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Thousands of adoptees — like state rep — finally get birth certificates

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State Rep. Sara Feigenholtz's birth certificate arrived in the mail last week.

For most of us, this would be an unremarkable event, just a perfunctory piece of paper necessary to fulfill some bureaucratic requirement of one kind or another.

But for Feigenholtz, as for thousands of adoptees like her in Illinois, this was a momentous realization of a lifetime of yearning.

A new state law has for the first time given adult adoptees the right to obtain their original birth certificate without first getting permission from their birth parents.

Unless the birth parents have filed a specific request to maintain their anonymity, adoptees are now able to apply for their birth certificates in much the same manner as any other person born in Illinois.

Feigenholtz, a Chicago Democrat who just turned 55, has wanted to hold that piece of paper for as long as she can remember.

"It's a document that has been denied me my whole life," she told me Friday by way of explanation. "This is a document most people take for granted."

It was that secrecy, born in an era when society shunned women who gave birth out of wedlock and labeled their children as "illegitimate," that mystified and stigmatized adoption, Feigenholtz said.

Feigenholtz understands how the desire for privacy resulted in laws that sealed adoption records. But she thinks those laws were in part misguided, and for most of her legislative career has used her position to lead the effort to whittle them away.

"I do believe my birth mother and I needed protection from society, but not from each other," she said. "I'm not a stalker."

Considering how important that birth certificate is to Feigenholtz, you might have expected her to open it right away. Instead, she gave it to her staff for the time being.

There were a couple of reasons for that.

One is that she and a group of other adoptees are planning to open their birth certificates together for a documentary about the new Illinois adoption law, which they hope will spread to other states.

It also may be easier for Feigenholtz to wait than for others because she already knows most of what she'll find there.

Having run across some type of birth document in her adoptive parents' possession as a young child, she memorized her birth mother's name and was able to contact and reunite with her during her 20s. She also knows the identity of her birth father, though she never tried to contact him in deference to the wishes of her mother, with whom she has stayed in contact.

That obviously diminishes some of the anticipation she might otherwise be experiencing. Still, she wanted the birth certificate "out of sight, out of mind" until the big day.

"I'd have been thinking about it all the time," she told me.

And Feigenholtz doesn't discount the possibility she'll learn something new about her family history.

"There are always new things we learn from our original documents," she said. "I always wondered: Was I really born Dec. 11?"

For two decades now, Illinois law has provided a system that allows adoptees — through an intermediary — to try to make contact with their birth parents.

That's why Feigenholtz says "this is a bill about knowing, not about contacting."

Many adoptees would like to know the names of their birth parents and more information about their family origins, she said, but are daunted by the prospect of trying to make contact — which brings the possibility of rejection.

"They don't really feel comfortable with that, but they want that piece of paper."

Since Nov. 15 when the birth certificate application process opened to everyone age 21 or older, some 4,184 applications for that piece of paper have been received by the Illinois Department of Public Health. Only 431 parents have requested anonymity.

Feigenholtz expects that ratio to hold as more people become aware of the law. She said there are some 250,000 adopted persons in Illinois who could benefit.

To be clear, Feigenholtz considers adoption a "beautiful institution" and emphasizes she very much loved her late adoptive parents.

"That does not preclude me from the need to know who I am," she said.