



# Adoptees praise Illinois law giving access to their birth records

By MARK BROWN May 19, 2014 7:34PM

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In the four years since Illinois became the most populous state in the U.S. to give adoptees the right to see their original birth certificates, about 10,500 individuals have obtained that vital piece of paper that most of us take for granted. On Wednesday, some of them will be in Springfield to thank those who made it happen and to extend a message to all the states that still haven't followed suit:

C'mon in. The water's fine.

Despite the trepidation long associated with piercing adoption secrecy, the opening of Illinois birth certificate records has met with mostly smooth sailing.

"The sky did not fall," said state Rep. Sara Feigenholtz, D-Chicago, who sponsored the legislation. "Illinois took a leap of faith and got it right. It's time every state did this."

To date less than 20 states have passed similar legislation to open up original birth certificates, with the privacy concerns of birth parents still trumping the rights of adoptees to have the information so many of them seek.

In Illinois, fewer than 500 birth parents have taken advantage of a provision in the 2010 law that allows them to pre-emptively request to maintain their anonymity.

Only 43 such requests have actually blocked an adoptee who was trying to obtain that information from their birth certificate, Feigenholtz said.

For Jennifer Dyan Ghoston, 50, who retired this month after 27 years as a Chicago police officer, obtaining the birth certificate has opened her life to a family she never knew she had.

Raised as an only child by her adoptive parents, Ghoston learned after receiving her birth certificate in 2012 that she had a younger brother who had been raised by their birth mother.

Ghoston made contact with him and found their mother was deceased.

“We’ve remained in touch and are very close now,” said Ghoston, who is also now in touch with other relatives as well.

“I am so deeply appreciative [of the birth certificate law],” Ghoston said. “...I don’t think I would have been able to find them any other way.”

Joel Chrastka, 77, of Berwyn, didn’t learn he was adopted until age 43, and for the next 30 years tried in vain to learn more about his identity.

“The records were sealed,” he said. “I was upset.”

Then Chrastka read a story in the Sun-Times about the birth certificate law and became the first adoptee in Illinois to obtain that “simple piece of paper.”

With the help of his own son, Chrastka was able to track down some younger half-sisters living on the East Coast, who filled him in about their mother, then two years deceased.

“I regret that I didn’t know them my entire life,” said Chrastka, now sounding very much at peace with his background.

Ghoston and Chrastka are among the “stars” of “A Simple Piece of Paper,” a documentary about the effect of the Illinois birth certificate law by filmmaker Jean Strauss that will be screened as part of the Springfield event.

Another star is Gay Ellen Brown, who couldn’t get insurance approval for breast cancer gene testing because she didn’t know her family medical history. After getting her birth certificate, she learned her mother had suffered from breast cancer. Although her mother is dead, Brown is now reunited with three siblings.

The others tell similar stories of making contact with family members — and the peace of mind that can bring.

Many of the adoptees featured in the movie will go to the capitol to tell their stories.

Feigenholtz said adoptees will thank legislators who helped approve the measure and Gov. Pat Quinn for signing it into law.

She said she feels a responsibility to tell the story of the Illinois law as often as possible.

“There are adoptees who still don’t know they can get their birth certificates,” she said.

Not every adoptee who gets their original birth certificate uses it to track down their birth family, Feigenholtz said. Some simply want to know.

“It is just so necessary that people have this, in my opinion,” Chrastka said.

Here is one subject on which Illinois has nothing to be embarrassed.

Email: [markbrown@suntimes.com](mailto:markbrown@suntimes.com)

Twitter: [@MarkBrownCST](https://twitter.com/MarkBrownCST)