

AEDC's Keith Holt knows 'you get what you need'

by Philip Lorenz III
AEDC/PA

1/7/2010 - **ARNOLD AIR FORCE BASE, Tenn.** -- Walking into Keith Holt's office it's hard to miss the coffee mug emblazoned with a diving symbol or the toy drum set and photos of him playing a gig or skiing out west.

Large story boards showing the latest multi-million dollar technology investment project he is working on line one wall.

However, it's all of the photos of his adopted daughter that clearly take center stage.

Holt, who is the program manager for the Space Threat Assessment Testbed (STAT) at the U.S. Air Force's Arnold Engineering Development Center, joined the work force at Arnold in 1985. During his 25 years at AEDC, he has managed a series of complex ground test support investment projects.

Twenty-eight years ago, Holt, armed with an undergraduate degree in mechanical engineering and a passion for tackling the challenging projects from the ground up, began by working for the commercial sector.

"I built a ready-to-spread frosting plant for Procter and Gamble and a couple of barbecue plants for the Beatrice Corporation," he said with a smile.

After coming to Arnold, his first job was to improve and enhance all the cryogenics and vacuum systems in the Mark I and ELA Space Chamber facilities.

Later, he was the project manager over what was the Decade nuclear effects facility and the construction of a National Missile defense facility in 10V. This was followed by his current role as the program manager overseeing the development of the STAT Spiral 1 test facility and the development of the Mark I test facility's transformation into the STAT Spiral 2 capability at Arnold.

Holt is proud of the role he has played in helping to fulfill Arnold's mission, but personally, his true pride and joy is a little girl named Kasen.

During Holt's 16 1/2-year marriage, he and his wife, Karen, had both been on the fence when it came to having children. Then about seven years ago, she told him of her desire to have a baby. Unable to conceive, the couple finally decided to adopt a child.

They had begun a challenging and rewarding journey.

Before deciding to start a family, Keith and Karen had travelled extensively and enjoyed a full life. He said as satisfied as they had been with their lives, both personally and professionally, nothing could have prepared him for the profound satisfaction parenthood would bring.

"I thank the Lord every day that my wife wanted to have children," he said. "This is what I was put on earth to do. I have no doubt, if anybody has ever gotten clarity about why they're here; I'm here to rescue and raise two little girls.

"We started this after years of pain, of not being able to conceive," he continued. "I kept telling my wife that we could keep going through this as long as she wanted to."

In 2003, Keith's wife told him that having a child was her goal, not being pregnant and she was open to an adoption. Before long, they decided on an international adoption.

"As old as we are and were when we started the process, we were not very likely to get an infant child, and we wanted to experience the entire process," Holt explained. "With the United States, infant children go to young parents. We also wanted the anonymity of an international adoption."



Keith Holt, his wife Karen and their adopted daughter, Kasen, pose for a group photo on the "Red Couch" at the White Swan Hotel, the place where Holt said all families stay when they come through Guangzhou. (Photo provided)



Kasen, who is now five years old, enjoys being active, whether its gymnastics or dancing. More recently, she learned how to ski during a trip to Utah. (Photo provided)

He also wanted to adopt from a country where there wasn't the likelihood of their adoption case being challenged in court.

The couple had been poring over material sent from adoption agencies all over the world, when something happened to make one country stand out.

"I had a class with Jacobs [Engineering, Corp.] downtown and there were people from all across the country at that class," Holt recalled. "There was a woman there who had just adopted from China and I told her what we were going through to decide and she recommended a couple of books. They were about the lost daughters of China."

In January 2005, the couple got their referral for a baby girl they named Kasen, which included a photo.

"Once we got the referral, there was a face, there was a human being and I wanted to go get her then," Holt said. "They made us wait a couple more months."

After being fingerprinted what seemed like countless times, the couple finally boarded the flight that would ultimately bring them to China to pick up their little girl.

"It was a wonderful experience," Holt said. "I felt very safe in China. You'd see the military presence there, but I never felt in danger - the people loved us there. The people knew that we were giving a better life to a child, one that would not be afforded there. They all treated us wonderfully."

Keith and Karen went to Jiangxi Province to a city called Nanchang, which is about 800 miles south of Beijing.

"She was 11 months old at the time we got the referral and we knew we were going to miss her first birthday," Holt said. "We sent her a bunch of presents. When they handed her to us, she had all those presents in her arms."

However, they immediately noticed something was clearly wrong with Kasen.

"They had her in four layers of sweat clothes," Holt said. "'Your baby is sick,' they said; she needs cold medicine,' and they gave us some."

It was obvious their newly adopted daughter needed proper medical attention, which their Chinese guide, "Uncle Bruce" arranged.

"[As it] turned out, she had double pneumonia and we spent our first five nights in a Chinese hospital. The conditions there make us appreciate our hospitals here much more," Holt acknowledged.

The threesome spent another week in Guangzhou near China's southern coast to finish the adoption process and allow Kasen to recover enough for the flight back to the U.S.

"[Overall], it was wonderful, we can't wait to go back," Holt said. "The process in China has slowed dramatically. We started the process for this second adoption in 2005. We hope, based on watching the progress of those ahead of us that we'll go by at least sometime in 2011. Kasen took less than two years, start to finish."

Holt said Kasen has come a long way since that day in 2005 that they picked up a sick little girl in China.

"We started Kasen in private school when we brought her home at age one," he said. "She just began kindergarten this past fall, where she flourishes. She makes straight A's, except for one category; She gets an 'I' for 'improving' in 'controls excessive talking.'"

"I can't imagine where she gets that from," he continued. "She's a nuclear bundle of energy who enjoys gymnastics, swimming, singing and dancing. She also enjoys spending time with her 10 dogs and three cats (all rescues)."

"People often ask us whether or not she speaks any Chinese," Holt continued. "We've even had folks who haven't met her ask whether or not she has a Chinese accent."

"Coming here at age one, she actually speaks with an extremely exaggerated southern drawl - again, we can't imagine where she gets that; we blame her school. We laugh when we think about her future of speaking to someone on the phone for an extended time before she meets them, complete with the exaggerated southern drawl; what a surprise it'll be when they meet this beautiful Chinese girl."

Looking back on the whole adoption process and what preceded it, Holt put the whole experience into perspective.

"After all the pain we went through trying to biologically have a child of our own, and constantly asking 'why us,' we now count our blessings daily that things went the way they did. If things went differently, we wouldn't have Kasen," he acknowledged. "It's obvious with every breath I take that she was meant to be with us."

"To quote one of my favorite British 'philosophers,' Mick Jagger, 'you can't always get what you want, but if you try sometime, you find, you get what you need!'"

To learn more about the international adoption process check out the Holt family's personal Web site at www.keithandkarenholt.com.