

GENERAL

Living

<i>Antiques</i>	61
<i>Weddings</i>	62, 64 to 67
<i>Engagements</i>	66

653



Joanne MacDonald says not knowing can be paralyzing. (Photos by Peter Kramer)

What happens to adopted children? Birthparents are women who gave up their babies for adoption and now feel a 'need to know.'

A social worker responds: 'If you think of the adoptive parents, well, what does it make them? Babysitters?'



Lee Campbell: Instrumental in founding CUB.

Birthmothers and the adoption triangle

By Ottilie McManus
Globe Staff

Carolyn sent out a Christmas card three years ago whose significance was lost on practically everyone but her husband who shared her secret. The card, a wide-eyed, wild-haired young girl cradling an infant in her arms, proved to be more than a seasonal representation of the Madonna. For Carolyn, it served as a painful and personal reminder of the day some 28 years earlier when she, at the age of 18, surrendered her infant daughter for adoption.

"I don't know if I can explain it," Carolyn said recently as she slipped the card out of the cellophaned pages of a scrapbook. "Maybe it was my way of quietly announcing that I was sick and tired of living a lie."

She was sick and tired of pretending she didn't remember the little girl she'd nursed for six weeks, the little girl who her well-intentioned parents, the local minister and a social worker insisted would be better off without her. She was sick and tired of filling in "four" in the how-many-children space on medical forms when the answer was "five." She was sick and tired of the guilt, of the anguish, of marking a birthday each year with questions instead of ice cream and cake: Does she look like me? Is hers a good life? Does she hate me? Is she happy? Is she even alive?

Today Carolyn knows some of the answers. Last month she and Barbara, her 31-year-old daughter, sat face to face in a Springfield motel room and talked for several hours. After a year

and a half of searching on her own — trying to get her hands on agency and court records — a member of the adoption underground provided her with Barbara's new name and address.

"People warned me not to tell her that I loved her, that it would be too heavy," Carolyn recalled. "But I sat there looking at her after all these years and I just couldn't hold it in. I had to tell her that if I'd had 85 children after her, I would have loved her just the same."

Although Carolyn acknowledges that she cannot take the place of Barbara's adoptive parents, she hopes that she and her oldest daughter will be able to establish a friendship. A week after their initial meeting, Barbara, her husband and their little boy came to Carolyn's house for a picnic with her husband and three of their four children.

Carolyn (not her real name) is just one of thousands of birthmothers — as many women who surrender their children for adoption prefer to be called — who couldn't forget. Until recently many kept knowledge of that child to themselves, telling no one except a close friend or relative or their husbands. Until recently public attention has focused on the problems faced by the adoptive parents or by the adoptee.

But in the past year many birthmothers have emerged to share their side of the adoptive triangle, to embark on searches to find the children who were given away, to crusade for changes in current adoption practices in this country.

Some have been prompted to speak up as a result of US Department of Health, Education and Welfare Secretary Joseph Califano's proposal to pay indigent women to bear children to be surrendered for adoption as an alternative to Medical abortion. "I'm not saying that having an abortion doesn't have psychological or emotional after-effects," one birthmother explained, "but at least there can be some kind of mourning period or some kind of resolution. With adoption, the mourning period never ends because you never know."

Others have been prompted to speak up because they know that there is strength in numbers. All but three of the birthparents interviewed for this story are members of a year-old organization, Concerned United Birthparents (CUB), which is headquartered here in Massachusetts with about 150 members.

Lee Campbell, a 32-year-old Cape Cod woman who is married to a banker and has two young sons, 10 and 7, and a job in the local school system, was instrumental in CUB's founding and is its current president. Although there are two male members and a handful of other men have expressed interest, CUB's membership is predominantly female, ranging in age from the early 20s to the mid-50s. Several adoptive parents and adoptees are also members or subscribe to the newsletter.

The organization serves primarily as a support group for birthmothers who are able to meet and exchange their experiences. CUB has also discussed al-

ternatives to current adoption practices, practices which prevent birthparents from knowing much about adoptive parents and adoptees and adoptive parents from knowing much about birthparents.

These alternatives range from a greater exchange of information at the time of adoption to releasing adoption records once the adoptee has reached 18 to open adoption, where an adoptee maintains an ongoing relationship with both sets of parents.

The only legislation CUB has sponsored so far in Massachusetts would make possible a continuing exchange of information through the adoption agency regarding, say, ethnic or medical background.

Rep. Lois Pines (D-Newton) filed the bill, which probably won't make it out of the judiciary committee before the Legislature adjourns later this year. She helped redraft it with safeguards protecting birthparents and adoptive parents from invasions of privacy. As the bill now stands, adoptive parents would have to initiate the contact in order for information to be exchanged.

Lee Campbell feels it will take several years to pass the legislation.

