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# Motherhood ? Me You've Got to Be Kidding!

By Alison Larkin

When the non-adopted friends I grew up with in England were getting married to men who looked like Hugh Grant—and having babies who didn't—I was on a quest to find my birth mother. I was twenty-five and living in London, two hours away from the very English village where my adoptive parents had retired. My birth mother, about whom I had known nothing up until this point in my life, was, I learned, American, and living in a cabin on Bald Mountain, TN.

A few weeks after our reunion, in the throes of 'I've just found out I'm really an American' euphoria, I moved to New York City and became a stand-up comic. Then, in an attempt to somehow come to terms with my new identity, I wrote "The English American," my one-woman show, in which I tell a comedic version of my adoption and reunion story. After that, I appeared on Broadway and was put under development contract by ABC and CBS television.

Broadway, Hollywood, TV deals! This was heady, exciting stuff, and consumed me almost as much as my exhausting and confusing relationship with my birth mother, so there was no

room for thoughts of men or babies. "The key to dealing with a fear of abandonment," I'd announce to audiences at the comedy clubs with the authority of an expert, "is to date people you don't like, so if they do leave you, it doesn't matter. Either that, or guarantee devoted fidelity by dating someone no one else wants."

Then I fell on my head on an icy New York City street. In an oddly fated moment, a man I had met in a comedy club, Jim Keenan, picked me up off the ice and took me to the hospital. A former rock and roll drummer from New Jersey, Jim looked like Paul McCartney. On top of that, he owned all the Fawlty Towers videos. After a three-year romance, during which time he was put through trust tests worthy of a medieval knight, Jim and I got married at my parents' church in England.



Alison Larkin

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**New AAC Mission Statement, June 2006**—"The American Adoption Congress comprises individuals, families and organizations committed to adoption reform. We represent those whose lives are touched by adoption or other loss of family continuity.

We promote honesty, openness and respect for family connections in adoption, foster care, and assisted reproduction. We provide education for our members and professional communities about the lifelong process of adoption. We advocate legislation that will grant every individual access to information about his or her family and heritage."

**AMERICAN  
ADOPTION  
CONGRESS**



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*Established 1978*

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## From the Immediate Past President



Paul Schibbelhute

This edition of the president's letter deals with the diverse topic of Parenting in the Triad. Those of us blessed with children to parent know how difficult parenting can be. From my own personal experience, nothing has been so rewarding or so difficult.

Parenting in a traditional family, like the ones many of us were raised in, has its own particular set of life experiences. Imagine the complexities and plethora of issues experienced by members of the adoption triad. For example, I went from being just "dad" to my daughter Kristen to being a "birth dad" when I began the search for my son Josh. Explaining to Kristen that she wasn't my only child, that she had a half-brother we hadn't yet met, was an experience unique to families in the adoption triad, one not experienced in a traditional family.

Finding my son was a very special moment in my life. Many of you who have been reunited understand. What I remember most vividly is Josh's birth mother and I explaining the circumstances of his birth to him. For the first time in his life, every question Josh wanted to ask about his relinquishment and adoption were answered. Given the opportunity, this is a moment that I believe all birth mothers and fathers owe their sons and daughters who were placed for adoption.

For adoptive families, raising children in today's multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-racial families can be bewildering. Although it has become the norm to see diverse families in our communities, that doesn't diminish the challenges the families face on a daily basis. Parenting issues facing adoptive parents include attachment and bonding, grief and loss, and birth family relationships.

Parenting as an adoptee has its own set of unique emotions and issues. For example, most adoptees have lived their entire lives without seeing a face or a family member to whom they bear a resemblance. It must be the quintessential moment in an adoptee's life to see their likeness in the face of a son or daughter. Parenting as an adoptee can also be worrisome with no medical history to pass on to your physician or your child's pediatrician. The school family tree assignment presents another struggle for an adoptee and his or her children.

It is clear that parenting in the adoption triad is more com-

plex and diverse than parenting in the traditional family. I have only touched the surface in this letter. No matter what your place in the triad may be, it is important to recognize that adoption does have an effect on how we parent. In some cases parenting by adoptive parents and birth parents can overlap. For example, my son's adoptive parents and I do a great deal of collaborating when he comes from his home in the South to visit me in New Hampshire. Once the final arrangements are made and he arrives in New Hampshire, I assume the role of parent for the duration of his visit. Yes, parenting in the adoption triad can take you into many surprising and unfamiliar places. Despite the differences, families within the adoption triad, as well as traditional families, are committed to the emotional health and well being of all family members.

