

Written by Kerstin Kullman
Translated into English by Jeremy Martinez

BENJAMIN RASMUSSEN / DER SPIEGEL

Die genetische Sehnsucht

Künstliche Befruchtung Wendy Kramer hilft Kindern aus Eizell- oder Samenspenden, ihre biologischen Eltern zu finden. Jahrelang suchte sie selbst nach dem anonymen Vater ihres Sohns.

Mutter Kramer

The Genetic Desire

Artificial Insemination: Wendy Kramer helps children of sperm donors and egg donors find their biological parents. She spent years in an independent search for her son's anonymous father.

Wendy Kramer and her son had made countless phone calls, written numerous letters, and poured over tons of birth registries. They took part in radio interviews, television shows, and even went so far as to create a website and undergo genetic testing. They searched 13 years for Ryan's biological father. They just needed to know who this donor was.

Wendy and her son have given him many names over the years: they call him "Mike", "Superman", "the alien" or simply "Donor 1058": It is under this number that the donor is registered in a California sperm bank. An anonymous donor.

After much searching, they finally come across a name and an E-mail address. There is only one question left on their minds: How do you go about telling a person, a person who does not want to be found, that you are his son? "Let's go to bed" Wendy says. "We will think about it some more in the morning".

Ryan is 15. He lies awake. He sits himself in front of his computer, writes

a letter, and hits the enter key. Just like that, it is done. He runs into his mother's bedroom, "I just sent him a message".

Donor 1058 is named Lance. He is in his late thirties, has no children, and lives in California.

Later, on a radio interview, Lance tells of the moment he first opened Ryan's letter. He went into his inbox and, in the subject line of the message, sees two words: "Interesting information".

The first lines read "Lance, where do I start? My name is Ryan Kramer. I am 15 years old and live in Nederland, Colorado. Fifteen years ago, my mother was fertilized using sperm from an anonymous donor, a 'Donor 1058'. You may want to sit down for the rest of this."

"It was like something out of a science-fiction movie", says Lance. "Who writes to you, so out of nowhere, telling you that you are his father?"

Back in Colorado, Ryan and his mother wait anxiously for a response. Two days later, a message from Lance finally arrives: "I am thrilled to be your biological father". Today, almost 10 years later, Wendy says "I wasn't too concerned about what he wrote. I just wanted him to be nice to my son".

Kramer, 56, stands in her house in the mountains of Nederland.

There is a large, newly-renovated hay shed, painted blue, and colorful birdhouses dangle on her veranda. She is a woman of petite stature and wears light-wash jeans and a gray sweater. Dozens of pictures hang from the refrigerator in her kitchen. Snapshots of Lance, of Ryan. As children, as students. In some, Lance and Ryan stand together. "The same chin and the same smile, huh?", says Kramer.

The end of their search marked the beginning of their friendship with Lance. However, now it was time for them to help other donor-children in the search for their own biological fathers.

Kramer works from home. In their search for "Donor 1058", Ryan and his mother created a website they named the "Donor Sibling Registry" (DSR). The site serves as a database through which children of anonymous sperm or egg donors can meet half-siblings and, hopefully, their biological parents.

Everybody that registers can provide any information they may have regarding the donor. From what clinic was the sperm or egg from? What is the donor number? What is his or her date of birth? Even details like height, hair color, and eye color can be useful information when searching for the donor.

Upon accessing the website you are greeted with one very important message “First things first: take a deep breathe”.

Wendy Kramer and her son, who is now 24, fight for the right of donor-children to know where they come from. They also want to prove though, that it is possible to provide donor-children with this right without turning the lives of the donors upside-down.

Fathers, mothers, and half siblings can all meet each other on this website, however, they do not have to. “Contact is only made if both parties agree to it”, explains Kramer. Whoever is registered can search anonymously through the database and later may decide whether or not he/she wants to exchange contact information.

The site has over 45,000 members worldwide and over 22,000 donors are listed. Upwards of 12,000 members have found relatives through this website.

The Donor Sibling Registry stands as the world’s largest database for children of artificial insemination and their donors. There are currently 90 members in Germany. Of these 90 members, 50 of them have successfully made contact with half-siblings and 10 have even found their biological fathers.

What they all have in common is what Wendy Kramer has appropriately termed “the genetic yearning”. She remembers seeing it in her own son just a few years ago.

Her story began while Kramer was with her former husband. He was infertile and, in 1989, they decided to turn to artificial insemination. One year after the birth of her son Ryan, Kramer and her husband decided to divorce. Wendy remained alone and her young son remained fatherless. Ryan was very young when he began asking questions. Wendy had no choice but to take Ryan’s questioning seriously.