Her own story begins 16 years ago with the birth of a baby boy. She'd been in love with the baby's father since they'd met in the eighth grade, she recalls, but the pregnancy was accidental.

"Many people, including Eunice Kennedy Shriver, maintain that people

like me are unloved or come from unhappy homes. I was loved. I came from a good home," she said sitting over a cup of tea in her immaculate but cozy kitchen earlier this month. "The fact of the matter is that many teenagers are sexually active today and they always have been."

When her boyfriend's parents learned of the situation, they encouraged him to deny paternity and absolutely refused to consider marriage as a possible solution. So she was packed off to a maternity home where, after some resistance, she was convinced she should surrender the baby for adoption. "After I signed the papers, the social worker told me to walk out the door and forget that this had ever happened," she said. "I walked out that door sobbing but I followed her advice. I began building a brick wall around my life and in some ways I lived like I was under anaesthesia. I developed a certain hardness."

She told her husband about the pregnancy before they were married but warned him that she didn't want to talk about it again. She nearly succeeded.

Three years ago everything came unglued. She observed that the family had achieved a certain level of respectability but that the time had come for an examination of the past "just like it says in 'Passages.'" Her sister decided to keep a child born out of wedlock while the radio stations conspired by playing songs like "Smoke Gets In Your Eyes" which were popular at the time of her teenage romance.

"Finally I had to face the fact that I'd been hurting," she said. "I had to face the fact that I couldn't forget no matter how hard I tried."

After unburdening herself to her husband, who was supportive, she gradually began to make contact with other birthparents through local members of adoptees' groups like Orphan Voyage, headquartered in Cedar Ridge, Colo., and ALMA (Adoptees Liberty Movement of America), headquartered in New York City. She also wrote to the Confidential Chat section of The Boston Globe where a series of letters from birthparents began to appear and arranged to have her letter forwarded to correspondents who'd expressed interest in getting together. Three women came to the first CUB meeting which was held in the basement of The Church of The Immaculate Conception in Brewster a year ago July.

Nancy, a 31-year-old South Shore resident who lives with her lawyer husband and four young children, was among them.

"The three of us just sat there and talked and talked. It was the first time I'd ever talked to anyone who'd been through it," she remembers. "It was so good. I didn't have to explain what it had been like."

The only child of traditional Roman Catholic parents who opposed abortion, Nancy became pregnant during a summer she spent in Europe after college.

hate to see an adopted child's life ruined by what he finds. Kids can have a lot of fantasies about their birthparents and don't think of all the ramifications. I just don't want to see our kids hurt—that's what our whole lives as parents are centered around, really."

One of the bills introduced in the legislature last session would have made up-to-date information on a child's birthparents available to the adoptive parents if they desire it. But even this mild reform tends to make adoptive parents nervous: one of them calls it a "subtle effort by those seeking to penetrate the adoptive relationship to obtain information concerning the whereabouts of the child." She is worried that the flow of medical information—even through an intermediary agency—may lead the birthparents back to the child they relinquished for adoption. She is wary of involving her child in "a search based on guilt"—the guilt of the birthmother.

Birthparents

Facing the issue from across the adoptive triangle are the proponents of change in the adoption record laws. Represented by Boston-based Concerned United Birthparents (CUB) and the Massachusetts chapter of Orphan Voyage, an adoptee's search and support group, they scoff at the arguments against reform.

"What adoptive parents fear," explains one member of CUB, "is that those women are trying to reclaim their children. Actually, we're trying to make it easier for them to answer their children's questions. I don't want to reclaim my son. He has a life already and I don't want to disturb it. I wanted the best for him then, and I want the same thing now."

Deeply embedded in the adoptive parents' fears, she feels, is the image of a scarred woman whose unsavory life would be a traumatic discovery to the adopted child who searched. "Look at me!" says this well-dressed professional woman in a voice struggling for control. "I don't wear a red dress and black boots. I don't work the Combat Zone. I am a mature, stable woman who has gone on with her life."

Not every birthmother will be an exemplar of the middle-class upbringing most adoptees receive. What is the effect of a search which leads an adoptee straight down a dark alley? "It's not what you find but that you find it," explains CUB spokeswoman Susan Darke. "These adoptive parents don't realize how important it is for an adoptee just to know, what ever the truth is."

Although CUB and Orphan Voyage give strong support to changing the Massachusetts adoption laws, their function goes beyond putting pressure on state legislators. For birthparents who must now live a lifetime of secrecy and guilt, CUB functions primarily as a support group. Until now, many parents who once surrendered a child for adoption have kept the secret to themselves, sometimes never revealing to their own spouse the existence—somewhere—of an out-of-wedlock child. "For the first time in my life I've been able to talk about how I feel," says one CUB member.

