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## An only child finds his big family

**Harold Cogdell always wondered if he had other relatives. A recent state law helped him find them.**

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Posted: Sunday, Mar. 07, 2010



Mecklenburg County commissioner Harold Cogdell Jr. with his birth mother, Rene Strickland. They found each other in May. DIEDRA LAIRD -  
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Growing up, a suspicion constantly gnawed at Harold Cogdell Jr. He'd never heard his mother, Jeanette, talk about her pregnancy, or how much he weighed at birth - like his friends' mothers did.

She and his father, Harold Sr., were older than his friends' parents in Kinston, where Harold Jr. was raised an only child 70 miles southeast of Raleigh. They were reserved; he was outgoing.

And they didn't share the same physical features. Harold Jr.'s friends often kidded that he looked like he came from Ahoskie, a town in northeast North Carolina known for its large Native American community.

His parents were African-American.

"Kinston lacked diversity; it was black or white," Harold Jr. said. "I didn't fit squarely into either one. There were times when I felt out of place."

He suspected he might be adopted. Yet he never brought it up to his parents.

"I didn't want it to affect our relationship," he said. "I knew my parents loved me and I loved them. So I never confronted them."

Until he launched a search to fill the hole in 1993. He was a first semester law student at N.C. Central University in Durham, researching adoption laws. Suddenly, he needed to know the truth.

Driving home to Kinston for the weekend, he thought about his parents. He admired Harold Sr.'s strength: He was Kinston's first black police officer (and sergeant) and later its first black probation officer. He treasured Jeanette's elegance: She taught piano.

Adopted or not, the truth wouldn't come between them.

That night, he sat with Harold Sr., mustering the courage:

"Pop, there's something that's not making sense," he recalls saying. "You and Mom have loved me, done everything possible for me. I am so thankful. But I feel there's some part of the story that I'm missing.

"I need to know: Was I adopted?"

Harold Sr. said nothing. He got up and nervously walked to the back - returning with Jeanette.

They'd been expecting that question all Harold Jr.'s life.

Yes, they did adopt him. He was slightly older than a year, living in a foster home in Durham. His name was only "Owen."

"I took one look at you and knew I had to have you," Jeanette told him.

When Harold Jr. was 6, they tried to tell him. His father read him a book about a baby alligator who'd been adopted. Story over, the boy threw the book across the room, and ran out crying and screaming: "I never want to hear that book again!"

The Cogdells dropped it.

Now, their son a grown man, they told him what little they knew about his birth mother: She'd been a college student in Durham - too young to care for a baby.

A baby born to a teenager.

In fall 1968, Rene Melton Strickland was an 18-year-old student at a Durham business college. There, she met a young law student named Frank Turner.

They dated briefly. But at the end of Frank's first semester of law school - at N.C. Central - he left school to work in Washington, D.C.

Weeks later, Rene discovered something she'd keep from much of her family, including her two sons, for four decades.

In late 1968, she was pregnant.

Abortion was out. So, too, was raising the baby - she felt she was too young. Her parents worked hard and had her four siblings to raise in Ahoskie, where her family descended from the Meherrin Indian tribe of Hertford County.

"I was not prepared to look after my baby; I knew I couldn't provide for him," Rene said. "I didn't want my parents to have to do it. They had enough on their hands. Back then, we didn't talk about these things. I felt it was best the baby go to a home that could provide for it."

Her decision was firm: She'd turn the baby over to Durham County Social Services to place for adoption.

At first, Rene told only her parents and a sister. She didn't try to find Frank.

On Aug. 13, 1969, Rene had a boy. She'd instructed nurses not to show her the baby, concerned it would make her decision harder. One nurse didn't get the message: "Here, I've brought your son so you can feed him."

Rene turned her head away.

Her mother, Dorothy, tried to see the baby. But he was gone.

Rene cried for an hour.

A new family in New York:

After her son was born, Rene moved to Brooklyn, N.Y., to live with an aunt.

