

TOWNSPEOPLE SECTION

## To China, with love: Andover families travel to help special needs kids

**Two Andover families make trek with donated supplies, special ed know-how**

**By Bethany Bray**  
Staff Writer

When Andover resident Cindy Morrison adopted her daughter, Katelyn from China in 2001, she found tears streaming down her face as she held her 8-month-old baby on the flight home.

"While I was there, I completely fell in love with China, the people, the culture," said Morrison. "I felt like I left a part of my heart there. I knew we'd be back."

And return she did. Yesterday, Aug. 18, Morrison left for her fifth trip to China since adopting Katelyn. During the next two weeks, she will visit seven orphanages in two provinces to share her knowledge of special needs therapies and distribute donated supplies.

Morrison is a pediatric occupational therapist at the Professional Center for Child Development, an Osgood Street school that has a day program for special needs children and a preschool for children of all abilities.

"I just feel such a powerful connection with the kids left behind (in China). Especially how I've been so blessed with adopting two daughters. It's something I want to do, I need to do, I can do," said Morrison. "I want people to know there's hope for kids in Chinese orphanages. Very small things can make a big difference."



Staff photo by Angie Beaulieu

**From left, Lisa Schwarz, Sebastian Schwarz, 9, Sofia Schwarz, 6, Katelyn Morrison, 8, Lianna Morrison, 5 and Cindy Morrison pose before making final preparations last week for their trip to China.**

### HOW TO HELP

- Follow Cindy Morrison's efforts to aid special needs orphans in China at [knowinghope.blogspot.com](http://knowinghope.blogspot.com)
- If you have equipment or items to donate, contact Cindy Morrison through the Professional Center for Child Development, 978-475-3806

This year, Morrison makes the trip with Andover Town Planner Lisa Schwarz, a close friend since high school. The Schwarz family - Lisa, Felipe and their two children, Sebastian, 9, and Sofia, 6 - are traveling with Morrison and her two daughters, Katelyn, 8, and Lianna, 5.

The Morrison and Schwarz children are close friends, and are eager to visit and play with the children in the orphanages. Sebastian and Sofia have taken Chinese at St. Augustine School.

"I'm hoping (my children) can see a difference being made," said Lisa Schwarz, who lived in Africa with the Peace Corps. "It's so eye-opening to travel around the world and help out. I want my kids to see different people and places in the world."

"Also, I want to see Cindy in action," said Schwarz, laughing.

"I'm like a whirlwind (in China). Your head will spin," said Morrison, breaking into a smile.

On Morrison's first return trip to China, when Katelyn was 3, they met a small, malnourished orphan awaiting heart surgery. Morrison says she and Katelyn felt an instant connection and knew the baby girl should become part of their family.

"It was meant to be that she was to come home," said Morrison.

After successful heart surgery, Morrison adopted Lianna at age 2.

Chinese orphanages, once known for adoptions of baby girls, have seen an influx of special needs children in the last decade, said Morrison. She estimates 75 to 80 percent of children in Chinese orphanages today have special needs, including Down syndrome, autism and cerebral palsy.

Without healthcare or support services, Chinese families are often overwhelmed by children with special needs and have no choice but to give them up for adoption, she said.

Orphanage staff don't have the training to deal with children's special needs or the myriad of health problems that often go hand-in-hand, she said. In past trips, she's seen children who don't have the muscles to support themselves slumped over in adult-sized wheelchairs and staff feeding formula drop-by-drop to children with a cleft palate because they don't have specialized bottles to feed them with.

"They're doing the best they can with what they have," said Morrison. "Infrastructure for special education in China is nonexistent. There's just a lack of understanding of kids with special needs. A lack of understanding that there is therapy for them ... They have no idea that someone with Down syndrome could graduate from high school, or work at a supermarket and be members of society. That's one of my hopes is to have some of that thinking changed."

Morrison spends the year gathering supplies for her annual trip to China. News of her work has spread, and most of the supplies are donated by local families that have adopted, have ties to PCCD or have special needs or Chinese-American children.

"It's definitely more than just me. It's a unified front," said Morrison.

Administrators at PCCD allow her to have the time off to travel and send her with used equipment that students have outgrown, she said.

While in China, she distributes vitamins, cleft palate bottles, specialized splints and other items, and gives clinics to orphanage staff.

Orphanage staffers are always eager to have her look at as many children as she can to offer therapy and treatment ideas, she said.

Through her adoptions and return trips to China, Morrison maintains a network of friends who help with planning, legwork and language translation while she's in China. She sends them her presentations weeks before she travels, and they have them translated by the time she arrives.

They e-mail each other through the year, sending Morrison requests for equipment and questions on how to best deal with the needs of specific orphans. She also sends packages of supplies several times a year, but they don't always make it through customs, she said.