

The Honolulu Ad

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On this, the most holy of days, here's a tale of love's labor found

Today is the best Christmas ever for Susan Sherry's family — because it's the first one in 26 years that she knows her daughter is alive and well.

Best of all, says Susan, "I know her."

This is a tale of the 1960s. But it is also a timeless story of parent and child separated at birth. Unlike many of those stories, this one has a happy ending. "Just like a fairy tale," she says, still not quite believing it.

It was 1965 when Susan, now a successful Realtor with Conley-Dew here, gave birth to a daughter in San Diego. She wanted to marry her high school sweetheart, but as a teenager she needed her parents' consent. They refused and gave the baby girl away for adoption.

That's the way it was usually done then.

You've heard of the seven-year itch? This was the 26-year ache.

"I'd be at the grocery store and see little girls with their parents and find myself following them wondering if that was my daughter," says Susan.



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"I thought about her all the time. But every year on her birthday, it was very hard. . . . The worst part was not knowing if she was alive and healthy and happy."

Every time she returned to San Diego, Susan visited the Salvation Army home that had placed her daughter. "They wouldn't tell me anything, not even if she was alive. But I kept asking. At that point, I wasn't thinking about having a relationship with her. I just wanted to know she was OK."

Susan later married and had three sons, Shawn, 22, Jorey, 20, and Nathan, 18. Eight years ago, she married Lt. Col Charlie Sherry, at 58 America's oldest active-duty Marine.

"Charlie is wonderful," says Susan. "I told him about that part of my life and he was so supportive."

Meanwhile, Marla Jean Rose, now Mrs. Marla Naughton, was growing up outside San Diego. Her adoptive parents "told me from the time they brought me home that I was adopted, but that they loved me. I had a happy childhood. . . . But I got really curious when I was 13 or 14. I went to the agency and they would only give me non-identifying information" (her natural parents' height, weight, age, ethnic background). When she turned 18, the agency told her the first names of her parents, but no more.

Susan, after years of "wavering back and forth, should I seek her out or not," filed with the Soundex Reunion Registry. "On her 18th birthday, I made myself available through their computer program if she wanted to find me. I didn't think I had a right to seek her out or to impose myself and intrude on her life and

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Reunion: Mom, daughter find each other

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family."

About that time Susan told her three sons that they had a sister, "in case she found me."

Marla also did a lot of wavering. "When I got married, I thought about her. You want your mother there when you get married. But I was afraid that she wouldn't want me in her life. I heard stories like that. Maybe I was a child of rape or a one-night stand. I wondered if she was a bum on the street. But then I'd think maybe I had a Rolls-Royce waiting for me. . . . I thought about trying to find her, but I always backed away."

Marla also "worried that I could be dating my brother and would never know it. I worked at a bank for a lot of years. You meet so many people and I was always searching faces to see if they looked like they could be related to me."

"Marla had been eligible to file with the registry when she was 18," Susan says. "I kept updating my file every time we moved, but after almost eight years of waiting, I didn't know if she never wanted to see me or if she wasn't living."

In fact, Marla didn't yet know about Soundex.

But then Marla, now living in San Antonio, Texas, gave birth to her second child — and first daughter. The baby girl "triggered something." She retained a "searcher" in San Diego to help find her real parents. The searcher put her in touch with the Soundex Reunion Registry. The computer found an immediate match.

"At first I thought I'd write a letter," says Marla. "I was so nervous. My heart was racing. But I called her home and got an answering machine that gave her work number. After hearing her voice, I had to keep calling."

"I was on floor duty," recalls



Advertiser photo by Richard Ambo

Susan Sherry and Marla Naughton — a Christmas reunion.

Susan. "She asked a few basic questions and then she said 'I think I'm your daughter.'"

"I don't remember much after that. I was in a haze. There were lots of people in the of-

fice and I was crying. But I'd remember a voice in my head saying 'no, there must be some mistake.' It was a defense mechanism so I wouldn't be disappointed. I was so stunned I told her 'I can't think now can I call you back?' I've saved the piece of paper — I wrote the number down 10 times to make sure that I had it."

After catching her breath Susan called Marla back: "I can think now. When can I see you?"

They talked on the phone nearly every day for the next two weeks catching up and planning a Texas reunion. Susan was so happy, "I had to pull her down from the ceiling to talk to her," recalls Charlie In Texas. Susan spent all her time getting to know her only daughter and hugging her only grandchildren.

She also spoke to Marla's adoptive parents: "I thanked her mom for loving her for all those years and told her that they could never be replaced."

That was in September. And now Marla is visiting Hawaii for the first time during the holidays, meeting her three brothers. "This is great because I had a big sister when I was growing up and I always wanted to be the oldest," she told the boys.

"And I always wanted a sister," Jorey replied. "An older sister."

Seeing mother and daughter together now, the physical resemblance is startling. So is the similarity in their voices. Talking about their new relationship, they both smile and laugh, even as tears gather at the corners of their eyes.

Asked how he was so supportive of his wife when many men might not have been Charlie looks at the reunited mother and daughter.

"How could you not be," says the oldest and surely the wisest Marine, "with so many positive things going on?"

Soundex Reunion is free, but it's not a search service

The Soundex Reunion Registry has made possible over 3,000 reunions of separated parents, children and siblings since 1975.

"We're a service of hope, but of no prediction for success," says Tony Vilardi, who spent 38 years with the Department of Defense and now runs the registry that his late wife founded.

The service is free. "This is a labor of love," says Vilardi. "We are not a search service. We only provide an opportunity for people to find each other."

He says 14,000 people registered this year. The ratio is about three adoptees for every two parents or siblings.

"Each of these people has one thing in

common," he says. "They want to be connected. Children want to look upon the face that gave them life, to hear that voice, to know where they got their freckles, to know where they came from. That is every person's birthright."

For more information: Soundex Reunion Registry, P.O. Box 2312, Carson City, Nev. 89702.