Soon, a young NYPD cop named Claudie Strickland began coming around. He, too, was Native American and had grown up in Clinton, N.C., 40 miles east of Fayetteville.

The attraction was instant. At Christmas 1969, Claudie drove Rene home to Ahoskie. Before leaving for Clinton, he asked Rene's father for permission to marry her.

"My mother asked if Claudie knew (about the baby)," Rene said. "I assured her that he did. She said, 'OK, then everything will be fine.'"

They married in January 1970. Three years later, son Billy was born, and in 1976, they had a second son, Jason.

They settled on Staten Island, as Claudie became an intelligence detective assigned to guard New York mayors.

Rene stayed at home with their sons. She often thought about the son she gave up and prayed he was with a good family that loved him.

In 1990, son Billy spent his high school senior year in Charlotte with an aunt and uncle. He graduated from Queens College (now University) of Charlotte in 1996.

Four years earlier, Rene, Claudie and Jason had also moved to Charlotte. Claudie had retired. Rene had finished nursing school and began working as a nurse.

All along, neither son knew they had a half-brother.

Finding his birth mother:

Harold Jr. had grown closer to Harold Sr. and Jeanette since their revelation, but somewhere he had another mother and father.

After law school in 1996, he took a job as an assistant district attorney in Charlotte. Two years later, he started his own criminal law practice. He got involved in politics and was elected to the Charlotte City Council in 2001, but left after one term to look after his practice. He's been a Mecklenburg County commissioner (he's now vice chair) since 2008.

In 2007, he read that N.C. legislators had eased restrictions on adopted adults finding birth parents, using adoption agencies as a go-between.

Harold Jr. applied through Durham County Social Services, and was assigned a "confidential intermediary" from an adoption agency. The law took effect in January 2008. A year later, the intermediary called: She'd found Harold's birth mother.

Her name is Rene.

By law, the intermediary wrote Rene Strickland in Charlotte that the son she'd given up in 1969 wanted to meet her. Was she willing? In early May, Rene and Claudie returned from vacation in California and found the letter in a stack of mail.

That evening, the intermediary called. I am so relieved, Rene told her. Of course I want to meet him. But not until I've told my other two sons.

On Mother's Day 2009, Rene sat Billy and Jason down. Two months earlier, she'd reacted strangely to Billy's news that he and his wife, Tracy, were adopting a baby. Now Rene was crying: "I don't want you to be shocked. Before Dad and I got married, I had a son who I gave up for adoption. I never thought it was important to tell you unless he found us.

"He's found us."

A new brother:

Billy and Jason were stunned and excited; they had another brother. But where?

From a letter Harold Jr. was permitted to write and give to the intermediary, they only knew his first name. And that he was a lawyer in Charlotte and "involved in the political arena."

At home, Billy Googled: "Harold, lawyer and Charlotte." Among Charlotte lawyers named Harold was Harold Cogdell Jr. Billy opened the Web site for Harold Jr.'s law office and saw his photo.

"Of course," he recalled saying. "He's definitely family."

Billy called Rene, his mother, with the Web site address. "Rene, that's your boy," Claudie told his wife.

Rene agreed: "If I'd ever seen him on the street, I'd have asked him where he was from. He really does look like family."

Billy contacted Harold Jr. by Facebook. He told him he and his family were all in Charlotte. They agreed to meet the next Saturday, May 16, at Tavern on the Tracks, a pub near Harold Jr.'s office. Billy knew the place well. For years, he worked for a title insurance company in a building across South Boulevard from Harold Jr.'s office.

Billy arrived first, then Harold Jr. They embraced. After an hour, Billy asked if it'd be OK for Jason to stop by.

Of course, Harold Jr. said. I'd love to meet him.

After Jason arrived, Billy said: Harold, I don't want to pile on, but would you like to meet our mother?

Oh, yes, of course - absolutely, he said, beaming.

Well, she's at my house now, Billy said. The whole family's there. They all want to meet you.

