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Finding the missing pieces of my family puzzle

Posted by [cdamico](#) May 11, 2008 01:26AM

Six years ago, I called her for the first time. It ended years of wondering and months of research. She wasn't doing well, living on public assistance, but at this point it didn't matter. Betty wanted to talk to me.

The one I had spent years dreaming about was alive.

And she wanted to talk!

For some reason, I don't know why, I fidgeted in front of the mirror for some time before finally picking up the phone and dialing. It seemed like an eternity for the call to go through. In my mind I was Caroline - my birth name I had found out - and it felt good even if I didn't look like a Caroline.

For 28 years my life had been a series of too many questions filled with too many emotions. It was a continuous loop that seemed to have no end, no beginning. Was she even living, and if so, did she ever think about me the way I had thought about her? Too many times I would walk through a mall, wondering if she was that woman over there. Or maybe she was the one on the corner who sort of looked like me.

During those years I often engaged in soul-searching conversations with myself. One thing was constant: If I ever found her, I knew I would never call her "mom." After all, my mom was the woman who raised me from when I was 8 months old. She was the one who was there for me every step of the way, from my first day of school to when I, myself, became a mother.

Not knowing my birth mother but knowing what she had done weighed on me, affecting relationships and too many other things. Fear of personal relationships was a constant companion. "Don't let people get too close. You never know what they'll think," an inner voice was constantly warning me.

I always felt the need to be in complete control of my destiny. That way, maybe, just maybe, I could avoid being given up on again. That's the way I looked at life; if it happened once, it could happen again. On the outside I was stronger than a rock; on the inside I was a mess. I longed for this chapter in my life to end. I craved the fairy tale.

By comparison, my struggles with life were nothing compared with hers. For her, life has been an endless battle against drug and alcohol addictions. There were also the dealings with a dysfunctional family. She grew up without a mother. Out of all her brothers and sisters, she was the one who didn't quite keep on the straight and narrow. I don't fault her for her choice to give me up for adoption. For me, it was a blessing.

For a few months after the initial conversation with Betty, I tried to get to know her the best I could, but it wasn't easy. My home was here in New Jersey; she was in Michigan. Can you imagine getting to know your mother through phone calls?

But at least I was getting to know her the best I could. I had hired a confidential intermediary who was appointed by the Michigan court to contact Betty on my behalf. Betty had the right to accept or deny my request.

My initial routine was to call every Saturday. Each weekly conversation brought some new revelation. I had so many questions, and some of the answers were mind-blowing. Especially the day she told me about Kelly - my sister.

Kelly and Caroline, how cute.

When Kelly first found out about me, I am sure she was as shocked as I was.

Whoa! A sister!

Initially, Kelly told Betty she didn't want anything to do with me. She wasn't close to Betty, who wasn't ever really there for Kelly. That's understandable. Betty had dropped off Kelly at her uncle's house one day and never came back to get her.

But Kelly came around. She was another part of my personal puzzle - an essential part - as I was part of hers. All those years I thought I was yearning for my birth mother and answers, but in the end it turned out that it wasn't Betty who filled the hole in my heart. It was Kelly.

If only we could have grown up together. That is the hardest part these days, especially when picking out cards for her on special occasions.

I always sigh and tear up when I read those cards with their messages of how great it was growing up together, remembering when. I wanted that. I feel fortunate to have had a mother, father and a brother, but in retrospect, I never had Kelly. I want those 28 years of life back with Kelly by my side, teaching me the things that big sisters do.

From that first awkward phone call on Mother's Day six years ago when I learned about Kelly, she and I have grown closer with each conversation, each minute spent together, whether we are teasing each other or giving each other life advice. I have gained a whole new family, two beautiful nieces, a wonderful brother-in-law and a new best friend.

Opposites in so many ways, we do have some similar physical characteristics. Technically we are half-sisters; we have different fathers.

But Kelly is to me everything Betty can't be.

The past few years have been surreal. The time has healed my psyche; I'm in a much better place. I have a sense of relief. I can breathe.

Don't get me wrong. Adoption can be one of the greatest gifts in the world. Two adoring parents brought me into their home, and I can never thank them enough. I was blessed with the best family anyone could ask for.

Finding Betty and Kelly added to all that. Still, there was one more thing I knew I needed to do. Phone conversations can take a relationship only so far. I had met Kelly for the first time five months after we first talked, but not Betty. I knew there could be no regrets or what-ifs regarding Betty.

Three years after Betty and I talked for the first time, I found myself driving to meet her. I was shaking because I was so nervous. I sat in front of the house in Michigan for a full 10 minutes before I found the courage to knock on the door. I had waited all my life for this moment, for this face-to-face meeting.