The end of January was accompanied by a landmark federal Court case in which two girls conceived through an anonymous sperm donation were granted the right to receive the name their donor despite his desire to remain anonymous.

As a result of this ruling, children are now allowed to obtain information about their donors at the clinic information desk. This “great unknown” associated with artificial insemination holds no place in a future Germany.

For the first time since 2007, sperm banks in Germany are committed to keeping donor information for at least 30 years. This 30-year-long keeping period

is noticeably longer than ever before. For some donor-children however, this change in policy has come too late and their search for their biological parents will likely remain difficult.

There are many situations in which people may seek artificial insemination. Some of these include infertile couples, homosexual couples, and single people who simply want to be parents. Before the procedure, the sperm banks present the qualities of each donor. Criteria such as health, intelligence, and skills of the donor are often taken into account. The quality of the genetic material is extremely important.

After the procedure, many wish to forget about the genetic process as quickly as possible. Love and care should be the glue that holds the family together. This, however, is not enough for many children. There is a deep-rooted, human need to know of your genetic origin.

Two Internet routers blink in the room. A computer hums on the desk and, just a few short feet away, a laptop sits on the living room table. This is Kramer’s workroom in Nederland.

Every morning at 5AM, coffee cup in hand, Kramer sits in this room and gets to work. It is nearly everyday that the phone

rings and someone is asking her for advice. What do you do when your son finds out he was the result of artificial insemination? What if half-siblings suddenly stop replying?

She soon opens up an inquiry. Jennifer, a woman in her mid-twenties, is searching for her biological father. She does not know her donor number. She simply gives her height, hair color and eye color. "Best of luck", writes Kramer.

Messages of this sort come up multiple times a day. The young woman paid the \$75 fee for a one year registration to Kramer's site. A lifelong membership costs \$175. For years Kramer operated the site in her free time and, up until fairly recently, the funding for the project came out of her own wallet.

The website eventually grew too large for her to maintain while also working her full-time job as an accountant. It is then that she registered the DSR as a charity organization, established a membership fee, and cut out a small portion of her site's earnings as a salary.

"Wow", says Kramer. "A donor just messaged me. That's a special occurrence". His donor number



has appeared in the database before and, therefore, he can begin searching for some of his potential children. However, he does not want to come forward and make contact right away.

Kramer takes a look at his donor number: 10 kids have been registered under his number. "He's probably feeling a bit queasy right about now", she says. Kramer will suggest to the donor that he give the kids a call. Already she knows what he will probably say: "I'm not their father." Maybe even something like "They're not getting any money from me."

Kramer will try to calm him down a bit. She will tell him that, up to this point, she has never heard of a donor-child asking the donor for money and no child will show up at the foot of his door in the foreseeable future.

Over the last few years, Kramer has worked closely with many universities, such as Cambridge, to co-author several scientific papers. Her database has long been a true treasure for reproduction researchers, psychologists, and

sociologists around the world.

By taking polls of the DSR members, scientists sought to discover why children were actively seeking out their biological parents. Kramer states "in order of importance, the answers are, first, simply to see what the donor looks like. Second: to learn something about themselves. Third: to learn more about their own ancestry. Fourth: to get to know their medical histories and predispositions. Fifth: to simply let the donor know that they exist. Finally, to build a relationship with their donor.

Kramer pushes her computer aside. The answers show that, above all else, the children would like to satisfy their own sense of curiosity. "It is nothing that could potentially ruin any stable family".

Didn't your son's interest in some strange man bother you at all?

"No, never. Really, not at all".

There are many parents, however, that are not happy with this situation. What if the child begins to love them less?

"Children tend to cope very well with the truth", says Kramer. "If someone is ashamed of his inability to reproduce, this is an issue he needs to come to terms with himself." These are problems of the parents, not of the children.

Kramer feels that it is best to tell the children very early on that they were conceived by way of a sperm or egg donation.

Kramer stands up and goes over to the window. Snow covered the ground. She says: "Ryan stood over there by the driveway one day when he was only two years old. He asked: What's the deal with my father? Is he dead or what?"

She didn't know what to say; she didn't want to lie to him. She told Ryan: "Mommy had an egg but she didn't have sperm. A doctor helped me get sperm. Then you were born"

He was very satisfied with the answer. As Ryan grew, however, his desire to know the "great unknown" grew with him. His mother gave the clinic a call but they refused to give up any information. The only information she had was the data the donor had originally provided in his profile. Kramer keeps it in a yellow envelope. The first page reads: "California Cryobank, Donor 1058". After that there is date of birth, birthplace, height, weight, hair color. It also states that the donor studied engineering. The next page reads: "Why are you donating?" The answer: "For the money."

