

'Donor Unknown' chronicles real-life children of anonymous sperm donors in Tribeca Film Fest doc

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Danielle Pagano
 Jeffrey Harrison and Danielle Pagano meet for the first time in 2007.
 Sitting in her basement den, 12-year-old Danielle Pagano looked expectantly at her parents as they walked into the room.

Their body language was awkward, she recalled.

"There's something we need to talk to you about," said her mom, in a serious tone.

The next few sentences made Pagano's head spin: Her dad was not her biological father. Instead, she was the product of donor insemination.

"They said they'd had fertility problems and used an anonymous donor," recalls Pagano, a 22-year-old international relations student from Seaford, L.I.

The soon-to-be teenager took the news badly.

Yelling that she'd been "lied to all my life," she locked herself in the bathroom and demanded to be left alone. Two hours later, only the promise of a trip to the pet store coaxed her out.

"I was angry they'd kept it secret for so long," says Pagano, whose story is followed in the new documentary "Donor Unknown" being shown at the Tribeca Film Festival. At Pagano's request, her parents' views were not included in the film.

"I have no idea why they chose that particular time, but they said they hadn't told me before because I was too young to understand," said Pagano. "But it's not true, because when you explain things like that to a child, you modify your language so they can understand."

Over the next few weeks, she tried to absorb the information and wondered, almost to the point of obsession, who her biological father might be. An only child, she constantly daydreamed about possible brothers and sisters. How many were there? What did they look like?

A few months later, Pagano searched through an old chest, found a faded sheet of paper and discovered her biological dad was known as "Donor 150."

The sheet was his profile with California Cryobank, and included his height (6-foot-1), hair color (blond), eye color (blue), weight (163 pounds) place of birth (Delaware) and, in a handwritten note, a summary of his interests, including yoga, drama, music and philosophy.

"He mentioned a love of animals, which really leapt out at me," she says. "Unlike most of my family — but like all the siblings I eventually found — I am crazy about animals."

Pagano began to search on-line. Behind her parents' back, she signed up with the Donor Sibling Registry, a nonprofit website that puts children like her in touch with one another.

The first time she logged on, she found a match. JoEllen Marsh, from western Pennsylvania, was also a daughter of Donor 150. A year younger than Pagano, she had lesbian parents who had been open about her conception.

Pagano e-mailed Marsh immediately. "I wrote something like: 'It's weird to find my long-lost sister' and asked her to tell me about her life. Then I wrote a little about myself."

Two weeks dragged by before Pagano got a response.

"I was freaking out because I thought she didn't want to talk to me," she says. It turned out Marsh hadn't checked her e-mail. They later talked by phone.

"We kept saying: 'This is so weird,' but it was surprisingly easy for us to get along," says Pagano. Their talks, which lasted hours, helped her deal with her resentment toward her parents.

The girls met in the fall of 2005 at Penn Station. "We sat on a bench and talked and talked," recalls Pagano. "And of course, we compared our features. But it's difficult to say whether we look similar. Some people think we do, some people don't. It depends on the person."

"Then, I guess for fun, we started to play a game — looking across at a guy going past and saying: 'Could he be our father?' or 'What about him?'"

Over five years, as more people joined the donor-sibling registry, Pagano and Marsh have discovered they are two of 12 half-brothers and half-sisters across the U.S.

"We have no idea how many there are in total," says Pagano. "It could be 12, 50, 100, even more. Nobody knows, because sperm donation in this country is unregulated."

The pair is regularly in touch with four siblings — all of whom show the same distinctive high forehead — who also agreed to be filmed for "Donor Unknown."

Danielle hopes their success story will inspire other kids in the same position to track each other down - and that parents will be more open about the issue.

"Parents who don't tell the truth, saying it's not in the interests of the kid to know about their sperm donor, are cowardly," she says. "They really mean it's not in their interests. It really gets me, because they don't have the right to decide.

"It's hypocritical when they say biology and genetics don't matter, as long as a child has loving parents. If it didn't matter to them, then why use donor insemination [not adoption]?"

Pagano and Marsh shared a desire to find their biological dad. Amazingly, 15 months after they were interviewed for an article about the Donor Sibling Registry in a national newspaper, they found him.

Californian Jeffrey Harrison, now 54, read the story and realized he was "Donor 150." In the late 1980s, he earned \$400 a month donating sperm twice a week.

"He told us he was reading the article and spat out his coffee because he was so shocked to see us," says Pagano.

It took him over a year to get in touch — in part, he admits, because he feared the teenagers might be disappointed by his "alternative lifestyle." A one-time stripper and recreational drug user, Harrison doesn't have a steady job and lives with his dogs and an injured pigeon in an RV parked near L.A.'s Venice Beach.

He has, as Pagano describes it, "out there" views on politics and the environment. Above all, he has a deep compassion for animals.

"Jeffrey is definitely an eccentric character, a free spirit," says Pagano, who first spoke to him in February 2007, after he contacted her and Marsh through the registry.

"My siblings and I had tried to figure out his personality from his profile and the shared commonalities between us. It wasn't a complete surprise, as we'd always seen him as an earthy, hippie type — but maybe not quite as a literal hippie! But that's okay. We're cool with that," she said.

She met him that summer in the car park where Harrison lives.

"It was nice seeing him smile at me — we just smiled at each other," recalls Pagano, who says she sees him more as a fun guy to hang out with than a father figure.

"Now we keep in touch by phone and e-mail, talking about stuff we're doing and what my other siblings are up to. He's one of my Facebook friends."

It has been a long, emotional journey for Pagano, who, although she enjoys a close relationship with her siblings and a respectful friendship with Harrison — is still adrift from her parents.

Perhaps if they watch "Donor 150" and its poignant look at family ties, biological and otherwise, they might be drawn closer.

YOU SHOULD KNOW

"Donor Unknown" is one of 20 movies featured on Tribeca Film Festival Online's Streaming Room and can be viewed online for free on selected dates through Saturday. Go to tribecafilmfestival.com for more information.

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