



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: The New Orphan Crisis – Part 1

Guest(s): John, Marlene and Hannah Strege

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Dr. James Dobson: Welcome everyone to Family Talk. It's a ministry of the James Dobson Family Institute supported by listeners just like you. I'm Dr. James Dobson, and I'm thrilled that you've joined us.

Roger Marsh: Well, welcome to Family Talk. I'm Roger Marsh. Now, you may be familiar with the words of Psalm 127 verse three. It reads, "Children are a heritage from the Lord. Offspring a reward from him." How often do you think about what a gift from God children truly are? Imagine a young couple. They're excited to start a family. They're filled with hope and love to share with their own son or daughter, making memories as a family. It's a beautiful thought, but the reality is the beautiful experience of having a family does not come easy for all. And that is the issue that we're going to hear more about on today's edition of Family Talk. Couples that perhaps have to think outside the box a bit and consider going to great lengths to become parents, like adopting a frozen embryo. Now, this version of accepting a child into a new family allows a mom to bond with her new baby as that child develops in the womb as nature intended.

But these frozen embryos are extra fertilized eggs that were not needed when a couple chose in vitro fertilization, or IVF, to conceive a child. At present, millions of these frozen embryos are waiting to be given a chance at life. It is truly the new orphan crisis, indeed. Now, on today's program, we're going to hear from a couple who literally pioneered the field of adopting frozen embryos. Gary Bauer will be joined in studio by John and Marlene Strege, and they'll share about their journey to begin a family, along with their daughter Hannah, who will also join the conversation as well. So let's join Gary Bauer now to introduce today's guest right here on this very special edition of Family Talk.

Gary Bauer: Well, hello everyone and welcome to Family Talk. I'm Gary Bauer, the Senior Vice President of Public Policy here at the James Dobson Family Institute. I'm also the host of the Defending Faith, Family, and Freedom Podcast here at the JDFI, and I'm honored to serve alongside my good friend for so many decades, Dr. James Dobson. When we think of a young couple starting a family, we often don't consider the complications they might have. And some of you do have complications. It can be quite a long and stressful and expensive process to

adopt or try medically assisted forms of conceiving a baby. And that brings me to our guest today, the Strege family. One couple paved the way for many people to adopt frozen embryos, a concept that was not even possible several decades ago. So joining me today on the program is the Strege family, John, his wife Marlene, and their daughter Hannah.

John and Marlene were the first couple to adopt a fertilized egg or snowflake baby, resulting in a successful pregnancy and birth of their daughter Hannah. John is a semi-retired sports writer and author. He's had two *New York Times* bestselling books, which is quite an accomplishment. Marlene is John's wife and a retired occupational therapist. Together, they are the parents of the first snowflake child, their daughter Hannah. Well, welcome to the program John and Marlene and Hannah. Dr. Dobson and Shirley send their best regards. And I'd like to start just with an aside. I remember learning in school many years ago, even though it sounds unbelievable, that each snowflake that falls is different from every other snowflake. That in itself is a miracle, right? Well, if that's a miracle, think about this miracle, that every human being is unique and different, except for one thing, that all human beings, regardless of the color of their skin or anything else about them, are all uniquely made in the image of God.

And that's actually what we're talking about today, one of those unique human beings made in the image of God. So I'd like to start, if I could, Hannah, when you first were, I think on a show with Dr. Dobson, I believe you were two or three years old. That's pretty amazing. Folks, you can't see her. I can. She's older than two or three today. In fact, you just graduated from Baylor University, I believe, and got a degree in social work. So tell us a little bit about what you're going to do with your life from this point on, and then we'll kind of fill in behind how you got to be the young woman you are today.

Hannah Strege:

Thank you, Gary. Yes, I just graduated from Baylor University in August with my master's in social work, and just recently got my licensure in Colorado. So I'm looking for work right now, but I hope to eventually open up my own adoption practice and doing adoption counseling for placing families, adoptive families, adoptees, pregnancy counseling, all the in-between. So that's the end goal that I have going right now. But right now, I really want to work towards getting my LCSW, which is a licensed clinical social worker. So that's the highest licensure we can have.

Gary Bauer:

So I hope our listeners caught that, that you're looking for a job. So if people out there are looking somebody with your experience in education and unique background, just contact us and we'll be glad to put you in contact with you. John and Marlene, a lot of people know your story, but there are lots of people tuning in that are not going to know this story. And so I'd like to just ask you to give us a little bit of the background that begins, I presume, with the fact that you wanted to start your family, and it wasn't going as smoothly as you thought. And then sort of fill us in about what happens next. And you might even throw in there, how did Dr. Dobson get involved in all this?

