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In Adoptee's Search for Roots, Loss and Gain Collide



Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

MOURNING HIS TWIN Mark Cellura kneels at the grave of his twin brother, Michael J. Weise, who died in 1987 at age 29. The brothers were separated and adopted by different families.

By [SARAH KERSHAW](#)

GALWAY, N.Y. — The phone rang on a Wednesday evening in February, and the voice sounded to Doris A. Weiland like a ghost, like her son, Michael. Or perhaps like what Michael might have sounded like had he lived to turn 50.

The man on the line said he was Michael's twin. The boys had apparently been separated at birth, and they were adopted by different families.

The man, Mark Cellura, during a search for his birth mother, learned six months ago, at the age of 50, that he had a twin.

The twin was Michael, Mrs. Weiland's adopted son, who died 21 years ago of AIDS at the age of 29.

Mr. Cellura, raised by a typographer and a waitress in Buffalo, started searching old newspapers in the local library at age 11 for clues about his birth family, and set out more seriously to find his mother nine years ago.

But along the way, he found Mrs. Weiland. Their first phone conversation lasted two hours, the next one three hours, the next four. Soon, after she told him to stop calling her “ma’am,” he was calling her “Mama D.”

They met for the first time in June. He traveled to her farmhouse here in upstate New York and slept in his dead twin’s bedroom.

“I feel like my son’s been resurrected,” Mrs. Weiland, 73, a retired legal secretary, said the day after she met him. “I wanted Michael back. Then Mark blows in the doorway.”

She said she believed that the twins were identical, but Mr. Cellura is still trying to determine if that is true.

Mr. Cellura, a former vice president of Merrill Lynch who is single and has no children, said he had always felt “like an arm or a leg was missing.” Finding out he had a twin, he said, gave him a sense of completeness after a life of feeling frustrated and adrift.

Over and over after he found out he had a twin, he imagined their initial meeting: Michael would come visit him in Chesterfield, N.J., and stay in the room with the gold-painted walls; they would travel together to Europe; and they would dress alike and trick people into thinking one was the other.

“Where have you been?” Mark would ask.

“Where have you been?” his brother would ask.

“Looking for you,” Mark would answer.

In the course of six weeks, Mr. Cellura had found and then lost a brother. It was, he said, like riding a roller coaster: excitement, sadness, hope, longing.

Mr. Cellura is among a growing number of baby boomers who were adopted when the process was veiled in secrecy and are now hiring professional genealogists and harnessing the Internet to track down their birth families. Their quest to find their roots has fueled a thriving business in searchers, like the one Mr. Cellura hired after seeing her Web site, and driven a national debate over whether to open adoption records without birth parents’ permission.

Eight states allow adoptees access to their birth records, and legislation to do so is pending in five more, including New York and New Jersey. But critics say such transparency violates the privacy of birth mothers who may not want to be in touch with the offspring they gave up.

For people like Mr. Cellura, the yearning for a lost twin is particularly powerful, psychologists say.

“It opened up a wonderful new world of possibility for him,” Nancy L. Segal, a psychologist who runs the Twin Studies Center at [California State University](#), Fullerton, said of Mr. Cellura’s search. “It’s one of the most exciting discoveries an adoptee can have. This changes his whole conception of himself, to think, ‘There is another one like me.’ ”

A Lifetime of Frustration

After a lifetime of wondering, Mr. Cellura, whose father died 10 years ago and whose 89-year-old mother has dementia, began contacting New York State in 1999 seeking his birth records. He signed up with New York’s Adoption Information Registry, created in 1983 to connect adoptees and birth parents if both parties are interested. He heard nothing. He also made a separate application for information about biological siblings, but heard nothing.

“I was always frustrated with not knowing more information,” Mr. Cellura said. “I would always say to my parents, ‘This is all we know?’ It was not about being unhappy with my family so I was going to find another one; it was about wanting to know my history.”

After writing in 2000 to the State Health Department, which maintains the sibling registry, he received a sheet of paper known as the “non-identifying information report.” It said that his birth mother was 18 when she had him and was Roman Catholic, that the pregnancy was normal, that he weighed 5 pounds 3 ounces, and that two other babies were born to her before him.

It was not until Mr. Cellura hired a genealogist in New Jersey, Pam Slaton, that he made real progress. Ms. Slaton quickly tracked down Mr. Cellura’s birth mother and, through talking to a neighbor of the birth mother, learned in January of the existence of the twin.

Ms. Slaton wrote to Mr. Cellura’s birth mother but she did not respond, and Mr. Cellura said he did not want to pursue her further.

At that point, they began a frantic search for Michael.

Ms. Slaton dug through records across the country, networked with other genealogists and called the parents of men named Michael who were born in New York on Mr. Cellura’s birthday, Jan. 14. At one

point, Mr. Cellura, who was arriving at his offices across the street from the World Trade Center on the morning of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, looked on the Internet at all the photographs of the people who had been killed. He saw one man who looked like himself, but hesitated to call his family.

In February, Ms. Slaton found Michael: in the Social Security death index. The news could have marked the sad end of a long journey for Mr. Cellura. But it was, in a way, the beginning.

He learned that Michael J. Weise had been adopted by a family living in a small town in upstate New York, near Saratoga Springs.

He wanted to find out who his twin was, and in the process, he said, he would learn who he was, too.

Over the last few months, he talked regularly with Mrs. Weiland, whose second husband, Dick, is a retired state trooper.

“I think Mark needs a mother and I’m it,” Mrs. Weiland said. Later, she added, “There was a song Michael used to sing called ‘Somewhere Down the Road,’ by [Barry Manilow](#). He used to sing it to me and send me tapes. I said to Mark, ‘That’s what’s happening. Somewhere down the road, there you are, you’ve appeared.’ ”

Mr. Cellura also quickly developed a close relationship with Michael’s sister, Mary Kay Groesbeck, 45, who told him, “You didn’t get Michael but you got the rest of us.”

