

## Birth mothers tell their stories to fight for N.J. adoption bill

Published: Sunday, May 15, 2011, 6:00 AM Updated: Monday, May 16, 2011, 3:37 PM



By **Susan K. Livio/Statehouse Bureau**



Robert Sciarrino/The Star-LedgerValerie Drabyk, a

reunited birth mom from Edison, participated in an adoption support group made up of birth mothers, parents who have adopted and people who were adopted, holds a meeting a the Presbyterian Parish House.

**TRENTON** — Growing up in Union Township 50 years ago, Valerie Drabyk said she was the kind of student who always earned solid grades, and the kind of daughter who went to church and never disobeyed her parents.

"I was a good girl," she said.

Then at the age of 19, she got pregnant the first time she had sex.

"I sat my mother down and asked her, 'Do you love me no matter what I do?' She was so angry, so disappointed. She said 'How could you do this to me?'"

Without taking a breath, her mother told her to put the baby up for adoption, saying: "I'm not raising another baby." Drabyk wanted to keep her child, but instead kept silent.

She even obeyed a priest who told her never to tell anyone, "not even your husband. No one will want you." Drabyk, 68, of Edison, waited 38 years to reveal her secret to her husband and their three grown children, and find the son she lost.

Today, shame and fear are relics of Drabyk's past. She is one of dozens of birth mothers who belong to the Morristown Post-Adoption Support Group that has tried for 31 years to change the law so people who were adopted can obtain birth records bearing their parents' names.

That effort reached a milestone last Monday, when the Legislature passed a bill to open up adoption records. The final decision now rests with Gov. Chris Christie, a practicing Catholic who has an adopted sister.

## **THE ONGOING DEBATE**

For three decades, the battle played out like this: In the spotlight pushing to change the law were the adopted adults who say they've been denied their civil rights to know their full identity. They were thwarted by opponents such as the New Jersey Catholic Conference, New Jersey Right to Life and the

American Civil Liberties Union of New Jersey, who say a silent population of women who gave birth in the 1950s through the 1970s want their privacy preserved and do not want to be found.

But birth mothers from the support group emphatically dispute the idea that most mothers don't want to hear from the kids they gave up — and they say their stories were never told.

The women talk of a time when the social mores were far different than today, when being an unwed mother was a source of unspeakable shame. They say parents and religious leaders persuaded or forced them to part with their babies. And they never stopped hoping they would reconnect with their children.

"A lot of these people are saying they are trying to protect our confidentiality," Betty Lou Pedone, 60, of Toms River, said during a support group meeting earlier this month.

"If you read this, there is no way you could tell it was protecting Betty Lou's confidentiality," Pedone said, pointing to the document she signed at 16, severing her rights to her son in 1966. "It was like I was scum. It's really harsh and upsetting for me to read that I will never look for him."

With the bill's passage, their focus is on Christie. The governor's office has not said where Christie stands.

"As a mother, we've been keeping these secrets for so many years about these children. We've always wondered where they are," Drabyk said. "We were given such guidelines we were not supposed to try to find them. That stays with you. But most mothers just want to welcome them into their families, into their hearts, where they have always been."

Birth mothers who want to be found — and those who don't — agree every woman has a story to tell of the panic of discovering they were pregnant, and the loss of giving away a child. Social scientists have focused on the powerlessness felt by these pregnant teenagers and young women during the post-World War II era into the early 1970s before the Roe vs. Wade decision legalizing abortion. There's even a name for it: the "baby scoop" era.

## **'A SAD IRONY'**

"There's a sad irony here," said Elizabeth J. Samuels, who teaches constitutional law at the University of Baltimore and is an expert on adoption law. "Here were women who felt tremendous pressure and were not offered or given any choice regarding their offspring and told they had no right to know anything about their children. When they finally found their voices and were speaking out, they were told this legislation should not be signed in order to protect them."

### **PREVIOUS COVERAGE:**

- **N.J. Assembly passes bill allowing adopted adults to learn parents' names**
- **N.J. Senate approves open adoption birth records bill**
- **N.J. adoption groups push for Assembly to consider bill unsealing adoptee birth records**
- **Open records bill for NJ adoptees advances in Legislature**

Tears welling in her eyes, Judy Foster of Parsippany, a co-coordinator for the support group, said while other birth mothers "had no choice — they had to give up their babies — I had a choice."

Foster's "choice" would have been to marry the man who date-raped her and took her virginity at 17 in the back seat of a car.

The daughter of a devout Catholic family in Dover — her father was a grand knight in the Knights of Columbus, her mother a member of the Catholic Daughters — Foster said yes when the father of her unborn child proposed. She called it off two days before the ceremony was to be held in a private room in the church.

