

Adoptees persevere in efforts to locate biological relatives

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For an adoptee, knowing the name of a birth parent is one thing.

Finding that parent is another story entirely.

Even if the Legislature passes a law giving adoptees access to their original birth certificates, there's no guarantee th adoptees would be able to locate their parents.

To do that, some adoptees hire private investigators. Some are able to find their relatives through the state's adoptic registry, while others do their own research.

Searches can take hours or years and can be conducted in a number of ways. The reasons for searching and the reactions from those who have been found range just as widely.

Adoptee Lisa D'Antonio of Jackson began her search about 10 years ago by placing a classified ad looking for women gave birth in Toms River on a certain date.

The one response she received indicated she should try the state's adoption registry, which conducts searches on behalf of adoptees — like D'Antonio — who were placed with families through the Division of Youth and Family Services.

It's a resource many others have used as well.

"Our phones ring constantly," said registry coordinator Dolores Helb. "Adoptees are waiting six months before we can get to their case because we're so swamped."

So far this year, Helb and her colleague Mary Coffey have initiated about 100 searches on behalf of adoptees.

Birth relatives cannot use the registry search for adoptees, Helb noted, because the state assumes adoptees don't know they were adopted, and therefore cannot inform them that birth relatives are looking for them, Helb said.

Some adoptees want the full story — names and contact information for birth relatives, Helb said. Others only want nonidentifying information about their birth parents, data that could include ethnicity, level of education, or physical characteristics.

Helb and Coffey begin the search for an adoptee's relatives using DYFS case files, which vary widely in their completeness. They plug in various clues — a maiden name, Social Security number or date of birth — to some national computer databases and go from there.

If they think they've found the right person, they send a letter indicating that an adoptee is looking for biological family members. DYFS requires written consent from birth relatives before releasing information to the adoptee.

At the time of D'Antonio's search, the registry was headed by Gerald Gioglio, who was able to find her birth mother within about six months.

Gioglio, of Lavallette, said that 95 percent of the birth relatives he contacted during his five years at the job "were very interested — ecstatic almost" to hear from an adoptee.

But D'Antonio said she and her birth mother only exchanged letters once, using the registry as an intermediary.

D'Antonio didn't feel the need to press the issue until she became pregnant with her second child eight years ago. Faced with a litany of questions about her family medical history — Do you have relatives with high blood pressure? Diabetes? Cancer? — D'Antonio was at a loss.

"It's a big blank," said D'Antonio, 35.

So she again wrote to her biological mother to ask for health information. She never heard back.

D'Antonio noted she respects her birth mother's desire for privacy and wasn't necessarily looking for a relationship with her.

"I don't want to knock on her door," D'Antonio said. "(But) the minimum she should give me is my medical history."

Opponents of the proposed open-records law, such as the Washington-area National Council for Adoption, say medical information is best brokered by an intermediary.

"There are ways to request medical information . . . through a third party that would be confidential (and) would maintain a person's right to privacy," spokesman Lee Allen said. "We're not against the disclosure of medical information for valid needs. We are sympathetic; we need to come to a compromise."

Carol Barbieri, a 49-year-old adoptee now living in Atlantic Highlands, began a serious hunt for her birth relatives 15 years ago after her son was diagnosed with Wolff-Parkinson-White Syndrome, a life-threatening heart condition that sometimes runs in families.

Barbieri ended up conducting her own search. Knowing only her birth father's last name, Barbieri tracked down the identities of her biological parents using police logs, death certificates, property archives, her baptism record and newspaper articles.

Although her birth mother and father had died years earlier, Barbieri found five siblings she never knew she had. The discovery was the "blessing" that came out of her son's crisis, she said.

The kind of research Barbieri did is similar to what Joe Collins sometimes does. Collins, a Morristown-based private investigator, specializes in reuniting adoptees with their birth relatives.

One such reunion took place seven years ago between Judy Foster, a birth mother from Randolph in Morris County, and the daughter she gave up to Catholic Charities in 1961.

Foster, now 62, was only able to tell Collins her daughter's birth date and that she was born at a Catholic hospital in Trenton, but it took less than three weeks for Collins to find her.

After an initial emotional phone call, Foster and her daughter, then 37, met each other for the first time on Sept. 6, 1998.

Foster said there had been plenty of anxiety before the reconciliation as she pondered the possible outcomes.

"What if she's a drug addict?" Foster recalled wondering. "What if she's dead? What if she doesn't want to know me?"

But then Collins showed up at Foster's house with her daughter's high school picture. The mother-daughter resemblance was remarkable, Foster said.

"When I saw the picture," she said, "I just kind of knew immediately that it would be a good reunion."

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