The three caravanned to Billy's house near Park Road Shopping Center. Harold Jr. swept Rene into a bear hug. They cried, and couldn't stop staring at each other.

They started catching up. She asked Harold Jr. where he lived. On The Plaza. Goodness, she said, she'd been riding by his house for years on her way to work at a pulmonary doctor's office near Presbyterian Hospital.

Jason and his girlfriend, Ronda Ridout, had lived two blocks away.

Soon, Harold Jr. asked Rene: I don't want you to feel uncomfortable. But do you know anything about my father?

Rene said they'd had a brief relationship. He was a law student and left Durham. His name was Frank Turner.

I always remembered his name, she said. Because I hoped that one day you would come looking for it.

A father and 4 more brothers

That night, Harold Jr. Googled: "Frank Turner NCCU and law."

He read that Frank, too, was a politician, a veteran member of the Maryland House of Delegates from Columbia and a college professor at Morgan State University. And he read this: Two months earlier, Frank had been in intensive care with blood clots after kidney stone surgery.

"I couldn't let this chance pass," Harold Jr. said. "If my father didn't want to meet me or have a relationship, that's OK. I had to try. I wasn't looking for anything from him - just trying to discover who I am."

Four days after he met his birth mother and the rest of the Stricklands, Harold Jr. drove to Maryland. He found Frank in his front yard pulling weeds on his knees.

Harold Jr. introduced himself and told Frank he had something important to tell him. Frank invited him up to the front porch.

"Does the name Rene Melton mean anything to you?" he recalled asking.

Initially, it didn't.

"Well, I was adopted and I just learned that she's my birth mother. I was born in 1969 in Durham, North Carolina. And she tells me you're my birth father," Harold Jr. said.

Frank pulled on his chin, then quietly said: "I didn't know ..." He paused, and continued: "You know, I've always wanted a basketball team."

Harold Jr. looked at him, befuddled. "I've already got four sons," Frank explained. "Now I've got five."

Frank, who'd been raised in Raleigh and finished his law degree at N.C. Central, told him he'd written the Maryland law that loosened restrictions on adult adoptees finding birth parents. He'd sent it to law school buddies in the N.C. legislature. Harold Jr. wondered to himself: So I could find you?

He didn't know Frank had been adopted, too. Frank had tried to find his own birth parents, but there were too many obstacles.

Welcomed into the family:

On Christmas Day, Harold Sr. died at age 85.

Throughout Harold Jr.'s search, his parents had supported him. Rene and Claudie visited the Cogdells, thanking them for raising a fine son.

Frank agreed: "They obviously did a great job raising Harold. That's what you want: Regardless of who raised him, the main thing is he turned out to be a good person, a good citizen."

On the day of Harold Sr.'s funeral, Rene, Claudie and the rest of the Stricklands drove up for the noon service at Kinston's St. Augustus AME Zion Church. A simple family tree had suddenly sprouted many branches - Harold Jr., who'd grown up an only child, had two mothers, his birth father, six brothers, a stepfather and stepmother.

"His parents welcomed us all into their family. They are lovely people," Rene said. "I am so happy Harold found us.

"Deep in my heart, I knew that one day I'd look up and he'd be at the door."

The family comes together

It was a crystallizing moment for Harold Jr. He'd been able to lean on the Stricklands' support during Harold Sr.'s illness. But at the funeral, he was deeply touched when he saw all of them sitting in the church - family helping him and his adoptive mother, Jeanette, through their most trying moment.

Reflecting on the months since he found Rene and Frank and their families, Harold Jr. said he's the same man with a "broader perspective on the world."

He cherishes his African-American family and traditions - and now his Native American heritage as well.

"I don't think I ever longed to change the way I saw the world. ... It was more of a desire to connect to biological parents - people who shared the same bloodline and had the same mannerisms and physical features. ... It gives me some real interesting perspectives on who I am.

"I do know this: The Christmas present list just got longer."



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