

IAMAdoptee meets Adoptees of South America. We are so thrilled to have a chance to speak with Maria and Megan, adoptees from Ecuador, and learn about their ambitious goal of creating community for intercountry adoptees born in South America. Our contributor Emma, sat with them to hear all about them and their project!

Adoptees of South America + Extended Latin Americas was created in August of 2020 by Maria Richmond and Megan Keif. The group was created for adult adoptees who have ties to a Latin Country either by birth or birth parent. We understand first hand how necessary a space like this is for an adoptee. The group is here to give support- we hold space, we listen, we support. It does not matter what part of your journey you are on, we welcome you. Maria and Megan facilitate monthly zoom calls. We also have a private Facebook group, which allows us to connect outside of our monthly calls. You can find us at @adopteesofsouthamerica is the IG/FB handle.



MEGAN



MARIA

Emma: Did you know each other before creating the organization or was this the thing that really brought both of you together?

Megan: So we met in July (2020) randomly. We came across each other. We were both adopted from Ecuador. And I don't really run into that a lot. So we've only known each other for not that long.

Maria: We noticed that we were from Ecuador and I had this feeling and so I reached out to her. I said, I would like to form this group. She said, of course.

Emma: Maria, where was the motivation, besides having that connection through the other group and through both being adopted from Ecuador?

Maria: I reunited with my birth and first family and I just remember kind of feeling a little lost, kind of feeling a little alone. I had really amazing support from my husband. At the same time, sometimes I would say stuff I didn't know, like, is this normal? I needed to be validated that what I was seeing, what I was feeling, from those who understand what it meant to be adopted. I was going through other groups and just navigating the adoptee space online, and I don't there's anything here where I live in Texas. So I thought, well, maybe I can create what I need and I know other people will need it too. That's why I was like, "let me create this group that I know will be beneficial to those who are from South America and extend to Latin America."

Emma: That's really awesome. What is your goal in creating this group, I suppose, beyond just the support aspect of it?

Megan: I kind of think for me personally, the support part was like the biggest because that was something that was lacking.

Maria: When we had our first meeting, I remember opening up the screen and then just seeing a whole bunch of people who mirrored me, and I got emotional because I had never in my thirty six years of life ever seen so many people in the same space who could relate on so many levels. But seeing them, seeing the mirror, the racial mirrors, was a really, really, really big thing. We all talked about our identities and our struggles with it, which is something that I struggled with from my adolescence up to just a few years ago. I really think a lot of people say that is also a struggle, connecting with their culture, connecting with their identities, and navigating that amongst white spaces. We all look very similar in one way or another. And it's just a beautiful thing to see.

Emma: Thanks for sharing about that. It's always really awesome to see other adoptees who are creating and providing support and family for everyone. So, I do have a few questions for both of you. Is there a conversation that you think we should be having more of just as an intercountry adoptee community?

Maria: Yeah, I think for me, when I found the community in October, 2019, I was amazed that it even existed. Then I was navigating it and I was amazed at the voices that were out there. And then I was a little sad at the fact that there wasn't something like that for me growing up. Everybody has different experiences and I know people went to camps or they had these resources. It wasn't something that I grew up with. I just kind of navigated and survived and made it. But I know a lot of adoptees who struggle a lot with identity like myself and who struggle with validating our feelings, so I do believe that there should be more resources for adoptees from when they're young enough to be able to verbalize that we look different. Help us manage as we grow up and grow older. Having those conversations, saying that my desire to search for my birth family is OK. We have that wound, it's there! I would like resources for adoptees and for more resources for parents in our intercountry, international adoption (community). I see a lot for domestic adoptions

and I don't see a lot of international. We talk about the triad and it doesn't include me, doesn't include international transracial adoptees. It really doesn't include those who are born overseas. **I'd like to see more conversation on how, if we're going to have adoption, make it realistic so that we can truly thrive.**

Megan: My response is pretty similar, just the whole having access to those resources similar to Maria growing up. My adoption agency had the Christmas parties and picnics and stuff. But at that time, I was so young that it was just like I barely remember it. I don't know how beneficial it was. And then after those, there were no other resources provided until maybe about high school. I went back and they had a few Ecuadorian adoptees get together and kind of talk about searching for their birth parents, but other than that, that was about it. I definitely think letting other international transracial adoptees know that this space exists, specifically our group. I'm in Massachusetts, so there's nothing around me specifically. As for adoptive parents, I also agree that there's a lot of change that needs to happen in terms of training or education or listening to older adoptees and their experiences.