*Editor's Note: This was Paul's letter written to the membership before the election of officers at the March 2006 board meeting. Our new president Pat Lubarsky's first letter will appear in the next issue of the Decree.*

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## Parenthood

*continued from page 1*

I felt truly secure for the first time with this kind American, with gentle, brown eyes, who ironed my shirts and cleaned our kitchen while I told jokes at the Comedy Store, appeared on television and struggled hard to integrate what I had learned about my birth family into my sense of who I was.

Having children was something other people did, and I never gave it a conscious thought. Until the day I got a tummy ache. The doctor told me that if the problem turned out to be an infection, it could affect my ability to become pregnant. Actually, the problem turned out to be indigestion—I'd eaten a platter of chocolate-covered strawberries the day before—but the visit woke me up. My ability to become pregnant? What ability to become pregnant?

To use an old cricketing term, I had been knocked for six. Suddenly I knew that I wanted to become pregnant with my own baby more than anything in the world.

My non-adopted friends had seen their mothers preg-

nant and knew all about morning sickness and the agonies of delivery. But in my family, babies came ready-made, from social workers. You drove to a foster home, a nice lady gave you a baby, and then you drove home. So up until this point, for me, whenever I pictured entering the world, my birth took place in a wooden-paneled station wagon.

I knew nothing at all about what happened to a woman's body between conception and birth, so I turned to books. One pregnancy book said that women who were too thin found it hard to conceive. So I happily gained fifteen pounds. Another said that black chicken eggs would do the trick. Concerned that nature might get it wrong in my case, after making love, I'd lie on the couch for hours with my legs in the air, to make sure no sperm dropped out. I initiated conversations with pregnant women all around Los Angeles, who suddenly seemed to be everywhere. I remember one conversation in particular, which occurred while standing in line at a car rental agency. The woman was pregnant and looked kind. I smiled at her. She smiled back.

"I think I might be pregnant too," I whispered

"Oh my God!" she said. "If you really want to know, stick your finger in your belly button."

I stuck my finger in my belly button.

"Do you feel sick?" she said.

"I do," I said.

"You're pregnant!" she said. Only I wasn't. Month after month I wasn't pregnant. And I felt a profound sorrow. I also understood an important part of my adoptive mother, perhaps for the first time. I'd ring her up and say, "Mum, it must have been awful." And she'd say, "Not really, darling. After all, it meant we got you." For my parents, adopting may not have been second best. But I now knew that it had been very much a second choice.

The month we stopped trying and decided to forget about the whole thing, I found out I was going to have a baby. I was in the ladies room at the Comedy Store, about to go on stage. Mitzi Shore, who owns the club, had been encouraging

me to talk about whatever was in my head at that time, rather than feeling restrained by prepared material. So, in the middle of a joke, I took the used pregnancy stick out of my pocket, held it up and said, "Does anyone know what one of these is? Well after a year of trying, it just turned pink. I've just joined the human race." It was the easiest applause break I've ever had.

I was in awe of the fact that there was a child growing inside me, and I loved every minute of my pregnancy. How

**My non-adopted friends had seen their mothers pregnant and knew all about morning sickness and the agonies of delivery. But in my family, babies came ready-made, from social workers.**

lucky I felt. And how guilty I felt. Unlike the mother who raised me, I got to grow my own baby. Unlike the mother who gave me birth, I got to keep it.

It was during my pregnancy that I first sensed the depth of sorrow my birth mother must have felt at being separated from the baby who had lived within her for nine months. I also understood an important part of her, perhaps for the first time.

Even though my reunion with my birth mother had been far from easy, and I hadn't seen her in several years, I was extremely grateful that I had been able to find her. Because we were in contact, my birth mother was able to provide medical information that turned out to be crucial. She told me that I had had a twin brother, who was stillborn, and that she had suffered from toxemia and other complications during her pregnancy, which caused my twin's death and nearly her own.

Without this crucial information, my doctor would not have known about my genetic predisposition to certain complications, and might not have known which precautions to take. It chills me to think it, let alone write it, but it is quite possible, if I had not been able to find my birth mother, that my children would not be with me today.

