

baltimoresun.com

Maryland father finds his son after 35 years

After many false starts, DNA test leads to reunion

By Frank D. Roylance, The Baltimore Sun
June 19, 2011



After DNA tests indicated Kevin Callaghan of Philadelphia, left, is the son of Timonium businessman Ron Ryba, the two met for the first time the week of Fathers' Day. (Courtesy of Ron Ryba, BALTIMORE SUN / June 17, 2011)

For 35 years, Ron Ryba dreamed of a reunion with the infant son he and his high-school sweetheart had given up for adoption. Two days before Father's Day, that dream came true over burgers and beer at a Wilmington, Del., restaurant.

The Timonium businessman said he and his newfound son, Kevin Callaghan of Philadelphia, were nervous at first. But that didn't last long. "He gave me a big hug, and told me he was happy to see me," Ryba said. "We had a couple of cheeseburgers, and shared our first beer together."

"Finally, we asked the bartender to take our pictures, and she said, 'You know, you two look alike.' So we both started laughing."

The hard-won reunion came after years of searches, heartbreak and false leads. Ryba's adoption agency, Catholic Charities of Trenton, N.J., had "reunited" him with another man in 2004. But four years later they learned through DNA tests that they weren't related. Before Ryba's quest ended, there would be an investigation by New Jersey authorities, leaked names and two more DNA tests.

But the last tests proved that Callaghan, a 35-year-old accountant, is the child that Ryba, 53, and Kathy Butler of New Jersey turned over for adoption.

"I'm happy and excited," Callaghan said earlier this week via email. "This happened very quickly for me, so I didn't have time to develop a lot of expectations. ... I feel it's the start of a relationship, and you can't predict

how it will turn out, but it's very positive so far. I'm happy Ron can stop his search."

Ryba's long separation from his son, and his dogged quest to find him again, began with the baby's birth on Nov. 25, 1975.

Ryba was a high school football player; Butler was a cheerleader. Unprepared to provide a home and a secure future for their baby, they gave him up for adoption.

While Ryba knew it was the right thing to do, he was heartsick. He couldn't even bring himself to look at the infant. But he wanted his son to know he was born and given up out of love. He took comfort in the adoption agency's promise to reach out and mediate a reunion, if the boy agreed, once he was grown.

The decades went by. Ryba and Butler split up. He went on to college in New Jersey and in 1982 moved to Maryland, where he now owns a company that designs and manufactures military uniforms. He married and had another son, by coincidence also named Kevin.

In 2004, Catholic Charities fulfilled its promise. Caseworkers told Ryba they had contacted his first son, Philip Bloete, then 28, and he had agreed to a reunion.

They met in Philadelphia, at a Phillies baseball game. It was a warm, if awkward meeting. Neither man saw much physical resemblance in the other. Ryba is blond, stands 5 feet 8 inches tall, and weighs 175 pounds. Bloete is dark, 6 feet 4 and 240 pounds.

But they and Butler grew close, sharing their time, family stories and photos. In time, when Ryba began to prepare a will to include Phil, his attorney suggested a DNA test. Phil agreed.

To their dismay, the DNA proved they were not related.

Ryba asked Catholic Charities to search its records, find its mistake, his real son and Bloete's origins. But the agency declined, insisting that federal health care privacy laws barred it. A New Jersey judge agreed.

In 2010, Ryba took his pleas directly to New Jersey's attorney general, who asked the Department of Children and Families, which licenses adoption agencies, to look into the records of the adoption.

After a six-month investigation, the department reported its findings, and gave Ryba a copy. It describes a confused process, but contains no information identifying any of the baby boys.

Lauren Kidd, a spokeswoman for the department, said that under New Jersey law, only "non-identifying information from those records can be disclosed to adult adoptees, birth, foster or adoptive parents."

In their report, the investigators said they found that Ryba's son was one of six similarly aged boys placed at St. Elizabeth's, the Catholic maternity home and nursery in Yardville, N.J., at around the same time in late 1975. They identified two who appeared to be Ryba's son and Bloete, and quoted a former Catholic Charities social worker who said "it was not impossible for the children to have been mixed up."

Infants at St. Elizabeth's did not wear identification, she told investigators, nor was there any on their cribs. Two staffers ran four separate nurseries, with eight cribs in each, investigators learned. Volunteers, often unfamiliar with the babies, were used to transport them to the Catholic Welfare Bureau for placement.

