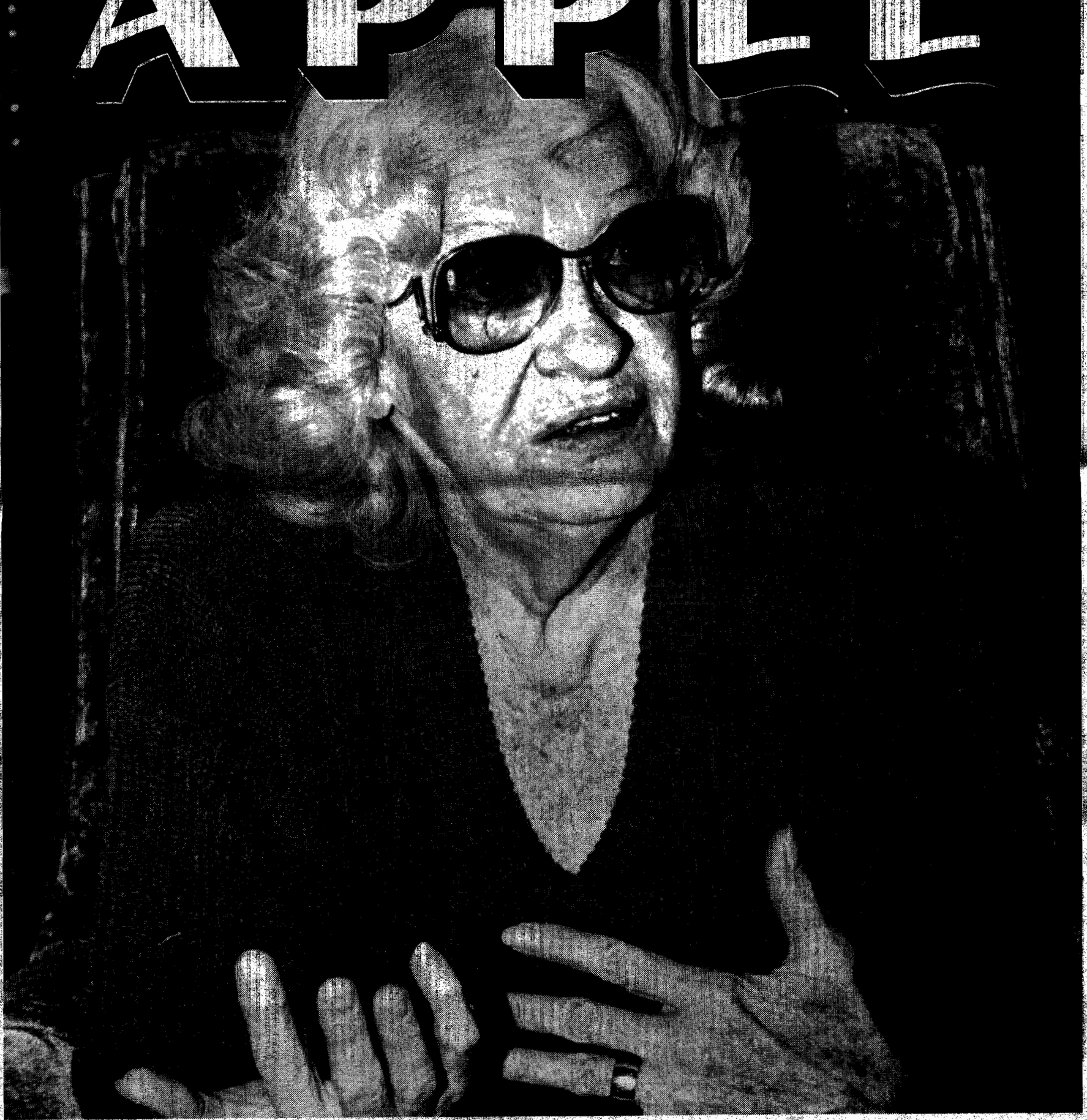


APPLE



• Registry reunites adoptees with natural parents

Reunions

International registry

By JO EWALD
Appeal Staff Writer

Carson City is home to an unusual international registry which reunites people who have been adopted with

their natural parents and siblings.

It's called International Soundex Reunion Registry, and its motto is "united today for the reunions of tomorrow."

The intangible product ISRR provides, according to its founder, Emma May Vilardi, is hope.