Emma: What sort of struggles or maybe triumphs you've had as an adoptee? What are the most difficult and what are the best parts of being adopted?

Megan: I think the best part for me is the community that I found online, specifically other adoptees. Knowing that there is such a huge community out there, so many adoptees who are doing so many things and being able to connect with them, whether it's through Instagram or Facebook or virtual groups, I think that has been the best part. I've been able to make a lot of friendships and have people to talk about who understand things that I'm going through.

Maria: Yes, I will probably piggyback on that. Definitely the community, although I wish I had found it earlier. I am thankful for my experience to an extent, because it has allowed Megan and me to create this group and to meet really cool people who have amazing talents and voices and just stories that need to be shared and supported.

Emma: Do either of you want to elaborate on the more difficult parts of being an adoptee?

Megan: I think there's a lot of difficult parts of being an adoptee, but I think I would say now... I've been in reunion with my birth family since 2018. I'm juggling multiple families, my family here and then my family in Ecuador. It's a lot of people to kind of navigate through and stay connected. There is also the whole language piece, they speak Spanish, I can understand Spanish, I can speak a little bit, but I'm not fluent. So that aspect is really hard. I definitely think that technology is very helpful, but it's still hard to stay connected and keep those bonds. Also, I have had anxiety since I was little. So that part of my mental health has been a big aspect of my entire life. I've been trying to navigate through my anxiety and kind of get a hold of that, so that's not taking over me. **The whole anxiety part plus being in reunion is like an added layer, which adds a little bit more of pressure and kind of a constant fear of not wanting to be forgotten, but also trying to stay connected is definitely hard.**

Maria: That's good, yeah, reunion is definitely hard. I didn't know what to expect. We're not prepared for it. It took me 13 years, so I didn't even know it was my wish of all wishes when it happened. My brain couldn't comprehend the 30 plus years and the moment came together where I actually found them. **Knowing that my journey does not end just because I'm in reunion, it's going to follow me until the end of time.** Growing up, it was it was hard with identity, my worthiness of who am I and the lack of information

didn't allow me to connect the dots on my mere existence on this Earth. How did I get here? I don't know. Was there a purpose? I just don't know. Having to fight the imposter syndrome when I'm trying to heal is always kind of rampant in my head. I have to constantly go back with my ego and say, "No, this is normal. This is what is to be expected with this type of situation." Healing has been really difficult, but healing has been taking place. It does exist. It's an everyday thing that I have to work towards because of my primal wound.

Emma: Have you found that people are either in the process of trying to reunite or are they in reunion with their birth families? Is that something that's common? For myself as an adoptee from China, it's very, very uncommon. I was just wondering how common that that is among folks in your South American plus group.

Maria: We have a wide range of experiences and journeys, which is really amazing. We do have people who are in reunion, we do have people that have been in reunion since they were preteens. We do have people who are searching. We do have people who want to search and don't know where to begin. We have people who are like, "I'd like to know, but I'm not ready."

Emma: Are there ways either now as adults or when you were kids that you have incorporated any parts of your birth culture or heritage, traditions into your daily life?

Megan: Number one, Spanish wasn't something that was prioritized once I was adopted, so I didn't really do that. I took Spanish classes throughout school but I just didn't really focus on that too much. But as far as other ways to incorporate my culture and heritage, I think definitely now that I'm in reunion, I think it's a lot easier for me to talk to my family and kind of see what they do as far as their traditions and how they celebrate holidays, what kind of foods they eat. Before it was kind of like me just going online and looking up Ecuadorian food and stuff and I felt a little disconnected from that just because I wasn't speaking to anybody personally and getting firsthand knowledge. Maria and I have done stuff. There's a holiday in Ecuador around Halloween time here and we got together on Zoom and we made...

Maria: *guaguas de pan*. Hopefully I'm saying that right...

Megan: Yeah, we made it together for the first time, something that I had never done. Maria made the drink. And that was really fun. I really enjoyed that because that's something I've never done before. I also like music, so I do listen to some music in Spanish, which is something that's helped me to learn a little bit as well. I kind of go through phases where like sometimes I'm very interested in incorporating and other times I just have other things going.

