

# Couple's Secret Has Surprising Outcome

## Couple's Life Changes 25 Years After Placing Baby for Adoption

By BOB BROWN

Oct. 1, 2007

<http://www.abcnews.go.com/2020/story?id=3665789&page=1>

Until the summer of 2006, Laurie and Chuck Thompson had shared a secret for a quarter of a century.

The secret dated back to their school days in 1980, when Laurie was a sophomore at Fort LeBoeuf High School in Erie, Pa. She played saxophone in the school band, and she had a horse named Lady that she rode and relied on for company whenever she had a bad day.

Video

Family Reunion After 25 Years?

Chuck was a senior — the kind of kid who collected beer cans and loved fixing things.

They went to a movie and a square dance on their first date, but their romance quickly turned into something neither was prepared to handle.

In the first semester of her junior year, Laurie discovered she was pregnant.

"It was a huge dilemma, obviously, for any 16-year-old who is still in school," Laurie said. "I wasn't sure what to do. So it was a very scary time for me."

She kept the secret from everyone, but her mother, her twin sister and Chuck. Chuck told only one other person, his brother. "Other than that, for 26 years, I never told anybody," he said.

**Watch the story Friday on "20/20" at 10 p.m. EDT**

Laurie continued to attend school until late in her pregnancy. "And then what happened was, I just got too uncomfortable to sit in a class," she said. "It was the '80s. ... Big clothes were kind of in. We all wore big sweat shirts and sweat pants, so no one really could tell that I was pregnant."

In April 1981, Laurie gave birth to a 7-pound, 2-ounce baby girl by Caesarean section at Erie's Hamot Medical Center. She and her mother had already decided that the child would be given up for adoption.

"At the time, my mother and father were going through divorce. My mother needed to work full time, so there wouldn't have been anyone available to take care of the baby," Laurie said. "I wanted to continue going to school and, of course, money was an issue."

Laurie saw the baby once, shortly after she was born.

"It took me a while to decide whether or not I was going to even look at her, because I just felt like it would be really hard to see her and not be able to take her home with me. But my mom encouraged me to do so. She said, 'You'll regret it if you don't.' And I remember thinking ... she was beautiful. I also felt sure of my decision. I felt that it was the right decision at the time for me to give her up."

Laurie returned to school and six weeks later, she and Chuck went together to her junior prom.

The couple defied statistics. According to the book "Making a Love Connection: Teen Relationships, Pregnancy and Marriage," most teen mothers are unlikely to marry the biological fathers of their children. Under those circumstances, the vast majority of teenage couples break up.

Instead, Laurie and Chuck resumed their lives together. Laurie graduated from Edinboro University of Pennsylvania and in 1986, the couple were married a day before Laurie's 22nd birthday.

They've remained together ever since, but they never had another child.

"I think mostly because we just didn't feel like it would be right to give one up and then have another," Laurie said. "But we always pictured someone coming to our door someday and saying ... 'Hello, I'm your daughter.'"

More than 20 years passed. No one ever came.

"The hard part for me was wondering if she was OK," Laurie said, "because we didn't even have an idea of whether or not she's alive or well."

As Laurie and Chuck went on with their lives, they glanced occasionally at waitresses in restaurants or passersby on the streets of Erie, wondering whether one of them could be their daughter.

#### Shared Experiences

Chuck became a successful tool maker and designer; Laurie achieved her success in broadcasting, most recently as a sales manager for Connoisseur Media, a group of radio stations in Erie. That was how she met a new young saleswoman named Missi Meely.

Missi was an only child who piqued Laurie's interest when she sat down in Laurie's office after a hard day and wondered aloud how people with children manage their lives.

Missi said she could imagine that her own parents felt unable to cope when she was born. Perhaps, she said, that is why they gave her up for adoption.

"I didn't know you were adopted," Laurie said.

"She got this look on her face that everybody does when I mention that I'm adopted," Missi recalled.

"Whenever I hear that, I always want to ask questions, obviously, because of my own personal experiences," Laurie said. Her next question was whether Missi would ever want to find her biological parents.

"Not really," Missi said. "I really don't have a need to, because I had such a wonderful upbringing."

And so Laurie, who had given up a child, listened closely to how Missi's story developed from the perspective of a child who had been adopted.

#### 'I Never Felt Like I Was Missing Something'

Missi's parents are Doug and Sandy Meely, who had waited on an adoption list for years before the call came. Sandy was a nutritionist. Doug was employed at the local General Electric plant.

"My wife called me at work, and said, 'You're a father of a baby girl,'" Doug said. "And I said, 'Wonderful. I'll get the cigars.'"

Holding Missi for the first time, said Sandy, "It was just like she was my own. They put her in my arms,

and I cried. I laughed. All the emotions that come with being a new parent."

Missi was raised in a rural area near Erie, where she could safely ride her bicycle on a country road and play beside a creek. She took dance lessons for most of her childhood, and liked to sing along with the radio. She got an A on a school paper she wrote about her adoption, recounting how her parents had let her know she was "chosen."

"We bought a book [about adoption]," said Doug. "I read it to her at nights, so when she got older, she'd understand that she was chosen, not had. ... We wanted to build trust."

"We didn't want her to find out later on, and then think that we had lied to her all her life," Sandy said.

"I never really thought that my life needed any kind of justification," Missi said. "I never felt like I was missing something. A lot of children, for whatever reason, have problems with neglect or abandonment, and I never had that."

In Laurie's office on that day in the spring of 2006, Missi told her boss some of the few details she knew about her birthparents. The details were contained on an information sheet provided by the adoption agency that Missi's parents had shown her.

'Is This Happening?'

Among other details, "My father had brown hair and brown eyes," Missi told Laurie. "And he must have been some kind of loser or something, because he collected beer cans. I said, 'Who collects beer cans?'"

