

TheNational

Website group is a relative success

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DENVER // Wendy Kramer and her son Ryan, 18, are uniting thousands of young people with the half-siblings they never knew they had.

Every year in the United States and across the world tens of thousands of babies are born with the help of anonymous sperm and egg donors.

Some donors may produce several – or even dozens – of offspring. But in the United States, the entire process is shrouded in secrecy: donor-born children receive only the identification number of their one anonymous parent, and some medical history.

Ryan Kramer, himself donor born, grew up with a desperate sense of curiosity about his biological father, but regulations at the sperm bank prevented him from obtaining his father's identity. By happenstance, however, he and his mother learnt he was one of several children born of the same donor.

"We very quickly realised that no one would facilitate us contacting those children," his mother said. "So we decided to create a place where Ryan could be found."

Thus was born the Donor Sibling Registry, a web-based project that is redefining the concept of family. It started out slowly as a chat group on the Yahoo website, which still only had 37 members after two years in existence.

But when the US media became interested in their project, and the Kramers made a handful of appearances on TV and radio talk shows, word began to spread quickly.

As of this month, the registry has more than 6,000 donor siblings and donor parents who have joined and made family connections using the donors' ID numbers. "We are not outing anybody and we don't invade anyone's privacy," Ms Kramer said. "But we get a lot of people who say, 'Wow, I didn't know I had the right to find these people'."

Vasanti Jadvia, a researcher at the Centre for Family Research at the University of Cambridge in the United Kingdom, which is conducting studies by surveying registry members, said the project is redefining the traditional concept of the nuclear family. One sibling group on the registry, for example, already tops 120 members, according to Ms Kramer. And because frozen sperm and egg donations can be legally shipped to certain countries, donor-born US residents are finding they have half-siblings in such places as France, Denmark and Australia.

While older, donor-born individuals often seek out their biological parent or half-sibling for medical reasons, Ms Jadvia said the biggest surprise of the study was that the vast majority listed "curiosity" as the main reason for their search.

"So far, most have reported that finding their half-siblings was a positive experience – and quite exciting," she said.

However, the largest donor sibling groups are comprised of children still less than 10 years old, too young, in other words, to grasp the concept of their wider biological family.

"As a psychologist I am very interested in knowing what an impact that will have on a person, to find out that they have 55 siblings out there," Ms Jadvia said.

It can also be hard for donor parents, according to Ms Kramer, who said a number of sperm donors have signed on to the registry, only to become overwhelmed to discover they had fathered more than half-a-dozen children.

Still, Ms Kramer feels the registry's rapid growth is an indication that there needs to be greater regulation of the US\$3 billion (Dh11bn) donor industry in the United States.

"Why does the donor's right to be anonymous trump the child's right to be curious?" she said, noting that many countries,



Ryan Kramer, with mother Wendy at home. In the background Ryan poses for a picture with a half-sister he recently met. Kevin Moloney for The National

including Britain, Canada, Sweden and the Netherlands, have banned anonymity and limited the number of births per donor. Scott Brown, a spokesman for California Cryobank Inc, the world's largest sperm bank, said his firm supports donor-child reunions but must walk "a fine line" between meeting the emotional and medical needs of the offspring while also helping families who might not otherwise be able to bear children.

"In countries where anonymity is banned you just don't get that many donors," he said. "You try to make everyone happy, but it can be a double-edged sword."

The Kramers themselves understand that not everyone wants to be connected. They suffered through two false starts trying to find Ryan's siblings, locating two whose parents did not want them to meet.

Then in Feb 2007, another half-sister signed up to the registry.

"Her name was Anna and she was 13," Ms Kramer said. "We were utterly delighted when we wrote her back and her mom called us right away."

Their meeting was highly emotional.

"Her mom and I were crying and I could cry again just thinking about it," Ms Kramer said. "We were meeting these kids who are essentially not our kids, but there was part of our child there. We had this unexplainable bond."

In May, the Kramers will board a plane to New York to meet up with Anna again, and this time they will also connect with two more half-sisters they have located.

"It is overwhelming just to think about it," Ms Kramer said. "A mixture of fear and joy and excitement and anxiety and relief."

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