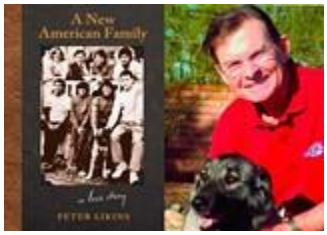
TUCSON WEEKLY / MAY 26, 2011

Tolerant Tucson: A former UA president tells the story of his diverse family

by Christine Wald-Hopkins



A New American Family: A Love Story

By Peter Likins

University of Arizona

200 pages, $29.95

In a world of egotistical, truth-stretching memoirs, it's refreshing to come across one written with modesty and apparent candor.

It's extra-refreshing to read about this Republican ticking off Russell Pearce.

In *A New American Family*, Peter Likins puts into cultural and historical context the story of his unusual family. Likins, who lives in Tucson with his wife, Patricia, retired in 2006 after nine years as president of the University of Arizona. This memoir grew out of the combination of a health scare and the election of Barack Obama: "Is America ready to consider," he asks, "the possibility that in ... the 21st century, the American family will be a lot like mine?"

The second child of four, born between the Depression and World War II in Northern California, his father a drinker who took off, Likins grew up in relative poverty. For one two-year period, he, his mother and his two brothers lived in a cold-water cabin (toilet, no bathtub) in a redwood forest north of Santa Cruz. He was a smart, scrappy kid, and by high school, young Pete Likins talked his way into becoming the student body president, wrestled his way to state champion, and landed a full ride to Stanford. By 19, he'd married Patricia Jolley, his high school sweetheart.

Likins works to balance his professional story with the stories of his wife and their family. He downplays his personal successes (crediting teachers, coaches and Pat for helping him thrive at Stanford and MIT and secure a professorship at UCLA, for example), and then—after reflecting on sobering realities of adoption—he foregrounds the children.

In succeeding chapters ("Kids," "More Kids," and "Still More Kids"), Likins describes how he and his wife adopted a multiracial family of six children. Unable to carry a pregnancy to term, they turned to adoption. Their first—an Anglo-American newborn—turned out to have a congenital heart defect that could have rendered her "practically unadoptable," according to regulations of the time. The couple then adopted five more "practically unadoptable" American children: a Mexican/Anglo, two African/Anglos and then, a few years later, two Native American sisters. As Likins paints it, these are children his wife, Pat, simply fell in love with.

Likins introduces the children and describes the family's early days as a busy, happy, swimming-pool-centered Southern California existence. Columbia University called, and they headed to New York, where Likins served as dean of Columbia's School of Engineering and Applied Science, and then as university provost. Subsequently, he would be president of Lehigh University and the UA.

As Likins' career star rose, home life became increasingly complex. Adolescence hit during the six years the Likins family spent outside of New York City, and while the family stayed busy with curricular and extracurricular activities, issues were emerging.

Ever the teacher, Likins periodically drops in a mini-lecture on an aspect of issues they struggled with: racial prejudice, nature vs. nurture in child-rearing, difficulties inherent in adoption relationships (including extended family racism), the nature of addiction, and mental illness. He also offers up the saving power of athletics, holding to principles, countering prejudice and learning to love.

Pat appears as a paragon of selflessness, affection, organization, patience and resilience. (While she was raising six children and getting her college degree, she "baked bread as well as cookies, prepared homemade soups and casseroles for the freezer, and found time for needlework creations.") Likins himself comes off as no slouch. Check out photos of him as a 50-something wrestling, and as a 60-something balancing a UA cheerleader on his shoulders. Out of principle, he risked (and lost) his position at Lehigh for selecting a black female admissions officer. He takes pride in helping establish a culture of inclusivity and diversity at the University of Arizona.

A New American Family also praises Tucson for its culture of tolerance. If his is, indeed, a picture of the 21st-century family, this, Likins asserts, is a place where it could work.

Likins' prose is clean, informed and disciplined; the narrative flows smoothly. Likins doesn't linger on tragedy, but celebrates a rich life. The memoir makes you wonder, though, about how other family members see their life: Just how easy was it for Pat to be superwoman? What was childhood like for the individual children, and how do they see themselves as adults? Just how easy could being the university president's kids be?

But those would be answered in *their* memoirs. Peter Likins' own is plenty intriguing.