Though her greatest desire is to someday meet her son, she hopes that he will be the one to initiate the search. To make that quest easier she has registered with local and national search organizations. Until her son is 18 all she can do is wait, but until she hears from him she will wonder. Because the agency does not usually notify the birthmother if her child dies, she will wonder if he is still alive. But she has another fear almost as great. Was my child ever told that he was adopted? Is he even aware that he has a natural mother somewhere? The fear that her child does not know, and therefore will never search, flickers in the lines around this mother's mouth and fills her eyes with tears. "I'll never feel right until I know. What kind of life does he have? Is he happy? Is he alive?"

The Search

The telephone at Orphan Voyage is the transmitter of real-life soap operas, and the mail brings poignant inquiries from both parents and adoptees. The business of reuniting searching parties can be frustrating or rewarding, but it is always emotional. "When an adoptee comes to us and wants to search, we require that he first attend two of our meetings to gain the benefit of other people's experiences. In some cases, when we think their expectations are unrealistic, we advise counseling first."

"Usually any hostility an adoptee feels, either towards his adoptive parents or towards his birthparents, will dissolve after

several meetings. It's usually feelings that have been brewing a long time without the opportunity for letting them out. But sometimes an adoptee has a general hostility, or sometimes the adoptee is looking for more than the two persons responsible for his birth. These are the exceptions, but when an adoptee is truly looking for someone to be a mother or father to him, then we refer him to someone he can discuss his feelings with. You can't walk back into someone else's life 18 or 50 years later and expect to get into parent-child roles."

There have been more women who have searched than men, perhaps because women have been permitted to express their emotions more freely than men. "We're beginning to hear from more male adoptees," says Darke. "It's been more difficult for men to deal with. You can't exactly go out for a beer and tell the guys sitting around the bar that you want to search for your mother."

Among the letters received by Orphan Voyage are many written by teenagers. After reading in the newspaper about the longings of one birthmother to meet her son, a teenage boy wrote to her to ask if he might be his mother. "I could tell from the birthdate that he was not my son," she says sadly. "But I told him I'd do what I could to help him find his mother when he reaches 18." Although the organization offers support groups for teenagers, who may have the most burning desire to know their

identity, Orphan Voyage cannot aid in an adolescent's search unless the adoptive parents give their consent.

The search for biological parents usually begins with the birthmother. In most cases of illegitimacy, the father's name is never recorded; sometimes, he was never informed that he had fathered a child. And because birth records are often changed to give the name of the adoptive parents, the mother's name may be on file only at the agency.

"Once you have the birthmother's name, you can use poll books, telephone books, hospital records, driver's licenses and marriage licenses. We teach people how to search discreetly, how not to embarrass the mother or create a scandal. We tell people not to put an ad in the paper giving the mother's name, and not to call up relatives, who may have never known, to say you are looking for your mother. There are ways of searching that work, ways of stretching the truth."

Are there birthparents who do not want to meet their children? "Maybe at first they're a little leery," says Darke. "But in 150 searches over three years, we've had just one parent who absolutely refused to meet her child. Once they realize that it won't ruin their family, and that they are not going to be rejected or hated, birthparents are usually willing." Darke feels that "every birthmother owes her child at least one hour of her time to have his or her questions answered."

"By the time an adoptee is old enough to

search, he is a mature person with his own life experiences. A reunion is an opportunity for mutual forgiveness. The birthparent has a chance to explain the circumstances which led to the surrender. The adoptee can usually accept what happened and perhaps resolve some feelings towards the adoptive parents."

The Legislation

H5200, which would make updated information on a child's birthparents available to his adoptive parents if they desire it, is a bill introduced by CUB.

Under the current law, when medical problems develop in the birthparents as they grow older, there is no way to pass on information that could be important to the child's health. "In the past few years we have discovered that everyone in my family has hypothyroidism," relates one mother who relinquished her child 15 years ago. "He could be sluggish in school now, or he could develop this condition at any time. There is no way to warn his parents to look out for this. I've tried to get the agency to contact them, but they say they can't do it." In some cases the agency doesn't even know the whereabouts of a child they placed. There is no procedure by which an agency is informed when a family moves.

H5200 would allow the birthparents the option of filling out a Consent to Inform release which states a willingness to share

(Continued on Page 8)



\$1 WILL GET YOU TWO.

Take this coupon to any participating Hardee's and get not one but two Big Deluxe Sandwiches for only \$1.00.

That's right. Two Big quarter-pound charbroiled burgers with all the fixin's at a price that can't be beat.

One coupon per customer please.

810 S. Hadley
East Main Street, Westfield
186 Federal Street, Greenfield

Hardee's.
Charbroiled Burgers

644 Riverdale Road,
West Springfield
1387 Boston Post Road,
Springfield

© Hardee's Food Systems, Inc., 1978

Coupon expires August 9, 1977.