"I laughed," Laurie said. "And then I thought, 'Whoa! This sounds really familiar!'"

After all, beer-can collecting had been a teenage hobby of Chuck's when they started dating. So Laurie asked another question: Did Missi know when her biological birthday was?

It was April 14, 1981.

After Missi left the office, "I was in shock," Laurie said. "And I sat there for the longest time thinking, is this happening? Is this really true? Could this be a coincidence?"

On her way home, Laurie phoned Chuck and told him she thought that by some bizarre coincidence the daughter they had given up for adoption might be her new employee.

That night, between them, they cooked up a plan to try to prove it without letting Missi know until they were certain. The next day, Laurie told Missi that she wanted to monitor some of Missi's sales calls.

Missi wasn't sure how to react. "Cold-calling's bad enough, not to mention cold-calling when your boss is standing over your shoulder."

As they drove together in Laurie's car, Laurie told Missi she had to stop by Chuck's workplace to give him a checkbook he had forgotten. Chuck was waiting when the car pulled up, and he looked through the window at Missi.

Neither he nor Laurie said anything, but Chuck later recalled that he knew instantly that Missi was their biological daughter. "I didn't think there was any doubt, especially with the two of them sitting side by side," he said.

As soon as the women drove away, Chuck called Laurie's cell phone so they could speak privately. He said three words: "Oh, my God."

Laurie took Missi to a restaurant on Erie's bay front. They sat down to lunch, with Laurie sensing 25 years

of lost history as she looked across the table, and Missi wondering something else altogether as she looked back at her boss.

"She crosses her arms and she starts looking at the floor," Missi said. "I'm reading her body language, [thinking] that there's something wrong. And she says to me, 'Well, there's actually another reason why I asked you to come out with me today.' And I said, 'Oh no, am I getting fired?'"

"I explained to her ... if I was going to fire you, I certainly wouldn't take you out to lunch to tell you," Laurie said.

Instead, she asked Missi, "If I thought I knew who your biological parents were, would you want to know who they were?"

Missi shook her head in surprise, then smiled and said, "Yes."

"I think it might be me and my husband, Chuck," Laurie told her.

"I think I was sitting up straight in my chair at the time, and I just sat back, and I said, 'Wow,'" Missi said. "And I know for sure that I didn't look at her."

Amazing Coincidence

"Then I started to tell her the story," Laurie said. "And we started comparing other notes [on their similarities], like she gets migraine headaches, and we both have some crooked toes."

"I was still in shock," Missi said, "because I thought, this woman's my boss, yet she might be my mother? I mean, it's just strange."

The more they talked, the more the details seemed to fall into place.

"And then there was one thing that I knew that was very specific to my birth," Missi said. "And this is what really gave me goose bumps. I said, 'I was coming out breach, and so I had to be delivered by C-section.' And she looked at me and she said, 'I have the scar to prove it.'"

Both realized they could be completely certain of their relationship only by unlocking the papers associated with Missi's adoption.

Laurie had a final comment. "I said to her, 'Missi ... if it does turn out that you aren't my daughter, I just want you to know that I would have been very proud to be your mom.'"

After what seemed to be an endless weekend of waiting, the Erie County Orphan's Court confirmed that Laurie and Chuck Thompson were Missi's biological parents. At that point, Missi knew she had to tell her adoptive parents, Doug and Sandy.

Even though the Meelys and Thompsons had lived within just a few miles of each other and had probably crossed paths over the years, the news that they were unexpectedly and profoundly connected had suddenly come from out of nowhere.

"I was very concerned," said Missi. "I didn't want my parents to think that ... I don't need them anymore, or that our relationship is going to change at all."

"She probably thought I was going to have a heart attack," said Sandy.

To prepare herself, Missi had first told Sandy's mother. Then she told her parents.

"I thought she was going to die, she was crying so much," Doug said. "And I said, 'I love you, and you

know that.' And she said, 'That's right.' And I says, 'And you have no intentions of leaving us, do you?' And she goes, 'No.' And I says, 'Well there. That's nice.' And it was."

'A Dream Come True'

In a gesture of friendship, Sandy and Doug collected albums of Missi's childhood pictures and sent them to Laurie and Chuck.

"You look at it and say, 'Wow, she really had a nice upbringing,'" said Chuck.

"Both of us thought ... we missed all of this," Laurie said. "It was sort of a mixed emotional day, going through that photograph album."

But Laurie and Chuck agreed that their decision to give up Missi for adoption was the right one. "I was still in high school," said Laurie. "My family was not in a position to raise a child. And she had such wonderful parents and such a wonderful family. It was a dream come true when we met them."

That meeting finally occurred at a family picnic, and the two families have met on special occasions ever since. One topic of discussion was how lucky they were not to have experienced the opposite results: biological parents who didn't want to be found or a child whose hopes were extinguished by unwelcome discoveries and unfulfilled promises.

In this case, the stars seemed to align in everyone's favor, and they knew it.

"It's just a real blessing to see that everything worked out the way it did," said Doug. "I think [Missi] has really pulled us all together, and it's just a good feeling."

Missi did get a new job with the Erie Times-News because it was "just too strange" working for her mother. Now, she occasionally goes sailing with Laurie and Chuck. On a weekend shortly after they discovered each other in the summer of 2006, Chuck realized he had neglected to get Laurie a wedding anniversary gift amid all the excitement.

"We sailed across the lake over in Canada," Chuck said. "I kind of apologized to Laurie because I didn't really get anything for our anniversary. And she just looks at me and goes, 'What else can you ask for?'"

"It was the best anniversary present ever," Laurie said.

"It is an adopted child's fairy tale," said Missi. "It could not have been written better if somebody made it up."