Maria: Yeah, it's the same music, playing Spanish music, cooking. Somebody had mentioned to me, like, when you use all five senses, it really helps with connection. So cooking is a really good way to do that. Your hands are touching things. You're smelling things. You're tasting things. You're seeing things. You're seeing the product. And so cooking food for my family and seeing if I can do it and seeing if they like it, it's been really it's been really fun. The kids know that I'm in reunion. I have a 16-year-old and a seven-year-old. Talking to them about it and getting support from them and getting their involvement has also helped me with healing because I wasn't taught that stuff. I'm passing it down to them and hopefully passing it down to their friends or family or whatever. Having their support has been really helpful. I do a lot of reading. Right now I'm reading a book on Afro Latin America because I am mixed with African. Learning my history has also

helped me to understand how and why things are the way they are in Ecuador. Connecting with my birth family has helped. I can ask a lot of questions and they can help me along the way or send me videos and stuff. And of course, the group, talking to them and hearing some people who are fully in their identities and their cultures and they give back to us.

Emma: Do you speak Spanish and what stage are you with that especially since language is definitely a barrier for adoptees if they come from a place where they don't speak English?

Maria: Yeah, I remember as a teenager, I wanted to know Spanish. People always asked me if I knew Spanish, they would talk to me in Spanish and I would have to say I don't speak Spanish and I don't think they believed me. I was really uncomfortable and I felt really bad because a lot of them were in the older community and I didn't want them to think I was being disrespectful. I don't know Spanish. When I brought that up to my adoptive mother, she said, "you said you didn't want to know." OK, I didn't want to know, but as I'm educating myself in the adoption process and what can actually help adoptees, I had to go back to her and I said, "wait a second. If I had taken Spanish, would you guys have taken Spanish? Who would I be speaking Spanish to?" If I had known that in a million years, I would find my birth family, then I would have stuck with it. But I struggled with it because nobody else is going to be speaking it. **I took a three-month course last year during the pandemic. It was so difficult, I was so glad that I had a mask on because I cried. My husband took the class with me and I literally cried. I was just bawling the first class; might have been through four classes that I was crying.** I should know my language, but I don't. Here I am having to learn it as an adult; a whole entire language that I'm trying to figure out how to learn in three months, and then I realized it's not going to take me three months, it's going to take me a long time and I have to be OK with that. The class did have books. When I get the itch, I will work in the book. I also do Duolingo when my family, my birth father does speak English, so when we talk on the phone, it's Spanglish for me. I have to just really give myself permission to mess up and still learn through it. It's been a struggle, it's been a journey. My youngest son is really interested in it and so he'll try and mimic what I say. My oldest, not so much, but at one point last year, we labeled like almost everything in the house to help us. That helped with memorizing objects. It really takes determination, which I think can come in waves. I think you kind of go inwards and get frustrated and upset, and then you feel guilty, you go through the emotional process of learning. But I know it's not going to happen overnight. I'm watching movies and stuff and watching TV shows that are strictly in Spanish so, yeah, it's been quite a journey.

Megan: I agree. It definitely comes in waves for me. So I grew up taking Spanish classes through elementary school until high school but that's very basic, just words and objects. I just didn't really prioritize it because again, where I grew up around me, I don't have anybody that speaks Spanish so there was no need for me to actually be fluent in it because there was nobody for me to practice with. Once I got into reunion, I always knew the language would be probably be involved, but then once it happened, I was like, oh wow, I really, really need to kind of learn a little bit more. I had to use translators. I had a couple friends from Ecuador that would help me. I still use Google Translate a lot. When I first got into reunion, I definitely put a lot of pressure on myself to learn Spanish and I thought I was going to master as soon as possible. I get really discouraged when I don't learn right away, that's then a bit hard for me. I am in communication with my birth family pretty much every day and we use WhatsApp, so I do practice that way. I definitely want to practice more maybe in the future, because I do want my children to know something. So that's how I am currently. It's definitely come in waves for sure.

Emma: Have either of you gone back to Ecuador, what that was like for you?

Megan: The first time I went back to Ecuador, I believe it was when I graduated high school (and I went with) my mom and my boyfriend. I don't really remember too much, honestly, but it was definitely very overwhelming to really be taken out of my element. I do have anxiety so getting out of my comfort zone was a lot for me. I went to the capital, Quito, and we stayed with a family friend. I definitely was around a lot of people that looked like me; that was very overwhelming, because I've never had that. I noticed myself thinking in my head when anybody walked by me, could that be my mom? Could that be my cousin? Could he be anybody related to me? That was a little hard. I went back in 2018 when I was in reunion for the first time to meet my whole family. Again that was overwhelming. I think every trip that I've gone on has been pretty overwhelming. I had to have a translator with me. My birth parents are not together, so I did have to split my time and kind of navigate that. There was a lot of brand new people I've never met in my whole life. It was definitely a good experience, I'm glad that I went again. Then the last time I went back was in August of 2019. The third time was about ten days. My family wanted to bring me all around and show me where they all live and do all these things. Definitely fun, but it was draining. Again, my Spanish was about the same so I had a translator with me. I went with my adoptive mom and my sister, and I'm really glad my sister was able to come with me, that she could meet everybody.

