



"I always wanted a daughter; I just wasn't thinking of Zhou Lin," says Swartz (painting the toenails on Zhou Lin's prosthetic feet).

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## 'I Loved Her from the Beginning'

When Brecken Swartz saw a badly burned girl in China, she didn't know she might one day adopt her. But she did know she had to help

**"It must have been my heart talking. I said, 'I will help you'"**

—Brecken Chinn Swartz

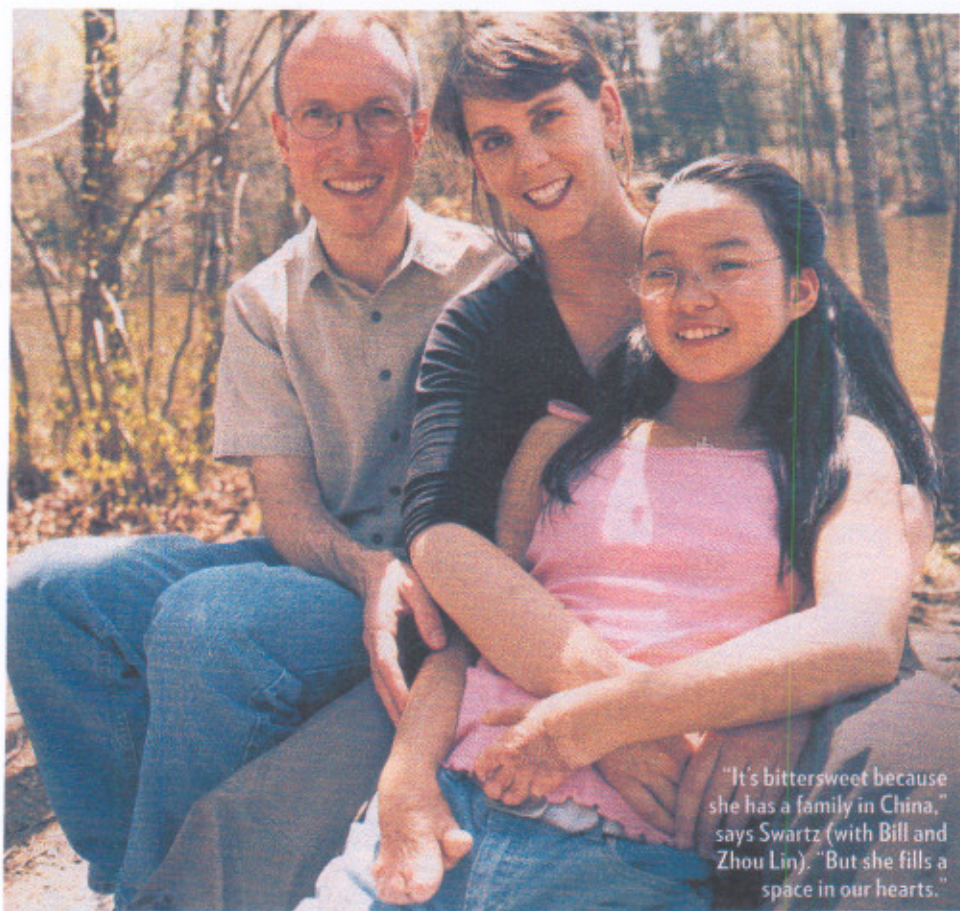
**B**y the time of her eighth trip to China in 2004, radio producer Brecken Chinn Swartz had already seen a good measure of that country's human suffering. But nothing prepared her for the sight that met her amid a sea of beggars outside a television station in Beijing—a little girl with a pained gaze and two useless, shriveled legs. "Our eyes met, and she gave me a look of recognition," says Swartz, 38. "It must have been my heart talking. I said, 'I will help you.'"

Against daunting odds, vast geography and enormous cultural barriers, that is exactly what Swartz has done. As she looks at the bright,

healthy, now-14-year-old girl watching TV in her living room in Maryland, the memory of the journey that began in Beijing seems impossible, except for one thing. Says Swartz: "I loved her from the beginning."

