



"I'm glad my children will have an uncle now," says Tyler (right) with his half brother Stuart. (Below: Stuart, left, and Tyler at age 5).

HIDDEN DANGERS

ARE SPERM DONORS' KIDS AT RISK?

Rebecca Blackwell discovered her son had 35 half siblings—and a life-threatening heart defect

BY NICOLE WEISENSEE EGAN



T Tyler Blackwell liked being an only child. But when the 18-year-old history buff learned he had 35 half siblings, conceived through the same sperm-donor father, "I was surprised and fascinated," says Tyler, a college freshman in Frederick, Md. "I had read stories about

this. I started picturing some giant family reunion."

So far Tyler has met just one half brother. But his mother's search for his biological father revealed that Tyler had inherited more than his donor's blue eyes. He had a life-threatening heart defect that, if not corrected, could result in a fatal

aneurysm. "I was terrified he was going to drop dead," says mom Rebecca, 59. Such concerns were far from her mind when, single at 40, she selected her tall, blond, apparently healthy donor. "It was now or never," she says. "I thought it was very safe."

There are more than a million people alive today in the United States

"He's the love of my life," says Blackwell of Tyler.



Stuart, with parents Price and Jeff Davis.

conceived by sperm donors, but because sperm banks keep donor identities secret and generally only screen for sexually transmitted diseases, most of these kids are missing key information about their medical histories. Now, though, moms like Rebecca Blackwell are at the forefront of a new movement calling for greater disclosure. "There's not enough regulation," says Sonia Suter, a law professor and bioethicist at George Washington University. "It's the Wild West." Adds Wendy Kramer, founder of the Donor Sibling Registry: "We don't know how many kids are walking time bombs."

Discovering those risks turned Blackwell into an unlikely medical crusader. In January 2010, after get-

ting in touch with her donor, she learned he had the heart defect; her donor also had Asperger's syndrome, something Tyler also has and Blackwell believes was passed on. Tyler had corrective heart surgery, but he'll have to be monitored for life. Relieved about her own son, she grew terrified on behalf of the other 35 kids her donor had fathered: "I didn't want children to die." So she took it upon herself to make sure the three sperm banks where Tyler's father—No. 832 to Blackwell—had donated were notified. (The donor declined to comment.) Sean Tipton, a spokesman for the American Society of Reproductive Medicine, which oversees sperm banks, says "human

“**EVERY CHILD HAS A RIGHT TO KNOW WHERE THEY CAME FROM**”
—REBECCA BLACKWELL

reproduction is a risky venture.” Blackwell's efforts paid off, and then some. After spotting a news article about Blackwell, Rebeca Price of Santa Fe got in touch. Her son Stuart, 17, was Tyler's half brother; he also has

Asperger's and a milder version of the heart defect. "I don't think I will ever be able to express how grateful I am to Rebecca Blackwell," says Price, 53. "She's a lifesaver in every sense of the word." Last month the two families met at Price's home, and the moms were amazed. "They stand alike. They walk alike," says Blackwell. Tyler, who is sending Stuart a chapter of a story he's writing, doesn't feel the need to meet his other half sibs, but he's glad he's found a brother. "We got along well," he says. "It was pretty cool." ●

**BORN WITH HELP:
DONOR BABIES
BY THE NUMBERS***

30-60,000

SPERM-DONOR
CONCEIVED BABIES
BORN EACH YEAR

60%

OF SPERM DONORS
DONATE MORE
THAN 50 TIMES

9,300

HALF SIBLINGS AND
DONORS HAVE
FOUND EACH OTHER
THROUGH THE
DONOR SIBLING
REGISTRY



Stuart (upper left) and Tyler (upper right) as babies, with their sperm donor's questionnaire.

*Source: Donor Sibling Registry and the Congressional Office of Technology Assessment.