

## The right to say thank you

IllinoisTimes.com

APRIL 3, 2008:

Legislation would give adoptees access to birth certificates

By Dusty Rhodes

I hardly slept a wink the night before I met my mother. I was in a motel, just off Interstate 35, on the outskirts of the city where she lived with her family. Our clandestine meeting required more scheming than an international narcotics deal, and I was so nervous that I tried on every shirt and pair of pants in my suitcase in each possible combination at least three times. She must have felt the same way: Just as the clock crawled to the appointed hour, she phoned to say she was running late because her hairdo didn't look right.

When she finally knocked on the door, I opened it and stepped back to let her in. I'd only been waiting 27 years, so I didn't reach out to try to hug her. I let her place her hand on my cheek. She had been waiting a few months longer. "They wouldn't let me touch you," she said.

I was born in a home for unwed mothers back in the bad ol' days when girls who got pregnant seemed to all spontaneously spend the summer or the semester or whatever with some "dear relative" a few hundred miles from home. At the south-Texas "mission home" where my mother served out her time, each resident had to choose a name from a bulletin board and assume that identity for the duration of her stay. The tag my birth mother chose said Tommie.

And now, two decades later and several states away, even though her husband, her children, and many of her friends and relatives know everything about me, I will still refer to her publicly only as Tommie, in consideration of her privacy.

I don't have any scientific proof, but I'm pretty sure that my ginger approach to my birth mother is typical of my tribe — my tribe being other "adult adoptees." Over the years, by way of support groups and online communities and articles I've written and just plain life, I've gotten to know scores of other adopted people, not to mention counselors, social workers, and adoption activists of every ilk. So far, I've never met or even heard of an adoptee barging his or her way into a birth mother's life.

I mean, think about it: Why would we? Those of us who want reunions — and many of us don't — tend to exhibit infinite patience and extreme deference to our birth parents' wishes. We don't



want to tick them off; we just want to know who they are. As Sara Feigenholtz puts it, “We deserve the right to say thank you.”

As state representative for district 12, Feigenholtz hopes to give adoptees that chance. She has drafted legislation — HB 4623 — that would give adult adoptees access to their original birth certificates. Birth parents who don’t want their names known to their offspring will have six months to indicate their preference to opt out.

Feigenholtz, an adoptee herself, initially proposed this idea back in 1997 but withdrew the bill before a vote. In the decade since, she has met more people, found more research, and seen attitudes about adoption shift.

“The whole face of adoption has changed when it comes to how important it is for families to stay connected on a level they’re comfortable with,” she says. “I think this is a much healthier environment for adoption.”

She is not reinventing the wheel. In the past 10 years Oregon, Alabama, Delaware, Maine, New Hampshire, and Tennessee have all passed similar legislation. Alaska and Kansas never sealed adoptees’ original birth certificates, and neither did Illinois until 1946.

The system has long been rigged according to a predictable pecking order: At the top are adoptive parents, who are, after all, the parties with the most maturity, the deepest pockets, and the presumed moral high ground. Next come birth parents, who are vulnerable, possibly disgraced, and probably in some sort of crisis and yet at least have a voice. Logically lowest on the totem pole are us adoptees, who at the time the deal is struck have no vote, no voice, no clout whatsoever. Well-meaning lawmakers across the country and across generations have conspired to keep us that way.

“We will forever be the little babies our adoptive parents don’t want someone to steal back,” Feigenholtz sighs.

In case you think I’m whining, let me tell you what would happen if I went to the trouble to hire an attorney and petition a Texas judge to release my original birth certificate: I would get a document that would tell me that my birth mother’s name was Tommie Smith. Nothing on the document would tell me that Tommie Smith isn’t her real name. That’s how perfectly the system stacked the deck against adoptees. Feigenholtz says some Illinois agencies used the same trick. Her bill, if passed, wouldn’t cure that problem.

I e-mailed Tommie to ask what she thinks about Feigenholtz’s bill. Her response: “Many — most — birth mothers welcome contact with their child. I know I did. I always hoped that would happen and I’m grateful that it did.”

HB 4623 is on its second reading, and Feigenholtz has high hopes. “It’s gonna be tough,” she says, “but I think I’m going to find 60 votes.”