

Web site finds missing pieces of biological heritage

Donor Sibling Registry in Nederland provides venue for personal search
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Author: Keely Brown

NEDERLAND – When Wendy Kramer's son Ryan was still a young child, she told him the truth about his genetic heritage: He was donor-conceived.

"I never wanted it to be a cause for shame with him," she said. Instead, it led to a journey of discovery for both mother and son – as well as thousands of others in similar situations around the world.

Ryan started searching for his biological connections at an early age. By the time he was 9, he found out from a California sperm bank that there were other children conceived from the same donor that contributed to his genetic make-up. Intrigued, Ryan and his mother put out a message on a Yahoo group messaging board, and that's how it all began.

Today, the Donor Sibling Registry, online at www.donorsiblingregistry.com, matches donor-conceived people with their half-siblings and biological parents.

From that one message posted on Yahoo in 2000, 1,000 messages soon appeared, and in 2003 Kramer started a Web site from her home in Nederland. As of this year, the Donor Sibling Registry has since grown to 6,327 members and has been able to match about 2,400 half-siblings or donors.

The Web site provides a match-up service for those who are donor conceived or who donated to a sperm bank – even if it was decades ago – and are curious about connecting with, or finding out information about, members of their biological family.

For a membership fee of \$40, those searching can post a message with information about themselves that may provide a clue to others seeking family members. By becoming a member, you can contact other members you think may have information relevant to your search.

In addition, anyone can browse the messages already posted for free without becoming a member. All postings are done on a mutual consent basis, and since Kramer does not release a client's personal information, privacy is guaranteed.

For those seeking biological matches, Kramer said the name of the sperm bank and the donor number are the best identifiers. Unfortunately, this information is not always made available to donors.

"Many are having a hard time getting numbers from sperm banks, because the sperm banks don't want to facilitate this type of connecting," Kramer said. "Since they're in the business of selling sperm, they think it may cause challenges or problems that could put a kink in their business."

Another major obstacle has to do with the issue of disclosure – particularly since sperm donation is often done with the casual anonymity of donating blood at a blood bank.

"Eighty to 90 percent of heterosexual couples don't tell their children when they're donor-conceived," Kramer said. "There's always been this shroud of secrecy or shame. A lot of children are lied to and find out inadvertently later in life, and it can be very damaging."

Kramer feels that a child's right to know about their parentage overrules any qualms a parent might have in telling them.

"We've come far in the idea that honesty is best in the area of adoptions, but in donor and artificial insemination we're not there, yet," she said. "Sperm banks are still counseling people to lie. We have a long way to go before there's complete openness."

In addition, Kramer said that many sperm banks don't keep accurate records, and some have even come to the Donor Sibling Registry Web site in order to update their files.

"We found 33 kids from one donor," Kramer said. "But no one's keeping track of all this."

The Donor Sibling Registry is a nonprofit organization and is completely run by Kramer and her son Ryan, who is now 16 and already beginning his third year at the University of Colorado. Since Ryan's own curiosity about his biological origins inspired the search, it is only fitting that he is a full business partner and co-founder of the registry.

"I think it's innate in humans to want to know where they came from," Kramer added. "My son has said that when he looks in the mirror, he can pull half of the things about him – his personality, talents and interests – from my side, but there's the invisible half as well. That's the missing piece of the puzzle."

This curiosity, Kramer said, is the main reason people come to her Web site. Others want to find out genetic history due to medical concerns – just as in adoptions. And for those who were seeking a

physical connection, many real family relationships have developed due to successful matches. A recent success story involved a pair of twin girls from Littleton who have reunited with three other half-siblings from Longmont and Denver.

Kramer, who also works full time as an accountant, said that the Donor Sibling Registry is run entirely by membership dues and donations. So far this year, the nonprofit has taken in \$60,329 from memberships worldwide, as well as \$3,585 from donations and \$3,000 in grant money from organizations such as the Boulder Community Foundation's Alexandra Fund.

As for Ryan Kramer, he already has found nine half-siblings as a result of the registry, and hopes to find more.

And with all the local and national coverage the Donor Sibling Registry is receiving, including appearances on Oprah, Good Morning America and 60 Minutes, Wendy Kramer is confident that Ryan, as well as thousands of others, will continue to find the missing pieces of their biological heritage.

"It's fabulous," said Kramer. "I know that every time there's media exposure, people are going to find each other."