

Adopted and Searching for Answers

Five people share their stories about looking for-and finding-their biological family

By Matt Samelson

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Like several states, Colorado recently eased restrictions on sealed adoption records-making it easier for adult adoptees and their biological parents to find each other.

But even as these records become more accessible, adoption advocates say people who want to contact biological relatives should consider the emotional impact a reunion might have before trying to initiate one.

Last month, Colorado's Attorney General John Suthers brought the issue to light when he talked publicly for the first time about finding his birth mother. He sent her a long letter, but his mother was reluctant to set up a meeting.

"She did not want to disrupt her life, and I respected that wish," Suthers said at a conference held by Adoptees In Search, a Denver-based nonprofit organization.

Yet for others, the desire to learn about-or meet with-a biological parent is too great to ignore.

"I'm 74 years old, and I don't know who my mother was. There's a black hole there," said Bart Brinkman, who is still seeking information about his mother. "You feel bad that you never met your parents."

Adoptees In Search says that as birth records open up and more information becomes available online, many people focus on the search for biological family members-but need to consider the issues of an actual reunion.

"The Internet is a wonderful research tool, but it does not prepare you emotionally for what you may or may not find," says Rich Uhrlaub, director of Adoptees In Search.

To help people on both sides of an adoption, the organization conducts monthly meetings and an emotional support group

"When you decide to search, you kind of go numb and fear sets in," says Suzanne Matson, who leads the support group. "People sharing their stories can really help others understand the process."

The following people shared their adoption stories with Parade.com, and described their happiness-or disappointment-after searching for a biological relative.

Bart Brinkman - May file a lawsuit to know who his mother was
John Talbert - Discovered that his father starred in TV's The A-Team
Karen Liebgold - Ready to meet a son she gave birth to 41 years ago
Suzanne Matson - Searched for a mother, discovered a father
John Suthers - Respected his mother's wish not to meet

'I Was Fine With Who I Was'
- John Talbert, Gunnison, Colo.

After graduating from high school in Minnesota, John Talbert decided to move west.

"The day I left, my dad gave me an envelope with information about finding my biological parents," Talbert said. "I was 19, and I didn't feel the need to open it."

Nine years later, while in the Coast Guard stationed in Seattle, where he was adopted, Talbert thought about opening the envelope. He set up an appointment with the Children's Home Society to learn about searching for his parents.

"They described the process, and told me it would cost \$600," Talbert said. "I wasn't flush with money at the time, so I walked out. I was fine with who I was, comfortable in my own skin and didn't need to do it. A year later, after a trip to the Antarctic and the Arctic on an icebreaker, I had more money, so I did it."

At age 29, Talbert met his biological mother, and a year later, his biological father, who did not know Talbert had been born.

"I exchanged letters with my mom, and we started developing a relationship," he said. "She asked me if I wanted to know who my dad was, and she ended up calling him to tell him about me."

Talbert's mother is an actress working in educational theater for at-risk kids, and his father starred on TV's The A-Team and Battlestar Galactica.

"I started exchanging letters with him. It was a pretty intense experience, but it turned out great," Talbert said. "It's pretty mind-boggling when I look at the direction of my life and the similarities. I have a degree in theater and communications and that's what they got their degrees in."

"Finding my biological parents was never a driving need for me," Talbert said. "I grew up a regular kid like everybody around me and never really thought about it. Now I could never imagine not doing it. It has had a huge impact on my life."

'I Don't Want Anymore Secrets'
- Karen Liebgold, Denver

In 1966, after becoming pregnant from a date rape, Karen Liebgold relinquished her baby.

"I never got to see him or hold him. As soon as he was born, they took him away," she said. "I was hustled out of the hospital soon after. It was done almost covertly."

Liebgold said she felt like she had to put the entire episode-the pregnancy, birth and adoption-behind her.

"You never talked about it again, because that's how things were back then," she said. "My family and I never talked about it."

Forty years later, Liebgold's sister called with some stunning news. Her son's adoptive father was helping him find Liebgold.

