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Three decades after adoption, DNA test reveals painful truth



For four years after their 2004 meeting, Phil Bloete, left, and Ron Ryba formed a bond based on their belief that they were father and son before a DNA test proved otherwise. (Baltimore Sun photo by Jed Kirschbaum / July 14, 2009)

For Cockeysville businessman Ron Ryba, the long walk from the parking lot to the stadium in Philadelphia was a 29-year trail of memories.

He had come to meet the son he and his high school sweetheart had never dared to look at when they gave him up for adoption nearly three decades earlier. Now, the baby was a grown man. What would he say to him? What would he look like?

For Phil Bloete, too, the 2004 meeting at a Phillies game, was the culmination of a lifelong dream. He was 28, a high school English teacher in New Jersey. He had enjoyed a happy childhood, and was well-loved by his adoptive parents. But he had always wondered about his birth parents.

Mostly, Bloete said, he wanted to know more about his genetic heritage. He and his wife wanted to start a family, and "if there were any inherent risks, I wanted to know about them."

Their meeting was warm, if a bit tentative. "We laughed a little bit, and talked, and hugged," Ryba recalled. And he was astonished at Bloete's appearance.

Bloete is 6 feet 2 inches tall, 240 pounds with dark hair. He's been a swimmer, lifeguard,

soccer coach. Ryba played football in high school and college, but he's blond, 5 feet 8 inches tall, and tips the scales at 175.

"I'm thinking to myself ... 'Man, did he get the good genes,'" Ryba said.

As it has turned out, Bloete, Ryba, and Ryba's high school girlfriend, Kathleen Butler, share no genes at all.

More than three decades after Ryba and Butler gave up their baby son to Catholic Charities of Trenton, N.J., for adoption, and four years after the agency facilitated their "reunion" with Bloete, genetic testing revealed last year that none of them are related.

Lisa Thibault, a spokeswoman for Catholic Charities of Trenton, acknowledged that the situation is "tragic," and that a "mistake" was made somewhere. But she said the agency has done all it is legally able to do for them.

That has shaken Ryba's lifelong faith in the Catholic Church, or at least in those who lead it. And, it has launched him on a thus-far fruitless quest to find the son he believes Catholic Charities has "lost."

Their story began in 1975.

Ryba was a high school football star. Butler was a cheerleader. They were crazy in love, but when Kathy became pregnant at 16, they knew they were both too young to provide a proper home and a secure future for their child.

So, they agreed to give their baby up to Catholic Charities, which arranged an adoption. They were promised updates on the boy's well-being, and assured the agency would mediate a reunion -- if the boy were willing after he grew to adulthood.

"The solace for me was the fact I would someday reunite, and know that the journey I took was for a good reason," said Ryba.

Catholic Charities' assurances were "a very big reason why I believed that what we were doing was the right thing. I never lost faith in that," he said.

Ryba went on to graduate from high school and earned a degree from Glassboro State College. In 1982, he moved to Maryland to open a sporting goods store in Cockeysville. Now 51, he lives in Timonium with his wife and two children. He owns and operates a business that sells uniforms to the U.S. Department of Defense.

But he has never forgotten the boy he and Butler gave up for adoption. And for three decades, Catholic Charities seemed to have kept its promises to Ryba and Butler.

Their baby was born Nov. 25, 1975, at Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Camden. On Dec. 1, according to documents given to Ryba, the infant was transferred to St.

Elizabeth's Home in Yardville, a home for unwed mothers run by Catholic Charities. And on Jan. 7, 1976, Phil -- identified on the state adoption consent papers as "Baby Boy Butler" -- was adopted by Anne and Edward Bloete, of Brielle, N.J.

Ryba and Butler split up after high school, and went off to college. They stayed in touch, but married others and lived separate lives. Both have their own children.

Over the years, Catholic Charities case workers sent Ryba baby pictures and information on his son's progress. And in 2004, the agency contacted Bloete and mediated the first direct communications between him and Ryba, which led to the "reunion" in Philadelphia.

Phil Bloete is 33 now, with a wife and daughter of his own. He said he had a happy childhood, and was well-loved by his adoptive parents.

"My whole life I grew up believing that Ron's story and Kathleen's story was the story of my [birth] parents," he said. "Catholic Charities had provided that all along."

Ryba said his long dream of a reunion with his firstborn son, and a resolution to decades of heartache and hope, seemed to have been realized in 2004 when he and Bloete agreed to meet for the first time at a Phillies game.

For Bloete, too, it was the culmination of a lifelong dream. "I had sorta prepared myself my whole life for the possibility that this day would never come," he said. "When it did, I was just surprised."

In the years that followed Ryba, Bloete and Butler grew closer, visiting, sharing photos and family stories and introducing relatives. They set aside the difficulty they all had in seeing family resemblances.

Ryba thought maybe Bloete got Butler's eyes. "You try to make it fit, in a way," Ryba said. "They told me this was my son, so it's my son. You want to believe."

