

Rockford adoptee among many to use Illinois' open birth record law

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ROCKFORD — Kathi Johnson applied for a copy of her birth certificate as soon as a new Illinois law allowed it. The 62-year-old Rockford woman was adopted immediately after she was born, and until the law was enacted Nov. 15, she was prohibited from obtaining the piece of paper.

The birth certificate, Johnson felt, represented a lifelong dream — it was a key to her identity. It would have her parents' names and offer a path to discover both her nationality and her biological family's medical history, in case she needed it. She didn't care whether she learned something bad about her parents; she just wanted to know.

Johnson mailed a request for her birth certificate in mid-November. By Christmas, she was starting to get nervous.

Her family kept asking her: "Did you get it; did you get it?"

It came in early January, a folded sheet of paper in the mailbox.

She saw her mother's name first: Ruby Lundquist.

"OK," she thought. "I have a name."

She looked at the line for her father. It read "legally withheld."

Hundreds issued weekly

Since the law went into effect Nov. 15, the Illinois Department of Public Health has issued more than 6,500 original birth certificates to adoptees.

"In the beginning, we were getting hundreds of requests a day," said Melaney Arnold, spokeswoman for the Department of Health. "It has slowed a little since then, but we're still issuing 100 to 200 weekly."

Laws on whether adoptees have a right to their original birth certificates vary from state to state. Some states allow adoptees unrestricted access to their birth certificates; others only unseal them with the mutual consent of the parent and the child.

Illinois Rep. Sara Feigenholtz, D-Chicago, who sponsored the bill, hopes the new law becomes a model for the rest of the country. It protects the minority of birth parents who want their identity to remain confidential — they can file a preference to strike their names — while also allowing the majority of people access to the records, she said.

"Our (previous) law sealing adoption records had made the assumption that almost all birth parents wanted to remain confidential," Feigneholtz said. "That was unfounded. So we carefully crafted a bill that put the burden on the minority to keep their records sealed."

Johnson was irked that her father's name had been withheld — it wasn't stricken from the birth certificate or redacted. Back in the early 1950s it was standard practice to withhold a father's name if the mother wasn't married. There was a box

to check if the child was legitimate or illegitimate. Another box on the birth certificate caught Johnson's eye: Her mother indicated that she had another child.

Following the paper trail

Over the next several months, Johnson became immersed in her mother's life. She went to the Rockford Public Library and the Winnebago County clerk's office, and she used a genealogist to find marriage records, obituaries, birth announcements. She found most of the information she needed within the first week.

Johnson discovered her mother had been divorced by the time she was born in May 1950. By 1951, Lundquist had been married again. She was married a third time by 1955.

Johnson worked the phone books, called ex-husbands and aunts and cousins. She made it clear she was only looking for information. She caught her biggest break when she called Terri Cote of Rochelle, her half sister.

Johnson gave her usual speech. She introduced herself, saying that she was adopted and had just seen her birth certificate for the time that week.

"Before I could even finish, Terri asked if Ruby was my birth mother," Johnson said. "I said 'yes,' and she just started screaming — she was so excited."

Half sister creates connection

They met at CherryVale Mall's food court. They talked for three hours about Lundquist's life, and Cote brought photos of their mother.

"It was the best gift I could have gotten," Johnson said.

The resemblance between Johnson and Lundquist is immediately clear. She learned that she is Scottish and Irish on her mother's side.

She also learned that from 1947 to 1957 Lundquist had seven children. She gave four up for adoption. By the time of her death in 2003, she had been married seven times.

It was a shock for Johnson, who married Randy when she was 19 — and is still married to him 42 years later.

"I don't think she had the best childhood — her father was an alcoholic and her parents were divorced before I was born," Johnson said. "But Terri wanted me to know that her mother was a good person — she was a happy person. She wasn't great with men."

Search isn't over

Johnson often thinks about how different her life would have been had she been raised by her birth mother.

She was adopted by Don and Lorraine Anderson and says they "spoiled" her.

"I have a great family," Johnson said. "My mother had had several miscarriages, and they didn't think they could have children. But seven years after they adopted me, they had my sister."

She hasn't given up on finding her biological father. It's possible the hospital still has the record or someone will come forward with more information.

Her search has kept her up at nights as she goes through the names, faces and what could have been. More than anything, obtaining the birth certificate has offered her closure.

"If Ruby had been alive, it would have been so different," Johnson said. "I get emotional just thinking of her life. I would have loved to have met her."

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