"I had never told anyone, never told my husband or my children," Liebgold said. "I sat my husband down and told him the whole story, and we cried. After that, I picked up the phone and called the adoptive father."

Four days later, Liebgold's son called and introduced himself to his mother.

"He said, 'Hey, Mom. This is really trippy, huh?'" she said. "I told him the whole thing. It's not a perfect story. You can't redo things, but you can pick up the pieces."

Liebgold said she felt liberated after talking to her son-and after sharing that part of her life with her family.

"There's healing in the telling, and I don't want any more secrets," she said.

In August, Liebgold and her son have plans to sit down, face-to-face, for the first time.

'I Would Do It Again in a Heartbeat'
- Suzanne Matson, Pine, Colo.

Some people know from an early age they want to find their birth parents, but then the process takes years-and the end result fails to meet their expectations.

Suzanne Matson, a certified counselor, decided when she was 8 that she would one day search for her biological parents.

"My adoptive brother and I were playing under the coffee table," Matson recalled. "He asked me if I was ever going to search for my real parents. I said yes, and he said he wasn't going to."

As soon as she turned 18, she filled out paperwork for the National Adoption Directory Search. But the filing required her birth certificate, and Matson's adoptive mother did not give it to her until she got married several years later.

When she finally received contact information for her biological mother, Matson wrote to her. She said her mother was nervous about making contact, and so she used a fake name and address.

The relationship did not take off. For seven years, Matson attempted to set up a reunion until she realized her birth mother was not prepared to have one.

During that process, however, Matson was able to track down her birth father, who lives in Golden, Colo. They established a good relationship. And although it was difficult not being able to meet her mother, Matson said she doesn't regret trying.

"I would do it again in a heartbeat, as painful as it was," she said. "It still changed my life in a positive way."

'I Respected Her Wish'
- John Suthers, Denver

Colorado Attorney General John Suthers never set out to find his biological mother, but through a series of events the adoption search and support community calls "synchronicity," he did determine who she was.

Suthers' birth mother worked for the Denver Catholic Register newspaper while she was pregnant, and after his birth, a Catholic family in Colorado Springs adopted him.

The Catholic faith played a major part in his life, and after law school Suthers worked as an attorney for the Diocese of Colorado Springs. During his tenure there, he learned some non-identifying information about his birth mother, as well as the name of the woman who drove her to the hospital for his delivery.

Suthers also learned that one of his biological uncles was a physician, and after giving a speech at a public library, he began flipping through a physician reference book. He spotted his uncle's name and contact information.

After talking it over with his wife, Suthers decided to call his uncle, who agreed to get in touch with his birth mother. Suthers eventually sent his mother a long letter telling his life story, and in the end, they decided not to meet.

Suthers recently shared his story at an Adoptees In Search seminar in Lakewood, Colo.

"She did not want to disrupt her life, and I respected her wish," he said.

A synchronicity of events led him to his birth mother, but not to a reunion. Even so, Suthers said, he did not regret contacting her.

"I don't hesitate to speak about adoption because I want to encourage adoption," he said. "I don't think there are enough adoptions in the world."

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Colorado has not only increased access to older adoption records, it now allows any child adopted after 1999 to obtain their full birth and adoption records at age 18-unless the biological parents specifically request privacy.

Several other states have enacted similar legislation. Among them, Tennessee, Oregon, New Hampshire, Alabama and Delaware are the most progressive in opening birth and adoption records. (For a state-by-state list of laws, [click here](#).)

Since 1990, about 3,400 people in Colorado have filed adoption-related searches for biological family members, according to Colorado Confidential Intermediary Services.

In about 70 percent of those cases, the biological relative who was being searched for agreed to have a reunion. More than half involved a birth mother who consented to a reunion with her adult child. Birth siblings were the second-most common search.

About 10 percent of the cases involved a parent looking for an adult child they had given up for adoption.

For more information about adoption searches, go to the [National Adoption Directory Search](#) or [The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute](#).

If you would like share your adoption story with us, please e-mail webeditor@parade.com, or add your comments below.