

Reuniting families is her way of life

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CARSON CITY, Nev. — Some were parted by war, others by the stigma of out-of-wedlock pregnancy. But 1,200 of those adopted children have been reunited with their biological parents by Emma May Vilardi, who has 25,000 more people waiting "for a face resembling their own."

"The most frequent reaction is that they feel free for the first time, and feel like a great weight has been lifted from them," said Mrs. Vilardi, a former municipal historian from New Jersey who has been matching children with their natural mothers for a decade.

Mrs. Vilardi, 62, runs the International Soundex Reunion Registry, and she contacts agencies worldwide for help. She charges no fees, but accepts donations.

"I've been accused of being a do-gooder, but I believe everyone has equal rights. And I feel denial of genetic and biological information is a denial of a person's own heritage and own self-identity," said Mrs. Vilardi, who has a 41-year-old son.

Most people who seek Mrs. Vilardi's help were given up for adoption as infants. Some come from families split up by divorce, war or institutionalization.

Mrs. Vilardi tries to match background information supplied by the applicant with her reference material. Until recently, she did it all manually. Now she is beginning to use a computer, but, to protect confidentiality, she never places names in the computer.

Sometimes adopted children and their mothers simultaneously seek help from Mrs. Vilardi. When the background check reveals strikingly similar information, the two are told how to contact each other.

Mrs. Vilardi got into the registry work by helping senior citizens who were having trouble getting Social Security benefits due to inadequate birth records. Her own mother, who was adopted, had a similar problem.

Her mother, who was orphaned at the age of four, didn't have any interest in discovering who her natural parents were until she was ready to retire in her 60s. Mrs. Vilardi said her mother's pension was held up, because she couldn't prove she was a citizen.

"I had offered for many years to help her find out who her natural parents were, but she said no. Then it became imperative for her to find



Emma May Vilardi
...helps people "feel free"

that also," said Mrs. Vilardi, who located her mother's birth certificate.

Mrs. Vilardi's interest in genealogy is not new. She was town historian for 17 years in Kearny, N.J., and has done research for the state of New Jersey and the U.S. Civil War Centennial Commission, helping to locate battlefields and other places of historic importance.

Although there are many happy endings, Mrs. Vilardi also encounters a great deal of pain.

Adoptive parents sometimes feel "the child they raised is rejecting them. But it's not true," said Mrs. Vilardi. "They're just searching for their own self-identity. They've been on the outside looking in, in limbo, searching for a face resembling their own."