I hadn't talked to her in a year and a half. Certainly she couldn't have expected this. Her health declining, she was living in an adult group home. For 40 minutes as we spoke, certain things about her stood out. She had striking blue eyes; her nails were beautiful; her nose was just like mine.

That afternoon there was a hug and a kiss and she uttered words that made me realize whatever she did years ago was okay. She still remembers my birthday. Mothers are always mothers in some way, shape or form. I will always be connected to her no matter what happens.

Thirty-four years later, I have closure.

A sister and Betty.

After all, she is my mother.

The person who gave Kelly and me life.

And for that I am thankful.

(Annette J. Vazquez is an assistant Star-Ledger sports editor. She may be reached at avazquez@starledger.com)

Categories: [Family & Kids](#)

Comments

pamhasegawa says...

This is so beautifully written and poignant! The way Ms. Vasquez describes her feelings as an adopted person will resonate with most adopted people and help those who love an adopted person to understand something of how it feels to be adopted.

I encourage anyone anyone reading this who cares about adoptees' right--to-know to check www.nj-care.org and write to us (pamhasegawa@gmail.com) if you'd like to be kept up-to-date on NJ legislation that would allow adopted adults, as well as parents of adopted minors ,to have access to a copy of the adopted person's original birth certificate.

We are nearing what we hope will be the end of a 28-year struggle to see the restoration of a right that was "deleted" from the adopted when legislation passed in 1940 prevented adoptees access to their own birth information and kept adoptive parents from being able to obtain their (minor) son or daughter's birth history in case they might need or want it for medical or psychological reasons. Or maybe just because it is part of who there child IS.

Pam Hasegawa
Morristown

Please contact me if you'd like to help efforts to see this bill through to passage.
pamhasegawa@gmail.com

Posted on 05/14/08 at 7:59AM

roberthafetz says...

New Jersey's Witness Protection Program for Mothers

In this time of high taxes and intrusive government, it concerns us all, to look closely, at a program most people are not aware of. The State of New Jersey currently maintains a program that keeps a select group of mothers in hiding. Participation in this program is not a matter of choice or even desire on the part of the women whose secrecy it maintains. Many of these women have been abused by state and private agencies, made to feel unworthy, ashamed, and guilty. Their most cherished needs have been ignored trampled, and denied. They have committed no crime against their state. They have in fact made the greatest sacrifice a mother can make. Their sacrifice defines them as having the most fundamental quality of motherhood. They selflessly placed the welfare of their children above any needs of their own, denying their most primal love and devotion for the sake of their children. A sacrifice of this magnitude is unbearable and unthinkable. These vulnerable mothers were often compelled and coerced to make this most painful of

all choices under duress. In return for this the state holds these women in secret, forever apart from their children even as they grow into adulthood. The desires and choices of these adults carry no weight in the face of government mandated secrecy. Mothers must be "protected" from their offspring even when their sons and daughters grow into adulthood. Their desires as adult individuals carry no legal authority. Further, no law has ever been passed with the intent of keeping mothers from their legally adult children. How then does one become a part of this witness protection program for mothers? Just relinquish your child for adoption. You will never see each other again even if you desire it decades later. The Oregon Court of Appeals has ruled in Jane Doe 1,2,3,4,5,and 7 VS The State of Oregon, 12/29/1999 that; " Neither a birth nor an adoption may be carried out in the absolute cloak of secrecy that may surround contraception or the early termination of a pregnancy." The Tennessee Supreme Court in Promise Doe, ET AL., VS Donald Sundquist, ET, AL., 9/27/1999 has ruled that; "Limited access to adoption records is in the best interest of both adopted persons and the general public." My first mother fought to keep me but what can a single 17 year old do against a society's beliefs that deny her emotions and mine. A society that believes mothers are simply interchangeable devalues motherhood as a whole. In defiance of New Jersey's archaic secrecy law, I searched for my first mother. By the time I found her she was in a grave in Texas. We deserved better. Because I have no right to know my name the search took half of my life.. We should have had the right to know each other if we chose to. The state should assist us not stand between us. We should have had the right to know each other if we chose to. A bill is pending in New Jersey to preserve the heritage of families so mothers and their adult children will have the same rights as any other citizen, to know each other once again. Support s611

Robert Allan Hafetz

Born January 28, 1951 in The Door of Hope Booth Home, Jersey City, New Jersey.
Roberthafetz@comcast.net,

Posted on 05/14/08 at 9:59AM

madysonsmom says...

So fitting that this article was brought to my attention today, May 14th, my 38th birthday. I feel like Annette has echoed my exact feelings as I am sure other adoptees feel the same. Kudos to Annette for writing this article and hopefully some day we will all be able to have an experience like Annettes when the secrecy of adoption is over.

Victoria Weber

Posted on 05/14/08 at 2:07PM

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