For me pregnancy was a glorious time. I went to a pregnancy yoga class so I could be around other pregnant women, who I watched with fascination. I approached women with children everywhere—at the coffee shop, in the supermarket, at the park—and asked them how their deliveries had gone. And, probably because I was pregnant and had a posh English accent, they would tell me everything, filling in the gaps in my knowledge that my adoptive mother could not fill. I ate everything in sight, put on sixty pounds, and was absurdly happy.

Of course, there was the occasional blip. Like the time the yoga teacher asked us to visualize our own birth. At first I pictured a wooden-paneled station wagon. But then I went somewhere else. My non-adopted friends left the room feeling relaxed. I left the room terrified.

Then there was the nightmare I had that I was leaving the hospital with my baby when the lights suddenly went out. When the lights came back on again, all the newborns had been stolen, including mine. A man with a stethoscope explained that he wasn't really surprised, as babies were getting top dollar on the adoption black market that week.

By this time I had a trained counselor who was herself a reunited adopted person who had been through childbirth. She recognized all of it and was able to help me through the

blips, and because of that, the profound joy far outweighed the fear.

My son Toby was born first, after an eighteen-hour labor followed by an emergency Caesarean. Immediately after the surgery, feeling more dead than alive, struggling to stay conscious, I saw the dim shape of a woman holding my newborn son and heading towards the door. In a voice bossier than Margaret Thatcher's on a bossy day, I said, "Where on earth do you think you're going?"

"Ma'am, I'm taking him away. To be washed."

"Oh no you're not," I said. "Bring him here please. He won't be leaving my side until we're home."

Nearly two years later, I was devastated when I learned, after another eighteen-hour labor, that I was going to have to have a second Caesarean. The doctor asked me why I was so upset. "I didn't want my daughter's first view of the world to be strangers in green masks, in a sterilized room, with bright lights and lots of horrid clatter," I told the doctor. "I so wanted her to be able come straight to my breast." And this doctor, Dr. Dwight, at Good Samaritan Hospital in downtown L.A., said, "Okay. We'll turn off the lights, keep the room quiet, and, providing everything's okay, we'll cut the cord while she's nursing. That way she'll bond with you even quicker than if you'd delivered the other way. Is there any music you'd like to be played?" And everything went perfectly. And my daughter, Eliza, came out to the tune of "I'm Getting Married in the Morning."

I was taken away from the mother in whose tummy I grew straight after I was born, and put in a foster home for six weeks before being adopted. I was determined to give

my children what I had not had. For them there would be no bright lights, no sterilized hands ripping mother and newborn apart, no doctors, no social workers, no well-meaning strangers who smelled different, just us. Nursing and feeding in the

safety of our bedroom, with the phone pulled out. And in those first six weeks, despite recovering from major surgery and dealing with hormones and breasts that squirted milk all over the furniture, I felt a deep peace for the first time in my life. And the soul connection I had traveled the world to find was right there with the tiny human beings who had grown within me.

Even though my adoptive mother did not have this experience, she was profoundly happy for me. To know, you only had to see the look on her face when she first held her newborn grand-children, and smiled at me.

My non-adopted friends now look at me perplexed, unable to understand why I, Alison Larkin, obsessed by my

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work, who used to sigh with boredom at the thought of children, now guard my time with my kids so fiercely that I'll only answer the phone when they are sleeping. Why do I not complain about the exhaustion of mothering my children full-time, while maintaining a busy career?

"I don't know how you DO it. Why don't you get some help or at the very least take a break?" they say. The people who ask these questions were raised with their birth families. They don't understand.

"Are you kidding?" I say. "I don't want to miss a second of this."

And now I have two small children, aged three and five, and I know, as much as a mother can ever know, who they are and, most importantly, who they came from. It's the parents who raised me whom they call Granny and Grandad. It's my mother in England who I call when I'm trying to work out how long an 18-pound turkey should be left in the oven. It's the parents in England who taught me "Polly Put The Kettle On", and "What Shall We Do With The Drunken Sailor?" that are now my son's favorite songs. He sings them over and over again to his little sister.

