

Side by Side

They'd been working together for months, not knowing they shared a deeper connection.

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More Than Co-Workers

Melissa Meely dropped into a chair in front of her manager's cherry veneer desk. "I don't know how people with kids can do this job," the 25-year-old radio advertising sales rep said.



Photographed by Tho Westenberger
Missi Meely (left) was the sales rep. Laurie Thompson was the boss.

Her boss, Laurie Thompson, had heard such self-doubt before. Her six salespeople at Connoisseur Media in Erie, Pennsylvania, often popped into her office just before quitting time to vent frustrations about a tough day of cold-calling. On this Wednesday in June 2006, as the late-afternoon sun cast rays of light through a wall-length window, it was Melissa (Missi to her friends) who led the caravan into Laurie's office.

Laurie nodded. She didn't have children, devoting herself instead to a sales career, running marathons, cycling, sailing and spending time with Chuck, her husband of nearly 20 years.

"I don't think I'll ever have kids, though that would really disappoint my parents," Missi said.

"Why, because you're an only?" Laurie asked.

Missi said her parents would be disappointed because they wanted grandkids. Then she added almost as an afterthought, "I was adopted."

From the time she was tiny, Missi knew she was adopted. Doug and Sandy Meely were

always open with their daughter about where she came from. "You weren't had, you were chosen," Doug would tell her.

After they were married in October 1972, Doug and Sandy learned they were unable to conceive. But they longed for a family. So they sought out an adoption agency, went through the screening process, put their name on the list and waited for five long years. Finally, in May 1981, they brought home a five-week-old girl with a full head of brown hair and deep brown eyes. They called her Melissa Jean.

All Doug and Sandy knew about her background was typed on two sheets of white paper provided by the adoption agency. Melissa was born April 14, 1981, to a 16-year-old girl who played saxophone in the high school band, loved horses and was described as intelligent, decisive and sensitive. The infant's father was 18 and had brown hair and brown eyes, just like his daughter. He also had intense allergies, something he passed on to Missi.

A Major Revelation

Missi spent summer days playing on her parents' three-acre plot in rural Erie County and swimming in the backyard pool. She helped Doug tend the family garden, sneaking green snakes into the house to make Sandy scream. She wore elaborate feathered costumes for her ballet recitals at Long's School of Dance.

Missi sang in school musicals, marched in the color guard and whirled through the air as a cheerleader for Harbor Creek Senior High School. She went on to Gannon University, where she was a deejay for the college radio station.

Over the years, there were moments when Missi would peek in Sandy's hope chest, pull out the adoption sheets and read the few details about her birth parents. But she never felt any great sense of loss or longing for idealized parents who for some mysterious reason had to give her up.

Along the way, Missi grew accustomed to questions from people who'd learned she was adopted. So she wasn't at all hesitant about answering her boss that June afternoon.

"Do you ever have a desire to meet your real parents?" Laurie asked.

"Not really," Missi said. "It's not that I don't want to. It's just that I haven't gotten around to it. And I don't feel like I'm missing anything. My parents are wonderful." She continued talking, telling her boss the few details she knew about her biological parents, and making a little self-deprecating joke, saying that her birth father "was probably some kind of loser because he collected beer cans."

"Well, not everyone who collects beer cans is a loser," Laurie said.

Missi laughed and was about to leave the office when Laurie asked another question.

"When were you born?"

"April 14, 1981." Then, sensing she'd taken up enough of her boss's time, Missi said goodbye and headed home.

The next day, Laurie accompanied Missi on her morning sales calls and then invited her to lunch at Jr's on the Bay, a signature spot on the downtown Erie waterfront with a view of Presque Isle Bay. Lunch hour was ending, and they had a quiet table with privacy. Each ordered a coconut shrimp salad and waited.

"There's something I have to tell you," Laurie said. "And it's major."

Missi shifted in her seat. "Oh, my God," she said. "I'm getting fired."

"No, no, no," Laurie replied. "It's about our talk yesterday."

"Yeah?" Missi said.

Laurie continued. "If I had a hunch about who your biological parents were, would you want to know?"

"Well, yeah," Missi replied.

"Are you sure about that? You said yesterday you weren't in any big hurry to find out. It might not be who I suspect. You might be disappointed. So are you in?" Laurie asked.

Missi thought for a minute to consider what her boss was dangling before her. She'd never been that curious before -- then she began to wonder who it might be. Some friend of Laurie's? "I'm in. Tell me," Missi said.

Laurie paused. "I think it might be me and my husband."

A New Life Begins

Laurie Willow and Chuck Thompson met while they were students at Fort LeBoeuf High School in the Erie township of Waterford. They started going steady in March 1980, during Chuck's senior year. He gave her his class ring, and they remained together after he graduated that spring.

