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## Adoptees praise birth certificate statute for revealing family history



Sara Feigenholtz



Ann Marie Williams

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SPRINGFIELD — Joel Chrastka didn't find out he was adopted until he was 43 years old. He spent the next few decades searching for his birth parents, to no avail.

But four years ago, legislation passed by the Illinois General Assembly and signed by Gov. [Patrick J. Quinn](#) allowed adoptees to request a copy of their original birth certificate.

Chrastka, now 77 and living in Berwyn, was the first Illinois adoptee to receive his original birth certificate, which allowed him to connect with his biological sisters.

"Thirty years, there was just a hole," he said, adding later that his sisters "didn't know any more about me than I knew about them. This was their family secret."

Chrastka and several other adoptees came to the Statehouse on Wednesday on the fourth anniversary of the bill becoming law.

Their purpose was simple — to thank the legislature for its help on the Original Birth Certificate Access Law, signed into law on May 21, 2010. Quinn was also honored at a special screening of a documentary about the law called "A Simple Piece of Paper" at the Sangamo Club Wednesday evening.

"The title of (the documentary) is 'A little piece of paper,' spelled P-I-E-C-E," Chrastka said. "And what did that generate? Peace — P-E-A-C-E — of soul."

The act granted adoptees born before Jan. 1, 1946, access to copies of their original birth certificate. Adoptees born after Jan. 1, 1946, but before Dec. 31, 2010, would be able to obtain a

copy of their original birth certificate — unless the birth parents filed a request to remain anonymous before Dec. 31, 2010.

“Illinois was the largest state, the most populous state to have passed (the law),” said Rep. Sara Feigenholtz, D-Chicago, who sponsored the measure in 2010 and is an adoptee herself.

On new adoptions now, biological parents must now fill out a birth parent preference form in order to indicate they wish to remain anonymous.

Since Quinn signed the bill into law four years ago, Feigenholtz said Illinois has issued 10,500 birth certificates requested by adult adoptees.

Rep. [Ann Marie Williams](#), D-Chicago, who like Feigenholtz is adopted, traveled to Pennsylvania last year to testify in support of a similar measure being considered by the legislature there.

Williams is a Pennsylvania adoptee, and that state’s measure has yet to become law. She is still awaiting her own original birth certificate.

“It was an incredible experience and, for years and years, I’ve always told myself if I ever had the opportunity, I would go to Pennsylvania and try and impact the law,” she said. “I never anticipated I would go there as a lawmaker from Illinois, so it was an incredible experience — they were very welcoming, and I got to know some amazing people that were adopted.”

Williams, who was first elected in 2010, got to see the Illinois version of the measure pass as a member of the legislature.

“It was so exciting to see Illinois adoptees have access to their birth certificates, but it honestly was a bit bittersweet for me because, as excited as I was that my home state was allowing adoptees to have this critical information that’s so important, I personally couldn’t get it,” she said. “But I know when one big state like Illinois passes it, it does impact others.”

Since Illinois passed its law, four other states — Washington, Rhode Island, Ohio and New Jersey — have approved similar statutes.

“I really believe that our stories are what opened the hearts and minds of policymakers around the country,” Feigenholtz said.

[Lawrence J. Suffredin Jr.](#), a lobbyist for The Chicago Bar Association and partner at Taft, Stettinius & Hollister LLP, said the CBA’s Adoption Law Committee helped craft the bill, ensuring there were proper safeguards for both the biological and adoptive parents of an adoptee.

“We’ve learned a lot and evolved, but this was new ground in Illinois four years ago,” he said. “We had a number of people express concerns — especially people who did adoptions.”

Despite those issues, Suffredin said, he wasn’t aware of any legal challenges — on privacy or other grounds — brought once the bill was signed.

“I think today many of the people who were on opposite sides of the issue have come to be on the same side, and we’ve worked out procedures so that people are protected,” he said.

In 2010, several lawmakers questioned whether the bill undermined parents’ expectation of privacy or cast doubts about the effectiveness of the proposed public information campaign.

The confidentiality issues raised then weren't based on fact, Feigenholtz said, as some opponents claimed it was better for adopted children to not know who their birth parents were, even after the adoptee became an adult.

To counteract some of those concerns, Feigenholtz said, Illinois created an adoption registry which allows adoptees to find out important medical information about their birth parents — say, a family history of cancer or heart disease — even if they wanted to remain anonymous.

The registry also serves as a way to help birth parents or adoptees know that someone may be looking for them.

“All along this path, we collected data to prove that the majority of people wanted information and wanted contact, and that the confidentiality issue was more mythical than reality,” she said.