And yet, living with me every day, crushing raisins into my couch and spilling apple juice all over my car, are two little people who have my birth mother's coloring and my birth father's spirit. My daughter and birth mother and I all have the same legs. The dramatic way my son speaks about his trains could be my birth father talking about his country. The irrepressible energy is in their nature as irrefutably as it is in mine. I know it, I recognize it, and I know how to help them channel it. I found my birth parents so that I could understand me, so that I could understand them.

But I also know where my son's kindness, and empathy, and sense of what's okay and what's not comes from. And I delight, as they delight, in the company of my sprawling adoptive family with their adoptive cousins, and aunts and uncles and grandparents who take such enormous pride in them. I had a glorious childhood, and it's that, as much as the knowledge of where I came from genetically, that I want to pass on to my children. The childhood given me by my parents in England who, when my other parents couldn't, sheltered me, fed me, and loved me constantly, giving me a solid base from which I would be able to go forward, face the tumult of an international closed adoption reunion, and ultimately move beyond it a better, rather than a broken, person.

One of the advantages of being adopted and finding your birth mother, is that when it comes to passing on advice to your children, you can pick the best advice from not one, but two mothers, and leave the rest. As my children are currently far too young to understand any of this, allow me to pass that advice on to you.

#### **Advice from my American birth mother:**

Get a walk around phone. That way, when you're talking to the boring people, like the tax man or whoever, you can get the chores done at the same time, see?

If you're feelin' broke, but you just gotta go shopping, hit the thrift stores.

If you don't want to get a ticket for driving too fast, get yourself a radar detector, drive behind the fastest car on the road, and never speed past clusters of trees, 'cos that's where the cops hide.

The world is divided into two groups of people. People who back up their C drive—and people who wish they had.

You can keep your cigarettes in the refrigerator.

If you don't know what to do, listen to your intuition.

You don't have to spend your life cleaning the house.

Either hire a cleaner, or marry one.

#### **Advice from my English adoptive mother:**

Clear the floor first, then the surfaces.

You get what you pay for.

If you don't want to get a ticket for speeding, don't drive too fast.

If you don't know what to do, make a list.

Don't smoke. It will kill you.

And, darling, denial is underrated.

*As a comedienne and keynote speaker, Alison appears all over the world. Her one-woman show "The English American," which garnered rave reviews at the London Comedy Festival, will open in New York City in 2007. For details on upcoming appearances go to [www.alisonlarkin.com](http://www.alisonlarkin.com).*

*A previous version of this article was published in Adoptive Families Magazine and is reprinted here with permission.*

The National Adoption Information Clearinghouse and the National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information have been merged into one expanded website and information center, called the Child Welfare Information Gateway, [www.childwelfare.gov](http://www.childwelfare.gov). Visit their website to access a huge online library, publications, and information about additional services and conferences.



# ADOPTION REFORM: VICTORY THROUGH UNITY PART TWO

**Speech Delivered by Adam Pertman,  
AAC International Conference, Las Vegas, July 2005, Part Two**

*Editor's Note: In the previous issue of the Decree, Adam Pertman listed four suggestions for adoption reform: (1) Agree to disagree on some issues; (2) Address the opponents openly and honestly; (3) Think strategically with the willingness to compromise; and (4) Work together and learn from each other. The rest of the speech follows.*

I really am confident that AAC and other organizations and individuals will continue to step up and provide that leadership and vision—and I really do believe we can achieve victory.

In fact, in most ways, you—we—are winning already. We have a long way to go, to be sure, but our world today is radically different than the one in which we lived not very long ago. Thank God. And in most ways, it is getting better every day. More and more adopted people, for instance, are searching for and reuniting with their birth mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers and other members of their biological families. My wife and I recently brought our son together with his birth family, as we did for our daughter earlier—and both experiences have been overwhelmingly positive for

everyone involved.

Significantly, more and more of the new adoptions taking place in America today don't require the unsealing of records or reunions in order for everyone to know the truth about themselves. Because the birth mothers—and fathers, when they are involved, as they increasingly are—choose their children's adoptive parents and insist on greater and greater levels of communication and interaction. And, thankfully, steadily growing numbers of us adoptive parents are overcoming our insecurities and realizing that this remarkable new family structure is best for all involved—especially for our children.

This trend, which already is far more extensive than most Americans know, is going to accelerate as people in and out of the adoption world finally see with their own eyes that it's socially constructive, personally fulfilling, and the morally right thing to do. That doesn't mean all such families will get along or that all reunions will work out well, because relationships among human beings too often don't.

