

# Oprah's Family Secret

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For the most part, Oprah's life has been an open book. "I think I've seen just about everything and heard every story," she says. "I thought nothing could surprise me anymore. But let me tell you, I was wrong."

Just before Thanksgiving 2010, Oprah received some news about her family that she says shook her to her core. "[It's] a bombshell family secret that left me speechless," she says. "Only a handful of people in my life know about this."

With the way the media works today, Oprah says there's no way the story wouldn't eventually get out, so she and her family made the decision to do this show. "I wanted you to hear it from me first," she says. It all starts with one woman's story...a mother from Milwaukee who discovered she's Oprah's half-sister.



Patricia was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on April 26, 1963. From the moment she came into the world, Patricia's life was far from easy. "I was put up for adoption at birth, and I was left in the hospital for about a month," Patricia says.

For the next seven years of Patricia's life, she bounced around from one foster home to another before finally being adopted. All this time, she says she longed to be reunited with her birth mother. "I had some disbelief that she didn't mean to put me up for adoption. I just would always wish that my birth mother was going to come back and get me," Patricia says. "Then, as you get older, you know that that's not going to happen."



When Patricia was 17 years old, she gave birth to a daughter, Aquarius, and six years later, she had a son, Andre. "I had my daughter very young, and my whole goal with wanting to have my daughter is to have a part of me—to be able to look at her and see a part of me," Patricia says.

Patricia spent the next 30 years raising her children on her own. Even today, she works two jobs so she can give her children a better life. "What I'm grateful for is the people who I've had in my life and the people who have given me strength and the people who have loved me," she says. "I don't regret the fact that my mother gave me up because that's not the way my life was supposed to go. This is."

When Patricia was 20 years old, she contacted the State of Wisconsin to find her birth mother but never followed up. Then, in 2007, Patricia's children urged her to give it another try. Patricia requested her adoption records and started the search for her biological family.

Soon after, Patricia received her birth records in the mail. "I was like, 'Oh, my God,'" she says. "I have a family." The documents dated back to 1963, the year Patricia was born. Although the names of her family members were not revealed, the documents did include key information. "I found out that I had three other siblings," Patricia says. At the time of her birth, she had a sister who was 4 1/2 years old, a brother who was 2 and a 9-year-old sister, who lived with her father in Nashville.

The records also showed that two of her siblings—her second oldest sister and brother—had since passed away, but her other sister was still alive. "[I thought,] 'I can't wait to meet her because she's probably down there cooking up a storm and has about 10 kids,'" Patricia says.

But, one month later, Patricia received a heartbreaking phone call from the state's adoption agency. "[The caller] was telling me that my birth mother had called her back, and she had made the decision at that particular time that she did not want to see me," Patricia says. "I said, 'That's okay because God is going to let me know who you are.'"

The same day Patricia got rejected by her birth mother, she saw a story on the local news in Milwaukee that would give her some answers. "She had the TV on the news, and they were doing an interview with Vernita, Oprah Winfrey's mother," Andre, Patricia's son, says.

During that interview, Oprah's mother revealed details about Oprah's two half-siblings who had died. That information matched details in Patricia's birth documents. "Her mother said two of her children had passed away ... I knew that two of my siblings had passed away, and I knew which two," Patricia says. Their names? Jeffrey and Patricia, also known as "Pat." "The hairs on the back of my neck stood up, because I also knew that one of my siblings and I shared the same name," Patricia says. "I said, 'No, that can't be.'"

All the details were lining up. Andre put the last piece of the puzzle together. "I went online and found a [bio of Oprah Winfrey](#) and saw the birth dates of when her mom was born and when her siblings were born," he says. With that information, Andre and his mother realized that [Oprah might be Patricia's half-sister](#).

Could this be? "Yes, it is true," Oprah says. "It is true that my mother, Vernita, is also Patricia's birth mother, which means Patricia is my half-sister, who I never knew existed."

It was 2007 when Patricia pieced together her family history, but she says she had no idea what to do with the information. Keep in mind, Vernita never told her other three children she had given a baby up for adoption.

[Patricia tried to reach out to Vernita three times](#), but Vernita said she wasn't ready to meet her. "I was very hurt," Patricia says. "I just had to let it go."

Despite feeling rejected by her birth mother, Patricia decided to keep her findings a secret, fearing that it would become a media frenzy. "I remember just still worrying about my older sister and just praying to God that nothing gets out," Patricia says. "I did not want her hurt."

