

# More than a piece of paper

By Jane Donahue ~ For sun-times media March 3, 2012 11:04PM

A birth certificate — a proclamation of who you are and where you came from — is something most people take for granted.

But for the more than 200,000 estimated adult adoptees in Illinois, it's a fundamental right they has been denied — until now.

An Illinois law signed into effect in May 2010 allows adult adoptees to obtain a copy of their original birth certificates without receiving written consent from birth parents. Birth parents who oppose the new law can file a request to have their names redacted from the document.

For state Rep. Sara Feigenholtz, D-Chicago, the bill's sponsor, it wasn't only about changing public policy; it was personal. Adopted in 1956, she championed the effort for nearly 15 years.

"What a blessing I have had to be able to be elected to the General Assembly, and to be a voice for this," said the 55-year-old Feigenholtz. "There is no doubt in my mind that this has been the most meaningful thing I have done in my life."

This document that most people take for granted, Feigenholtz added, is something she has been denied her whole life. That all changed on May 21, 2010, when the birth certificate application process opened to Illinois adoptees born prior to Jan. 1, 1946.

And on Nov. 15, 2011, when the second phase of the birth certificate application process opened to those born on or after Jan. 1, 1946, Feigenholtz plunked down her \$15 and the completed form like thousands of Illinois adoptees.

A report compiled by Pam Hasegawa of the American Adoption Congress indicates that Illinois is one of only 13 states in the U.S. to provide adoptees "some" access to their original birth certificates. Feigenholtz said she and fellow lawmakers have worked extremely hard to "pry open this issue over the years," and that while the new law is not perfect, it is a major improvement.

"Think about the evolution of adoption and how much better this institution is now," she said. "Files used to be stamped 'illegitimate,' and there was a significant need to protect a pregnant, unmarried woman and the child she gave up. The fault in the law — as I see it — was that those two parties never needed protection from each other. They needed protection from society."

“We are trying our best to remedy that particular issue: permit, yet continue to protect those that want it. It’s a very emotional issue, and I can attest to that because I have been working on it for many, many years.”

Since the new law took effect, more than 6,600 Illinois-born adult adoptees have requested a copy of their original birth certificate, according to the Illinois Department of Public Aid. Less than 1 percent of birth parents have requested anonymity.

Jody Moreen of Naperville

As an adoptee who pondered her beginnings, Naperville resident Jody Moreen supports the law that provides adoptees access to their original birth certificate.

“If you have a book and the first chapter is missing, it doesn’t make sense,” said Moreen, 57. “When you jump into that book, where is the foundation? Who are the characters, and what is the setting? Why did they do what they did?”

Born in Wisconsin, Moreen searched for her birth parents 15 years ago and learned they were both deceased. According to Wisconsin law, without their signatures, she was unable to obtain a copy of her original birth certificate

“I wanted to know the circumstances of my birth and adoption, my cultural heritage, and also my crucial medical information,” Moreen said. “I had a wonderful upbringing; and yet as I got older and started to understand I came from someone else, I had questions.”

With the support of her adoptive parents — but without a birth certificate — Moreen began a search that led her to three older sisters, and “the missing pieces” of her identity.

“It brought me — and my sisters — peace, closure, emotional healing and family fellowship,” Moreen said.

Her search inspired her to begin a local support group for anyone affected by adoption, and she has served as the facilitator for “Adoptees, Birth Parents & Adoptive Parents Together” for past 15 years.

The group meets monthly in Naperville and draws participants from the surrounding suburbs, Chicago, and even from as far as Wisconsin.

“Countless persons touched by adoption carry unresolved issues due to their closed adoption,” she said. “The support group I facilitate encourages persons to find a safe place to share their experiences, connect with others who have walked similar journeys and work through their unresolved losses.”

Moreen said it’s beneficial to have the information, regardless what you do with it.

“I have rarely met a person who received their birth identity and regretted it,” she said. “Even those who found death at the end of the search or a closed door from their birth family still found closure to the mystery that had paralyzed them for a lifetime.”