That fall, Laurie learned she was pregnant. Initially, she refused to believe it and told no one. But as her body kept changing, the frightened teen couldn't hide the truth. She confided in her mother, who was then divorcing Laurie's father and starting a job to support herself and her kids. There was so much hurt and confusion in the family, her mother advised Laurie to give up the baby.

Laurie explained the situation to Chuck. And he agreed adoption was the best course. They were too young, too unprepared and financially unable to care for a child. They weren't much more than kids themselves.

The next few months were a blur for Laurie. She continued to go to school, taking advantage of the baggy fashions of the time to conceal her pregnancy. As she moved closer to her April due date, she stayed home from school, using the excuse that she had mononucleosis. In truth, carrying a baby on her tiny frame caused her such intense back pain that she couldn't sit in class or sleep in bed at night.

Then one day in April, her water broke. Laurie's mother drove her to Hamot Medical Center in Erie. When Laurie arrived, she was whisked away in a wheelchair and taken to a delivery room, where a doctor determined the baby was breech and that she would need an emergency C-section.

The doctor rushed her to an operating room, where nurses and anesthesiologists quickly prepared Laurie for surgery. Soon, under the bright surgery lights, a baby girl with brown hair was born and then taken away. Laurie never held her.

But while the baby disappeared, the guilt did not. As time passed and the trauma and fear subsided, Laurie and Chuck would each wonder what happened to that tiny baby with the full head of brown hair.

Laurie went off to college, graduated, found a job at an advertising agency and then in August 1986, about the time their baby was preparing for kindergarten, Laurie married her high school sweetheart.

They never had more children.

Now, as Laurie looked at the shocked expression in Missi's brown eyes, she wondered if it was really true. Had she actually been working with her daughter for the past five months?

They sat together, their salads untouched, and Laurie slowly related the facts she knew that seemed to fit: Missi's birth date, Chuck's allergies and beer can collection, the horses, and the hair color. But she also probed deeper, asking Missi questions. And each of her answers seemed to ring true.

Family Reunion

Missi told Laurie she was born at Hamot by C-section because she was breech. They compared medical notes. Missi had migraines -- just like Laurie. She had problems with her toes -- just like Laurie. She had impacted canine teeth. So did Laurie. With each new detail, the likelihood grew. Still, they wanted official confirmation. That afternoon, they went to the county courthouse and filled out the paperwork requesting that the Orphans' Court staff pull Missi's file.

And then Missi began to have second thoughts. What if the parents she had known all her life, who had changed her diapers, packed her school lunches, sent her off into the world armed with love -- what if they felt threatened, circumvented, excluded? The last thing she wanted to do was hurt them. Had she been right to agree to start this bizarre search? But how could she refuse to know her own history? And if it turned out her birth parents weren't Laurie and Chuck after all, would she keep looking?

Answers to those questions came the following week. Missi got the news while out driving and rushed back to tell Laurie. She went into her office and closed the door. Tears began to well in Missi's eyes. All she could say was, "Uhhh-huhhh."

Missi had put off telling Doug and Sandy anything until that day. Then she prepared the scene carefully, opting to do it in the wood-paneled living room at her grandmother's house. "I just want you to know that I love you very, very much," she said. "But I want

you to know something," she continued, fighting back tears. "I accidentally found my biological parents."

Chuck and Laurie Thompson showed up at the Meelys' home on an August afternoon with a bouquet of flowers and a pair of nervous smiles. They rang the bell, dogs started barking and the door swung open.

Doug and Sandy Meely greeted them with warm hugs as Missi looked on excitedly. Then they all went outside, where Doug tossed hot dogs on the grill and Sandy told stories about Missi's childhood.

When the Meelys first heard Missi's news, they'd accepted it -- not without some question and doubt, yet confident in their love for her and hers for them. Sandy put together a photo album for the Thompsons, showing Missi petting deer at Marineland, smiling with missing front teeth, posing awkwardly with prom dates. When she saw those photos, Laurie knew Missi had been happy and well loved. Her eyes filled with tears, of joy and of regret. Joy that Missi had had such a perfect childhood. Regret that she and Chuck hadn't been part of it.

Missi left her job at the radio station. Working with a boss who was also her mom was just a bit too complicated. She and Laurie and Chuck go boating on Lake Erie, attend concerts and get together for family gatherings.

Now Missi is beginning to make plans for her future and the possibility of marriage -- and children. The wedding may be crowded but not complicated. Both sets of parents will be there. And Doug has invited Chuck to join him in escorting their daughter down the aisle.

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