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Groups, bill aim to give adoptees access to birth, medical histories



JANE NAST, NJ CARE MEMBER



THE REV. TIMOTHY MULDER, NJ CARE MEMBER



PAM HASEGAWA, NJ CARE MEMBER

By GREG MARANO
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When the birth mother of Jane Nast's 13-year-old adopted son wanted to meet him, Nast was afraid it would destroy her family.

"When we got the letter (from the birth mother), I was afraid he would go back to his birth parents," Nast said.

But 25 years after the reunion, Nast declared it was "absolutely the best thing that could have happened" to her son.

Now Nast, a resident of Mendham Township, is a member of the New Jersey Coalition for Adoption Reform and Education, or NJ CARE, an organization working to make it easier for adopted children to contact their birth parents.

Members of the Morristown-based group met with the Courier News editorial board last week to discuss A-3237, a bill passed by the state Senate as S-1093 and introduced in the Assembly in December, on which NJ CARE is pinning much of its hope to give adoptees some more light into where they came from.

The bill would provide adult adoptees, adoptive parents of minors and adult children of deceased adoptees with access to the adoptee's original birth certificate, with the name of their birth parents and the place of birth.

Currently, adoptees are issued an amended birth certificate, which contains just the child's name, date of birth and place of birth. The place of birth listed is not necessarily where the child was actually born, but can instead be the hometown of the adoptive parents.

Advocate groups such as NJ CARE say information about birth parents is something adoptees should have so they can learn about their origins.

"Self-identity, self-knowledge and self-understanding ... I find that to be at the root of every major religion through history," said the Rev. Timothy Mulder, director of St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Gladstone and a member of NJ CARE.

For NJ CARE member Pam Hasegawa, a Morristown resident who was born and raised by adoptive parents in New York, finding her birth mother would have meant a chance to thank her.

"I wanted to know who she was, I wanted to know why she had to relinquish me, and I wanted to tell her I was glad to be alive and thank her for giving me life," Hasegawa said.

"My mother gave up her rights to participate in my future," Hasegawa said.

But Hasegawa said that shouldn't deny her the right to know about her own past, which can include family medical conditions as well as social and cultural background.

She said she missed the opportunity to meet her birth mother, who died before Hasegawa could make contact. But she said she wants to make sure other adopted children have that opportunity.

Hasegawa points to Division of Youth and Family Services statistics that show 95 percent of birth parents who DYFS contacts at the request of adopted children agree to some form of contact with the child.

"If 95 percent of birth families welcome the contact, keeping the records sealed is punishing the many," Hasegawa said.

Opponents to the bill include the Catholic Conference, Right to Life, the American Civil Liberties Union, the National Council for Adoption and the New Jersey Bar Association.

Marie Tasey, executive director of New Jersey Right to Life, said the bill does not take into account the wishes of the birth mother.

"This law ignores the very people who make adoptions possible," Tasey said.

"We believe that if you remove the option of confidentiality from a woman who is pregnant ... that could encourage some women, for whom confidentiality is paramount, to have no other choice other than to have an abortion," Tasey said.

The result, Tasey said, would be a law designed to give adoptees more access to information about their origins, but would instead create obstacles for women to put their children up for adoption in the first place.

NJ CARE cites trends that show abortion rates falling in states where laws have been enacted to make adoption records more accessible. But Tasey said there are too many other factors at play to attribute a direct correlation between adoption record laws and abortion rates.

"In a couple of the other states that have open adoption records, they have also recently passed laws like 24-hour waiting periods, parental consent laws, abortion regularity laws, laws that we know do impact the rates of abortions," Tasey said.

"What the state of New Jersey is doing by bypassing this law is putting more roadblocks in the way and making adoption more difficult," Tasey said.

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For more information

- To read the entire bill, visit the New Jersey Legislature Web site at www.njleg.state.nj.us/2004/Bills/A3500/3237_11.HTM.
- For more information about NJ CARE, visit their Web site at www.nj-care.org.
- For more information about New Jersey Right to Life, visit their Web site at <http://www.njrtl.org/prolifenews.php>.

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