

# The adoption search

**With resilience, older adoptees and birth parents take on the journey of finding each other**

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'You must be short,' Dave Mills, 42, of Napanee in Ontario, Canada, remembers saying to his birth mom in the first five minutes of a phone call he waited so long to have.

"Do you have a pink crocheted stuffed bunny doll?" Hilory Boucher, 60, of Northport asked of him, and he said he did. It was the one she made for him while waiting to give birth as a teenager in 1964 at a home for unwed mothers outside Boston.

For some in their 40s, 50s and older, adoption searching has been a Pandora's Box; for others, there is newfound peace with closure. When an adoptee and the birth parent or other relatives reconnect and establish a relationship after years of absence, the experience can be overwhelming.

"It's startling to think that you are of one family, but then to know that you came from another. No matter what age you discover this ... your reality is shaken," said Caroline Menafrá, director of search at the Adoption Annex in Garden City. Courage and an ability to deal with complicated emotions and circumstances are needed, she added.

But the search, with all its risks and pitfalls, may be easier to handle with age, when maturity and strength combine with a sense of mortality and spirituality. Those over 50 or approaching 50 reach milestones and a special place from which to become whole or at peace with themselves and their lives, experts in the field said.

"The 50-plus generation has more patience and wisdom about who they are and what they are looking for by reuniting," said Menafrá.

Varied reasons for searching

According to Dr. Mark Lerner, a clinical psychologist based in Commack and stress consultant who includes an adoption column on his Web site, "Younger people are more often searching for answers while those over 50 are looking

for closure. The advantage of waiting is that since those over 50 have more experience dealing with adversity -- with issues of loss -- they are usually in a better place to cope with whatever can occur from the reunion. They've gone through the yearning -- they've put it off, but they are dealing with the pressure of it being 'now or never.'"

Among the disadvantages of waiting is that people may have lived for years under basic assumptions regarding their identity that can come crashing down, Lerner said. The realization of something inconsistent could be difficult and an enormous letdown.

Boucher had just turned 60 when she was encouraged to search for her son by a longtime friend whom she had met at the home for unwed mothers in 1964, near where she attended college. The friend had been located by the daughter she had given up. Their reconciliation encouraged Boucher to search for her son, whom she had wanted desperately to keep.

#### Shame over pregnancy

As the eldest child in a Catholic family, having two brothers and two sisters, Boucher said, she was supposed to "set an example." Getting pregnant at 17 during her second semester in college embarrassed her parents, she said. Abortion was not legal and not an option. She had to stop school and, after her son was born in January 1965, she relinquished him for adoption.

He was adopted by Dr. James and Janet Mills, Canadians who were living in Connecticut at the time. Today, Dave Mills is married and has four children. He is a DJ on a Web-based radio station.

Boucher married in 1967 and gave birth to four other children. She later divorced and was remarried, to Bernie Carlin, in 1993.

When Boucher began her search for her son in January 2006, she was thrilled to find the Connecticut agency with her adoption records was so helpful. She didn't know it, but Mills had given his information to the agency 13 years earlier, hoping she would be looking for him. His wife had become pregnant with their first child, and he was looking for health records.

Boucher sent e-mails and letters to the addresses she was given to no avail. Mills had moved and neglected to update the file. But on March 14, 2006, there was a message on her answering machine from Dave -- a letter from her had been forwarded to him. Boucher said she was welcomed and accepted by Dave and his family.

"Fortunately with this outcome, it has been much easier for me to come to terms with second-guessing my life's decisions, the right or wrong of these choices, and I can't regret the results when they are like this," she said.

Boucher's and Mills' families quickly exchanged introductory visits and have built their relationship since then.

"Turning 60 was significant," said Boucher, "I started to give myself permission in many ways." She added, "I decided that before I die, I needed to know what happened to that baby, and that is a big risk, but the closure of it all on both sides was extremely gratifying."

### A judge's story

Judge John Pessala, 57, who recently retired from Nassau County Family Court, where he presided over adoption cases and other family issues for many years, was abandoned at an orphanage in Finland as an infant. He was taken by his adoptive parents to Long Island at age 6.

In the late 1980s, he hired a private investigator to find his birth mother. He had waited until after both his adoptive parents were deceased. As with many adopted children, he feared the search and possible reunion might hurt the caring, loving parents who brought him up. In 1990, he located his birth mother living in Finland. However, he elected not to meet her, as he didn't want to upset the tranquillity in his life, he said. She has since died.

But Pessala has found some of his original family. His second cousin, Debbie Mazzei-Buckman, 50, of Dix Hills, orchestrated a reunion with 17 members of his biological family in January. It was a gathering made in his honor and sparked by Mazzei-Buckman identifying him from a story in Newsday.

Pessala said he's becoming more open to the gradual process of discovery about his personal history. "The hesitancy I had 10 to 15 years ago is dissipating somewhat. Life changes as you get older, my kids are grown up -- there's less apprehension."

Of his career choice, Pessala said, "Any psychologist in the world would say that my subconscious drive was to create a family for myself in my work."

