



# Unsealed Birth Records Give Adoptees Peek at Past

By JOHN O'CONNOR AP Political Writer  
SPRINGFIELD, Ill. July 28, 2013 (AP)

Maura Duffy spent a day in Chicago last September with her mother: A walk along Lake Michigan, shared meals, a boat tour highlighting Second City architecture.

But this was no typical mother-daughter outing. It was the first time the two women had ever met.

Since a handful of states, including Illinois, have unsealed birth certificates, thousands of adoptees have claimed them and learned about their beginnings. The 35-year-old Duffy, adopted at birth, is among 8,800 Illinois residents since 2010 to do so.

Not everyone who gets the document goes on a search. But for many, it's led to heart-rending reunions.

"I finally got to see and meet someone who looked exactly like me," said Duffy, a marketing professional. "It's a very kind of emotional, strange thing that you grow up your whole life and don't ever know anything about your background. And it's the first chapter of your life, that birth certificate."

Obtaining a birth certificate — something most people can do without much thought — often is a visceral, as much as legal, quest for an adoptee.

"The things that people take for granted are enormous, life-changing moments" for adoptees, said Rep. Sara Feigenholtz, a Chicago Democrat and adoptee who sponsored the Illinois law and still breaks down when discussing it.

Feigenholtz, who met her birth mother years ago, worked for more than a decade to open birth certificates in Illinois, which like nearly every other state had sealed such records from the 1940s through the 1980s. There are several reasons adoptees want access to those records, including learning medical histories crucial to determining health risks. Many adoptees believe they have a right to such a personal, intimate record.

Illinois is one of 11 states to have open birth certificates and one of nine to have unsealed them since 1999, according to the American Adoption Congress. And because of its size, the Prairie State has seen more adoptees get those papers than most. Still, the 8,800 is only 2.5 percent of the 350,000 Illinois adoptees' records that were sealed beginning in 1946.

In Oregon, which opened its records in 2000, 11,500, or nearly 11 percent of the 108,000 records sealed after 1957, have been requested. Alabama didn't seal 300,000 records until 1991, reopened them just nine years later, and 5,800 adoptees have requested them. Rhode Island reopened 24,000 records in 2012 after 68 years, and 759 people have laid claim to their birth certificates.

Some adoptive children have reunited with birth families without open-records laws. Public intermediary services, private businesses and volunteers help reunite willing adoptees and birth mothers, although sometimes it involves hundreds of dollars and no guarantee of success.

Jenny Spinner, who grew up in an adoptive home in Decatur with her twin sister, found her mother before the law changed. But Spinner, a 43-year-old mother, English professor and researcher in Philadelphia whose intrepid inquiries have prompted preparation of a book about the experience, is frustrated by the lack of

documentation of her personal story. She still wanted her birth certificate for the emotional connection it brought.

"The paper that I've been looking for just to see all our names together in one space has still eluded me, outside of this birth certificate," Spinner said. "It's the only thing where her name is stamped on a document that has my birthdate. That proves it."

States generally had open birth records until the mid-20th Century when unwed motherhood became more stigmatized, said Adam Pertman, executive director of the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, a not-for-profit, nonpartisan research and policy center.

Birth certificates often were stamped "illegitimate" and sealing them was thought to protect the baby, the adoptive family from intrusion and was even considered, in some circles, the cleanest break for a "maladjusted" mother to re-enter society and later marry.

Opponents contend birth mothers were promised privacy in perpetuity, which Donaldson Institute research has not been able to substantiate, and research shows both adopted children and the parents who gave them up want contact, Pertman said.

The trend is "toward greater honesty, greater openness," said Pertman, adding it's "way too slow."

In Pennsylvania, an adopted lawmaker has introduced legislation to open birth records there, and Illinois Rep. Ann Williams, an adoptee who was born in the Keystone state, traveled there to testify July 17 in favor of the bill. Williams, a Chicago Democrat whose district neighbors Feigenholtz's, told the committee the Illinois law brought "excitement, joy and fulfillment" to nearly 9,000 adoptees, but for her, it was "bittersweet, as I was not among them."

Dave Reynolds, a 46-year-old health care-plan operator from Deerfield, didn't seek his birth record until he met Feigenholtz, who encouraged him. He just spoke by phone about a month ago to his birth mother, who lives in another state and never told anyone in her family about her son.

"I'd love to meet my birth mom face-to-face. I'd love to give her a hug," Reynolds said. "I'd love to meet my half-brothers. That would be a neat moment. But that's on her timetable. If it never happens, then I'm just so thankful I had a chance to thank her."

The meetings can be just as wrenching and emotional for birth mothers, and many adoptees are reluctant to ask them to come forward and speak publicly. Nor is it always an easy process for the family that reared an adopted child.

Duffy's adoptive mother, who is ill with Alzheimer's, often talked with her daughter about finding her birth family. The process has been hard on her father, but "I'm not going anywhere," Duffy said.

"They were the people that put a Band-Aid on my knee when I scraped it. They're my family," she said. "It's just nice to start to get to know this person who gave so much up for me, who did such a selfless thing for me, giving me birth and bringing me into this world."