They all tried, but Butler said there weren't any tall genes on her side. Ryba's wife and their 16-year-old son didn't see much resemblance either. Doubts nagged.

So, four years after they had become "family" and friends, as Ryba prepared to add Bloete to his will, he asked for a paternity test. Bloete, with his own doubts, readily agreed.

When the initial test found a "zero percent chance" that he was Bloete's father, Ryba called Butler, and posed the difficult, but inevitable question: Was there someone else? Butler told him, in no uncertain terms, "If you're not the father, then I'm not the mother."

So, they all agreed to a \$1,200 DNA test that would stand up in court, if need be. The results again were conclusive. None of them were genetically related.

"We were all just stunned; shocked," Ryba recalled. "Now I realize we don't know who or where our son is. And then I realize Phillip has no origins."

The next call went to Catholic Charities.

"I said, 'You told me for 30 years this was my son. Can't you just go in your files? Maybe you mixed up some files,'" Ryba recalled.

Catholic Charities did provide some documents, but there was nothing to reveal who Bloete's real parents were, or where Baby Boy Butler might have gone.

A meeting was arranged for Ryba, Butler and Bloete with Catholic Charities director Francis Dolan. Ryba was hopeful.

"I'm feeling we're all in this together," he said. He expected that Catholic Charities would agree to search its files, find his real son, and uncover the records for Phil's birth parents.

Instead, the meeting with Dolan ended for Ryba in disappointment and anger, with few answers to his biggest questions. "I finally said to him, 'Are you here to help us?' His recollection is that Dolan replied that his agency had no further obligation to help.

"I don't think there was anything he could have said that could have been more hurtful," Ryba said.

Dolan chose not to speak directly with The Baltimore Sun. Lisa Thibault, his spokeswoman, said that throughout Catholic Charities' contact with Ryba, Butler and Bloete, "we have been mindful of the tragedy inherent in their situation, and have on numerous occasions ... expressed sympathy for them and their situation."

Ryba felt no such sympathy from this agency of the Catholic Church, to which he had belonged all his life.

"The one time I've turned to them ... for their cloak of comfort and help and justice, and they slowly closed the door on me, and said, 'We can't help you,'" Ryba said. "It doesn't diminish my faith in God. It diminishes my faith in the men who lead us to God."

Thibault acknowledged that the situation is "tragic," and that a "mistake" was made somewhere, although she suggested it may have been made before the Butler baby was moved to Catholic Charities' custody at St. Elizabeth's.

Adam Pertman, executive director of the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute in New York, a leading research and policy organization in the field that has long advocated an end to secrecy in adoption records, said, "The secretive ways of the past don't yield very good outcomes."

The mix-up in the adoption of the baby given up by Ryba and Butler -- and the mystery of Bloete's origins, even his true date of birth -- is "an abject lesson on how to not conduct good, strong, ethical adoptions," he said.

Catholic Charities did take one other step to try to shed light on the mystery. In September 2008, the agency went into Superior Court in Mercer County, N.J., asking for permission to release information from its files that is normally barred from disclosure under state or federal law -- information it said "would be helpful to [Phil's] search for his identity."

In April, however, a judge denied the request, and in a June 5 e-mail, William Isele, Catholic Charities' attorney, told Ryba that the documents in the case were sealed. So were the judge's reasons for the denial.

"You can, of course, use your own counsel if you want to petition the court to unseal the Statement of Reasons and the underlying medical documents in the file," Isele told Ryba. "Our client, Catholic Charities, tried to do just that and was told 'no' by the Court."

Contacted by The Baltimore Sun, Isele declined to discuss the case, noting that records in the matter were sealed.

For Catholic Charities, Thibault said, the court's refusal to open the records was the end of its legal options. But perhaps not for Ryba, Butler and Bloete.

Birth records that reveal the identities of adopted children in New Jersey were sealed by a law passed in 1940 and are closed to both the general public and the parties to an adoption. The laws were designed to protect adoptive families from the interference of birth parents.

But there are exceptions when parties to an adoption can show "good cause" to have them opened, according to Steven Sacharow, an attorney with extensive experience in New Jersey adoptions.

"In the case of adult adoptees," he said, "the burden of proof should shift to the state to prove that good cause is not present. I would think the state would have an interest, in the best interests of all the children potentially involved in this situation, to determine what occurred, and as to the integrity of the adoption," Sacharow said.

The experience has sown the seeds of doubt in Ryba's mind. He wrestles with dark suspicion about what happened back at St. Elizabeth's. "How do we not let our thoughts go that way when they're not willing to help us?" Ryba asks.

Angry, and worried about his first-born son's fate, Ryba consulted with a private investigator. He even tried to file missing person and kidnapping reports with the New Jersey attorney general's office. He said he was turned away.

As Ryba continues to search for answers, he recognizes that a lawsuit may be his only option. But so far, he has been unable to find an attorney willing to take his case. He also worries about the cost.

Still, he said, "I would like to know where my son is."

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