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## For late-discovery adoptees, pain and betrayal

They are fighting for access to birth records, denied in Pa., N.J. and 43 other states.  
By Jeff Gammage  
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For the first 52 years of his life, said Phil Ruggiero Jr., *adoption* was just a word in the dictionary.

But then his father died of a heart attack, and his mother was hospitalized with dementia. Ruggiero flew home to Philadelphia to make arrangements.

He was outside smoking a cigarette when an old family friend pulled into the driveway. She said she was sorry about his dad. Ruggiero explained about his mom.

The woman sighed wistfully, "I remember how happy your parents were when they got you."

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Ruggiero looked at her. "Why did you say *got?*"

Ruggiero, 57, is what's known as a late-discovery adoptee, an LDA - someone who learns of his adoption decades after the fact, often in middle age and frequently after those who could have answered critical questions are dead.

It is a curious fate, a life story suddenly rewritten, the plot a cross between the drama of Oedipus, punished by the gods for ignorance about his birth, and an overheated Lifetime cable movie. The effects on LDAs are immediate, and often include anger and depression. Many mount personal inquiries into their pasts, aided by the Internet.

Today, some LDAs are helping to lead what they say ranks among the last civil-rights battles, for access to original birth records, denied to adoptees in Pennsylvania, New Jersey and 43 other states.

While adoption has become a rich tapestry of color and type, late-discovery adoptees remain one of its least-examined subsets. Numerous studies track the development of children brought here from overseas, for example, yet few investigate the phenomenon of late discovery.

No one is even sure how many LDAs are out there.

Lifespans have increased, enabling some adoptive parents to keep a secret well into their 70s, said Susan Friel-Williams, director of AdoptionFamilyNetwork.com, an adoption-search Web site. She estimates that in six months she's heard from 30 people who had just learned they had been adopted. The eldest was 63.

"The majority feel betrayed that the people they loved the most their entire lives were also lying to them their entire lives," Friel-Williams said.

In the 1950s, when many recent LDAs were born, infertility and illegitimacy were shameful secrets. Social workers advised couples to withhold the truth until the child was "ready." Sometimes, even after the child was ready, the parents weren't.

For generations "it was a reasonably prevalent practice not to tell your kids," said Adam Pertman, executive director of the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute in New York and author of *Adoption*

*Nation: How the Adoption Revolution Is Transforming America.* "There are more [LDAs] out there who don't know they're out there."

## **Interracial court battle**

In April, the Chester County saga of an interracial adoption made national news, as a white couple fought to adopt the black foster child who had lived with them for nearly two years. The battle ended when a judge placed the 4-year-old boy with African American parents.

Ruggiero, a bank teller who moved into his parents' Roxborough home, closely followed the case, which in a way is the inverse of his own. In one instance, racial difference made adoption obvious even to strangers. In the other, similarity allowed adoption to be hidden even from the child.

Society has changed dramatically since Ruggiero was born in 1949 to an 18-year-old unmarried mother.

Today, single parenthood is common, and adoption practice has turned 180 degrees. Those who place a baby for adoption are no longer expected to vanish. Now they often select their child's new home. Adoptive parents are advised to be honest from the start.

Ruggiero loved his folks and they loved him. That never changed, he said. He wishes they had told him, "but they couldn't. And I will never know whether it was something in their character or my character."

Looking back, he said, trivial differences have new meaning.

His dad was a sports nut; he wasn't. His father was earthy; he was intellectual. Once, when he was about 7, he actually asked his mother if he had been adopted.

"Don't be silly," she told him.

Not long before his father died, Ruggiero asked whether a particular illness ran in the family. His dad said it didn't.

Two days after learning the truth, he confronted his 83-year-old mother at her nursing home.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked.

She answered: "It was none of your business."

He didn't push it.

"It turns out, a lot of people did know," Ruggiero said. "People you wouldn't expect. Like my dentist. Family friends."

When Ruggiero and his wife, Rosemary, were dating, he learned that she too possessed knowledge of his adoption. She had worked for a firm where Ruggiero's parents were clients, and someone in the office mentioned the adoption of their son.

