

All in the family

Donor-conceived children look for those who helped in their creation

*By Tom Corwin | Staff Writer
Sunday, September 4, 2005*

The moment Will Gerardot spots Katie Whitaker, he races across the lobby of Fort Discovery toward her.

"Sissy!" yells Will, 5, as he wraps his arms around her legs and hugs her. Katie, 21, smiles down at him before he lets go and speeds off.

Will and Katie are brother and sister, although their parents didn't meet until a few years ago and there is no legal relationship between them. They share a father, but their mothers are just friends. Katie has become a part of the Gerardot family that might be difficult to define to outsiders. They share blood, as do perhaps hundreds of thousands of children who might not even know they have other siblings. Thousands are now looking, and one by one they are redefining what it means to be related.

Bob Gerardot was an anonymous sperm donor at Xytex sperm bank in Augusta in the 1980s, and Katie's parents chose him to help them conceive. Katie said she always felt she was somehow different but didn't know the truth until she was a rebellious teenager and had a heated showdown with her mother.

"Things just kind of came to a head. She just said, 'You've been lying to me about so many things,'" Katie said. "She was really angry but then she just sat there and was like, 'Well, I can't be mad at you for lying because I've been lying to you your whole life.'"

After several months, Katie used what information she had to contact Xytex, where a sympathetic employee agreed to contact Mr. Gerardot. Her situation was helped by the fact that Mr. Gerardot had been adopted and only five years before had tracked down his own biological father.

"So I had probably an over-identification with Katie and her dilemma, and her thoughts and feelings," he said. "(I had) exactly the same motivation as Katie and these other folks - these youngsters that I've talked to wanting to know the missing piece."

"I was not looking to replace anybody or to find an alternative to what I already have," Katie said. "I just wanted to get that information that wasn't there. It was more about the information. The relationships were a bonus."

THEY HIT IT OFF FROM the first meeting, with Katie sharing Mr. Gerardot's charge-ahead personality. His wife, Lisa, with then-18-month-old Will, was trying to think more about the implications for her own family.

"So I kind of pulled back and tried to be like the voice of reason in all of this, which was sometimes hard, to be the voice of reason in something that nobody knows anything about," she said.

And it is truly a pioneering effort that sometimes causes them to try and convert terms to fit. Katie refers to Mrs. Gerardot as her "stepmother," a phrase close enough to the truth. At first, Mrs. Gerardot said, she just called her Katie.

"Initially I didn't attach any kind of a relationship term," she said.

"And that really wasn't necessary within the context of the family," Mr. Gerardot adds. "It's just when you get outside and try to explain it to somebody else, that's when it gets cloudy. (I just say) 'This is my daughter Katie' and let it go at that."

Society has yet to supply a framework for the relationships between these donor-conceived children and their donors or their siblings from the same donor, said Wendy Kramer of Nederland, Colo. She founded the Donor Siblings Registry in 2000 to help those such as her 15-year-old son, Ryan, who were searching for the anonymous donor used to conceive them or for other children from that donor. Her site has since grown to more 5,000 people looking for that genetic connection, and it has resulted in nearly 1,000 matches.

"It's like a whole redefinition of the word family," Ms. Kramer said. "We are so ground-breaking, we don't even have names for it."

IT IS NOT SOMETHING Armand Karow contemplated in 1975 when he helped found Xytex. Back then, women didn't even choose the sperm donor - the doctor did, he said. But the clamoring of the donor-conceived children to get information on what were almost always anonymous donors has been influential, Dr. Karow said.

"We had to come around, so to speak, into incorporating new ways of thinking about the consequences of our actions," he said.

But here is where the agreement ends - parents and donor children want sperm banks to help them find these donors or supply more information; sperm banks feel they cannot.

"We simply have to tell parents, when parents are serving as advocates for their children, 'Look, you agreed that this donor was going to be anonymous,'" Dr. Karow said. "'Without that agreement, we wouldn't have been able to provide you with the semen that enabled you to get pregnant. We can't abrogate the agreement with our donor.'"

That position is frustrating to Katie, who would like to find other children from Mr. Gerardot's donations who might be closer in age to her.

"Because my whole life, I've been raised with siblings that were old enough to be my parents, and now I've got two little brothers that are young enough to be my children," she said. "But I don't have any peers, that are age-appropriate, as my mother likes to say."

THE LACK OF INFORMATION could be more than frustrating for Kathy Dudley-Youngs, of Boston, who chose Xytex in 1997 in part because it promised to help her later if she wanted to track down her anonymous donor.

Last year, her 8-year-old daughter, Hannah, was complaining of nausea and dizziness. An MRI showed it was a 1-centimeter cyst in the pineal area in the center of her brain.

Ms. Dudley-Youngs wants to know whether the donor had a similar problem or if another child conceived using the same donor got a cyst as well.

That way, she thought, she might know whether it is likely to get bigger. But an official at Xytex told her they would not help her unless it was "life-threatening," she said, which it is not for now.

"If it starts to grow, it could be a problem," said Ms. Dudley-Youngs, who is a registered nurse. "It's not a crisis today, but it definitely could become something."

But Dr. Karow said officials do review it when they find out there is a problem with an offspring, and if they feel it could pose a threat to other children, they contact the doctors those recipients used.

"There's no question in our mind that we've got an obligation to do this," he said, although not all tissue banks feel this way.

On top of that, Ms. Dudley-Youngs said the offer to aid her in tracking down the donor in the future has been rescinded.

"I feel a little duped, and it's just been disheartening," she said.

THOSE LOOKING FOR their donors say they are not looking to disrupt their lives or out them; often, they just want to know more detailed family or medical history or, in Katie's case, whether there are others like them out there. Xytex and others have also started "open donor" programs where the donor agrees to provide more information or to be contacted when the child is older.

he American Society for Reproductive Medicine, taking a cue from trends in adoption, now encourages parents to be open with children about their genetic origins where once they were encouraged to keep it secret.

Still, Ms. Kramer estimates about 90 percent of children aren't told because there aren't that many out looking for their donors. Dr. Karow said he has seen estimates that 75,000 to 100,000 children a year are conceived with donor sperm. If even a portion of those children start demanding more information on the donors, "the sperm banks won't know what hit them," she said.

AND THERE Might even be a way around the suppliers. Family Tree DNA, a genealogical service that uses DNA to help people explore their roots and search for relatives, was able to match one donor-conceived child with a distant family member of the donor, and eventually to the donor himself,

Ms. Kramer said. It's something for the anonymous donors to think about, she said.

"This DNA thing is brand new," she said.

Genetics has been a fascination of Dr. Karow's since high school biology, and he knows its potential.

"Throughout my life I have looked in awe at genetics and its influence on living things," he said.

That influence is not hard to see, at least to Katie and the Gerardots.

"She is so much like Bobby," Mrs. Gerardot said, laughing. "So it is easy to like her and it's easy to feel like I need to throttle her sometimes."

Katie, in turn, can see herself in her other little brother, 18-month-old Noah.

Katie was in the room with Mr. and Mrs. Gerardot when he was born.

"Noah is very much like how I was when I was that age," she said. "And that's great."

Will is only now beginning to ask questions about Katie's relationship to the family. When he is old enough, the family will explain the relationship in all its complex glory.

For now, as the boys race around a playroom at Fort Discovery, there is no need to add anything.

Noah squirms in Katie's arms and tries to fight her off as she tries to wipe his runny nose. He screams in delight and she laughs at his reaction when she moves around a toy car on a table. And when Katie puts out her hand, Noah takes it without a word. And they walk off together.

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