

Identical twins discover each other after 35 years

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Paula Bernstein was 35 years old when she found out she had an identical twin.

Bernstein, who grew up in Rye Brook, always knew she was adopted. But she and her adoptive parents were never told about her identical twin sister, who was placed with another family on Long Island the year the girls were born.

In 2004, Bernstein got a surprise telephone call from the Louise Wise Services adoption agency and learned that her twin, Elyse Schein, was trying to find her. Until then, she didn't even know about Schein.

"I was completely in shock," Bernstein said recently. "I don't think anything like that had crossed my mind."

Fear, exhilaration and insecurity washed over her as she stood in her Manhattan apartment while her 2-year-old daughter watched a "Dora the Explorer" video nearby.

"As scared as I was, though, I definitely wanted to meet her," Bernstein said. "The Pandora's box was open at that point, and I felt I had to dig around a little bit."

Bernstein and Schein, who was living in Paris at the time, reunited two days later at an East Village cafe. Their subsequent 3 1/2 -year journey from separation to sisterhood is documented in their book, "Identical Strangers: A Memoir of Twins Separated and Reunited," which is to be released Oct. 2 by Random House.

The book, co-written by the sisters, also describes their search for their birth mother and examines the role of genetics vs. the environment, or nature vs. nurture.

Though they grew up apart, the twins discovered some surprising similarities. Both were editors of their high school newspapers, for example, and grew up to become film critics. Bernstein is now a freelance writer, and Schein is a filmmaker and writer.

The sisters also share the same fair skin, small frame and slightly upturned nose.

"It was shocking to see someone who looks like you," Schein said of their initial encounter. "We never had any biological relatives at all."

There were more revelations as the twins probed their backgrounds. They learned that they were once part of a secret twin study that included five sets of twins and one set of triplets, all adopted from Louise Wise Services. Bernstein and Schein were dropped from the study shortly after being adopted but remained oblivious to their twin status.

There are no regulations on twin separation, said Nancy Segal, a psychology professor and director of the Twin Studies Center at California State University, Fullerton, who has studied hundreds of twins, raised together and apart.

"Whether we advise that or not, absolutely not," said Segal, who has written two books on twins. "As twin researchers, we believe that twins do so much better together; they belong together."

Segal said she is aware of 926 sets of separated twins involved in scientific studies and case reports worldwide. Those twins have helped shape scientific theory on nature versus nurture.

"Genetics plays a very important role in human behavioral development," Segal said. "It's not the whole story, but it certainly plays a very important role. Genetic factors affect every aspect of human development that we've been able to measure."

As they went to work on their book, Schein moved to Brooklyn to be close to Bernstein and her two daughters, now ages 5 and 2. Bernstein jotted down notes on the experience of reconnecting with her sister, and Schein recorded her thoughts.

"It seemed we were both coming at this situation from so many different perspectives in so many different ways," Schein said.

The pair swapped pages in person and via e-mail, and their relationship evolved with the book. A tentative first meeting grew into a friendship, and Schein became an aunt to Bernstein's kids.

Their experience also changed the twins' perspective on nature vs. nurture.

"When I was growing up, I had always believed that environment was entirely responsible for shaping my identity, but after meeting Elyse, it was hard to deny the power of genetics," Bernstein said. "Although Elyse and I are very much our own people, we come from the same stock. We are variations on the same theme."

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