin to fly to Boston for treatment at the Shriners Hospital for Children. Zhou Lin's mother and a teacher came with her. The experience overwhelmed them: Sweet cherries at Whole Foods Market. The Harvard University campus. An Imax movie about dolphins. The beeping hospital machines.

Doctors reconstructed Zhou Lin's left hand, giving her use of finger stubs, and amputated her feet. She was given prosthetic feet that slip on like boots. Therapists taught her how to walk again.

To help nurses and therapists who stumbled over the girl's name, Swartz spelled it like it sounds: Jolene.

Music therapists taught Zhou Lin to strum a dulcimer and write songs about China. Sometimes the instrument was played before surgery to soothe the girl.

Zhou Lin's mother had to leave Boston after three months. At the airport, Swartz said they would all meet soon in China. But the mother realized that Zhou Lin had become Jolene and would stay in the United States to receive medical care.

Swartz and her husband, Bill, decided to adopt the girl in late 2006. The adoption papers, finalized in December 2007, name her Jolene Chinn Swartz. These days, Swartz usually writes her daughter's name as "Jolene (Zhou Lin)" -- even in e-mail from her iPhone -- but Jolene makes it "Jolene C. Swartz" in neat, tiny handwriting that looks typed.

Much to learn

The Swartzes sold their two-story, stair-filled house and bought a one-story home in Prince George's County. They replaced heavy tumblers with stemware, which is easier for Jolene to pick up. Brecken Swartz put her career as a professor on hold.

At first, the bright-eyed girl seemed younger than her teenage years. She loved putting huge bows in her hair and listening to Curious George stories. She watched cartoons and PBS. She learned that the world is round and part of a grand solar system.

"Every day was a class in life," Swartz said. "It was overwhelming for her. Some days she would just get tired."

Soon, Jolene was into Hannah Montana, stickers and anything pink. In early 2007, she enrolled at Eleanor Roosevelt High School.

"We delivered her to Roosevelt -- pink from head to toe with her Hello Kitty backpack," Swartz said.

Gradually, the pinks gave way to black and white. The backpack was replaced.

At first, Jolene attended English-language classes during the day. Her parents tutored her in Chinese and English during the evening.

Last semester, she took two periods of English, plus algebra, government, chemistry, Spanish and computer graphics. She wore a midnight blue gown to the prom and danced with her friends. This summer, she will study for the SAT, research colleges and learn how to drive.

Her name is listed on the honor roll posted in the school lobby. Math teachers this year voted her the "most outstanding" member of her class.

"I have straight A's, so I don't want one B," she said. "If I have to have a B, I have a B. But I don't want a B."

In August, Jolene will start what effectively will be her second year as a senior at Roosevelt. Her parents and teachers thought it would help her get ready for college. Her

schedule will include trigonometry, Spanish and Advanced Placement classes in environmental science and computer graphics.

Jolene doesn't tell her life story to many classmates. "Sometimes I feel comfortable to tell them," she said. "People who know me, I tell them. I want them to treat me as normal."

Returning to China

During the Saturday phone calls, the teenager tells her biological family about life in Maryland. They tell her about a new highway cutting through the farmland in southwestern China and their transition to life as roadside merchants. She can hear chickens and dogs in the background.

Last summer, Jolene returned to China. Her family greeted her and her adoptive mother with a 17th birthday party. Her little brother got to know the sister he didn't remember.

Jolene had forgotten about the country's intense heat. Burn-damaged skin cannot sweat, so the walk to her family's house left her exhausted. She fell onto a bed, too tired to speak.

Relatives gathered around: Why isn't she talking? Does she not remember us? Has she forgotten Chinese?

Jolene is returning to China in July, this time with clinicians, therapists and musicians who will spend two weeks in hospital burn units. The team was organized by HandReach, a nonprofit organization at the University of Maryland that aids children in developing countries who have traumatic injuries.

The team collected musical instruments to donate so the children can learn to create calming music, just as the dulcimer once soothed Jolene.

On Thursday evening, at a fundraiser for the trip, Jolene said: "Everything in your mind just goes with the music."