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N.J. Assembly passes bill allowing adopted adults to learn parents' names

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By **Susan K. Livio/Statehouse Bureau**



Tony Kurdzuk/The Star-

LedgerView from above the New Jersey Senate Chamber at the Statehouse in Trenton in this 2010 file photo.

TRENTON — Adults who were adopted as infants will be able to get a copy of their birth certificate with the names of their biological parents under a bill that won final legislative passage today, 31 years after advocates began waging what they have called a civil-rights battle to learn their identities.

"This means I'll be able to find out who my mother is," said Ellen Hill of Doylestown, Pa., wiping away tears.

The full Assembly approved the measure — the same one passed last year by the Senate — by a vote of 44 to 26, with two abstentions.

But the legal fight may be far from over. Gov. Chris Christie must sign the bill to make New Jersey the seventh state to give adopted people access to their pasts, and he has given no indication what he plans to do.

The issue is one that could be intensely personal to him. The governor has an adopted sister, something the bill's advocates hope will make him more sympathetic to the concerns of those who are adopted.

But Christie is a practicing Catholic, and the groups in the state most vocally opposed to the legislation are New Jersey Right to Life and New Jersey Catholic Conference, a group representing the bishops.

Both organizations have expressed their concern that pregnant women faced with the prospect of losing their anonymity would be inclined to choose abortion over adoption.

"We hope the governor will veto the bill," said Marie Tasy, executive director for New Jersey Right to Life. "This bill is not only poorly drafted, it contains multiple flaws the consequence of which, in human terms, could be devastating to many and ultimately harm the institution of adoption."

A spokesman for the governor, Michael Drewniak, acknowledged the "great intentions" that went into drafting the legislation. "We understand it's important to a lot of people, many of whom we've heard from," he said. "But, like all bills, this one will receive careful review by the governor's counsel's office."

Assemblyman Vincent Prieto (D-Hudson), who sponsored the legislation, said many opponents mistakenly believe birth mothers were guaranteed privacy. Mothers signed papers years relinquishing their babies, he said, "mainly to protect the adopted child and the adoptive parents."

The bill's uncertainty did not stop its most ardent supporters from reveling in their victory today. About 30 people hugged, laughed and wept following the vote at the Statehouse in Trenton.

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"New Jersey grassroots advocates have fought for the last 31 years to restore this basic human right — the right for adoptees to have a copy of their original birth certificate," said Judy Foster of Parsippany, who was reunited with her biological daughter as an adult.

The bill, (**A1406/S799**) would allow adopted adults to receive a copy of their birth certificate upon request.

Birth parents who gave a child up for adoption before the law's passage and who want to maintain their anonymity would have one year after the bill's enactment to send a notarized letter requesting that the state registrar redact their names and addresses from a copy of the original birth certificate.

Birth parents surrendering a baby after the law is enacted would have an opportunity to submit a document stating their preference not to be contacted. In that case it would be up to the adopted child to respect the wishes of his or her natural parents.

For many, it was a victory long awaited and fraught with emotion. Hill, who was adopted in Newark through a private agency, has not been able to find information about her biological parents despite a 20-year search. "Everybody wants to know their roots, who you look like and take after — what a no adopted person takes for granted."