Lori McGuire of St. Charles

Lori McGuire has been attending Adoptees, Birth Parents & Adoptive Parents Together for more than a decade. The St. Charles resident and adoptee supports the change to Illinois’ law but does not benefit from it because she was born in the state of New York.

Without a birth certificate, McGuire searched and found her birth mother more than a decade ago. She hoped to find information about her background, including family medical history, and she did.

“I had health issues, and my doctor strongly suggested I find out my health history,” said the 53-year-old. “I really feel like it saved my life. I had a screening I never would have had, and now my children can be screened at the proper ages.”

McGuire said attending Moreen’s support group helped prepare her for the reunion. There she met with adoptive and birth parents and fellow adoptees, and gained a better perspective of all parties involved.

“I started searching because I thought I would find healing — and, of course, I did,” McGuire said. “I found information that helped me with my identity, but what I found was that I helped heal my birth mother as well.”

Barbara Shields of Oswego

At age 11, Barbara Shields went to live in a Chicago orphanage after both her parents died.

“I didn’t learn much about life there,” said Shields, 74. “We had jobs and school, but we knew nothing about dating, relationships or sex. When I came out of the orphanage at 18, to say I was naïve would be an understatement.”

By 1957, she was unmarried and pregnant. Her boyfriend urged her to place their baby boy with an adoptive family so he could have a better life than they could provide. A private adoption took place — on a sidewalk about a block from Illinois Masonic Hospital — three days after he was born.

More importantly, she was told by everyone to forget about the child and move on with her life.

“It took a lot of persuading for me to let go,” said Shields, who lives in Oswego. “During that day and time, we were told to forget it. I really did try to forget.”

The birth mother said she truly believes it's important for "every person to know where he or she came from, and why they were placed for adoption." For these reasons, she supports the change to the Illinois adoption law.

"It sure was a long time coming," she said. "An adoptee should have the right to get their birth certificate if they want it. It's between the child and the birth mother, and what transpires after that is between them."

And she speaks from experience.

On June 10, 1991, she received a phone call from Patrick McMahon, the son she placed for adoption 33 years earlier.

"When Patrick first called me, I knew it was him," she said. "I felt there was a hole in my heart somewhere. I knew there had been something missing. I had that filled when he contacted me. I really feel that way."

She said it was a slow process that began with phone calls, letters and eventually a meeting. Shields, who later married Patrick's birth father, told him he had three sisters and a brother. His birth father was deceased.

Two of his sisters were placed for adoption (see photo caption at right).

"I told him that I was going to be honest, and that is how we started," she said. "He asked me why I gave him up — something I think every adoptee would ask —and that was hard. It may not be what they want to hear, but it is for the best for both mother and child."

Ironically, Patrick McMahon, now 54, was part of a committee that worked on drafting Illinois' first equal access bill for adopted adults in 1997.

"A small group of us wrote a one-page bill, made it very simple, and boy did that open the flood gates," said McMahon. "We had no idea what the opposition would be to it, and it really just came out of the woodwork over a period of months."

McMahon said that over the next six months, the committee met with many groups opposed to the bill and tried to accommodate their concerns. Now, more than a decade later, he's happy to see it come to fruition.

"I had mostly very satisfied feelings. I am both grateful and excited that the great, great majority of adopted adults in Illinois will have access to their original birth certificates," said McMahon, who now lives in San Diego. "It has been a long time coming. A lot of people have put a lot of work and time into this — and it's very gratifying. It is a step in the right direction in so many ways."

McMahon applied for a copy of his original birth certificate years after meeting Barbara, whom he calls his "first mother." At that time, Illinois law allowed adoptees to obtain a copy only if they provided affidavits signed by all parties involved. He still recalls the moment when he held it for the first time.

"I was really surprised at how emotional and satisfying it was to finally have that document in my hands, even though I had been in reunion for 15 years," McMahon said. "To actually hold that piece of paper that documented the true recording of my birth, I had tears coming out of my eyes."

He said he plans to request his birth certificate again, now that the new law is in place.

"I am very glad that my home state has finally granted equal access to adult adoptees," McMahon said. "I know many, many people here who don't have access to their original birth certificates. Hopefully, Illinois will set a precedent as far as overcoming the challenges of all the opponents."