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Adoption: Are You My Mother?

Patricia Szymczak was 36 years old when she decided to pursue a quest she had contemplated since childhood: finding her mother. Adopted in infancy, Szymczak, a reporter with the Chicago Tribune, attacked the task as if on deadline. She knew the woman's name and hometown from a 1953 Illinois adoption decree, obtained when she turned 18 from her adoptive mother. Szymczak called the local post office, found a retired mailman and got him talking about the family -- her family. She contacted old neighbors, who led her to friends. Some had seen the woman, who now lived out of state, at a recent high school reunion. Finally, she got her phone number.

But before tremulously placing the call, Szymczak journeyed to the tiny public library in her mother's hometown 300 miles from Chicago. "My fantasy," she explains, "was to open a high school yearbook and see a woman who looked like me." On page 15 of the 1952 yearbook, Szymczak's fantasy came true. The smile was the same one Szymczak saw in the mirror; the graduation quote: "I'm just the girl you're looking for." The long search ended with a three-hour call from a pay phone. By the end of the conversation, it was after midnight on the second Sunday in May. Patricia Szymczak smiled and wished her newfound relation a happy Mother's Day.

According to the North American Adoption Congress in New York City, there are more than 60,000 Americans engaged in quests like Szymczak's: mothers anxiously seeking children they gave up at birth, children hunting for their biological parents. Desperate, obsessive, their searches have, over the past two decades, ceased to be merely a matter of individual effort and have become a national movement. There are more than 450 support groups for searchers. Many conduct meetings modeled on Alcoholics Anonymous, in which new participants rise with the passion of the converted and state their mission: "I'm Sarah, and I'm looking for my daughter born on . . ."

At the forefront of the movement are the N.A.A.C. and ALMA (Adoptees Liberty Movement Association), which lobby to change state laws protecting the confidentiality of adoption records. Three states -- Alabama, Alaska and Kansas -- have completely open records, available to all adoptees over 18. Other states require the consent of a birth parent, the child and one or both adoptive parents before documents may be unsealed.

Those intent on recovering their past often start by contacting one of the voluntary registries set up by 22 states to match adoptees with birth parents who are looking for them. The most successful effort is the **International Soundex Reunion Registry in Carson City, Nev.**, a private, nonprofit center that since 1975 has matched more than 2,200 people.

The seekers sometimes hire "search consultants" and go to great lengths, even illegal ones, to find their kin. "I'm calling about a probate matter" and "I'm doing genealogy" are typical little white lies. Many justify their actions with the claim that they are victims of adoption, robbed of their heritage or shamed into giving up an illegitimate child. Their anger and desperation have led some psychologists to conclude that adoption leaves a permanent wound. "Birth parents and adoptees are amputees in our society," says Los Angeles psychologist Annette Baran, who specializes in adoption-related counseling. Says she: "I think reunions are excellent, even when the outcome is bad."

And sometimes the outcome is very bad. Some search for decades to no avail; others learn that their child has been abused, that their mother committed suicide or that they are the product of incest. Even a happy reunion can produce "an overwhelming feeling of anger and confusion, and rearrange everything in one's life," says Linda Brown, co-author of a forthcoming book on the subject, *Birthbond*.

Searches can take unexpected turns. San Antonio public school counselor Claude Thormalen, 49, not only found his mother but learned from her that he had an older half sister Nancy, who had also been given up for adoption. To his amazement, Nancy turned out to be a high school acquaintance. Gayle Beckstead, 55, who now works as a search consultant in Simi Valley, Calif., learned of a sister -- who hadn't been put up for adoption. When they met, Gayle found a depressed high school dropout who had given up four out-of-wedlock children. The sister regarded the middle-class Beckstead with obvious envy. Beckstead recalls, "Her anger was, 'How come I was kept, and you were given away?' She saw the advantages of my life."

Reunions are not for everyone. Some birth mothers would slam the door if their relinquished baby came knocking. In fact, the search process is the focus of a great debate in adoption circles. Critics contend that it breaks legal contracts, that confidentiality should be the cornerstone of adoption. Says a woman who gave up a child 28 years ago: "The mere thought of being found by this baby is so upsetting. I made a new life for myself, and it doesn't include her."

Not every adopted child wants to open that door. "A search would rob me of a certain amount of security, the security that comes from believing that the family I know is my real family," argues Rhonda Brown, 34, a New York City lawyer. "I'm the one who has finally defined my identity -- not someone from the mysterious past."

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