Patricia wasn't quite sure what to do next, but then, she saw a magazine article about Oprah's niece, Alisha, the daughter of Oprah's deceased sister Pat. Alisha and her husband own a Milwaukee-area restaurant called Pat's Rib Place, which is named after her mother who died in 2003. Patricia decided to go to the restaurant and meet Alisha.

When she arrived, she saw photos of Pat on the restaurant's walls and was overwhelmed by how closely she resembled Pat. "I am your mother's sister," Patricia said to Alisha. "At that time, I think she believed me, but she didn't understand, because she got very emotional."

Alisha says she stared at Patricia, stunned at how much she looked like her mother. It was then that Patricia showed Alisha the documents that detailed her biological family's history. Alisha's husband, Tydus, was suspicious at first. "I'm thinking in my head that, you know, this could be any crackpot out here just claiming to just be related to Oprah," he says.

Then, he met Patricia and saw the resemblance to his deceased mother-in-law, Pat. "It was the way she spoke; it was the way she moved her hands; it was the expression that she made," Tydus says. "It was her laughter. It was her excitement, her joy." Tydus says he broke down and began to cry.

"[There was] just something about her," Alisha says. "It just felt right."

Even though Alisha's instincts told her Patricia was her aunt, she says she wanted to be 100 percent sure. One week later, Patricia and Alisha took a DNA test. The results say there is an 85 percent positive match, and because they are niece and aunt, there's little doubt that they are related.

For months, members of Oprah's family knew about Patricia, but no one told Oprah. "I had no idea that my mother had given up a baby in 1963," Oprah says. "I was 9 years old at the time, living with my father in Nashville, and didn't even know my mother was pregnant ... So imagine my shock just a few months ago. It was the end of October, right before Thanksgiving, [when] I found out that I have another sister living just 90 minutes away in Milwaukee. What's even more unbelievable is that she has the same name as my first sister who passed away, Patricia."

It was Alisha who first emailed Oprah. Then Alisha's sister, Chrishaunda, sent another email. Oprah says she called both of her nieces, and they told Oprah she needed to talk to her mother, Vernita. But when Oprah spoke to her mother, she says Vernita didn't mention Patricia. After calls back and forth to more family members, Oprah finally asked her assistant, Libby, to tell her what was going on.

Just 10 minutes before a show taping was about to begin, Libby told Oprah she has a sister. Oprah called her mother and confronted her. "[I asked,] 'Is this true?'" Oprah says. "[Vernita] finally said, 'Well, yes, I think it's true.'"

On Thanksgiving Day, Oprah and Stedman drove to Milwaukee to meet her half-sister, Patricia, and Patricia's family for the first time. "You look just like Pat," Oprah said when she saw Patricia. They spent the rest of the afternoon sitting around the dinner table, getting to know each other.

In the car on their way back to Chicago, Oprah says she and Stedman didn't say a word for miles. "Finally, he turned to me and said, 'What was that?'" Oprah says. "It was so uncanny to us and to everybody in this family how much this Patricia looked like, moved like, talked like Pat. It was a *Beloved* moment, if you know what I mean: the daughter who comes back from the dead."



Since meeting her half-sister, Patricia, and her new niece and nephew, Oprah says [she's come to admire their character](#). "What is so remarkable to me about this story, and it's going to make me cry, so just be patient," Oprah says to Patricia. "Since I have been a person known in the public, there have been few times that I've been anywhere and not been sold out. There have been few times where you can bring anybody new into your life and not have that person in some way betray you or use you or take advantage of you."

Patricia tried and tried and tried again to get responses from my mother and other people in the family. She never once thought to go to the press. She never once thought to sell this story. ... When I heard this about you, I said, 'Regardless if it's true or not true, I had to meet you because I wanted to meet somebody who had that kind of character.' So thank you."

A few weeks after Alisha and Patricia's DNA test, Patricia met her birth mother, Vernita, for the first time. "I just kept looking at her going, 'I don't know if I look like you or not,'" Patricia says. "I kept trying to find myself in her."

But, there's no questioning how much Patricia looks like her half-sister Pat. Pat's daughter Alisha says meeting Patricia is "one of the best gifts I could have ever gotten."

Chrishaunda, Pat's other daughter, first heard about Patricia from Alisha, who then sent her a photo of their newfound aunt. "When I saw the picture ... I just knew that it was true," Chrishaunda says. "Before the [DNA] test, I just believed it was true."

For Chrishaunda, getting to know Patricia has been an emotional process. "I think that she has her own personality and her own gifts, but she, for me, is a constant reminder of the godness that my mother represented, personified," she says. "My mother had a lot of demons that prevented her from being her best self. We know about that, but I feel like my mother speaks through her."

