

Consider these when seeking birth parents

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BRUNSWICK

Imagine growing up in a world where no one looks like you. You don't have family medical history. You don't know your roots or family lore. You may have loving parents and family, with deep emotional bonds. Yet you grow into adulthood without ever seeing your face — or mannerisms — or blood heritage ever reflected back to you through those you love.

For others like me, born and adopted in the long era of closed adoption, this has been "normal" life experience. Each adopted person finds his or her own way to live with the huge gaps in information about themselves. For some, it matters more than others. Nonethe-

less, for decades, there has been no choice — personal information in a closed adoption was largely inaccessible.

As of Jan. 1, this reality changed for those governed by Maine adoption laws. A new Maine law (LD 1084) allows adopted individuals 18 and older to have access to their original birth certificate without the need to petition probate court.

To obtain an original birth certificate, contact the Office of Vital records in Augusta for the necessary application form, fill it out and submit the standard \$ 15 fee. The original birth certificate will have the birthmother's name, and possibly the name of the birthfather. As part of this bill, birth parents will also be able to fill out forms providing medical history and indicate preference

about being contacted by the adoptee.

The decision for an adoptee to readily obtain identifying information then choosing to pursue contact (or not) can be an emotionally complex and life-changing process for all involved: adopted individuals, adoptive parents, birth parents and extended families.

Growing up adopted

I had always known I was adopted — it is a fact of life for me. I was born and adopted as an infant in Massachusetts, but moved to Maine by age 4 to grow up in a small town. In my French Canadian family, my younger sister and I were the only ones who were adopted. For holidays, our larger extended family was always around, laughing and telling

family stories far into the night. I'd lay in bed, listening, feeling safe and loved — with another conflicting layer of emotion — a vague sense of painful disconnection as I wondered about my true biological roots.

At age 4, being adopted was magical to me. Along with my parents, I anticipated and loved my baby sister long before the day of her arrival. I grew up knowing when the time came, I could easily have family either by my own pregnancy or adoption. In my life experience, it didn't matter, as love and family bonds were not dependent on blood ties.

Growing up, I always had a deep curiosity and desire to know about more about myself and my birthroots — sometimes spoken, but most often kept as a secret part of my inner world. I prayed my parents would understand my need to find my birth mother was never a betrayal of our parent-child relationship, or any lacking in the love and family that is real to me.

It was my own need to consciously connect with missing information about myself through meeting the woman who chose to bring me into this world so I could live my life.

Finding my roots

I met my birth mom shortly before my 21st birthday. In the late 1980s my original birth certificate was still not easily available to me in Massachusetts. My mom and dad knew about my search efforts. I had also worked with a search group to help emotionally prepare me throughout each step of the process: obtaining her identity; locating her; making initial contact through a letter in a sensitive, respectful manner; then mutually deciding to meet shortly after.

It sounds simple as I describe it now, but at the time it was an intense process. I was dealing firsthand with the many taboos — spoken and unspoken — in society, my family, and those I had internalized over the years as an adopted individual.

I drove several hours to meet her. I had barely parked the car when I was greeted and bear-hugged for the first time by my first mother, Ann. In those first moments, we compared hands ... No surprise, I "have" Ann's hands ... was my first tangible, physical experience of my own biological connect-



LISA HASKINS

TIPS FOR ADOPTEEES THINKING ABOUT SEARCH FOR THEIR ROOTS

Obtain information and make contact only if and when it seems right to you.

Take breaks when you need to.

Give yourself permission to stop the process if it gets overwhelming.

Think carefully about your expectations.

Are they realistic?

What if expectations are not met?

How will you handle it if you are rejected or denied information?

What do you want from birthparent contact?

Just information?

Face-to-face reunion?

Possibility for an ongoing relationship?

Obtain plenty of support along the way.

No matter how well prepared you feel, there will be unexpected strong emotions to sort out along the way. Read, talk to others, take breaks, and take care of yourself.

Important sources of support: friends and family, adoption support groups, therapists with adoption specialty or experience.

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The reality of my own birth became instantly real to me, providing completion to a wordless lifelong need. Later, we'd laugh as our closest family members also recognized a shared trait of incessantly gesturing and "speaking" with our hands.

We both wanted to stay in touch beyond the initial reunion. For me, our relationship has had its share of joys, pains, gratitude, and regrets over the years. Kind of like most family relationships, yet different. We are close yet often strangers as we care enough to move beyond the old ghosts and myths, personal hopes and fears that came along with the circumstance of adoption in our respective lives.

The legal changes afforded by new Maine law (LD 1084) are celebrated by many adopted individuals and birth parents who want

information. Obtaining this information may or may not lead to a search, meeting or continued relationship.

Nonetheless, those not in favor — perhaps adoptive parents or birth mothers who had anonymity until now — will still be impacted. There is no question — we are all unique, with differing needs within the adoption community. It is important, moving forward to manage personal choices and respond to life changes that result from LD 1084 with compassion and sensitivity for each other.

Lisa Haskins is an adoptee, adoptive parent, lifelong student of adoption psychology, and a psychotherapist in private practice in Brunswick. One of her passions is working with individuals who have needs related to their adoption experience — either as an adoptee, adoptive parent, birth parent, or people considering adoption.

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