Marlene Strege: Sure, I'd be happy to. So John and I had experienced infertility in 1996 and in 1997. The doctor informed us that I was no longer producing eggs, which was premature ovarian failure. So we did not like the options presented to us, which was using a donor egg that would be creating a baby outside the marriage bond, so we didn't think that that was going to be honorable before God. I asked the physician at that time, through my tears, do you have any embryos that we could adopt? And it just kind of took him aback, and he's like, "I've never been asked that question, but I have tons of frozen embryos." John and I wanted to know what does God think about this? So we contacted several trusted pastors. We're Lutheran, so it was within the Lutheran Missouri Synod Church. We also contacted, I did, Dr. James Dobson.

I had listened to him every day on the way to work, and he was a child psychologist. And it was God ordained, I think, that somehow I got through to him. And he called me back the following week and he said he'd never been asked that question and he had to get counsel. But everybody agreed that if the original family was not going to go back and get these frozen embryos, that they needed to be placed for adoption. And any woman can carry any embryo, so that wasn't an issue. We then contacted our good friend who was an attorney at executive director of an adoption agency in Orange County, and they started the Snowflakes Embryo Adoption Program, and that was in 1997.

Gary Bauer: So you know your story about getting through to Dr. Dobson, over the years, this has happened with Dr. Dobson a number of times. He's always wanted to see letters that were coming in, although obviously he can't see and read them all. He was always interested in having the staff tell him if there was a phone call that was particularly intriguing or raising a question that he could do something about. And so it's been interesting for me over the years that he and I have worked together, how often somebody has said, "I can't believe it, but I got through to Dr. Dobson somehow. And because of that, this baby's alive, or this marriage was saved." And so getting through to him, it sounds like it played a major role in you being able to sort all this out about the moral consequences. And I guess there's still some debate and division in the Christian world about this whole area. Is that a fair statement?

Marlene Strege: It is. There's some people that think that if we support embryo adoption, we're supporting the whole IVF industry, which we don't support the whole IVF industry, but we need those doctors to perform the frozen embryo transfers. So this was started not to create more babies, but to solve a problem of... There's a lot of babies out there, and right now, it's 1.25 million to one and a half million frozen embryos.

Gary Bauer: Wow.

Marlene Strege: I testified before Congress in 2001 regarding the stem cell issue. And in my testimony in 2001, that number was 188,000. So you see how that's grown in an infertility industry that's unregulated. They do whatever they want in this

country. So these are babies, and they need to be adopted or something that's life affirming, have the original family go back and get them.

Gary Bauer: So the frozen embryos, which you said it's between a million, a million and a half, that's hard to get your arms around, can those be experimented on by so-called doctors or whatever? There really isn't any restrictions, it sounds like.

Marlene Strege: I don't believe so. Yeah. However, I've just seen news articles. It's been 26 years, I believe, since the doctor discovered how to extract the stem cell from the human embryo, but there's been zero cures from embryonic stem cell. It's all coming from adult stem cell, umbilical cord stem cell. When you read about stem cell progress though in media, it just says stem cell. It doesn't clarify that it's not embryonic stem cells.

Gary Bauer: Yeah, that has been a big controversy. Dr. Dobson and I fought for years about this issue. All the scientific advances that have been made have been made using adult stem cells for the most part, so there isn't any medical reason to be experimenting on embryos in the name of science. In fact, it's quite the opposite of what I took science ought to be based on. Well, Hannah, you have a unique beginning here. So how does the knowledge of that, and when did you first become aware of your unique beginning, and how has it impacted your life?

Hannah Strege: Yeah, it was never a secret to me that I was adopted. My parents taught me that I was adopted as a seed and put into my mommy's tummy to grow, and that's how I explained it to people from the youngest age that I can remember to doctors, to families, parents. That was the only thing I knew. That was the only way I knew how to describe it, and I thought it was perfect. And we talk a little bit about it in our book, *A Snowflake Named Hannah*, and how... People always ask me, "How did you find out you were adopted? How did they tell you?" And that's always a question that parents want to know that are adopting snowflake babies, is how do you tell your kids they're adopted? And how do they feel about that? And how do you tell your child that they were frozen and for how many years? That's a complicated thing.

And I never really expected to get into the adoption world, even though I am adopted. But getting into it career wise and starting my own practice eventually, I never saw that that's where I was being led until I was in college, and I was like, wow, I really want to help these babies get adopted. And that's really led me to where I am today.

Gary Bauer: Wow, that's fantastic. John, as the husband here and the father, and being part of all this, give us a husband and father's perspective on first, your desire for you and your wife to have a child through the regular process, and then the decision that was made to do something really bold and extraordinary and something that's a miracle.