"I knew this is not what I wanted," she said. "I couldn't imagine a lifetime with him. To be divorced in the Catholic Church in the 1960s was worse than to have a baby out of wedlock."

Foster went to live in a Catholic maternity home and delivered her daughter in April 1961.

At age 39, she married a man with four children from a previous marriage. She kept her maiden name, just in case her daughter ever came looking for her. She never had another child.

Opponents of the bill (S799) are most upset by the requirement that birth mothers who don't want to be found must take proactive steps to protect their identities.

Women who surrendered a child before the enactment of the law and want to remain anonymous would have to file a notarized letter with the state expressing their wishes. They would also have to submit a family medical history form every 10 years after age 40 and every five years after age 50.

Women who surrender a child after the law's enactment would not have a guarantee of privacy. They would submit a contact "preference" form to the state, stating their wish to be contacted directly, contacted through an intermediary or not contacted at all. But the state would still furnish upon the adopted person's request the complete birth certificate, leaving it up to the adoptee to decide whether to honor the birth parent's request.

Marie Tasy, executive director of New Jersey Right to Life, one of the bill's most vocal opponents, said women who surrendered babies long ago believed their confidentiality would never be compromised and would feel betrayed by the law's change. She stressed these women cannot publicly criticize the bill because that would be outing themselves.

Beth is one of these women. At Tasy's request, she spoke by telephone on condition of anonymity because her children do not know she gave birth to a daughter when she was a 21-year-old college student in the 1970s.

"This is the painful thing" — expecting privacy for placing her child for adoption — "and not being able to voice it publicly," Beth said.

Beth said she considered abortion, which was legal by then, but knew other women who were "tormented by it." She chose adoption because she understood the law sealed birth records permanently. Beth said she was blessed to have parents who respected her decision. She grieved for

several years, she said, keeping in touch with the adoption agency to learn little tidbits about her daughter.

"Time helped. I finished college and went ahead with my life. I ended up marrying a wonderful man," Beth said. "I am at peace with my decision and hope she is, too.

"Having made that sacrifice, to have this happen now is disgraceful — an absolute invasion of privacy," Beth said.

Beth said she would tell her children they have a half-sister when she feels they are ready. "It's my story to tell."

Pat Brannigan, executive director of the Catholic Conference representing the state's bishops, said he "had no comment on recollections of memories from 40-50 years ago." The Catholic Conference has opposed the bill because Catholic Charities adoption officials made promises of privacy to all pregnant woman and girls as a matter of policy, he said.

"We are in favor of reunions," Brannigan said. The Archdiocese of Newark initiated 44 searches for birth parents from July 2007 through February 2010, reuniting 32 birth parents and children, including 26 that "turned out positively," he said.

## **A PERSONAL QUEST**

Adoptees and birth parents who couldn't wait for the law to change have used social networking sites and private investigators to track down family members.

A private investigator retained by Catholic Charities located Drabyk's son. They met in the lobby of the Short Hills Hilton on March 27, 2001.

"He was the only person in the lobby. I saw there were flowers. I ran over to him and hugged him, and I cried and cried," she said.

They spoke for more than three hours. "I really wanted to get it out there that I really had no choice," she said.

Foster, the woman who had been date-raped, waited 10 years before revealing the secret to her husband. He encouraged her to start searching for her daughter right away, but she waited another eight years.

"I was afraid," she said. "It was drummed into me I had no rights."

After her request to Catholic Family Services adoption agency in Paterson yielded a form letter saying her daughter had not inquired about her, Foster hired a private investigator who brought her a high school graduation photo of her daughter, Donna. She keeps it with her own high school yearbook picture, to show how much they resembled each other. The fear about meeting her daughter vanished.

"I knew when I looked at this face, I had a feeling she would be warm and welcoming."

Within days, Foster and her husband met with Donna, her husband and their two daughters for dinner near Donna's home in the Pocono Mountains.

"My daughter said, 'I didn't think it was right to search for you,'" she said. "I know I made the right decision (to not get married). But I have to live with that guilt, especially after meeting my daughter."

A decade after finding her son, Drabyk said she still doesn't know what kind of relationship she can expect from him.

"I try not to push. You know, I don't think he feels like I am his mother," she said, her quiet voice trailing off.

Pedone, who reconnected with the son she surrendered at 16, says she knows where she stands.

"I am the person who gave birth to him, but his mom is his mom," she said. "She has been a wonderful mother and I'm grateful for that. And I kind of roll with it."

© 2011 NJ.com. All rights reserved.