On that fateful day, Swartz, fluent in Mandarin, learned that the little girl, named Zhou Lin, had been badly burned nearly two years before in her village in Sichuan province when a kerosene lamp exploded in her family's tiny house. Zhou Lin's clothing caught fire. By the time her father reached her, she was unconscious, with third-degree burns over much of her lower body. Zhou Lin's parents struggled to pay





"It's bittersweet because she has a family in China," says Swartz (with Bill and Zhou Lin). "But she fills a space in our hearts."

## "I feel peace in my heart that she can walk now, and she's doing so well"

—GUO CHUNMEI,  
Zhou Lin's biological mother

for her medical care, which did not include anesthesia, even during skin-graft operations. Desperate, they made a cross-country train trip to Beijing, where they sat for eight days outside the TV station in a bid to call attention to their daughter's plight.

On hearing Zhou Lin's story, Swartz gave the family her business card and \$200, extracting a pledge that the money would be used for the girl's schooling. Then Swartz, who was finishing a doctorate in communication at the University of Maryland, returned to the U.S. But she couldn't stop thinking about the child. "Everything in the universe went wrong for her. I just knew something had to happen if she was going to survive."

Months passed without word from China. But Zhou Lin's mother, Guo

Chunmei, was keeping her part of the bargain, carrying her daughter to school every day on her back. In 2005, Swartz received an e-mail from an English teacher at a nearby school, who found her from her business card: Zhou Lin was still in desperate need of medical care. After months of paperwork, Swartz won a promise from the Shriners Hospital for Children in Boston for free care for Zhou Lin until she turned 22. Swartz and her husband, Bill, 37, a scientist, scrambled for medical visas and secured free airfare from American Airlines. Last June 5, Zhou Lin, with her mother and the teacher, arrived in the U.S. in a wheelchair after an 18-hour journey. What most stunned the Swartzes was her wide grin. "We didn't think she knew how to smile," says Bill.

Zhou Lin underwent eight surgeries to correct the damage from her burns, including the amputation of both her feet. "It was a hard decision," says Dr. Robert Sheridan, assistant chief of staff at Boston Shriners. "But if I didn't do it, she would not have walked again." The night of that procedure marked a turning point for Swartz. "The morphine [they gave her] was not enough,"

she says. "I heard Zhou Lin's cries, and I realized how much I loved her."

Three months later, Zhou Lin stood on her own on her new prosthetic legs, and her mother, Guo Chunmei, resigned to the fact that she had done all that she could, made the decision to return to China without her. Perhaps sensing the inevitable, she also gave Swartz legal authority to act as Zhou Lin's guardian. At the same time, Swartz was beginning to question whether it was in the best interest of Zhou Lin, who remained dangerously susceptible to infection, to return home to a dirt-floor one-room hut in rural China.

During all that time, admits Swartz, "I had been trying to play it cool, trying not to bond too much." But last fall, she and Bill decided to ask Zhou Lin's parents for formal permission to adopt her. Already reconciled to the decision, her parents, for Zhou Lin's sake, agreed.

Today, Zhou Lin speaks to her family by phone for hours every week. During one recent conversation, her mother said that while she still misses her daughter deeply, she is also grateful to the Swartzes for what they have given Zhou Lin: "I feel peace in my heart that she can walk now, and she's doing so well."

As for Zhou Lin, she is learning English, walking well on her prosthetic legs, and is earning all A's and one B as a ninth-grader at Eleanor Roosevelt High School in Greenbelt, Md. She also is passionate about working with Swartz on a new program to bring Shriners medical expertise to children in China and hopes one day to return there to work with handicapped children. "I have a big family now, in America and in China," she says. "They all love me, and they all care for me."

Susan Schindehette. Reported by Judy Rakowsky in Greenbelt

Know a hero? Send suggestions to [HEROESAMONGUS@PEOPLEMAG.COM](mailto:HEROESAMONGUS@PEOPLEMAG.COM). Please include your name, phone number and return e-mail address. For more information on Zhou Lin's story, go to [www.handreach.org](http://www.handreach.org).