

# Adopted adults to celebrate Illinois' 4-year-old access law

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After Jean Garner of Taylorville saw her birth certificate for the first time in 2012 and learned she had siblings, “everything started happening,” she said Tuesday.

Born in Decatur to alcoholic parents — the fourth of eight children — and adopted by a Kincaid couple when she was 5, Garner was raised as an only child and had an empty feeling for decades.

A 2010 state law allowed her to get a copy of her 1951 birth certificate. The information on that form eventually led her to find five of her seven siblings, including her younger brother, Steven Willis, 53, of Petersburg, who became a good friend.

“When you’re adopted, so many things go through your mind,” said Garner, 62, who now is married, the mother of three and grandmother of three.

The law, she said, “made a big difference. I’m happier.”

Garner, a housekeeper at Taylorville Memorial Hospital, is among the 10,500 adopted adults so far who have obtained copies of Illinois birth certificates previously unavailable to them until the General Assembly passed a bill that was signed into law by Gov. Pat Quinn four years ago today.

Adoptees will gather for a 3 p.m. news conference Wednesday at the Capitol to thank lawmakers for the Original Birth Certificate Access Law, based on legislation sponsored by state Rep. Sara Feigenholtz, D-Chicago.

Many, including Garner, also will be on hand Wednesday for a free, public screening of an hour-long documentary on the law’s impact. More information on the film, “A Simple Piece of Paper,” is available at [www.asimplepieceofpaper.com](http://www.asimplepieceofpaper.com).

Quinn will make opening remarks at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday before the screening at the Sangamo Club, 227 E. Adams St., Springfield.

Feigenholtz said the signing of her bill “made Illinois the 10th and most populous state in the nation” to restore rights to birth records that were taken away in 1947.

"We want to use this anniversary as an opportunity to thank the legislators who supported this bill and made this lifelong dream possible," said Feigenholtz, 57, herself an adoptee. Garner is part of the documentary, which shows her reading her birth certificate for the first time. She said she always was told she was adopted by her adopted parents, the late Lester and Beulah Waud, but not much more.

"I had a real good childhood" with the Wauds, but Garner said she always had questions about her past. She learned a lot more from the birth certificate, which led to connections with Feigenholtz and with filmmaker Jean Strauss, who produced the documentary.

Strauss helped Garner find one of her siblings, which then led to Garner learning the identities of five of the eight children of Helen Louise Frazier, and Frazier's husband, Ralph Willis, a mechanic. "This was amazing," Garner said.

Many of the Willises' children were either removed from their Decatur home by state authorities, or they eventually ran away. It's hard to believe, Garner said, but one actually joined a circus and traveled as a circus worker for a while.

One sibling now lives in Florida, another is in Kansas, and another is in Iowa, Garner said. She has met four of the siblings, and is the closest with brother Steven.

Steven was the first sibling she met in-person in 2012. The meeting was emotional.

"We spent almost four hours at Golden Corral in Springfield, talking," she said.

One of her brothers still lives in Decatur but has refused to respond to her letters, Garner said. She said she hopes he changes his mind someday. But she doesn't regret finding her siblings and learning more about her biological parents.

Another adoptee featured in the film, Gay Ellen Brown, 55, a homemaker from Union, New Jersey, was born in Chicago in 1959 and spent 37 years looking for her biological parents.

The finding of pre-cancerous tissue in both breasts in 2009 added urgency to her search. She wanted to be tested to determine whether she, and potentially her three daughters and one granddaughter, carried the BRCA gene mutation that would put them at a much higher risk of developing breast cancer.

But the health insurance through her husband's job as a dock worker in New Jersey wouldn't cover the \$3,000 test unless there was proof of prior breast cancer in one of her relatives.

Because of the Illinois law, Brown got her birth certificate in 2011 and eventually learned that her mother, an Alabama native and former Chicago waitress who died in 1999, gave birth to her as a result of an affair.

Brown also eventually located her oldest sister, Barbara Robare, 61, of Hammond, Indiana, and the two have developed a close friendship.

"I couldn't ask for a better big sister," Brown said.

She learned from Robare that their mother had a breast removed because of breast cancer. Brown got the BRCA test covered by insurance with medical records from her mother that Robare had kept.

Many women who find they carry the BRCA mutation have both breasts removed to guard against breast cancer in the future. The test showed Brown didn't carry the BRCA mutation, so she abandoned plans for a prophylactic mastectomy.

"Thank God I'm not a carrier of the gene, but it's good to know," Brown said.

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