

FAMILY REUNION INSTITUTE'S

STICKY REUNION SITUATION

IS REUNION PLANNING FOR BLOOD MEMBERS ONLY?

September 2023

The Situation:

Our planning team is having a debate. Should only blood family members hold positions on the reunion planning team? Many of our family in-laws have been part of the family for years, are well loved and considered part of the family. Some of them have assisted with the planning of the reunion. When a couple of the relationships ended, family documents and info the in-laws were working on disappeared creating chaos, disorder and mistrust. So now the family wants to institute a rule that only blood family members can hold planning positions. We don't want to offend the in-laws who haven't done anything, but we are concerned about being able to secure family documents and keeping them safe. What do you think?

The Fix:



Doug Harris

There are two issues here. One is blood vs. non-blood relatives. The other is about missing documents and information. I have no expertise in either area so all I can give is my opinion. Re: the lost items, I suggest approaching it like a detective. Find someone who was not around or uninvolved when the items went missing. Have them contact the in-laws for help as part of a family history project, and ask if they know anything about where the items might be. The best outcome is they may have mellowed and are willing to return the items. The worst outcome is they will lie. Either way ask if they know of anyone else who could help.

I must answer the second issue from an African American perspective. Because our families were heartlessly split up during slavery the African concept of "the village" became even more important. Regardless of blood ties, all villagers helped raise and nurture children. This tradition continues today. Many of us have non-blood-related "play" aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters, and cousins who are loved and perceived as family. It is how slaves not only survived, but maintained our humanity. There are people who make a distinction between blood and non-blood relatives, but they are in the minority in my opinion. Most African Americans embrace all family regardless of DNA.

That said, I believe there is little you can do to change the minds of people who only acknowledge blood relatives. My advice is to avoid letting a few "blood only" folks who plan and/or come to the reunion make the decision. Take a vote on the issue. See what the majority thinks.

The Fix:



Sylvia Ford-George

I've heard this scenario more than once from more than one family. And knowing how hard it is to gather, collect and document family information, I can understand the reasoning behind the "blood relatives only" sentiment. Our information and history must be treated with care and respect—no matter what. And I think we all know that some blood relatives can be just as careless with family info as those who are not. So the real culprit is not the person holding the information. The real problem is having just one person in charge of your info. When only one person has access, what happens when their computer breaks down, or documents get misplaced, or lost during a move, flood or hurricane, (or if they get sick or pass away)? You're no better off than if a disgruntled in-law throws everything away with the trash.

The fix here is to share important documents with more than one person and more than one generation, so that if something happens all is not lost. Find a place to house your docs so that other family members can have access if needed.

I agree with Doug that it takes the entire family—blood and non-blood relatives—to make a family whole. We should find ways to work together rather than plan strategies that tear us apart.
