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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

## A Father's Day Plea to Sperm Donors

By COLTON WOOTEN  
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Eleanor Davis

WHEN I was 5, my mother revealed to me that I had been conceived through artificial insemination. This was before I understood anything about sex or where babies came from — I think I thought they just sprang from their mothers' stomachs at random. Because my understanding of conventional conception was so thin, my mom remained vague about the details of my conception — in all its complexity — until I got older.

When that time came, I learned how my mother, closing in on her 40s, found herself unmarried and childless. She had finished graduate school and established a career, but regretted not having a family. And so she decided to take

the business of having a baby into her own capable hands. Artificial insemination seemed like a smart idea, perhaps the only idea.

She arranged a consultation at the University of North Carolina fertility clinic in early 1992. During the visits that followed she examined the profiles of the sperm bank's donors, compared favorable traits and credentials, and picked one. In the autumn of that year, I was born.

My mom's decision intrigued many people. Some saw it as a triumph of female self-sufficiency. But others, particularly her close friends and family, were shocked. "You can't have a baby without a man!" they would gasp.

It turns out, of course, you can, and pretty easily. The harder part, at least for that baby as he grows older, is the mystery of who that man was. Or is.

I didn't think much about that until 2006, when I was in eighth grade and my teacher assigned my class a genealogy project. We were supposed to research our family history and create a family tree to share with the class. In the past, whenever questioned about my father's absence by friends or teachers, I wove intricate alibis: he was a doctor on call; he was away on business in Russia; he had died, prematurely, of a heart attack. In my head, I'd always dismissed him as my "biological father," with that distant, medical phrase.

But the assignment made me think about him in a new way. I decided to call the U.N.C.

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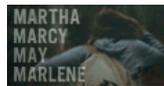
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fertility center, hoping at least to learn my father's name, his age or any minutiae of his existence that the clinic would be willing to divulge. But I was told that no files were saved for anonymous donors, so there was no information they could give me.

In the early days of in vitro fertilization, single women and sterile couples often overlooked a child's eventual desire to know where he came from. Even today, despite recent movies like "The Kids Are All Right," there is too little substantial debate on the subject. The emotional and developmental deficits that stem from an ignorance of one's origins are still largely ignored.

I understand why fertility centers chose to keep sperm donation anonymous. They were attempting to prevent extra chaos, like custody battles, intrusion upon happy families (on either party's side), mothers showing up on donors' doorsteps with homely, misbegotten children with runny noses and untied shoelaces to beg for child support. It's entirely reasonable, and yet the void that many children and young adults born from artificial insemination experience from simply not knowing transcends reason.

I don't resent my mom; she did the best thing she knew how to do at the time, and found a way to make a child under the circumstances. But babies born of the procedure in the future should have the right to know who their donors are, and even have some contact with them. Sperm donors need to realize that they are fathers. When I was doing college interviews, one of the interviewers told me that he didn't have any children, but that he had donated sperm while in college because he needed the money. He didn't realize that he probably is someone's father, regardless of whether he knows his child.

I'm one of those children, and I want to know who my father is. There are some programs like the [Donor Sibling Registry](#) that try to connect those conceived through sperm and egg donation with lost half-siblings and sometimes even parents. But I don't have much hope that I'll ever find him.

For my eighth grade project, I settled on fabricating the unknown side of my family tree, and not much has changed since then. I'm 18 now, today is Father's Day, and I still hardly know anything about my biological father, just a few vague details that my mother remembers from reading his profile so many years ago. I know that he was a medical student at U.N.C. the year I was born. I know that he had olive skin and brown hair. I know that his mother was Italian and his father Irish.

I call myself an only child, but I could very well be one of many siblings. I could even be predisposed to some potentially devastating disease. Because I do not know what my father looks like, I could never recognize him in a crowd of people. I am sometimes overwhelmed by the infinite possibilities, by the reality that my father could be anywhere: in the neighboring lane of traffic on a Friday during rush hour, behind me in line at the bank or the pharmacy, or even changing the oil in my car after many weeks of mechanical neglect.

I am sometimes at such a petrifying loss for words or emotions that make sense that I can only feel astonished by the fact that he could be anyone.

*Colton Wooten graduated from Leesville Road High School this month.*

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