

Illinois Adoptees Mark Anniversary

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They call it "A Simple Piece of Paper." That's how adult adoptees in Illinois are referring to their original birth certificates, which until 2010 had been sealed. It's also the name of a documentary film, chronicling the journey for a number of Illinois adult adoptees who were able to receive their original birth certificates, years after they'd been adopted; and their journey to find their biological families.

We talk to one of those adoptees and the woman who worked to change the law, [State Rep. Sara Feigenholtz](#). She's among the advocates hoping the film will help change the laws in other states, as some Illinois residents are hopeful to find their own birth certificates from when they were adopted outside of Illinois.



Jean Strauss

Read an interview with Jean Strauss, director of the documentary "[A Simple Piece of Paper.](#)" On Wednesday, July 9, a screening of the film will be held at Center on Halsted, 3656 N. Halsted St. Doors open at 6:30 pm and the film screening begins at 7:30 pm.

Q: What was your inspiration behind this project?

I was inspired really to help other people understand why Illinois did this. Illinois is the 10th state to allow adoptees the right to their birth records, so I want others to recognize and understand why this is significant. Many people don't understand what it's like to be an adoptee and not know your identity. For a lot of adoptees, getting their birth certificates isn't just about finding their birth parents; it's about knowing who you are. In fact, there was an older man that asked me "Can you help me because I want to know who I am before I die?" I didn't start as an advocate for this cause. I was a documentarian. Over time, I couldn't understand how anyone would want to have control over

something like this. These birth certificates don't belong to the birth parent, to the public or anybody else. It belongs to the adoptee. In a way, it's restoring their dignity.

Q: Why do you think there has been such opposition to allowing adoptees rights to their birth certificate?

Those old, antiquated values in society still persist. I also think "illegitimacy" is a label that follows the adopted kids for a while so there's a negative connotation on adopted children. Many states also made a claim that adopted parents feared birth parents might want to take the child back after. People in older generations know this is always how it has been, so they don't understand the significance.

Q: How did you get in contact with your subjects?

Each person was different. One woman was the first in line at the office of records after it became legal in Illinois. One person was in an article by the *Tribune*. I reached out to him because his story was quite interesting. After going through the process of requesting his record, he had received a blank birth certificate. One state representative reached out to me because she was receiving phone calls about it and asked if I would be interested. State Rep. Sara Feigenholtz really helped other legislators understand this issue.

Q: What has the process been like for your subjects to obtain their birth certificates?

Each person was unique, that's why legislation is so interesting when you're legislating for many. Overall they felt relief, empowerment, and a sense of closure. Many were also quite emotional. There's also sort of a sense of "this was kept from me, why?" feeling. The information on there wasn't secrets of the birth parent.

Q: How closely do you follow your subjects after they've received their records?

I stay with them for as long as I can. The story is never really over. I try to get to know my subjects ahead of time. One subject has a medical condition, so she wanted to benefit from information that could possibly help her health. I followed her through her reunion with her birth family but did not want to show it out of privacy. Since it was over, her story got better and better. She's now had a chance to know her real father. But many people don't get fairytale endings. Sometimes they find out their birth parent is dead or the reunion is awkward.

Interview has been condensed and edited.