And that intangible hope has led to very real reunions for approximately 1,400 people in ISRR's 12-year history.

Vilardi carefully points out that ISRR does not search for birth parents or adoptees. It is strictly a mutual-consent registry, she explained. Only if both the birth parent and the adoptee register, does a "match" occur and a reunion take place.

Also, only adult adoptees at least 18 years old may register, Vilardi said.

ISRR is the only central reunion registry internationally that functions in a referral capacity on a non-fee basis.

The volume of registrations ISRR handles is staggering—more than 9,600 in 1986, and close to 3,000 so far this year. In addition, ISRR coordinates with more than 400 affiliates.

Vilardi and her husband, Tony, do the work themselves with the help of a computer, although they are seeking donation of an office large enough to accommodate some extra volunteer help.

Vilardi, 64, started ISRR in 1975 following her own frustrating efforts to search out the family history of her mother, who was adopted as a child.

Although Vilardi was ultimately successful in finding 12 generations of her mother's family tree, she remembers it as a frustrating and sometimes humiliating process. So to try to make things easier for other adoptees, she founded the registry.

She rails against the practice of sealing the records of adopted children which is the rule in many states,

including Nevada.

The original reasoning behind sealing records, Vilardi explained, was to protect the adoptive family and the child. "It was never intended to protect the adoptive and birth parents after the child became an adult," she declared.

"What's truly needed is education of the general public," she added.

Society's old attitudes that adoptees were rejected by their birth parents and that adoptees who search for their birth parents are disloyal to their adoptive parents still persist, Vilardi said, although public perception of the adoptive situation is improving somewhat.

"No adult adoptee is going out and looking for another set of parents," she explained. "What they want is the answer to their own self. What was their heritage? What do their family members look like? What is the real story behind their adoption placement? They want to look upon a face that's familiar to their own. It has nothing to do with love that they share with their adoptive families."

In fact, Vilardi said the relationship often improves between an adoptee and his adoptive family after a match with a birth parent has been made because all of the so-called "good lies" and deception are ended.

"What the adoptee is asking for is proof of their own identity," Vilardi continued. "They make statements like, 'I'm on the outside looking in' with respect to their adoptive families."

Adoptees also have a very practical consideration: they're afraid they might inadvertently marry an unknown relative, Vilardi added.

Adoptees are also seeking valuable, sometimes life-saving, information about their genetic medical history, she pointed out.

One of her goals is to convince adoption agencies to provide each adoptive family with at least three generations of health history of their adoptee.

Meanwhile, Vilardi offers ISRR Genetic Medical Alert Registration for the specific purpose of providing medical information and even locating donors if the need arises.

"It is not just the life of the adoptee, the birth parent and the adoptive parents that are affected," Vilardi said. "Adoptees have chil-