Catholic Charities acknowledged in 2009 that the mix-up was "tragic." But "we did everything we were

required to do," said spokeswoman Lisa Thibeault. She added that the state investigation found "no violations of best adoption practices."

As "corrective action," the Department of Children and Families said, Catholic Charities "shall make good faith attempts to assist the three complainants [Ryba, Bloete and Butler] in securing answers to their questions should they request searches." Catholic Charities would also inform the state of its progress, and assume the costs of DNA testing.

None of that happened, according to Ryba. But he was not ready to give up.

It was about then that someone with access to information from the Catholic Charities files contacted Ryba and — in likely violation of New Jersey law — gave him identifying information for the young man who investigators believed was most likely to be his son.

He reached out. The man said his parents were told their baby was the son of a teenage football player and a cheerleader — the same story Bloete's parents had been given. But a DNA test came back negative.

Still Ryba wouldn't quit. His informant had provided another name from the files: Kevin Callaghan of Philadelphia.

So he tracked down a likely Kevin Callaghan, who said he wasn't adopted. But, incredibly, he said his wife worked with another Kevin Callaghan who was. Ryba contacted the wife.

"She thought it was ... some type of scam at first," Callaghan said. "Then she told me about Ron's story."

He'd actually read it before, in a version of a Baltimore Sun story from 2009, spotted by an aunt in a local newspaper. Callaghan had dismissed it because the baby described in the story was born Nov. 25, 1975. He'd been told his birth date was Dec. 2.

"I got his email, and we started going back and forth," Callaghan said. His parents had been told their baby was born to a 21-year-old legal secretary and a 26-year-old exterminator. "And my biological parents took me home for a week, and then made the decision to give me up for adoption." It turns out none of that was true.

Callaghan grew up happily in Hamilton, N.J., with two siblings, also adopted, he said. He earned a degree in accounting and works for a pharmaceutical company. He's working on his MBA and lives in Philadelphia.

In the photo he sent Ryba, he seemed to share Ryba's coloring, eyes and hairline, height and weight. And he agreed to DNA testing. It was a match.

"I admire Ron," Callaghan said, "not only for his dedication and persistence ... but also his ability to go through the ups and downs of thinking you found your son, only to realize later that you were wrong. Emotionally, it must have been very difficult."

When they met Friday, Ryba asked Callaghan for forgiveness. "I said, 'Were you ever angry at me?' And he said, 'No, I never was. I was always thankful you had the courage to do what you did. ... The only alternative was an abortion. You took the harder road.'"

"I felt shame for a long time," Ryba said, "and he absolved me of it, and did it with a smile. ... I feel great."

Callaghan has contacted Butler, too. "We are working out the details to meet," he said. Butler declined a request

for comment.

Still unresolved are the origins of Philip Bloete, now 35. Ryba said he has some leads on Bloete's birth parents. "We are still working on his information and case," he said.

A high school English teacher in Rockland County, N.Y., Bloete said Friday he's happy for Ryba, and still wants to find his birth parents.

"I'm interested in my birth date for one thing," he said. "Now, when I'm in a restaurant and I hear someone singing 'Happy Birthday' across the way, I almost get resentful. It's a given that everybody knows their birthday. I'd like to know my heritage, and any medical history, now that I have two kids."

Thibeault said that although Catholic Charities has given up its state adoption license because of falling demand for Catholic adoption services, it will continue search and reunion services until June 2012. It will work with Ryba and Bloete "if they make a request for us to do so. To my knowledge, they haven't."

Bloete said, "If they need another one, I'll send them a request every day, for however long it takes."

New Jersey, meanwhile, has moved to loosen its adoption records laws. A measure that makes identifying information in birth records available to adult adoptees was passed in May, despite opposition from legal groups who argue that it violates the privacy of birth parents, and from the Catholic Bishops Conference and others who fear it will encourage women to choose abortions instead of adoption. New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, a Catholic whose sister is adopted, has until June 23 to sign or veto it.

Ryba hopes his years-long quest will give others the courage to search for their children or their birth parents.

"It's worth it," he said. "Maybe some legislators will read this story and realize it's wrong to withhold information from anybody. That's the best I can give back to the people that helped me."

frank.roylance@baltsun.com

<http://twitter.com/froylance>

Copyright © 2011, [The Baltimore Sun](#)