Like Mrs. Weiland, Ms. Groesbeck said that she felt like she had Michael back, or some older version of him, or even a different brother she felt like she had always known.

Mr. Cellura, who retired this year after taking a buyout package from Merrill Lynch, spent long hours questioning the family about Michael — what was his favorite vegetable, his favorite color, who were his friends?

Mrs. Weiland liked that Mark seemed so responsible, that he had saved enough money in 28 years working for Merrill Lynch that he could retire at 50. Michael, an artist, had struggled with drug addiction.

“Mark could have saved Michael,” she said. “He could have seen the road he was taking and stopped him.”

Mr. Cellura, who likes to say now that he was “from the nerdy side of the womb,” said, “I could have grounded him and he could have lifted me up.”

Mrs. Weiland told him that one day, when he was 17, Michael came home and declared that from then on he wanted to be called Max, and he signed some of his paintings as Max. Mr. Cellura said he was shocked

because when he was 18, he told his friends the name Mark was boring and that he wanted to be known as Max from that point on.

Ms. Slaton, an adoptee herself who has conducted thousands of other searches, said she was moved by the relationship between Mr. Cellura and Mrs. Weiland.

“He’s giving her a gift; she’s giving him a gift,” she said. “It gives him some kind of peace. He understands now what that void was about, that makes sense to him now.”

Fantasies and Ghosts

The search for birth relatives stems from the desire to replace fantasy with reality, some psychologists and people who are adopted say. Wendy Freund, a Manhattan therapist who specializes in adoption issues, says such a search can end the “ghost-fantasy life” that runs parallel to adoptees’ existence.

In this case the ghosts and fantasies have not been totally put to rest. Mr. Cellura now has a new fantasy built around the ghost of his brother, while Mrs. Weiland sees in Mr. Cellura a ghost coming back to life, creating new fantasies of the person she wished her son had become.

“It seems somewhat dangerous all around,” said Ms. Freund, who sometimes works with Ms. Slaton’s clients when they have found their birth relatives. “For the mother, it’s a constant reminder of her loss. And it puts a tremendous burden on the surviving twin to sort of repair this other family that’s so hurt and in so much pain.”

Mrs. Weiland said that she knew her son was a twin, but was told that his brother was not available for adoption. Michael knew, too, but he didn’t show an interest in searching for him, she said.

Mr. Cellura, who has a binder filled with notes on his search (“6/6/2008: Went to social services; original form mailed to Albany 11/17/1999; mother surrendered 8/7/1959”) is working on a timeline of his and his brother’s lives.

They were placed in foster care at birth and adopted at age 3; Mr. Cellura is trying to determine if they were together until then.

He has already spent about \$10,000 on his search, and Ms. Slaton, who charges \$2,500 per search, is still working to track down his birth father and the other sibling, a sister, who was listed in the state report. He is also trying to determine who made the decision to separate the twins, which is now considered unusual and harmful.

With the help of Michael's sister — an adoptee who last year tracked down her own birth mother and half-sister and began relationships with them — he is trying to locate and meet people who knew his brother.

A Second Funeral

After months of getting to know Michael's family by phone, Mr. Cellura made a request: Could they plan a funeral Mass for his dead twin, since he had missed the first one? They agreed, saying they felt he should have a chance to mourn his brother.

On a Saturday in June, Mr. Cellura made the four-hour drive to the Weiland's house here in the foothills of the Adirondack Mountains. He spent a night in what had been Michael's room, and, over dinner, introduced his own family to his twin's sister, cousins and nephews. He spent hours with Mrs. Weiland, showing her his high school yearbooks, home movies and childhood photographs.

By their second day together, Mrs. Weiland was already teasing Mr. Cellura about how often he digresses. At one point, she slapped him on the wrist and said, "You're like a tornado."

On the morning of the funeral Mass, Mr. Cellura wore a black suit and sunglasses, rosary beads wrapped around his wrist. Mrs. Weiland hugged him and said, "You look nice, Mark."

His adoptive sister, Rosemary, and her two sons, were there, and he pointed to a picture of Michael on the wall and told his nephews, "Kids, this is your Uncle Mike."

Mr. Cellura had sent five flower arrangements to the small Catholic church: lilies, carnations and daisies. At the altar, he placed three of his brother's artworks, including a self-portrait that portrays three identical faces forming one person. Mr. Cellura calls it his brother's "picture of us."

The organist asked whether he should play "Amazing Grace" or "On Eagles' Wings." Mrs. Weiland and Mr. Cellura looked at each other.

"Mama D?" he asked, touching her arm.

She said it didn't matter; she would cry either way. They sat in different pews because they said if they sat together they would fall apart.

Mr. Cellura, alone in the front row, wept through most of the service. At the end he got up to speak and said, "My brother has been called home to be with the Lord."

He also said that he was thankful "for the opportunity to have new family and new friends."

When it was over, the families drove to the graveyard where Michael's ashes were buried, and Mr. Cellura saw the grave for the first time. "That's my big brother," he said. (Michael was born a few minutes before him.)

Mrs. Weiland held a plastic bowl of water for the consecration, and Mr. Cellura handed everyone a red carnation, plucked from the arrangements at the church, telling them that he now knew that Michael's favorite color was red.

He held three carnations, kneeled over the gravestone, crossed himself, kissed the stone and laid down the flowers.

After the funeral, the families went to lunch, and then Mr. Cellura went back to Mrs. Weiland's house.

She teased him and said, "So Mark, how many more weeks are you going to be here?"

He asked if he could stay a few more days.

"I'll be like gum on your shoes!" he said.

She told him to stay.