

Through the Web, kids of sperm-donor dads connect with siblings

By RICK MONTGOMERY

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Sitting on his mother's lap at the computer, Charlie Rusco smiled when a picture of his soul mate popped on the screen.

"I call him brother," said Charlie, 8, of Jack, a younger boy he first met in 2005. "We went hiking. We played in his swimming pool. We kind of got along right away."

The only link between Charlie in Kansas and Jack in California is a sperm donor whose name they don't know.

Ditto for their half-sisters: Dana in New York, the twins in Colorado, a teenage girl who sends Christmas cards from Los Angeles.

Five families and counting, they mostly stay in touch by way of the World Wide Web that brought them together.

Through an online social network called the Donor Sibling Registry, thousands of people conceived from sperm or egg donations have found the relatives they had always figured were out there.

"It's a fascinating development that goes to the question of what constitutes a 'family' in the 21st century," said David M.J. Lazer of Harvard University, who has studied the legal implications of Web-driven family matchmaking.

"It's meaningful for the people who want to know, 'Who am I and with whom am I connected?'"

Not all donors are eager to help. But some are.

Having made their contributions years ago, anonymously, typically as a way to raise money to get through college, about 1,000 have logged onto the network — although many still keep their identities secret.

They include an East Coast lawyer named Ben, 31, who asked not to be identified in this story, citing a confidentiality agreement with a clinic. Curious about what his sperm donations as a young man produced, he tapped into the registry his designated donor number and the clinic where he gave.

The clinic had also provided Ben's donor number to mothers who were artificially inseminated. And many of them had typed that number into the network, looking for Ben even before he began exploring.

What he discovered now fills a spreadsheet.

Ben, who is single, has at least 60 children out there. All are 6 or younger, logged on by their parents to the registry.

He was staggered by the number and unsure what to do with it.

“It would be a full-time job to keep meaningful conversations with 60 people,” he said. “That is the quandary.”

He has chosen to meet with just a couple of the inquiring mothers. He provides any relevant information to the others through anonymous e-mails. “Right now I’m comfortable answering the occasional question,” Ben said.

Finding Jack

For Charlie’s mother, Roxanna Rusco of Topeka, tracking her only child’s half-siblings has been all good.

A single mom by choice, she joined the Donor Sibling Registry in 2005 and still hasn’t heard from the anonymous donor who made Charlie possible. But more than a third of the man’s offspring, known to total 16, have taken the initiative to hook up online.

Rusco learned about the registry on the morning TV news, and just a few days after signing on, she received a message from a mother in New York:

“Your boy has a half-brother and a half-sister! My daughter is jumping up and down and is very happy to hear about your son.”

Then pictures started flowing in.

A snapshot of Jack, from Palm Springs, Calif., nearly knocked Rusco out of her chair — a slightly younger Charlie with blond hair instead of brown.

More photos: Twin girls Lizzie and Sydney of Fort Collins, Colo., in a happy embrace, wound up sharing the same birthday as Jack. There was another Sydney, too, a teen girl on the West Coast. She had the same full figure and thick eyebrows as half-sister Dana on the East Coast, who at 16 is the oldest of the group so far.

When the Ruscos flew out to California to meet Jack, “he and my son clicked right from the start,” Roxanna Rusco said.

At a street fair, “both boys were wearing little Spider-Man caps and sort of palling around when someone passing by made the comment, ‘You sure can tell they’re brothers,’ ” she recalled. “Jack’s mom and I looked at each other and went, ‘Yeah, I guess they are.’ ”

Studio photos of the boys together now hang in Charlie’s bedroom.

The Internet has facilitated forms of sleuthing unfathomable 15 or 20 years ago, when sperm donors who helped conceive some of today's online searchers could not have imagined the tools available.

At Fairfax Cryobank in Virginia, one of the nation's largest depositories of donated sperm and egg samples, the whirl of online information-sharing stirs worries about protecting the anonymity of donors and the recipients they help.

"We haven't seen a decline in interest, but our screening process does include a discussion of the Internet," said laboratories manager Michelle Ottey.

Donors increasingly are agreeable to having their identities released, she said. But for those who wish to remain private, "there's a common theme of wanting to help couples grow their families, but not wanting to have any role in that..."

"It's significant, also, for the recipients who choose anonymous donors. They don't want a chance of those donors someday entering their lives."

At the Donor Sibling Registry all users have volunteered to step forward — either to network with a biological parent who has logged on or, more commonly, to find half-siblings.

Registry founder Wendy Kramer said the network has matched more than 6,000 offspring since its creation in 2000.

"We're not outing anyone," she said. "Each person wants to find somebody. It's all anonymous until you feel comfortable enough to make direct contact — and for each person, that's going to be a unique set of considerations."

No. 1058

Kramer's son, Ryan, was 2 when he asked, "So, did my dad die or what?"

No, he was Donor No. 1058.

With that information received from the clinic, she launched the Web site, her way of trying to answer her son's persistent questions.

Nearly 3,000 other users of the site had made connections of their own before someone responded to the posting about Donor No. 1058. A 13-year-old girl named Anna had the same biological father.

(Anyone 18 or older can log onto the site for a fee, but younger people must have a parent's permission.)

“Oh, the surge of relief that washed over Ryan and me,” Kramer writes on the site. “This young girl not only had her parents’ permission, but they seemed as excited as we were to have found the match.

“Call it destiny, but Anna shares the same birthday with Ryan. As I was serving a 3-year-old Ryan his Superman birthday cake, Anna was being born 2,000 miles away.”

They’re now close friends, both entering adulthood and referring to each other as brother and sister.

Practical reasons exist for half-siblings to hook up. They can share health information and learn about potential genetic links to any diseases that may arise.

When artificial insemination is performed, fertility clinics provide to patients extensive medical histories and personality profiles of the donors. But often their health issues later in life never get reported to clinics.

For this reason, among others, the Ruscos of Topeka would be open to someday connecting with Charlie’s donor.

“I know my donor ran marathons” because the Web site says so, Charlie said.

The man’s online profile, drawn mainly from a clinic catalogue: Born 1968... Blood: O-positive. Interests: Music, art, sports, dirt-bike riding

Charlie smiled again. He’s got a dirt bike, too.

The social network for those seeking links to genetic relatives by artificial insemination is at donorsiblingregistry.com.