Ryan developed very quickly. When he was only 6 years old, he was already

reading books about electrical circuits. His elementary school teacher got him to take an IQ-Test. The results showed an IQ of 181, the IQ of an extremely gifted child.

He finished high school by age 14 and, by age 19, he had already finished college and began working as an aerospace engineer for NASA. Naturally, his mother finds herself asking: Where did that come from? How did he turn up this way? Kramer is an accountant. She says: "He certainly didn't get it from me."

Ryan became well known as a prodigy throughout the state of Colorado. Newspapers wrote many articles on him and he even made a few appearances on television. Mother and son began making their search public. One thought never left their minds: What if the donor changed his mind over the years? What if he doesn't want to get to know Ryan? "But the sperm bank was not willing to help us make contact", says Kramer. Kramer and her son began searching on their own.

When Ryan was 10 years old, she created a Yahoo Group in which other donor children were invited to share information. Soon thereafter, the editors of the television show "Oprah" called. Oprah Winfrey is one of the most famous talk show hosts in all of the US.

Ryan made an appearance on her show.

The night the show was aired, more than 500 new members joined the group. One woman wrote that she had two daughters from Donor 1058. Ryan was overjoyed and was ecstatic to make plans to visit them.

That night, however, they received another email: The girls are not allowed to know of their half brother. The girls' parents had never disclosed the nature of the girls' conception to them and their non-biological father wanted to keep it that way.

Ryan is furious. His mother tells him that he has to respect the decision. Instead of getting to know his own siblings, he now turned his attention to bringing together the members of the Yahoo-Group. Soon thereafter, they founded the database.

Ryan was not ready to give up though. He took a special genetics test. Interest in genealogical research is very widespread in the US. Many people want to know more about their ancestry. By comparing special genetic markers, people can find potential relatives that may be stored on the database.

Two men matched Ryan at "Marker 37". This meant that the men at least had similar ancestors. Both men had the same last name. Now Ryan just

needed to now what his donor's last name was.

In her office, Wendy spreads out a large, two-sided paper. It is a chart that Ryan and his mother had put together during their search. The left side contained everything they already knew about Donor 1058. On the right, assumption and guesses. "When we could verify a piece of information, we would mark it in yellow", says Kramer. They were like detectives.

From the donor profile, they knew both when and where the donor was born. They acquired a list of births from the registry. Exactly one boy with the specific last name was born that day.

They Googled the name, found a mailing address, and even a few photos. Little by little the right side of their spreadsheet grew increasingly yellow. Eventually they were sure: They found Donor 1058.

Wendy folded up the pages in front of her. She says: "If the sperm banks would tell the donors how much this meant to the children, the donors would be much more open to making contact."

If someone knows that they would never come forth as the donor, according to Kramer, then it is best that they do not donate. That is exactly what the sperm banks fear, however:

that almost nobody will donate if they are not guaranteed anonymity.

After Lance replied to Ryan's email, they continued to write back and forth for a while. Ryan wants to know: What kind of music do you like? What do you do for a living? Eventually Lance made a suggestion: Do you want to meet me and your grandparents?

They arrange to meet at a hotel lobby. Wendy Kramer describes the meeting as wonderful, but both men were a bit awkward. At first, Lance and Ryan put their hands against one another's and compare the lengths of their fingers.

After that, things became more normal. The grandparents were very excited about their new grandson. Lance stays a bit skeptical, however. Once, says Wendy, Lance asked Ryan: "What is it that your mother actually wants from me?" Ryan answered: "Nothing. It's not about my mother, it's about me."

After a few months, Ryan moved to San Francisco where he now works for Apple. Lance too lives there: He works for Google.

What are they now, then? A family? Yes, something like that, thinks Wendy Kramer. A new kind of family. And what does she think about Lance?

"I am very thankful". she says. But she remains

cautious. She doesn't want him to think this is about anything more than about Ryan: "We only have contact if their are organizational questions."

Wendy and Ryan proved, with great patience, that they had no ulterior motives behind finding Lance. Just curiosity.

In the beginning of the year, all three of them went out to a bar in San Francisco. It was the first time that Lance ever stood publicly with his son. Many work colleagues were there and they quickly asked how they knew each other.

Wendy Kramer had already had a response planned. She said: "Ryan is my son, and Lance is my anonymous sperm donor who is no longer anonymous." The sentence was received well, says Kramer and everyone who heard the story was extremely enthused.

Near the end of the night, Lance came over to Wendy once more. He said: "Wendy, the boy has grown up very well. That is all because of you."

She replied: "No, that was also your doing. Thanks to the genes you passed on."