

About Concerned United Birthparents

by Bonnie Bis

When I received the phone call from Beth Hall asking me to write an article for your newsletter, I was delighted to have the opportunity to provide your readers with an accurate representation of our group and its members. Yet I must also admit the prospect was a little daunting — to adequately portray the range of people we include and at the same time capture the essence of our struggle for acceptance. After reading this article, I hope you will have a better understanding of CUB (Concerned United Birthparents, Inc.) and what we stand for.

CUB is a nonprofit organization that began its official existence in October 1976 to provide mutual support for birth parents, men and women who have surrendered children to adoption. CUB membership and its purposes have expanded since those early days. CUB members now include birth parents, adoptees, and adoptive parents, as well as other adoption-affected people and professionals. CUB's purposes are to provide mutual support for coping with the ongoing pains and problems in adoption; to work for adoption reforms in law and social policy; to prevent unnecessary family separations; to assist adoption-separated relatives in searching for family members; and to educate the public about adoption issues and realities.

People sometimes mistakenly assume the surrender of a child ends a traumatic time for birth parents and is soon forgotten. In his 1984 national study of birth mothers in Australia, Robin Winkler reports that even forty years later, birth parents regard the loss of a child to adoption as the most stressful part of their lives. He found that for half of birth parents, the pain of that loss either remains as intense as at surrender or intensifies over time. The loss of a child to adoption can affect all areas of life, particularly marriage, subsequent children and difficulty trusting other people.

Birth parents come in all sizes, shapes, colors, religions, classes and walks of lives. We are married, divorced, widowed and single; more and less educated than others; parents of other children either subsequent or previous to the children we surrendered to adoption; and a surprisingly large percentage of us are secondarily infertile — never able to bear another child. Many of us hid the shame of our relinquishment under the cloak of denial for years, even decades. Some of us are still hidden — afraid of the pain and judgment awaiting our "coming out." Almost all of us are hurting and need others' understanding of the range of feelings which permeated our very souls. Most people deny knowing any birth mothers, yet

we're here, we're everywhere. WE ARE YOUR MOTHERS, YOUR GRANDMOTHERS, YOUR MOTHERS-IN-LAW, YOUR SISTERS, YOUR FRIENDS, YOUR AUNTS, NIECES, CO-WORKERS, COLLEAGUES, FELLOW STUDENTS, ACQUAINTANCES.

Birth fathers are even more invisible, and are often thought of as the "source of the problem" in the first place. While society bemoans the lack of male father figures, it also discourages their participation in making decisions for their children unless that decision is marriage and/or financial support.

The fortunate among us, who have found our way to CUB and other similar support groups, have actively struggled with the issues of shame and denial in order to get to the other side — the side of understanding and acceptance by the rest of society who had condemned us for doing the "unselfish" — and unspeakable — thing. Did we birth parents have the right to acknowledge the purportedly shameful event in our pasts that we were told to forget about? If so, and we then acknowledged it, how could we begin to integrate it into the new lives we were assigned? We'd grown so used to the role of impostor. What words could we use with others, with ourselves, to explain why we'd lived a lie? We anguished: would we be banished and lose someone else we loved, again? And what about our own feelings? How could we analyze them so they could be understood and put to rest?

Over the past twenty years at CUB, we have been able to develop a means, by categorizing the feelings shared by the many birth parents we have touched, to understand their origins and gain a perspective on the process birth parents go through. We know, for example, that the overlapping issues birth parents must deal with concern those of self-esteem, identity, secrecy, guilt, depression, anger and grief. And we know, specifically, the origins of these issues so we can now more fully understand them. Many of us have evolved from silent persons filled with pain to powerful personages demanding to be heard! We have evolved on our own, without the research and comprehension of the psychologists, social workers and other helping professionals.

Despite the lack of social support and the frequent outright condemnation that birth parents have experienced, many of us have additionally managed to become activists for adoption reform. We are whittling away at the long-held notion that birth parents want anonymity. We've declared otherwise in courtrooms, in the legislatures, on radio and television, even

through educational materials which we have published and disseminated without endorsement from any foundation.

Unfortunately, some of us are still shrouded in secrecy, the secrecy foisted on us by a puritanical, shame-based, judgmental society. Here is where the rest of society can help —by casting aside their mistaken notions that birth parents didn't want their children and by fostering an atmosphere of honesty and respect to permit the remaining unknown birth parents to claim their identities and their voices. Thousands of adoptees have spoken out to demand their birth parents' identity and learn their heritage. The visibility of birth parents in CUB and other organizations has helped to dispel the myth that an adoptee's reappearance in our new lives would ruin us.

In this, the year of our 20th anniversary, birth parents can reflect on a great number of accomplishments. In addition to our personal growth as individuals, we've grown as an organization, and as a viable part of a larger adoption reform movement. Many CUB members work to promote legislative and social policy changes to require fully informing vulnerable families, including single parent families, of all alternatives and

services available to them and to assist them to keep their families together. And there are some parents whose situation, even with support, does not permit them to raise their children. In those instances where adoption is truly necessary, we encourage changes that would make adoption a humane and caring alternative, not a punishment. Closed adoption harms all parties by denying choices and by imposing secrecy on people who do not want it. We encourage openness, honesty and cooperation in all areas of adoption practice, and advocate to protect the rights of all parties involved.

Bonnie Bis is a reunited birth mother of a son and daughter surrendered to adoption in the 1960s, as well as mother to a son she raised during her marriage. She has an AAS in Marketing Management, a BA in Liberal Arts and is currently working as a temporary administrator. Recently elected as National President of CUB, Bonnie is also a Board member of the local NOW Chapter and resides in Evanston, IL. For an information packet about CUB, write CUB Headquarters at 2000 Walker Street, Des Moines, IA 50317 or call 1-800-822-2777.