

## Edison man fights for adoptees' rights in new film

By CHRIS JORDAN • STAFF WRITER • June 11, 2010



Joe DeGeronimo of Edison as he appears in the film "For the Life of Me" (Jean Strauss)

**EDISON** — Joe DiGeronimo of Edison was so close, yet so far.

His search for his birth **parents**, which began 30 years ago, culminated with his learning of his birth father's identity just six months after he died and five years after his birth mother died.

"That's the worst part," DiGeronimo said. "That's crazy to know that at least I could have said hello."

DiGeronimo's search is depicted in the new documentary "For the Life of Me" from filmmaker Jean Strauss. It will be shown 7 p.m. Sunday at Voorhees Hall on the campus of Rutgers University in New Brunswick as part of the New Jersey International **Film Festival**.

The film follows the plight of adopted children, now adults, in states where laws restrict their to birth information.

New Jersey is one of those states, according to the film.

"After a long time searching, I got a decree and they could show me all the paperwork but the original name was blacked out," DiGeronimo said. "It's very unconstitutional."

"Try to put yourself in my shoes," he said. "I have just as much right as anyone to find out who I am. The Legislature has to vote (to allow adoptees to see who their **birth parents** are). They have my life in their hands. It's crazy."

An open-adoption bill, in which adoptees would have access to their original birth certificates and the names of their birth parents if the parents wish to be contacted, in addition to the adoptee's medical, cultural and social histories, was approved by the state Senate and is now in the Assembly.

The Assembly Human Services Committee will hear testimony on the bill Monday afternoon in Trenton.

DiGeronimo, 70, did track down his half-sister and the two had a reunion in a Toms River diner in the film.

"We talk to each other and she's been to my home," DiGeronimo said. "She's a nice woman."

The film also follows David Kiley in Massachusetts, where the state recently made birth certificates available for adult adoptees. It also features impassioned testimony from Darryl McDaniels of the hip-hop group Run-DMC on restrictive adoptee-rights laws.

The film won the "Best Documentary" award at the Smogdance Film Festival in Los Angeles and the "Sleeping Giant" title at the Kent Film Festival in Connecticut.

DiGeronimo is a long-time Edison resident who has a wife, two sons and grandchildren.

His wife was "all for" his finding out who his birth parents are.

"She's happy I found out," DiGeronimo said. "She's like me. She can't understand why we can't see these records after all these years."