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'Donor siblings' taking advantage of chance to meet

By Bonnie Pfister

TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Sunday, December 10, 2006

Sherra Basham doesn't even like "60 Minutes."

But one Sunday evening in March, in an armchair nursing an achy back, and with the TV's remote control nowhere in sight, the North Hills software programmer let the CBS news program natter on for several minutes. Then a tout for an upcoming segment drew her to the edge of her seat.

It was a feature about "donor siblings" – how children who are offspring of the same sperm donor, born to and reared by different mothers, were finding each other through the Internet.

Basham's interest turned to amazement as the camera panned across the faces of five such children from Colorado, who somewhat resembled her daughter, Bree, 11. Then she heard the words "donor number 66."

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"I gazzelled out of the chair," Basham said. "I never went to sleep that night."

She raced to her computer to check out

Photo Gallery

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Sherra Basham with 11-year-old Bree Jasmine Gehris/Tribune-Review

click to enlarge



Meet the 'donor siblings' Photo courtesy of Sherra Basham

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www.donorsiblingregistry.com, a Web site designed by a Denver single mother, Wendy Kramer, and her teenage son, Ryan, who was curious to learn about any genetic family he might have.

Within minutes, Basham had her confirmation. Bree was indeed the half-sister of twins Rebecca and Erin Baldwin, 18; Justin Senk, 16; and Tyler and McKenzie

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Gibson, 19 and 13, all of Colorado, where Basham and her then-husband lived from 1992 to 2001. All were conceived with sperm from Donor No. 66, described as a 5-foot, 7-inch Caucasian surgical assistant with blue eyes and blond hair, born in 1951.

Basham feels she was fated to see that broadcast.

"I believe things happen for a reason," Basham said. "My overwhelming feeling was, 'It's time for Bree to know the truth.'"

**DEALING WITH THE TRUTH**

Sperm donation has existed for more than a century, but in the past 30 years it and other assisted reproductive technologies have expanded the definition of family in new and sometimes ethically nettlesome ways.

Like many such parents, Basham and her husband decided not to tell their child how she was conceived. But with more sperm banks - in response to consumer demand - establishing protocols for offspring and donors to contact each other if both wish, coupled with the easy accessibility of information and long-distance relationships via the Internet, the trend toward greater openness is under way. Some see this evolution paralleling the way attitudes toward adoption have grown less rigid and secretive over recent decades.

Jenny Wolsk Bain said in her nearly three years as a fertility counselor in the Pittsburgh area, none of the 25 couples and single women she has advised wanted contact with their donor. Only about half planned to tell their children about the circumstances surrounding their conception.

"There are people who feel there's nothing secret about it, but it's just private," she said. Others fear running afoul of their religion: the Roman Catholic Church and Orthodox Judaism have strictures against such techniques. And lingering notions linking manhood to the ability to propagate prompts many fathers who rear these children to keep the information under wraps.

Experts suggest parents tell their children the truth, answering the universal question of where they came from in simple, age-appropriate terms as children raise it. The American Society for Reproductive Medicine advises openness with children, particularly to avoid consanguinity -- a situation in which an adult child unknowingly conceives a baby of his or her own with someone also related to the sperm donor.

"There's a tendency to think this is a life-shattering decision," Wolsk Bain said, but many children are fine with such information if it's clear that parents are, too. "If you're embarrassed, or feel like a failure, that's going to be conveyed to the child."

As for telling others, Wolsk Bain said there can be good reasons for discretion.

"Some people are so excited after years of trying to conceive they tell the world all the details," she said. "Then they have the child and realize, 'This is a person, this isn't just a story; I don't want everyone to know.' There is no reason not to take it slow, even if you're planning full disclosure."

Although registry founder Wendy Kramer feels personally that family secrets are "toxic," she said parents should not push a child who's not interested to reach out to half-siblings or donors.

"This is not about your needs, your curiosity," Kramer said.

**TAKING IT ALL IN**

For Basham, secrecy was counter to her instincts, but she ceded to her husband's wishes.

"He didn't want (Bree) to treat him differently. He didn't want his family to treat him differently," she said. Basham's ex-husband declined to be interviewed for this article.

"I insisted that we tell our parents," said Basham, 48. "But every medical history you fill out for your child is half a lie."

Through the couple's separation and 2005 divorce, Basham said she never revisited the decision. But after learning that her daughter's genetic siblings existed and were reaching out to each other, she wrestled for several days with what to do. A week later, during Bree's spring break, she explained the situation.



After the reunion  
Jasmine  
Gehris/Tribune-Review

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Of Bree's half-brothers and sisters in Colorado, Basham said she told her daughter: "We can meet them, or not. Your father is your father, and always will be. But I feel you are ready to know this."

Basham said Bree quietly took the information in, then asked her mother if she had her birth certificate from Colorado. When Basham said yes, Bree replied, "That's all I need to know" and briskly changed the subject.

Over the next several weeks, the tomboy with the sparkly hazel eyes who enjoys algebra, the books of R.L. Stine and the music of Beethoven asked more questions.

"It was a little confusing," Bree said. "I wanted a lot of explanation."

**MEET AND GREET**

Back in Colorado, several teenagers with similar complexions, noses and smiles were champing at the bit to meet their youngest half-sister.

"It was surprising. We didn't think there was anyone younger than McKenzie," said Rebecca Baldwin, 18, whose online surfing of the registry after reading a newspaper story about the Kramers initiated the first of the meetings of Donor 66's offspring in November 2004.

In October, Bree packed 13 stuffed animals into a carry-on bag for her first airplane trip, and she and Basham flew to Denver.

"I was beside myself," Rebecca said. "Her personality, her sense of humor. She fits in great."

Rebecca and twin Erin say they think of the other children as siblings. Bree is more reticent, perhaps because of the distance and the newness of the situation.

"I think of them more as very, very, very good friends," Bree said.

Although Erin and Bree were neutral on the subject of one day meeting Donor 66, Rebecca said she's curious to see if the traits she doesn't have in common with her mother and sister could be traced to someone else. But, she said, that wouldn't make him her father, although she was raised by a single mother.

No. 66, however, has yet to step forward.

"I'd like to thank him. He has connected the moms, connected our lives," Basham said. "He has given us the most precious gift -- the gift of a child, a child's love."

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