

# In search of natural parents

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In the mid-1970s, adoptees in search of birth parents and other relatives began calling attention to themselves, trying to get help with their searches.

As the searchers' cause became the center of a public right-to-know vs. invasion-of-privacy debate, many adoption agencies held their breaths, hoping the desire was a fad and would go away.

But any time any human being is denied his or her rights, the hurt will not go away, according to Emma May Vilardi, whose adoption reunion registry in Carson City is the largest in the world. The movement did not fade, and helping adoptees in search is now a whole new social service field, she said.

Most people who call Vilardi on her reunion hotline are full of fear, she said. She said she tries to put them at ease, find out their situation and answer any questions they have.

A genealogist, historian and researcher by trade, Vilardi is also an avid stamp collector and an amateur "rock hound," writes children's stories and designs and makes period costumes for dolls.

The founder of the International Soundex Reunion Registry says one of her main objectives is to reassure searchers they are not alone.

Adoption support groups in every part of the country now offer assistance and emotional support, she said. There is also a national organization with which the groups can link and a variety of publications on the psychological dynamics of adoption and searching.

The Triadoption Library headquartered in California publishes and sells "The Adoption Searchbook" with sample documents, example request letters and other search guidelines. The library used Vilardi's study of state statutes to set up a state-by-state file of updated statutes, public and private adoption agencies, adoption groups and other information pertaining to adoption.

Another publication Vilardi recommended is the "Open Arms Quarterly" out of North Platte, Neb. The magazines search advertisements in each issue reach individuals and adoption support groups internationally.

Support groups include "WARM," Washington Adoptees Rights Movement; Truth Seekers in Adoption, one of the first groups in the United States; and Concerned United Birthparents, the largest birthparents' organization, with chapters nationwide.

The groups are kept abreast of developments by the American Adoption Congress, incorporated in 1981 to act as a national organization and to disseminate information to the public about the problems associated with adoption.

Vilardi also tells her callers how to check documents, about such common search tools as birth records, tax and voter registration records and city directories. She advises them

to take a common-sense approach to where their written records would be and to consider the informal "pal system," which many people use to trade search assistance.

Adoptees' original birth certificates are sealed by the court which has jurisdiction where an adoption takes place, Vilardi explained. An amended birth certificate, with a date and place of birth furnished by the adoptive parents, is filed in the state in which they reside, and all that adoptees have access to is the amended certificate.

The 62-year-old historian charges nothing for coding and checking applications for inclusion in her Soundex Reunion Registry, although the work usually occupies her eight to 14 hours a day.

She said that, with a few exceptions — such as the day her office received 3,000 pieces of mail after a "Dear Abby" column advised searchers to register in ISRR — she codes registrations into the registry within 24 hours after she receives them.

All registrations in ISRR are voluntary, so all applicants want a reunion and there is no invasion of anyone's privacy, she said. But registrants must have enough information with which to be matched, and searchers circumventing sealed records are beset by requests for research and filing fees, she said.

Volunteer genealogists, whether associated with a group or working independently, often have to decide whether to devote more time to research or to maintain their jobs, Vilardi explained. If they decide to search full-time, they must usually charge a fee. Many adoption groups ask membership dues, and government agencies almost always require some form of filing fee to copy official records.

After the necessary documentation is obtained, and if a match is made with another party who has voluntarily registered in the ISRR, Vilardi calls each party and gives them the name, address and phone number of their match.

The researcher pulls file cards at three or more points of match. If back-up information does not assure her of a match, Vilardi said, she tells each party by letter that a possible match has been made and asks for additional information.

The opening of adoption records for any reason is at the sole discretion of individual judges, Vilardi pointed out. Most laws specify only for "good and compelling reasons" and leave the interpretation up to the courts, which have denied information even in life-threatening situations. On the other hand, some courts have, in the past, confirmed or denied an ISRR match without releasing sealed information, she said.

Persons are free to contact their relative or not, but — since both people have requested to be found — most do reunite, she said.

