

REAL-LIFE READS

Eve tracked down her dad, and they've now formed a tight bond.

"My Dad Was a Sperm Donor"

For these two young women, the search for their biological fathers was, in large part, a search for themselves. One has an emotional story of success, while the other is still struggling to find the truth. As told to Julie Weingarden Dubin

Eve Andrews, 20

When I was 16, I read my mom's e-mail messages, hoping to learn some gossip—she's the school nurse in our small town of 5,000 people—but instead, I got the shock of a lifetime. The e-mail began "I don't know how to tell my daughter...." It was about artificial insemination.

My parents had used an anonymous sperm donor. That meant my father, Doug, who died when I was 7, wasn't my actual father. I got chills staring at the screen. I felt numb and betrayed because my parents had lied to me. But I also felt a strange sense of peace because I never looked anything like my dad or little sister growing up.

I stayed up all night and tried to think rationally about the situation. I realized that if it hadn't happened, I wouldn't be alive. From that moment on, it didn't bother me that my parents used a donor.

The next morning, I confronted my mom when she was getting ready for work. "I know Doug wasn't my biological father," I blurted out. She froze for a minute and then broke down in tears. My parents didn't tell me because, just as I became old enough to grasp the concept, my father got sick and passed away. My mom asked if I wanted to take the next step and try to find my donor dad. Find him? Yes, and I wanted to know everything about him.

I had to wait until I was 18 before I could contact the sperm bank directly, so I spent two long years wondering about my identity, angry that the bank denied me the only

thing I was born with: my genetic makeup. Fortunately, they'd kept my records. So when I was old enough, they agreed to try to contact my dad. It took about a year and a half before they tracked him down, and one day, I received a message from him saying that he was open to e-mail contact. No matter what happened from that point on, I knew I would have some closure.

Writing back was probably the hardest thing I've ever done. After all, what do you say? This man I'd never met before jacked off 20 years ago, and now, suddenly, he finds out about my existence. So there were no established rules. And I didn't want to sound like a psycho.

Even though he responded within a day, waiting for his reply was torture. And luckily, his curiosity was as strong as mine. Our e-mails started getting longer, and we began building a solid friendship. Within a month, we were also talking on the phone, discussing our childhoods, families, hobbies, sports, politics, movies, music—everything. We had years to catch up on. I not only wanted to know about him, I *needed* to know. I'm at the age when I'm starting to find myself.

Finding Families

The Donor Sibling Registry is a nonprofit that helps donor-conceived people find their biological kin.

SOURCE: DONORSIBLINGREGISTRY.COM

Developing such a strong relationship was the last thing I expected. At the most, I was hoping he'd answer some questions. But the fact that there aren't any social guidelines when making contact with a donor allowed us to be open and honest about our emotions.

We decided to meet last year. I was jittery and anxious, but as soon as I opened the door and saw him smile, all my nervousness disappeared—his smile looked just like mine. We immediately embraced, and it felt natural, not forced. He stayed, and we talked for a few hours as if we hadn't seen each other for a long time.

We've only met twice in the past year because we live far apart, but we e-mail and talk on the phone regularly—we even joke about his one-night stand with a plastic cup. My dad has three other kids—he talks about them all the time, and we all look alike. I want to meet them, but his wife is less than thrilled by my existence. He says her concern is for their children, since they are young and might not be able to understand the situation.

I can't really imagine what it feels like to find out after 18 years of marriage that your husband has another child that he didn't know about. But it isn't like he lied or cheated or did anything wrong. I think she's just trying to protect her family.

Despite that, I'm certain my relationship with my dad will grow stronger. Genetics are funny; we have an incredible connection. I call him Dad, he calls me his daughter, and we say "I love you." People may think it's strange, and I guess I can understand why. But it feels right to me.

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With each DNA test, Kathleen hopes to find the answers she craves.

Kathleen LaBounty, 26

When I was 8, my mom told me I was special and different from other kids. When I asked why, she sat me down and explained that "a very nice man" gave my parents his sperm so my mom could get pregnant.

I had never suspected that my dad was not my biological father, but I did know our interests were very different: He liked to watch a lot of TV, while I was social and into people and animals. But I didn't cry. Instead, I ran downstairs and wrapped my arms around my dad's neck and told him I loved him. He had no idea that my mom had just told me I was donor conceived, and the two of us wouldn't discuss it for nearly two decades.

The only thing I found out about my biological father was that he had blue eyes and attended Baylor College of Medicine in 1981. The concept that this person existed fascinated me, and as I got older, I became more curious. Eventually, my motivation to find him went beyond curiosity because I needed to learn my medical history.

When I was 21, I was diagnosed with atypical type 2 diabetes even though I'm thin and active. I also have high cholesterol and polycystic ovary syndrome. These conditions don't run in my mom's family, so I went to about 15 doctors before I was properly diagnosed. If I had known my medical history, the doctors would have known what to look for.

When I was 24, I decided I couldn't just sit around hoping we'd find each other online, and I went into action mode. The clinic my parents used had told me for years that the records had been destroyed. So the only thing left to do was look through yearbooks. I went to the medical library and copied tons of photos, then put them in huge binders. I hoped one man would jump out off the page, but instead I'd think, *I've got his nose*, and then see another photo and think, *But I have his ears*.

I wrote to every single man who attended med school at Baylor from 1979 to 1984. I thought I would be lucky if 10 of the men responded, but I received 250 responses out of 600. Forty said they were donors.

So far, 14 grads—most of whom have blue eyes and donated at my mom's clinic—have undergone testing with me, and 14 tests have come back negative. Several of the guys refer to me as their collective pseudo-daughter, and it's a mutual feeling. It's like I've gained an extended family, which isn't an outcome I considered when I began my search. My mom gets excited each time I might have a positive DNA test with a former donor, and my dad tells me that he's not threatened by my search. Without his support, it would be impossible for me to feel free to find the other part of my family. Last February, I sent him an e-mail reassuring him that he's my one and only dad.

He Fathered 45 Kids!

One man who donated sperm in his early 20s explains what it's like to know that his DNA is spread so widely.

Q So what made you decide to start doing it?

A Cash. During law school, I got a flyer about earning up to \$1,200 a month donating sperm. I got paid per dose, and I was quite... productive. I made \$40,000 in two-and-a-half years.

Q Are you in contact with any of the 45 kids?

A I've e-mailed some parents. And recently, I met a mom and her twins. The boys are 3½ years old and adorable.

Q Do you regret not having the children in your life?

A I didn't donate expecting involvement. Though if they weren't loved or properly cared for, I'd be upset.

Q How do you think your future wife will feel?

A I wouldn't marry someone who doesn't approve, so I'm more concerned with how our kids will feel. But I'll be honest and make a clear distinction.

Nevertheless, I feel rejected by my biological father. I imagine he knows I've been searching for him, and I have to presume he doesn't care enough to call. Even if he said he didn't want to know me, I'd respect that—as long as I could get my medical history. So although there have been good things that have resulted from my search, I'm now coming to terms with the fact that I may never get the answers I'm looking for. ■