John Strege: Well, it is a miracle, but when we got that diagnosis from the doctor, we were both there, and that's when Marlene asked, "Do you have frozen embryos we can adopt?" I don't think we had ever talked about that before. That was probably the first I heard of it, but it quickly became clear to me but that was a good way to go, provided that the Christian aspect, that we're doing everything in the eyes of God, it would be good.

Gary Bauer: The fact that that was a major factor as you thought this through, that you obviously wanted a child, but you didn't want to do anything that would violate God's word about how it is where to live and respect life. And I'm assuming from what you're saying that if you would've gotten a different answer from Dr. Dobson and some of the other people that you consulted, you probably would've gone in another direction or maybe not made this decision at all.

John Strege: I agree with that. We probably would've gone towards traditional adoption. But talking to all those pastors that we talked to, and then Marlene actually, you referenced it, how hard it was to get through to Dr. Dobson, especially in those days, that was a long shot, but eventually the message got through to him and he returned the call on a Saturday morning.

Gary Bauer: In preparing for the show, I went back and listened to some of the other shows, and there was really a special moment in one of them where you all visited with Dr. Dobson. And it's not clear in my mind now whether that was on the air or whether in his office or whatever, but Hannah, I think you were only two or something like that. And Dr. Dobson, he loves children, and he was holding you on his lap, and you sang a song to him. Do you recall this incident?

Hannah Strege: I do, but I'm not going to be singing today.

Gary Bauer: Yeah, I was put in the wrong line when that skill was put out. I'm not going to do any singing either. But do you recall what it was you sang maybe?

Hannah Strege: I think it was Jesus Loves the Little Children.

Gary Bauer: What a perfect song, right? It's a perfect time for this whole conversation because we've been seen, not just in this area, but all over the country, a big debate raging about whose children are they? Are they the parents', children, or are they the government's children? And it goes everything from what's being taught in the schools to whether some other adults other than parents have a right to interact with the child on sensitive matters without parental permission or input or whatever. So suffer the little children, the biblical injunction. This is very important in our country today that we sort all this out. So what you did so many years ago is even in some ways more timely today than it's ever been. How many children are snowflake children? Do we have reliable figures on that?

Marlene Strege: Through the organization we went through, they've had about 1100 plus children born. There's an organization in Tennessee, I think they've had more,

between 13 and 1400 children born. So the blessing, I think, is that now there's several different organizations that do embryo adoption or a type of embryo adoption. And I really encourage families to pray about it and see where God has their child or children to adopt. Or if you're placing children, do your research and find out where God wants you to place your children.

Gary Bauer: Have you met other Snowflake children now, young adults? And is there a club you belong to or you get a newsletter? Or do you have conventions? Or how is it that this very unique thing in your life that others have shared, how has that worked out in maybe having relationships with these other folks?

Hannah Strege: Yeah, I have started an Instagram page for the organization we went through for adult snowflake adoptees, or also adoptees that are 14 and older, so we can have these conversations that are hard and difficult and share our experiences. But people always think that, "Oh, she's adopted as a frozen embryo. She must have this amazing story." I do, but I'm just like any other person. Yes, we have this group for our shared beginning, but we are just like normal adults going to college, going to high school, watching the newest Netflix shows. We are doing what normal 20 somethings, 18 year olds are doing. And so people seem to put us on a pedestal, like, "Oh, they had this experience that makes them other." Well, no, we were all brought into God's family. And we're all adopted, and we were all born. We were all conceived in some way. We were conceived outside the human body in a Petri dish, but that doesn't make us any different than the person sitting next to us.

And so I think that's really clear for people to know, is we are just children. We're no different than anybody else in this room.

Gary Bauer: Interesting.

Hannah Strege: I think that's really important. So yes, there is some sort of club, I guess you could say, but we're not separating people by how they were born, I guess.

Gary Bauer: Was it well known among your friends and at the university and so forth about your beginnings? And if so, did it ever come up in the classroom in a good way or a bad way?

Hannah Strege: It has come up in the classroom. When I was at Biola, I was in a ethics class and we were talking about stem cell research, and the professor said something about, "Oh, did you know the first adopted frozen embryo was born and such and such in textbook date?" And I went up to her at the end and I was like, "I am that first adopted embryo that's in the textbook." It was a really awkward conversation, but she was like, "Oh my gosh. What?" And then we ended up talking about it. But yeah, it came up in the classroom more so with people just kind of Googling me. I don't really walk up to people and say, "Hi, I was the first adopted frozen embryo." People just kind of find out about it, and then it just

starts a conversation. But it's well known among most of my friends, and definitely my close friends too.

Gary Bauer: Wow.