A successful search does not solve everything, Vilardi stressed. Any relationship established after contact is made will be influenced by what may be terribly different lifestyles,



EMMA MAY VILARDI

values and attitudes. For the first time in their lives, however, adoptees have a voice in the relationship with their missing relative. With that option should come the moral commitment to treat the person they find with compassion and respect whether they develop a relationship or not, she advised.

For the past year, Vilardi has been informing adoption support groups in general and individuals she has matched that professional consultants are available to help people through the often-difficult, initial reunion process.

Social workers, psychologists and physicians have volunteered to offer more hours of free counseling for those who request it, she said.

The service is part of the evolution of the Genetic Evaluation Committee in Palo Alto, Calif.

In 1983, Vilardi initiated a "Medic Alert Form" that can be filled out by a family physician or geneticist of birth parents, adoptive parents or adoptees. The forms are filed in her registry if requested and also forwarded to the Genetic Evaluation Committee. The committee reviews each one, and, if approved, sends it to the placing adoption agency. If a hereditary disease is involved, the committee requests the agency inform all parties concerned.

The lack of access to heredity and biological information, a byproduct of the sealing of adoption records, denies adoptees treatment that could prevent their progressive deterioration and death from a variety of rare, hereditary diseases, Vilardi said.

One out of every 10 adoptees now entering her reunion registry is listing genetically-linked medical problems, she said. But all adoptees who discover a health problem related to genetic heritage can and should write their placement agency directly, she said.

Vilardi is looking toward the day when the ISRR is computerized and registrants can be matched by disease as well as by other factors. She said she can almost guarantee two ISRR registrants documenting the same rare disease are related.

Although she is closest to having a central, computerized reunion registry, Vilardi is not

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Appeal photos by Lisa J. Smith

FOR SOME, FAMILY relationships are as frightening as they are promising. Whether to make contact at the end of a search is a decision that requires much soul-searching.

# Adoptees helped through registry

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the only person who envisions one. Since 1979, Sen. Carl Levin, D-Mich., has been advocating a national adoption identification center. He is currently sponsoring a Uniform Adoption Act as an amendment to the Child Abuse Prevention Act of 1978. It would establish a national informational center under the jurisdiction of the Secretary of Health and Human Services. Like Vilardi's ISRR, all registrations would be voluntary, and all information would be confidential. Only 10 states have state registries, Levin pointed out in a letter to his fellow senators. The state registries are handicapped because birth parents are most likely to register in the state where their child was born. Adoptees, many of whom do not know where they were actually born, will probably register in the state where they were adopted, so the registrations are never linked.

Vilardi said society's attitude toward adoption as a one-time process is responsible for the prohibitions in present laws and for much of

the heartache experienced by those who try to claim their right to know.

An adoption decree is essentially a contract over another person for life, Vilardi pointed out.

Adoption was not known under English Common Law, she said, so each state passed its own statutes as the nation grew. But in all those statutes, she said, an adoptee remains a perpetual child.

In the 13 original colonies, if a father died, a mother was not considered her children's legal guardian. "Orphans Courts" appointed administrators, who often indentured or apprenticed the children.

The holder of a bond of indenture could sell the paper without his servant's consent. Nor did children apprenticed fare much better. They could not work up to an apprenticeship for 12 or so years, so they started their careers in debt for room and board all those years.

The first child welfare laws were based on precedents set by laws against cruelty to

animals, Vilardi said. In the late 1800s, the Welfare League for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals was instituted. The records of their intervention in a case of cruelty to an orphan are the first documented legal protest of cruelty to children in this country, Vilardi said.

Laws enacted during the 1940s were based on the need to protect minor adoptees and adoptive families. Those precedents have been interpreted by the courts to mean that records are sealed for life, she said.

Some adoptees have gone through two adoptions, she said, and face two sets of sealed records. A two-record barrier is established if a couple who originally adopted divorces and a new marriage partner later adopts the child. Also, during the Great Depression some adoptions were "revoked" for financial or psychological reasons, Vilardi said.

To register in the International Soundex Reunion Registry, send a stamped, self-addressed envelope for a registration form to the registry, P.O. Box 2812, Carson City 89702.