



Reunions mean success for longtime Carson City nonprofit

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After 31 years in the profession of matching lost family members, the small staff of this Carson City nonprofit agency have piles of thank-you letters and a database full of more than 200,000 active registrations.

And they have their own stories of reunion and disappointment.

Marri Rillera, registrar of the International Soundex Reunion Registry, and Carlita Ray, her volunteer assistant, were both adopted and found the names of long-lost family members through record searches.

Because a Nevada judge agreed to open up her case, Ray found her mother's name and that they had once lived only 30 miles from each other in Southern California. Her mother died in the 1980s before they had a chance to reunite. She also found out she has a brother she's never met.

"I'm still chasing after him after two years, I've only gotten old addresses," she said.

Rillera obtained information from the state saying her grandfather had scarlet fever and what year he caught it. Because all communicable diseases must be reported to the state, she tracked down her family. Both women are passionate about keeping state records open for children looking for adopted parents. Knowing about your family history is important for health reasons, not just personal closure, said Rillera.

But in some states, adoption records remain closed, even in cases where both parent and child are seeking reunion. This is where the Soundex Reunion Registry comes in.

Those who apply to the registry are hoping a lost family member is also looking for them. For example, a woman who knows only the birth date of her child and the place can apply to the registry and hope that one day a child matching that description will also register.

"Hundreds of matches are made a year," Rillera said. "We do matches every day."

Often, they have one family member in the system for decades and are able to match it with a recent applicant. Grandparents, siblings and children apply, all looking for one thing: a sense of belonging.

Tony Vilardi, chairman of the board and founder of the registry along with his wife, Emma, said there's a box of tissues on every desk. Even after all these years, every reunion match made over the phone is a tear jerker.

The registry covers more than 28 countries. Word spreads by mouth, the media and state agencies. The Carson City nonprofit organization is known around the world from its periodic publication in Dear Abby.

Last year, when the registry was mentioned in Parade Magazine, 400 pieces of mail came in daily to the office on East Second Street for several weeks. The Web site got 3.4 million hits.

Vilardi recalls one case where he found a mother in her 70s who had never told her mother, who was in her 90s, that she had a child out of wedlock and put it up for adoption. It worked out because "every grandmother loves to be a grandmother."

In another case, a father was matched with a daughter who was born from a high-school romance.

"He said to me, 'I just want her to know that I've always loved her,'" Vilardi said.

The International Soundex Reunion Registry

What it is: A system for matching people who want contact with family members. It's a mutual-consent registry requiring registration by both parties. Registrations have been kept since 1975, when the registry started.

The cost: There are no fees to register. The organization is supported by charitable donations, which mostly come from families reunited, or those looking for family members.

Where to register: Visit www.isrr.net to apply online. Call 882-7755 to receive the form by mail.

- Contact reporter Becky Bosshart at bbosshart@nevadaappeal.com or 881-1212.
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