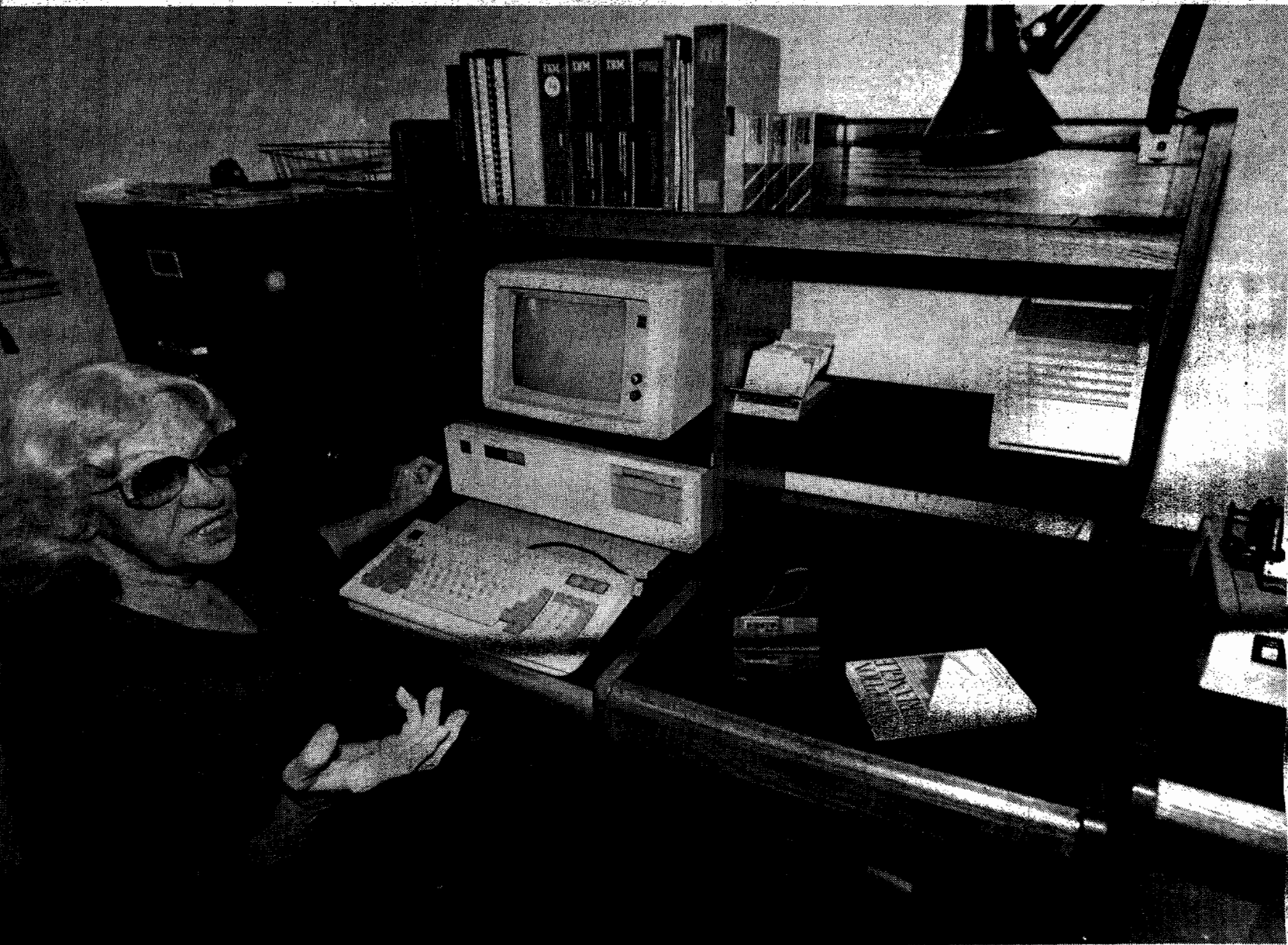


Photos by Lisa J. Tolda

EMMA MAY VILARDI, founder of ISRR, discusses the pain and hope adoptees and their birth

parents often experience while searching for one another.

unites today for reunions tomorrow



BEFORE GETTING THIS COMPUTER, Emma Vilardi kept track of all of ISRR's registrations by hand.

dren, they have grandchildren."

Birth parents also have a need to know, Vilardi said. Many spend years wondering what became of their child.

"We had a flood of registrations from birth parents whose children were old enough to fight in Vietnam," she recalled, adding that whenever there is a national tragedy, such as a large airline crash, "it brings out a big spurt of registrations" by birth parents.

In the past, Vilardi said, birth parents were told to look upon giving up their child for adoption as though the child had died; grieve and go on, they were advised. "But what society didn't realize is they gave that mother no place to go and grieve for that

child," she said. "That mother knew that child was still living."

And then later, the doubts set in.

"The pain is still there. In some instances it's much worse," Vilardi continued. "When you hear a birth parent who's in their 80s or 90s wanting to find the only baby I ever had, and that baby's in his 60s or even in his 70s, you know that pain stays there."

And more and more birth parents, including fathers, are registering, Vilardi pointed out. Whereas the ratio of adoptees to birth parents registering used to be 2-1, the trend has now reversed to 3-1 birth parents to adoptees, she said.

What Vilardi ultimately seeks is a more humane approach to adoption,

for all parties involved.

"I want humane adoption laws that allow the exchange of information in a humane way," she said. "Where adoptive parents don't have to lay their souls and private lives bare to an adoption agency. Where the birth mother isn't held up as trash."

"Everyone of us in society extend our family by some means as we grow up," Vilardi continued. "We marry, we have children, we take on in-laws... If the public can regard both families (adoptive and birth) as extended family and that it's a natural thing, that we all do it to some extent in our lives, then I think there'll be less fear, less ignorance, and more humane adoption measures will come into being."