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Relative strangers

By Catherine E. Toth
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Growing up, Jan Takane wanted answers.

Adopted at birth, she wanted to know how she was born, who she looked like, why her mother gave her up for adoption.

"I was always curious about the circumstances of my birth," said Takane, 38 of Manoa.

"Although I loved my (adoptive) parents, I knew there was something missing — who I was, who I was going to be."

This wasn't just an adolescent plea to fit in. This was truly a search for an identity.

"Through the years, I had my ups and downs, the usual struggles of life," Takane said. "I came to a point where I needed to find those answers and settle myself."

At 26, Takane decided it was time. The search for her birth mother began.

Many adoptees feel a strong desire, even just curiosity, to meet — or at least know about — their birth parents, experts say. But many don't know how to go about finding those parents or how to cope with the feelings they have when they finally do. Some adoptees never search them out at all.

"I think there is a general curiosity and wonder about your biological family and why they gave you up," said Nancy Sidun, chief clinical psychologist at Kaiser Permanente, who adopted her daughter, now 11, from China. "What somebody does with that (information) is up to them. Some don't do anything about it. Others are haunted."

Tomorrow is Registration Day across the nation, including on O'ahu. (See box, right). Adoptees and birth parents can register their names in this free international database and perhaps be matched and reunited. (This registry can also help reunite family members separated by divorce.)



Jan Takane got a lot of support from her adoptive father George in her search to learn about her birth mother and her genetic roots.

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According to the 2000 Census, there are about 2.1 million adopted children in the United States. In Hawai'i, there about 9,800.

That number is rising. And with that, the stigma of adoption is softening, Sidun said.

"It's not the 'Big Secret' anymore," she said. "Although some adoptees may still feel some of it. Like, 'Why me?' "

Takane, who was told she was adopted "from before I knew what that meant," said taking the initial step to find her birth mother was terrifying. She knew she had to be emotionally ready for whatever would happen. And she needed the support of her adoptive parents, who helped her the entire way.

"It's a huge step for any adoptee to take," Takane said. "And some adoptees never take that step."

When adoptees do search out their birth parents, experts advise they get support for the inevitably emotional journey. Some searches end happily with the reunion of families, others don't.

"It can be scary," Sidun said. "You never know what you're going to find."

MEDICAL HISTORY

Takane didn't find her birth mother through a registry. But she did get help with her search through the Adoption Circle of Hawai'i, a nonprofit organization that provides support to adoptees, adoptive parents and birth parents.

She and her adoptive parents began attending monthly meetings, sharing their experiences while gaining perspective on their own. It was important for Takane — and for her adoptive parents — that they searched for her birth mother together.

"When the subject came up, we wholeheartedly supported her search," said her adoptive father, George, 79, a retired attorney who has handled adoption cases. "It was really a cooperative effort."

Unlike some adoptive parents, the Takanes didn't feel threatened or rejected that their adopted daughter wanted to search for her birth mother. They knew she didn't want to replace them as parents. And they understood her need to find an identity, to learn about who she is. That unconditional support wasn't lost on Jan Takane.

"The search has nothing to do with the adoptive family at all," she said. "It's all about finding out who you are."

Takane started her search through the state. But that turned out to be too costly and tedious. With the help of her adoptive parents, Takane hired a private detective who specializes in reuniting families. Part of her motivation was to find out her family medical history, something many adoptees deem critical.

She decided to write a letter to her birth mother, introducing herself and asking whether she would want to meet up. She dropped the letter in the mail and hoped for a response.

"I was on pins and needles, just biting my nails," Takane said.

A few days later, the phone at Takane's family home in Manoa rang. It was her birth mother. But Takane was attending the University of Oregon. Her adoptive mother took a message and passed her number to Takane. This was it.

"It's hard to describe how I was feeling," said Takane, who earned a doctorate in developmental psychology with plans to work in adoption research and therapy. "I was very scared, very terrified beyond any experience I ever had."

Phone number in hand, Takane sat in her dorm room nervously going over everything she wanted to say, everything she wanted to ask.

"All those questions went out the window," Takane said, laughing. "There's really no way to prepare for it."

They talked for three hours, sharing the details of the past 30 years. One thing Takane, as with many adoptees, really wanted to know about was her birth.

"I wanted to know what it was like," she said. "I never knew about that. I had no sense of or connection to being born."

She found out she was a small baby, born to an unwed mother. At one point, her birth mother was able to hold her. In the end, though, she wanted her daughter to have two parents. So she gave her up.

Takane and her birth mother made plans to meet up that summer.

"We were so happy," said George Takane. "After that long search, this was the fruition of those efforts."

That summer they met at the Kahala Mall for lunch. Just seeing her birth mother — who had the same body shape, the same thick dark hair as her — was beyond words.

"The minute I looked at her, something inside me, deep inside ... I just knew," Takane said. "There's no way to describe how it feels."

Takane finally had her questions answered. She knew who she most looked like in her birth family, how she was born, even why she blows her nose like a horn. And now she could walk into her doctor's office and tell him whether diabetes and heart disease run in her family.

"The fact that I could offer up that information was so freeing," she said. "It was a monkey off my back."

Since then, she's visited with her birth mother — and her two half-sisters — at least once a year.

Throughout the year, they talk on the phone or exchange e-mails. She knows how lucky she is. "I think about how many adoptees never get this chance," Takane said. "And I feel so incredibly blessed to have this opportunity."

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