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Suddenly, siblings

Carlos Gonzalez, Star Tribune



Jennifer Lewis, 32, Jim Hengen, 42, Penny Stodolka, 40, John Hengen, 42, and Katherine Helmin-Sapp, 39.

More adults are adjusting to growth spurts in their family trees due to adoptee and birth-parent searches.

How would you like to welcome a new sister or brother into your family -- at the age of 45? As laws change and stigmas soften, more adults who were adopted are seeking and finding their birth parents. The meeting of birth mother and newly found "child" is often, if not always, joyous. For children born later who now must adjust to having a new and older half-sibling, feelings can be more complicated. We talked with several Twin Cities families about their experiences, and some (nonscientific) patterns emerged.

Almost all of the adoptees expressed concern regarding sensitivity to the parents who raised them. It seemed much easier for families of babies placed after the 1960s to adjust, because before then, it was more common for a child to be placed and never spoken of again. And the oldest child of a family welcoming a new, older sibling was more likely to accept it if they were opposite genders, particularly for girls.

From strangers to poker buddies

Brother and sister John Hengen and Penny Stodolka attended the same Coon Rapids high-school prom in 1986. Neither one had any idea -- because they didn't know each other.

Hengen, 42, and his twin brother, Jim, were adopted by the same family as infants. Their teenaged parents later married and had two girls, Stodolka, now 39, and Katherine Helmin-Sapp, 37. Their father cut ties when they were young girls. Their mother remarried, and had their half-sister, Jennifer Lewis.

Last year, the brothers initiated a search and sent their birth mother a certified letter. She was so overcome with emotion, it was her daughters who wound up first calling the Hengens.

"I had known about them since I was 25 when my aunt let something slip," Stodolka said. "Since then, we had made half-hearted attempts to find them, but this all happened long before the Internet made searching easier. We could have paid \$2,000 to Catholic Charities with no guarantees. And my mom was reluctant. With her generation, you just didn't bring it up, you left it in the past."

For their first meeting after that phone call, two weeks later, the group decided that bowling at the Mermaid in Moundsview would be a good icebreaker. And it was: "We saw right away that we had tons of similar interests and personality traits," John Hengen said.

"Everything about them is familiar to me, the way they move, their dry, sarcastic sense of humor," Stodolka said. "We like to tease each other a lot."

That was last September. The siblings live in different suburbs and exurbs stretching from Lino Lakes to Eagan, yet they now see each other two or three times a month, including a standing poker night. In April, they went to Florida to visit their birth father, whom the twins had never met and the daughters hadn't seen in 35 years. They're ready for another first next month -- all are running together in Grandma's Marathon.

High-school confidential

Ten years ago, St. Louis Park High freshman Amy Lewis felt like she was having a "Back to the Future" moment. The older boy she'd just passed in the gym looked so much like her father. She pointed him out to her friend. One week later that friend, who was dating one of the older boy's pals, called her and said, "No wonder. That guy's your brother."

His name was Brady Pask. They had grown up only five blocks apart and shared a father. At 30, his mother told her then-lover, 17, that she didn't need anything from him. She later married a man who legally adopted Pask.

"One time, before I knew who he really was, he drove his car so close to me I thought he was going to run me over," said Lewis, now 25. "He was just trying to get a closer look."

Pask had known since he was in fourth grade that he had a half-sister, but never said anything until the siblings' social circles got too close for comfort.

"She always used to have a little attitude around me," Pask said. "We had mutual friends, and I finally just decided to throw it out there," knowing she would find out eventually.

The two have developed a familial bond. For Lewis, an only child, Pask is "all I could ever ask for in a brother," she said.

Pask, who has two other sisters, said his advice to others is to "do all the catching up you can." He sometimes felt like he wanted to slow it down a little when Lewis would go through photo album after photo album, trying to catch up on each others' lives. "But I'm really glad I could be there for her."

Sweetness and regret

Katie DeCosse, 52, lives in northeast Minneapolis. Her birth mother, Jackie Maher of Brooklyn Park, had her at age 20. DeCosse was placed with an Orono couple who had two other adopted children. Maher went on to get married and have five more kids. After Maher hired a detective to find DeCosse, the two became close and are now co-writing a book about their reunion. Among DeCosse's half-siblings, however, reactions have varied. They did not find out about her until two years ago.

Watching them eat pizza around her dining room table, it's clear DeCosse and her husband get on well with Tom and Tim Maher, two of three half-brothers who are 14 and 15 years younger. She affectionately calls them "the brothers T."

Her two half-sisters, who are eight and 10 years younger, who did not want to comment for this story, have not been as interested in developing a close relationship, she said.

"Obviously I have five new siblings and there is a little bit of everything there. The other half-brother was at first enthusiastic, then changed his mind. I met one sister and that did not go well, and the other sister is still reluctant to meet. I couldn't imagine someone wouldn't want to meet me. I'm still trying to let some of that go." If the oldest sister in the Maher family had found out that she had had an older brother instead, "that might have been better," DeCosse said. "I think it's hard to find out you're not your mother's oldest girl."

Because of the age difference, DeCosse seems like an aunt to the brothers. But Tom Maher says he doesn't look at her that way, or quite like his other siblings either: "She's the accommodating stranger who feeds me," he said, laughing. "She got more than she bargained for with us."

The brothers agreed with DeCosse that what they've learned from the experience is not to be pushy.

"Be open, take it as it comes," Tim Maher said. "Be aware that the other person might not be as interested as you are."

There's no question of the mutual interest in this recently blended family.

"Even if I broke up with Jackie," DeCosse said, looking back and forth between the brothers on either side of her, "I'd still have you."

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