He is still searching. "My birth father could theoretically still be alive," Pessala said. Mazzei-Buckman plans to travel to Finland and may continue the search for Pessala's birth father. Pessala is thinking of picking up the search on a later trip.

For a 52-year-old Westchester businesswoman and mother, the discovery process didn't take long -- once she decided to search. She has adoptive family members on Long Island and asked to maintain anonymity to protect her adoptive father, who is unaware she located her birth mother last year.

"I didn't want to go there earlier in life," she said. "I had my own fantasies of who they were and didn't want to open a dreadful Pandora's box, where the fantasy could be completely shot down."

The woman had thought about searching when she had some medical problems in her early 20s and when she gave birth at 34. But, shortly after turning 50, she realized, "I was in a place from which I couldn't be derailed. I was centered and secure."

### Finding a mother

After a series of referrals that weren't successful, her attorney directed her to the Adoption Annex in Garden City. After a year and a half of searching, the Annex located her birth mother. They quickly arranged to speak by phone.

She found out her birth mother had waited for four months in a home for unwed mothers for the father to come for her so that she could keep the baby, but he never did. She later saw photos of her first four months of life, touching off an overwhelming range of emotions.

She said she has become the catalyst to mend dysfunction in her birth family. She said her re-introduction and the elimination of the "family secret" have brought joy and peace to once-divided factions.

Not every search is successful. Adoptee Jeanne Earnest had made her first search attempt when she was 38. She went to the foster care home where she had stayed before she was adopted and learned the names of her birth parents. She spent hours examining microfilm in libraries and high school yearbooks from the area and joined a support group for adoptees.

But she did not find her parents. For Earnest, now 67 and living in Baldwin, the longing to find her birth parents has never gone away. She has, however, finally approached peace. "My faith in God has enabled me to accept that I would meet my parents in the afterlife, if, indeed, there is an afterlife," she says.

LeAnn Hahne, a registered nurse, now 50 and living in Bay Shore, relinquished a son for adoption in 1974. She said she may finally be able to shake the last vestiges of pain, guilt and trauma after being found by and

reunited with Gary Rosen in 2004.

"It is only in the last eight months that I'm feeling lighter," she said, somewhat liberated from the complicated emotions she'd endured for getting pregnant at 17 and giving him up for adoption. "I can actually feel the remaining traces of negative emotions being expunged from my body and psyche. It's like a rebirth, a cleansing," she said.

Hahne said she just recently learned to accept her decision to give up the baby. Her mother said to her recently that she did the right thing. She also had equated the lack of love from her father to her being a disappointment to him all these years.

Hahne married Gary's biological father, Ed Hahne, four years later, just before her 22nd birthday, and they are still married. They live in Bay Shore, not far from where they both grew up and dated while LeAnn was a senior in high school. Her husband is a retired music teacher and was in college when they met. When she told him she was pregnant, he told LeAnn that he wasn't getting married.

The choice to give her baby up was so traumatic for LeAnn that she changed her mind after Gary was born and wanted to bring the baby home. However, she said she was never told she had three months in which to decide, during the time he was placed in foster care.

Meanwhile, not far away, Ann and Seymour Rosen of Smithtown had spent three years searching around the country and the world for a baby to adopt, with the help of private adoption agencies and attorneys. Ann was a school psychologist and her husband a computer programmer. They said they were fortunate in being able to take a 3-month-old, Gary, home from the foster-care agency in the winter of 1975.

From the time he was 16, he began showing interest in searching for his birth parents, Ann said.

"My adopted Mom was an integral support during this process," said Gary. They used birth records, the hospital, attorneys and court documents.

Adoptive parents shocked

Gary was overwhelmed to find his birth mother and father and a sister born later living a few miles from where he grew up in Smithtown. After years of searching, Gary was 28 when he located his birth mother and father in 2004, leaving the Rosens a bit shocked and anxious. They had been away for a

month on vacation and came home to find he had already met them.

There was also the discovery that they came as an intact nuclear family with a sister, grandparents and extended family on both sides.

"I don't think that there are words that can describe how I felt when I found them," he said. Gary now has two families and his life's work is to help others through adoption issues and the stresses as a professor of social work at St. Joseph's college in Patchogue and as the director of counseling and education at the Adoption Annex. It was a career path he had begun before being reunited with the Hahnes.

Both Gary's adoptive parents and his birth parents said they have met with challenges during this process. The two mothers met and talked, laughed and cried. "I'm still learning about what he felt about the adoption process, which has been a natural outgrowth of the reunion," says Ann Rosen. She never had imagined that she'd be working with him to help other people address these issues. A psychologist, she participates in workshops and seminars at the Adoption Annex with Gary.

"So much has changed in the 30 years since we adopted him with regard to what is thought to be the best way to help children adapt, when to tell them of their adoption, how best to support their needs to know of their birth parents," Ann says. Together both families say they have managed to come to terms with the present and how they are all connected.

"The most important thing to making it work is respect," says LeAnn Hahne.

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