Maria: **I have never been. Kind of going back to “what do we need?” It might be far-fetched, but I but I feel like the organization in charge of adoption, or the parents, need to find a way to get their adopted children to their birth country at least once. I feel that was taken away from me.** I've always kind of planned going. Right now, it's just kind of the bucket list plan of what I would like to do when I get there. I do hope to bring my husband and my children if it all works out because I don't know how often I will be able to make the trip. We send a lot of photos and a lot of videos so they know all of our family over here and they're eager to meet them. I've got nieces and nephews that that look like my kids. It's crazy. And I would love for them to be able to connect with their cousins from Ecuador. My birth father does live here in America. So he actually will be the one that I go to visit first.

Emma: Is there anything you wish you could communicate to your birth parents still? Or and on the flipside, is there's anything that maybe you would want your adoptive parents to know as well, related to adoption?

Maria: From the time I was a teenager, even not knowing the details of how I came to be in this world, I wanted to talk to my (birth) mom and tell her I loved her and so I was able to do that and she was able to say back to me. I was able to tell her that I understand what she had to do with the circumstances surrounding my birth and that I forgave her for relinquishing me. I wanted to free her from that. Is it my responsibility? I don't think so, but I knew that I could give her some healing by telling her that. From the video, her whole demeanor (changed), like this weight of guilt has been lifted from her. The same for me, I feel lighter in many ways. I tell her I love her all the time and hopefully she can see that through the screen.

Megan: Honestly, that's what I was going to say, just that I would say to my birth parents where I'm at currently, I've gone through a lot of different stages of emotions with them. But where I'm at right now, I would definitely just tell them that I love them. I always knew that I wanted to find them, and I needed to find them for myself. I always felt I felt love for them. At the same time, there were times that I felt angry because I didn't know why I was put up for adoption. I didn't know why I couldn't stay with them. So I definitely have gone back and forth between a whole range of emotions, not just love and anger, but a whole lot

of things, but I think where I am right now, what I would just say is that I love them, and I can't wait to be able to see them again.

Maria: One thing I would like to add, which was very scary and difficult and gave me a lot of anxiety, was having to tell them that, **even though I didn't struggle with them and their struggles, I struggled.** It's difficult to admit that because I'm very aware of my privilege. A lot of people think, oh, new life, better life, and I've had to be very open as part of my healing and say, no, I actually struggled. This has actually been really difficult. I did have a really good life, I really did over here in America, but I still struggle. That's why I think it's so important for adoptees to be able to say what's on our mind, because we're told to be grateful by everybody around us.

Emma: Last question, do you feel that your identity has changed or evolved over time?

Maria: Even though I have some days where I feel like an impostor, I have more days where I feel like I am becoming myself as an Afro-Indigenous, Latina, and I am an adoptee. I was born in another country and I am here in America. I've done a lot of growth over the years, even before being in reunion. It required me to really make sure that even if I never found them, that I knew my worth. Even if the story that I would be told about how I came about wasn't this beautiful fairy tale, I was still worthy to live on this earth, to exist, to do the things that that I wanted to do.

Megan: I'm 24 right now, that in itself is a huge development and growth that I've seen in myself, plus the whole adoptee piece. I definitely think that I'm getting more comfortable and I'm growing more confident in my identity. I definitely also think that, I've been in therapy since high school maybe, and I think that has really helped me to grow away from not being confident in myself. My therapist is adoption informed. She only works with adoptees. And **I think that just being honest about my feelings and my emotions and my thoughts and having that space, whether it's with Maria, my therapist, the people in our group or just other adoptees, has helped me. There's times where I really focus on being an adoptee and focus on trying to find out more about my story or learning Spanish or trying to incorporate like my culture and traditions into my daily life. Other times it's, I guess, on the back burner just with everything else going on.**

Megan: I think the biggest thing is getting the word out there to people that this space does exist and that we're here to support everybody and listen. Everybody's on different parts of their journey. We are here and there's a lot of us who are willing to build the connections and build friendships.

Megan Keif is a 24-year old international, transracial adoptee from Ecuador, South America. Co-creator of Adoptees of South America. Megan is working towards her Masters Degree in Social Work and will graduate in May of 2021. Megan plans to dedicate her career to supporting adoptees. She currently lives in Massachusetts. @megankeif

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