

Open adoption ... all grown up

With the secrecy long gone, adoptees are now old enough to reflect on their unique family bonds

By Leslie Mann

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You might say that 30 years later, open adoption is maturing nicely.

Today, 90 percent of domestic adoptions are open, according to the New York-based Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute.

Letting all that sunshine in has emotions blossoming: Studies cited by the institute show adoptees in open adoptions are happier than their closed-adoption counterparts, birth parents grieve less when they know the birth children, and adoptive parents, contrary to myth, are not threatened by their children's relationships with their birth parents.

"Overall, the more open the adoption, the happier the adoptees," said Harold Grotevant, who co-directs the Minnesota-Texas Adoption Research Project, with Ruth McRoy. The ongoing project, which began in 1984, includes 171 adoptees from 23 states, plus their birth and adoptive parents, in adoptions that vary widely in "openness" and connection with birth parents.

So in honor of Nov. 17 being National Adoption Day, Q decided to catch up with some of these open adoptees to see how they feel about the families they've helped shape.

JEREMY

Jeremy Witteveen's adoption story sounds straight from Hollywood. The characters: Peter, his adoptive dad; Susan, his adoptive mom; and Maria, his birth mom. The scene: North Carolina, 1975. The script: Teenage Maria hitchhikes. A stranger, Peter, gives her a ride but tells her it is dangerous. Call me next time, he tells her, and gives her his number. A few months later, Maria calls. Her boyfriend is out of the picture, she's pregnant and has nowhere to go. She and her baby, Jeremy, move in with Peter and Susan. Maria leaves.

Jeremy and Maria keep in touch but don't see each other again until he is 19, when he visits her in Florida.

"Seeing then how she was still having trouble making ends meet made me realize that adoption had been the right thing," said Jeremy. Getting to know Maria, he learned their similarities, like their addiction to popcorn and a "moody -- in an extreme way" personality, he said.

Now, Jeremy, 31, is a Chicago photographer engaged to Tina Serafini.

"It's no accident that Tina is like Maria -- fun-loving and affectionate," he said. Tina's Italian family reminds Jeremy of Maria's Puerto Rican clan. He hopes they will meet at his wedding next year.

Friends don't always "get" open adoption, said Jeremy, so he explains: "With Maria, I have a soulful connection. But Peter and Susan gave me unconditional love, family structure and opportunities I wouldn't have had, like studying overseas. They are Mom and Dad."

LEAH

Leah Herchenbach, 14, of Libertyville knows firsthand the difference between open and closed adoption.

"One of my sisters is from a closed adoption. Her birth parents are in Guatemala and sometimes she feels sad that she doesn't know more about them," said Leah.

Leah and her birth mom, Jeannette, keep in touch by telephone and get together when they can. Jeannette attended Leah's first communion and comes to some of her gymnastics meets. When Leah marries, she said, Jeannette will be there.

"People tell us we are both sarcastic, so I guess I got that from her," said Leah. She also inherited Jeannette's dark eyes. Leah knows she got her height from her birth dad, but doesn't know much more about him.

When Leah was assigned to draw a family tree in grade school, she gave it two branches - one for the Herchenbachs and one for Jeannette's family.

When Leah talks to adults at adoption classes at The Cradle, the Evanston-based agency that facilitated her adoption, she tells them: "Expect some weird questions from people, but open [adoption] is better for everyone. If I didn't know Jeannette, I'd always wonder about her."

JORDAN

When Jordan Anglen, 22, was in high school, she concluded in a paper she wrote about genetics versus environment that people are products of both. She should know.

From her birth dad, whom she knows only through photographs, Jordan said she inherited her profile. From her birth mom, Dawn, she inherited her inability to sit still and her passion for animals.

"Every time I talk to her, she has another kind of animal; now it's a baby squirrel," said Jordan, a veterinary technician in Normal. Jordan's menagerie has included everything from hermit crabs to Madagascar hissing cockroaches.

From her adoptive parents, Sandy and Cliff, Jordan said she learned tolerance ("they survived my pink-and-blue-hair stage") and perseverance ("seven years of piano lessons").

Through Sunny Ridge Family Center in Bolingbrook, one of the agencies that pioneered open adoption in the Chicago area, Sandy kept track of Dawn.

"When I was 17, Mom gave me an album for Christmas with pictures of Dawn," recalls Jordan. "I started e-mailing her, then I met her and her husband and kids." Since then, Jordan attended her half-sister's high school graduation and Dawn attended Jordan's college graduation.

If she had grown up in a closed adoption, Jordan said, "I'd be looking at people in Wal-Mart and wondering, 'Are you my birth mom?' Not knowing anything about my birth parents -- that would eat away at me."

"Go for it!" is Jordan's advice to families considering adoption. "But don't be selfish and keep secrets; they always come out. Keep in contact with the birth parents so the kids can meet them when they're ready. I'm really lucky that Mom and Dad did that for me."

LUKE

"To me, Susan is kind of like an aunt," said Luke Holec, 22, of his birth mom. "I see her and her family on holidays. We e-mail. Her family's birthdays are on my family's calendar."

With Susan's family, Luke shares fair skin, freckles and a tendency to be shy around strangers.

With his adoptive parents, Andy and Dani, he shares a strong work ethic and a love of extreme sports.

"They're risk-takers," said Luke. "I'm not sure if I would be if not for their influence."

Luke, who lives in Monee, lost touch with his birth dad, Kevin, which he said is OK with him.

Asked his opinion of open adoption, Luke said, "For me, my birth mom and my parents, it's good.

"My parents always encouraged me to see Susan. It's weird to think about not knowing I was adopted or not knowing Susan. If my parents would have kept it all a secret from me, I would have felt lied to."

Bottom line, said Luke, a salesman, "you have to think about what's best for the kid."

DIANNE

"The family story goes like this," said Dianne Keck, 21, of Winfield. "When [Sunny Ridge social worker] Becky visited possible adoptive families, my father was in full Bears gear. When my birth mother, Stephanie, heard that, she knew that was the family for me because she grew up a Bears fan."

Now, Dianne and Stephanie share much more.

"We walk alike, talk alike, look alike, dress alike," said Dianne. "We're both very analytical thinkers; we want the most efficient way of getting from Point A to Point B. We both ride horses. We have the same taste in clothes and men. One of my friends calls us 'the two Diannes.'"

When Dianne was younger, her parents read her a baby book they made called "Dianne's Story," which told of her birth and adoption.

Now, Dianne, an international relations major at Purdue University, maintains the connection by seeing Stephanie and her family when she's home. Dianne considers Stephanie's son (also adopted) her "other little brother." (Dianne's adoptive parents, Dan and Cindy, also adopted a son.)

Dianne credits Dan and Cindy with instilling in her and her adopted brother ambition and values.

"It's DuPage County, so I know we are fortunate, but they made sure we knew how to work hard and to help others through volunteering," she said.

"I've heard people ask my mom if she's jealous of my relationship with Stephanie," said Dianne. "There's a myth out there that the birth parent will take the kid away if the adoption is open. But that's not true. That would be selfish, and Stephanie made the very unselfish decision a long time ago for my parents to raise me."

"Now I have three women in my life -- my mom, my aunt and my birth mom -- who love me and I call whenever I have to make a big decision," said Dianne. "How could a parent not want that for their child?"

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