



pact's

point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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Whose Birth Certificate Is It, Anyway?

by Pam Hasegawa

The majority of states in the United States sealed birth certificates of adopted people between 1917 and 1950, thus firmly establishing the Sealed Records Era. The stated purpose of sealing adoption-related documents was to prevent public access to personal information, but when the adopted people's legislative struggle for access to their own information began in the early 1970s, suddenly "confidentiality of the birth mother" became the law's *raison d'être*.

Why is there opposition to legislation which simply redresses a wrong done to children who were helpless to participate in a decision which amputated their personal histories, impounded their genetic identities and removed them from their place on the human continuum?

Why Do Adopted People Want to Know ?

Whenever an airplane crashes, two questions surface immediately: "Who was on the plane?" (Anyone I know?) and "Why did it happen?" Is it so strange that an adopted child, realizing that she was born to parents other than those who are raising her, eventually asks the same two questions: "Who?" and "Why?"

The primary reasons most adopted people want access to their birth information are the psychological need to know the truth about themselves; the need for accurate and updated medical information; the need for information about religious identity; and freedom from fear of committing incest. The sealing of records was a social experiment whose unforeseen outcome has proven to be untenable.

Faye Cheesman, MSW, ACSW, former director of Maternity and Adoption Services, Catholic Charities, Trenton, testified recently for accessible birth certificates, saying, "When *Roots* was shown on TV, that program contributed to the awakening and acknowledgment of the feelings of... adopted people — their anxieties, their apprehensions, their curiosity, their insecurities and their questions. They needed answers and came to our agency because we were

the only recourse. They asked, 'Who am I? Where was I born? What time was I born? How much did I weigh? Did my mother name me? Did she hold me...feed me...kiss me? Why didn't she want me? Do I look like her? Do I look like anyone? Why can't I see or have my original birth certificate?' In these clients, I was witnessing pain that I had never before encountered as a trained clinician. Each adopted person expressed sadness and confusion. Each felt that a critical part of his/her life was missing. One described his life as a puzzle missing the most important piece. Each expressed a desire for wholeness, a feeling they had never experienced."

David Brodzinsky, Ph.D., who had reservations about open records when he entered the field of adoption in 1977, also testified: "The adoptee's interest in his or her origin is not a sign of psychopathology; nor is it frivolous curiosity which should be ignored or dismissed. It is a healthy extension of the universal search for self that we all engage in — adopted people and non-adopted people alike."

Adopted people need accurate and current medical information. Most birth mothers who surrendered their babies for adoption were not yet in their mid-twenties. Of course, most were healthy when they delivered; so were many of their own mothers, many of whom were only in their early forties. The medical information contained in agency records, if any, is often dismayingly slight. In the early years of the Sealed Records Era, far less was known about hereditary illness than now.

On July 22, The Philadelphia Inquirer reported this story: Daniel Wauters, 27, of Quincy, CA, sometimes wondered if he would live long enough to trace the roots of his cancer. A hereditary disorder called von Hippel-Landau disease, it causes tumors on the eyes, kidneys, brain, spinal cord and other organs. He and his adoptive mother, Joy Kerkhoff, waged an 11-year battle, which climaxed in court, to see his original birth certificate with his parents' names. During that time, he went blind in one eye and endured many surgeries.

In September, he was finally reunited with his blood relatives. He learned that his mother had died of the disease and that his family had been struggling with it for generations. But he also gained hope. "When I was diagnosed, I was made to believe it was more terminal and rare than it is. But my uncle is in his 60s. If I just monitor everything, I can live that long."

Susan Brody, a college math teacher and choreographer when she began her reunion search, was always told she "had the map of Ireland written all over her face." But, as she had been raised in a Jewish home, believing that she had been born to her parents, she knew she was Jewish. A neighbor child informed her at age 9 that she was adopted. Thereafter she was deeply troubled by this secret double identity. At age 30, when Susan choreographed her search through dance, the background music she chose was "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling."

An adoption agency official told National Catholic Reporter (December 16, 1994) that his agency had frequently issued birth mothers fictitious names and said that "the logic behind the dual certificates was based on the reality that several unwed mothers gave birth to more than one child, and it was to prevent the prospect of incest should two adult adopted people meet and fall in love, only to discover they were siblings or half-siblings." It seems obvious that the use of fictitious names on birth records could cause the very disaster he said the Church hoped to avoid — the possibility of siblings unwittingly committing incest.

The NJ Department of Youth and Family Services recently handled a case of a young couple, both of whom had been adopted. They contacted the state Adoption Registry when they realized there were disturbing similarities in their backgrounds and appearances. It was confirmed that they were brother and sister. The young woman had been placed for adoption at about age 5; the young man had been placed during infancy. Coincidentally, they had met 20 years later when they were living in the same apartment building. They shared the same mother, but because New Jersey's records are sealed they did not learn her name.

There is something about being human that makes all of us — adopted or not — want to understand our place in history. The evidence that adopted people need accessibility to the truth about their origins is clear, convincing, and compelling.

A recent Federal court decision in Tennessee upheld the state's right to pass retroactive, remedial legislation in areas reserved for state governance. This ruling may signal the beginning of the end of the Sealed Records Era.

In *Adoption: Philosophy and Experience*, Randolph W. Severson, Ph.D., wrote, "Every human being who walks upon the face of the earth has the inalienable right to know the names and faces and to look into the eyes of those who gave them birth."

Is the question really, "Do adopted people have the right to open records?" Isn't the true question, "Did we have the right to close them?"

Pam Hasegawa (nee Rolande Sygne Hampdon) is an adopted person with unfinished-business syndrome. Her own search and the struggle for adopted people's access to their truth are works-in-progress.