Oprah agrees. "It feels like [this is] closure for my sister Pat who passed," Oprah says. "My sister Pat, I did the best I could for her and many of you know, I had to put her through drug rehab twice, and when she came out, she just didn't survive it. It feels to me like [Patricia] is Pat on her very best day."



In January 2011, Patricia and Oprah met up at Vernita's home in Milwaukee to get more answers from their mother. Vernita, who recently suffered a stroke, says she was shocked—but not afraid—when Patricia first tried to contact her.

She was, however, struggling with feelings of shame. "I thought it was a terrible thing for me to do, that I had done, gave up my daughter when she was born," Vernita says.

The adoption records say Vernita gave up Patricia because she wanted to get off of welfare. "I made the decision to give her up because I wasn't able to take care of her," Vernita says. "So when I left the hospital, I told the nurse that I wasn't going to keep the baby. She said, 'Oh, but she's such a cute little girl. Why not?'"

After leaving the hospital, Vernita says she continued thinking about her baby and even went back looking for her. "They told me that she had left," she says. "I don't know if someone had adopted her or what."

Patricia is stunned by her mother's words. "I'm just trying to take it all in right now," she says. "I never heard that I was a pretty baby, so I didn't know. I always had a feeling that she didn't mean to give me up. Her saying that she came back to get me, it means a lot."

Now that Patricia is a part of Vernita's life again, Vernita says it makes her "feel wonderful."



After leaving Vernita's house, Oprah says [she had an epiphany](#): Her mother is still stuck in 1963. "She is still of the same mindset of 1963 and is still carrying the shame that would have been put upon her in 1963, and therefore, she hasn't been able to release herself to fully embrace [Patricia] and embrace this miracle that has really happened in our family," Oprah says.

Oprah looks in the camera and speaks to her mother. "You can let that go. You can let the shame go," she says. "There are millions of people all over this country who are just like you, who have given up their children because they knew at the time that they could not provide the best for them. So, Vernita, you can let that go."

This wasn't Oprah's only epiphany. "When I was 14 years old, I became pregnant and that was my big secret," Oprah says. "I'd been abused since I was 9 years old, became pregnant at 14 years old, sent to live with my father. My sister, Pat, went to the tabloids and told the tabloids that story. That caused a big rift between my sister and I because she sold [me] out to the tabloids.

When I left our mother's house the other day, for the first time I realized that that was a gift to me. Pat, going to the tabloids and telling the story about my having the baby, was a gift because it released me from the shame that my mother still carries today. I thought, had she not done that, I would still be exactly where my mother is—stuck in the shame."



Despite the difficulties she faced, Patricia never gave up trying to contact her biological family. "I knew that I needed to get it out or get in touch with you so that no one else would put it out there," Patricia says.

When Oprah asks why, Patricia explains she didn't want to hurt Oprah. "It's not fair, number one, because it's family business," Patricia says. "And family business needs to be handled by family."

"Well, it is now out there," Oprah says.

"And it was handled by family," Patricia says. "It shouldn't be handled by anyone else. That's not fair. It wouldn't be fair to you."

Patricia says her children were interested in meeting her family too. "It made me realize if they were coming to me, asking me the same thing, 'Can you go look for your side of the family?', it started to make me think that they're not feeling complete," Patricia says. "I didn't think about that. I just thought it was just me. ... I said, 'Let me go into this for them.'"



Now that Patricia's found her family, she says she feels connected, a sense of wholeness—even if her mother's reaction wasn't what she thought it would be. "That's okay," Patricia says. "I have my nephews and great nieces, and I have [Oprah]."

Patricia's daughter, Aquarius, says this whole experience has been eye-opening. "[It's] a miracle to know that we have a family, to know that we have someone that looks like us, to know that we have someone that may have the same mannerisms as we do," she says. "It's just amazing to know that we have another half."

Andre, Patricia's son, has been in awe, as well. "I felt really blessed to be a part of your life and just to be connected with you," he says to Oprah.



What has been the most rewarding part of this experience? "Getting my family [back]," Patricia says.

For Oprah, who has helped many families reunite on *The Oprah Show* over the years, this is only the beginning of the journey.

"As you can imagine, Patricia and I are still sorting all of this out," Oprah says. "It's a process. She's so sweet. She would call me and say, 'Are you all right? I know this is hard for you to process.' Yes, it is. I'm still processing. So we're going to be getting to know each other in the months and days and years to come."