It's almost funny, Ruggiero said. Growing up, he always sensed his family had a secret, some skeleton in the closet.

"Who knew the skeleton would turn out to be me?"

## **A pioneering adoptee**

Ron Morgan quickly grew tired of describing himself as "someone who found out he was adopted after

he was an adult, and then only by accident."

Today he is credited as the inventor of the term *late-discovery adoptee*, as well as being a leading thinker on the topic.

Morgan, of San Francisco, was a 36-year-old contractor in 1991 when he learned the truth about his birth. Since then, he has advised hundreds of LDAs at conferences, maintains an Internet chat room on the issue, and hears from two or three people a month who just learned they had been adopted.

Most LDAs, he said, are shocked and confused at first. Yet many find the news answers lifelong questions.

The deception creates distinctive family behaviors, Morgan said, because the parents must enlist relatives in the charade.

"If somebody doesn't collude, you don't see that person. So [as a child] you don't see certain family members, and you don't know why."

As a boy, Morgan said, he had no inkling he had been adopted, although he noticed a coldness from his grandparents. Once his mother made a vague remark about his parentage. And years later, when Morgan's daughter was born, he sensed something indefinable yet odd in his mother's reaction.

In the late 1980s, his mother was hospitalized with breast cancer. "I asked her point-blank: 'This is going to sound weird to you, but was I adopted?' She said, 'Oh no, no.' "

Morgan's father died of Alzheimer's disease shortly before cancer claimed his mother. While cleaning out their house, he discovered a small, flat box. Inside he found a letter to his mother - condolences on a miscarriage. And a foster-care certificate for a child who shared his birthday. And, finally, conclusively, legal paperwork related to his adoption.

The discovery was exhilarating and devastating. Morgan's suspicion had proved accurate, but everything he knew about himself was wrong, even his ethnicity. He grew up believing he was Irish and Greek. In fact, he was Norwegian.

He felt himself falling into an abyss. It took him more than two years to climb out. He concluded that, on an emotional level, his mother never saw him as having been adopted. His father went along. They presumed the lie benefited everyone, including him.

A search for his biological parents revealed that his birth mother was dead - and that as a girl she had been left at an orphanage. Morgan, now 52, also located the man he believes is his birth father, though they have no relationship. He found plenty of siblings: He's the fifth of 12.

Finding out he had been adopted influenced the way he parents his three daughters.

"I feel a deep commitment to being with them," Morgan said, "and being honest with them."

## **Finding a personal closure**

As he sat at his kitchen table, Ruggiero paused to look at an old black-and-white snapshot, a dark-haired boy standing beside his parents outside a Wildwood hotel.

"These people never stopped being Mom and Dad," he said. But he wanted to meet the woman who gave birth to him to thank her for making "the toughest decision of her life."

In his parents' safe-deposit box he found an amended birth certificate, along with papers that indicated his birth mother had dragged her feet in surrendering him. He was born in January and not adopted until July.

He wondered: The months I spent in a crib at St. Vincent's Home, did I have a name? Did my birth mother give me a name?

She did: Michael Joseph.

In August 2004, with the help of an informal Internet adoption network, he identified his birth mother. Patricia - Ruggiero doesn't want her last name disclosed, lest it trouble her family - was almost 73.

She delayed answering his letter, explaining that she dearly wanted to see him, but found it hard to acknowledge her "misspent youth."

They met in Roxborough the next month. Patricia was nervous, stammering, "Well, it's been a while, hasn't it?"

She never married or had other children. She lived in a trailer near Cape May, her working life spent tending bar. She told him the name of his birth father, who had died in 1990.

Ruggiero was thrilled to meet Patricia, although he can't say he felt an instant connection. After all, "we were strangers."

They started to build a relationship through calls and get-togethers. Then last year, five months after they met, Patricia died suddenly of a heart attack.

"At the end of her life, my mother got her son back," Ruggiero said, "but she didn't get back her baby."

## **ONLINE EXTRA**

To read a presentation by Ron Morgan on late-discovery adoption, or to join his mailing list, go to <http://go.philly.com/lda>

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