Marlene Strege: So I have to chime in with her Baylor experience because her capstone project for graduation was entitled, "Adoption Is Not Second Best." And the Baylor professor who was in charge of her particular presentation, it was a professor she had never had before, so she didn't know Hannah. And during the presentation she said, "Oh, I googled your name and I'm so impressed that you were actually in our program." And at the very end, she said, "And I have remaining frozen embryos so I can now look into this program." So things like this seem to happen to us all the time.

Gary Bauer: That is amazing. Tell me a little bit more about the organization. I believe that they are a longtime Christian adoption agency. Is that right?

Marlene Strege: Yeah, they've been in business for 64 years, I believe. And so they have four adoption programs, and Snowflakes Embryo Adoption is one of their programs.

Gary Bauer: John, for you, but anybody can jump in on this, obviously, this had to be a pretty big deal in your lives, when you were going through it, when you're seeking this advice from Dr. Dobson, and then probably considering a lot of things. As a trailblazer here, there are a lot of questions that you had to deal with. What kind of impact did this have on your relationship with Christ? And to what extent was prayer directing what, John, you and your wife ended up doing?

John Strege: Well, I don't think it had any impact on our Christian faith. We're devoutly Christian and we prayed about it, talked to all the right people. But extending that a little bit, I worked for Golf Digest since 1997, and we go to Washington, D.C. where Marlene's going to testify before Congress, and Hannah's two. And I didn't tell anybody. We were owned by the *New York Times* at the time. I didn't tell anybody at work what we were doing, and I thought, this is not going to be a big story. Well, it turns out it was page one in the *New York Times* the next day after Marlene's testimony, and then there was a photograph of me holding Hannah in the *New York Times*.

Gary Bauer: Oh, I could see where this is headed.

John Strege: But to their credit, all the people Golf Digest, no one said a word about it.

Gary Bauer: Really? You weren't canceled?

John Strege: No. No. So I was very fortunate, work with a great group of people. But the whole *New York Times* thing, they actually handled the story pretty well, fairly at that time.

Gary Bauer: Yeah, the *New York Times* has always been a liberal newspaper. The *Washington Post*, by and large, has always been a liberal newspaper. But in recent years, these media outlets have gone off on the deep end. The line between editorializing and reporting news is non-existent. And that's particularly true anytime the issue revolves around family, the sanctity of life, the Christian faith, any of those things. You're probably fortunate that when you were doing all this, they hadn't gone completely bonkers at the *New York Times* as they sometimes appear to be today.

John Strege: Yeah, I agree 100%. The timing was good. Yeah. Today, it would be brutal probably.

Gary Bauer: Wow. We're running out of time, and there's so much more I want to talk to you about. Could I impose on you good folks to come back tomorrow?

Marlene Strege: Sure, absolutely.

Hannah Strege: We'd love to.

Gary Bauer: Fantastic.

Roger Marsh: Well, you've been listening to Family Talk and part one of Gary Bauer's fascinating conversation with John, Marlene, and Hannah Strege talking about frozen embryo adoption and how the plethora of frozen embryos available for adoption has literally become the new orphan crisis in America. Be sure to tune in again tomorrow as the family will share how Hannah's life has been to serve as an advocate for other frozen embryos and also the sanctity of human life. Now remember, you can share today's broadcast with a friend or family member simply by visiting our website at drjamesdobson.org/familytalk. And for information on the Streges book about Hannah's life, it's called *A Snowflake Named Hannah*, simply go online to drjamesdobson.org as well, and you'll find all that information there. Any married couple is going to go through a rough patch in life, or maybe a couple of rough patches in life.

And when those moments happen, you can really feel the weight of strain and stress on your marriage, can't you? During those times, it's important to keep prayer and our relationship with God at the center of that marriage relationship. And if you and your spouse are going through a rough time right now where you want to prevent those rough times from really putting extra weight on your marriage relationship, we encourage you to try our 10 day marriage series from the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. Now, to take the challenge, all you have to do is visit drjamesdobson.org/10daymarriageseries. Then simply input your email address and click on the signup button. It's that easy, and it's absolutely free. From the day you sign up, and then for the next 10 days in a row, you'll receive an encouraging email from Dr. James Dobson about how to strengthen your marriage. Now, this email will include some words of wisdom from Dr.

Dobson, and also some questions for you and your spouse to answer as well, and then a final prayer that you can say together.

Well, I'm Roger Marsh, thanking you for making family talk a part of your day. Be sure to join us again next time for part two of our fascinating conversation about the new orphan crisis, featuring a discussion with the Strege family. That's coming up next time right here on Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk.

Announcer: This has been a presentation of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute.