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More children born from sperm donors seeking out genetic family

By Amanda Woerner / Published January 24, 2014 / FoxNews.com



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John Robbart, a 23-year-old from San Diego, Calif., has known he was conceived using a sperm donor for as long as he can remember. But, it wasn't until a few years ago, after he joined the U.S. Marines and was about to be deployed, that Robbart decided to seek out the man who shared half of his DNA.

"I wasn't really looking for anyone to teach me how to shave or throw a baseball anymore, those parts of my life are over," Robbart, who was raised by two lesbian mothers, told FoxNews.com. "But I was looking for someone to mentor me a bit and to fill that curiosity that I've always felt since I was a young boy."

Through the [Donor Sibling Registry](#), a non-profit web site that seeks to connect people with their donors or half-siblings, Robbart had already been in touch with two of his half-sisters, who had been born from the same donor's sperm. When Robbart decided to seek out his donor, he turned to Google.

"[My biological mother] had his name, and with the power of Google, you can pretty much find a picture of anything," Robbart said. "I went on YouTube and found a video of him talking, and [then] I found him on Facebook."

Eventually, Robbart was able to meet his father face-to-face.

"When I met my dad, it was kind of like looking in the mirror," Robbart said.

'Build it and they will come'

Reports of children tracking down their sperm donors and

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half-siblings have become increasingly common in recent years, as more young people use resources like Facebook, Google and the Donor Sibling Registry to track down their genetic relatives.

In 2003, when FoxNews.com [first reported on the Donor Sibling Registry](#), the site had produced only 70 matches and had fewer than 2,000 members. But by 2007, membership had grown to 16,000 – and as of 2013 the site claims 42,000 registered users.

Wendy Kramer founded the registry in 2000 to help her own son get in touch with his donor. She said media attention and recent films like “Delivery Man,” starring Vince Vaughn, and the MTV show, “Generation Cryo,” have boosted visits to the online registry – making people feel more comfortable about seeking out information on their donor.

“The more we got that word out there, that not only did they have the right to be curious, search and connect, but that there was a vehicle to do that... what we did is one of those ‘build it and they will come’ things,” Kramer, author of the book *Finding Our Families*, told FoxNews.com.

Now, nearly 70 percent of all people who sign up for the Donor Sibling Registry successfully match with a genetic relative – with an average wait time of only 116 days.

A largely unregulated industry

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) exercises little control over the sperm and egg donation industries. It was only in 2005 that they began to require donors be screened for a variety of health risks.

When asked by FoxNews.com, representatives from both the FDA and the American Society for Reproductive Medicine said they have no data regarding the number of children born from sperm donors in the United States.

As a result, sites like the Donor Sibling Registry have stepped in to fill the gap – and in the process, they have ended up unofficially policing the industry.

Kramer said stories like the one told in the film “Delivery Man,” in which Vince Vaughn’s character finds out his sperm donations resulted in 533 children, are no laughing matter – and may not be far from the truth.

“I thought when I went into it, it’s a medical community. It’s a doctor, and of course they follow medical ethics. We were wrong. They are sperm sellers,” Kramer said. “There’s no oversight, no regulation,

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nobody watching, so there's nobody demanding record keeping."

Kramer said she's experienced resistance from sperm banks, who wish to maintain the anonymity of clients and avoid regulations that might put a damper on their for-profit businesses. However, Kramer said egg donation clinics and agencies have been more willing to cooperate.

"We have probably 25 or more clinics and egg agencies that are now writing the Donor Sibling Registry into their contracts. Donors and recipients have contact with each other on the website right from the beginning. They can share and update information with each other, anonymously if they want," Kramer said. "Not one sperm bank has done this."

Kramer said she'd like to see sperm and egg donation clinics keep more accurate records, properly counsel recipients and donors, and update and share medical records. She also noted that she hopes they begin limiting the number of children per donor – and eventually end donor anonymity altogether.

Until then, Kramer said she'll continue to help donors and siblings share their stories.

"What it does ultimately is keep it as a public conversation, keeps it relevant, keeps the sperm banking and egg industry on their toes. Because people are talking about it, telling their stories and watching," Kramer said.

As for Robbart, who has developed a good relationship with his biological father, he hopes the Donor Sibling Registry will help more people connect their half-siblings with their donors.

"I wish that there was at least a way to know...are there many more out there?" Robart said. "...I'd love to meet them if they are out there."

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