MAY 22, 1977 VALLEY ADVOCATE 7

CUB
ORPHAN VOYAGE
SEARCH

SUPPORT FOR THE RELINQUISHING MOTHER

cont. from previous page

Naturally, relinquishing mothers bring special needs to child-birth classes. Questions concerning body healing, body image, permanent changes that pregnancy causes are often more meaningful than when working with other women. Often they are an attempt to define opportunities for significant relationships in the future. For example, the teenage mother who plans to surrender her infant and who asks whether stretch marks ever go away, may be seeking more than cosmetic information. She may be asking whether others will have to know she has been pregnant. Questions asked about the baby, genetic factors, the baby's possible appearance, the things a newborn senses and feels are also questions that may have more meaning than we would normally attribute to them -- or they may not. Active listening becomes an important skill.

It is one thing to work with a young mother as she prepares for birth, it is altogether another thing to influence the hospital environment in which she will give birth, to help see to it that she will encounter in which she will give birth, to help see to it that she will encounter a supportive and sensitive environment. It is usually unrealistic to expect the teenage mother to be a strong consumer, whether keeping or placing her baby. For the young relinquishing mother there is often little emotional energy to attempt to influence her health care; for many, it is simply a matter of getting it over. Nonetheless, a young mother who plans to surrender her baby for adoption soon after the birth brings unique needs to the labor, birth and postpartum experience.

1) Young mothers are often extremely disadvantaged by hospital policies which restrict companions to one person. Faced with so many other choices, a relinquishing mother should not have to choose between the companionship of her parents, her baby's father and a trained "coach" from a local childbirth group.

2) Assumptions should not be made about the relinquishing mother's care or her infant's care. She should be offered the same options as other mothers. Hopefully, "pulling the mother to sleep" just prior to or immediately after birth is a thing of the past. Upon admission to the maternity unit, a sensitive staff member should discuss with the young mother her wishes in regards to interaction with her baby after birth, keeping in mind that her feelings may change at that time. Her desires for postpartum room arrangements should also be discussed.

3) Hospital staff need to be especially aware of the impact their words and actions during labor and birth may have. Unkind or insensitive comments, whether intentional or not, will linger in the memory of the mother -- and these things will not be soothed by long term relationship with her child.

4) Relinquishing mothers, like all mothers, need praise for their work in giving birth and an opportunity to share both their positive and negative feelings about the experience. If a young mother leaves the hospital without having had an opportunity to share her feelings about the experience, she may never have an opportunity to do so.

5) Whether a mother sees her baby or not, she is intensely interested in her infant. She needs people around her who will recognize her maternal feelings. She needs the opportunity to share her pride in her infant and to hear her child praised. She needs others who will share her sadness in saying good-bye to her baby and who can help her cope with her feelings at this time. Platitudes about "this being for the best", "having other children", "the happiness that a couple will have in receiving her child", are generally inappropriate and usually close off opportunities for the young mother to express what she is feeling and thinking.

6) The popular theory that it is best if a relinquishing mother does not see her baby is contradictory to everything that is known about the maternal tasks of pregnancy and the process of grieving. The concern that a young mother will change her mind about placing her baby may be realistic in some cases, but it is more likely that interaction will lead her to question her decision rather than change her mind. In any event, it is the young mother's choice. She may



need assistance in again working through her reasons for her decisions about her baby. Her greatest need is to have others around her who will give her an opportunity to talk about her feelings -- to hear her thoughts so completely that she gets a chance to know how she feels and to decide what will be best. This is, of course, the hardest thing of all. It is such a temptation to advise or to non-verbally give a nod of approval to one decision or another or to encourage more discussion of the benefits of one decision over another.

7) The baby's father and grandparents are often suffering a great deal during the labor and postpartum experience. They need extra support and the knowledge that others are available to them.

8) Staff need to be sensitive to the reactions of others towards the relinquishing mother. If she is staying in a regular postpartum room, the sensitivity of roommates cannot always be depended upon. Well-meaning friends or family members may make upsetting comments. Among the teen peer group there is generally little support for placing a baby for adoption. Both young mothers and young fathers may need assistance in dealing with others.

9) Relinquishing mothers often want to have a memento of their babies; a picture, a small clipping of hair, a copy of the hand or foot print. These desires should be recognized as normal and healthy -- and if they are not requested, can be offered. In addition, many mothers wish to send something of themselves with their babies: a letter, an article of clothing, a handmade quilt. Special arrangements can be made for these to be given to the adoptive parents.

In the 1970's the needs of the adoption triad, birthparents, adoptive parents adopted children, have come into the open. What has been revealed is the complexity of the needs of this triad, needs which are often in direct opposition to one another. A multitude of agencies have been formed -- each representing these opposing needs. Whether or not these agencies will have an influence on current adoption practices is yet to be seen. What is certain is that there are no easy answers and that there will be no painless solutions.

