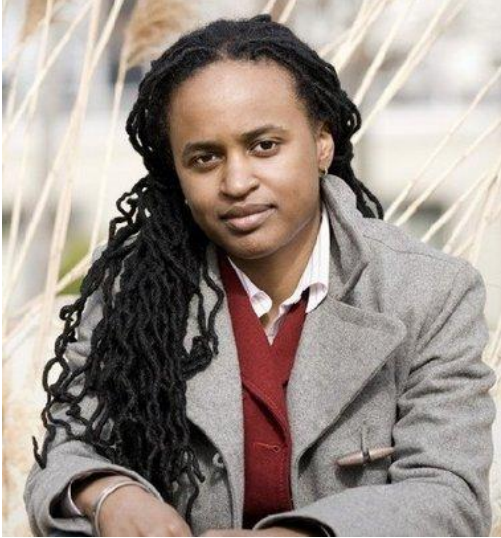




## A plea to let N.J. adoptees find themselves

Published: Sunday, May 22, 2011, 5:43 AM

By **Star-Ledger Guest Columnist**



Marshall ClarkeWriter Stacy Patton calls upon Gov. Chris Christie to sign the Adoptees Birthright Bill.

**By Stacey Patton**

I am case number KC 114343 in the New Jersey foster care system, and like thousands of other adoptees — some women like me, some black like me — I will not have a right to my birth certificate unless Gov. Chris Christie signs the Adoptees Birthright Bill (A1406/S799) passed this month by the state Assembly (and the Senate in March).

Though Christie and I are set in different positions on this issue, I write this piece to show how adoption touches everybody's lives in unexpected ways, even strangers.

A few years before I was born, my biological grandfather was brutally murdered and dumped in the Kearny swamps. The prime suspect in his gangland killing was the late mobster, Tino Fiumara, a fearsome convicted Genovese crime family captain who is also a distant relative of Christie's. As I learned more about my biological family of origin, I discovered this odd twist of history that neither the governor nor I willed, but nonetheless ties our fate.

My grandfather's 1969 murder set off a chain of tragic events that led to my birth mother's mysterious suicide and then to me being case number KC 114343. In my book "That Mean Old Yesterday," I tell how my adoption and reunion with my birth family unfolded even without access to my original birth certificate. But here I wish only to explain that while neither the governor nor I can undo unchosen family ties and choices, as he prepares to sign or veto the bill, he is now

empowered to heal what fate has dealt.

Surely my circumstances are different from my adopted brothers' and sisters' without the right to access their original birth certificate, but together we share a wish to discover who we were on the way to determining who we might want to be.

Christie can grant me access to the key document that affirms my legal identity as an American citizen and gives a factual accounting of my beginnings instead of an amended certificate that erases my past and legally defines my birth parents and me as nonrelated strangers forever.

In addition to my birth parents' names, I will be able to see my stamped footprint, the hour and minute I was born, how much I weighed and other traces of my identity. Access to this document will finally give me a sense of continuity. No longer will I feel as if I sprang from some mysterious nowhere, and no longer will I be dependent on what others selectively choose to tell me about my birth.

As well as finally being able to identify ourselves fully, vital gains for legions of adoptees will come from signing this bill into law.

First, the bill's most obvious and irrefutable benefit will allow adoptees and our offspring to become aware of health issues that affected our biological predecessors. Not knowing vital medical information leaves us handicapped in determining our potential health risks.

By granting unrestricted access to our birth certificates, Christie will also affirm that adoptees have the same veritable civil right as any other non-adopted citizen, a right covered under Articles 7 and 8 in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states: "All children have the right to a legally registered name, and nationality" and "Governments should respect children's right to a name, a nationality and family ties." If Christie does not restore adoptees' civil rights, we will remain a segregated and discriminated class of citizens subject to restrictions that apply only to us.

Contrary to the fear-based hypothetical scenarios offered by opponents seeking to thwart adoption reform, from the ACLU-N.J. on to New Jersey Right to Life, open access will not lead to disastrous results. We need only to consider facts from the eight states that have passed similar bills since 2000 and the two states that never sealed adoptees' birth certificates — Alaska and Illinois.

In states allowing open access, adoptees do not arrive unannounced in droves at their birth parents' doorsteps to shame or stalk them. The naysayers also argue that the bill violates the privacy of birth parents, will encourage abortions and will harm the institution of adoption. These assertions are false and do not weigh sufficiently to justify denial of the fundamental rights of adoptees.

First, birth mothers who relinquished their children were never legally promised anonymity. Simply put, they do not have any legal rights or authority over their offspring and they do not have the right of privacy from the children to whom they gave birth.

Second, in the states that have similar birthright laws, adoptions have increased and abortions have decreased. A study by the American Adoption Congress reports that between 2000 and 2008, abortions declined 16 percent in Alabama, 14 percent in Kansas, 8 percent in Delaware and 5 percent in Tennessee. Alaska and Illinois, the states that never sealed birth certificates, have the highest adoption rates in the nation. The study also found that most adoptees it tracked don't seek a reunion and 95 percent of birth parents welcome a reunion.

In 1994 while a student at the Lawrenceville School, I was reunited with my biological relatives thanks to the support of the New Jersey Adoption Registry. I was 15 and estranged from my adoptive parents after the Division of Youth and

Family Services removed me from their home because of child abuse. Given my special circumstances, the registry served as an unpaid intermediary and unsealed my records.

Within a few weeks of submitting my application, I was furnished with a two-page report explaining some of the circumstances that led to my adoption. The report did not include names or addresses of my biological relatives. Though it was not the fantasy reunion I imagined I'd have on "Oprah," I don't regret the journey. What I've learned about my origins is not great, but it is better than knowing nothing at all.

People who are not adopted cannot fully understand what it is like to have their name, identity and origins kept a state secret. I don't pretend to speak for all adoptees, but I can say that from personal experience, it is a terrible way to live and navigate the world. For 33 years I've carried the emotional baggage of loss, separation and unanswered questions.

Despite having met my biological relatives and despite the fact that both my parents are deceased, it is still illegal for me to obtain my original birth certificate. Christie can change this and finally help me conclude my personal journey to know myself, to seek closure and identity, and to realize the true meaning of equality. The bill is not perfect, but it is far better than the current situation of exposing adoptees to major health risks while denying us a more poignant image of our infant footprint and universal human rights.

Gov. Christie, there are no doubt myriad such stories that may or may not be as dramatic and layered as mine. I respectfully urge you to listen with your ears, your mind and your heart to the voices of adoptees like me.

Three years ago, on Mother's Day, I finally visited my mother's unmarked grave in Paramus, where she shares a plot with my grandfather. When I asked the cemetery officials about erecting a headstone, I was told that I needed to verify that I am a next of kin. Unfortunately, because I am denied access to my original birth certificate, I cannot prove that I am my mother's daughter.

Gov. Christie, you have the redemptive power to help me put their souls to rest and achieve peace — something long overdue.

*Stacey Patton is the creator of [sparethekids.com](http://sparethekids.com) and a writer for the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund Inc.*  
© 2011 NJ.com. All rights reserved.