But it's absolutely normal for parents to want to know

about and have relationships with the children they created and for those children, whatever their age, to want to know where—and whom—they came from. As a society and as individuals, we could pretend that wasn't true when adoption was an embarrassing secret. But it's not a secret anymore. So now we can see and tell the truth.

And so, adding one prediction to the list I rattled off at the start of my remarks, I predict that openness in adoption will not only become widely acceptable, but will become the norm. Again, it's already happening. Not as quickly as you or I might like, and not yet to the degree that I believe is healthy for all the participants. But a fast-expanding number of adoptions within this country are open and honest to an extent that is historically unprecedented.

My hope and belief, in the long term, is that we are moving toward a time—which most of us will live to see—when families formed through adoption will be commonly viewed in the same way as those expanded by marriage. That is, when you marry someone, you get all of his and her relatives, too—whether you like them or not, whether you see them once a week or once a year. It's just the way it is if you want that person to be your spouse. We may not yet internalize it or acknowledge it, but the same is true when we adopt a child.

So one thing I believe we need to do in providing leadership and vision is develop a new vocabulary—we really do, for lots of reasons (examples of “real” children, halting the practice of calling women “birth mothers” before placement, etc.). So ... how does birth-mother-in-law sound? Or maybe biosib? I'm only half-joking.

Words are vital; they can sap us of our humanity—what does it do to children when “you're adopted” is an insult?—and words can make us feel whole. They can demean us or they can help us learn to live with our most excruciating decisions. We need to find new words to accurately and comfortably describe the rapidly shifting roles of people whose lives are transformed by adoption. And we will do it, I am sure, because a fundamental part of the revolution is this essential, historic redefinition of what it means to be a family.

A quick tangent about the progress we've been making, because I'm optimistic, not delusional: Birth parents, but especially birth mothers, have benefited the least and the most slowly from the adoption revolution. Mercifully, that too is changing, but no one with a conscience can think it's

happening fast enough or pervasively enough. We cannot wait for the future to alter this status quo. It's a battle we all have to fight, no matter what other cause we're championing at the time.

**They will tell friends, politicians and reporters that they never asked for or were guaranteed anonymity.**

that they never asked for or were guaranteed anonymity. As that happens, and it will because it already is, the shame and stigmas will evaporate more quickly. Because, collectively, we will come to realize you are not the stereotypes society turned you into in order to expedite business transactions and placate insecurities. Put another way, we will all realize that you are us.

I'm going on too long, and I'm sounding way too optimistic, so let me talk a little about bad stuff—things that aren't going to improve unless we understand the breadth of the adoption issues we face.

Even as state after state unseals records—which I believe they will continue to do—nearly every state is also establishing facilities, usually at hospitals and police stations, intended to save babies from being dumped in trash cans and toilets. The way these statutes are typically written, the children anonymously abandoned at safe havens, as they are called, will have no original birth certificates to unseal or original identities to pursue; their adoptive parents will have no medical records or genealogical information to help raise their children or answer their inevitable questions; their birth mothers will have no way to make contact when they get older and wiser, or after the distress that led them to the abandonment finally abates, as it almost always will. And most of their biological fathers probably will never even get the opportunity to participate in the decision on what should happen to the chil-

What I do believe--optimistically, of course—is that a growing number of first mothers and fathers will take the hard step of coming out of the closet. They will tell friends, politicians and reporters



**Adam Pertman**

*continued on next page*

dren who also carry their chromosomes.

It's hard to learn much about secrets, so most politicians and policymakers still don't understand adoption very well. But it's equally difficult to learn anything *from* secrets, so most people also haven't learned the lessons of adoption's history and experiences either. So individuals and organizations promoting legalized infant abandonment behave as though they're starting from scratch. They are not examining the research about issues such as identity formation. Nor are they talking to adult adoptees who were abandoned or women who dumped their babies, to hear their ideas.

These laws, now in effect in 47 states, were passed without holding hearings at which mental health professionals might have weighed in on whether it's realistic to think a young woman, so distraught or in denial that she would consider throwing her baby in a dumpster, might ask instead for a ride to the local police station.

At best, these laws might save a life or two now and then. That's a fine thing, if it happens, but have we really explored alternatives that could accomplish the very same objective without repeating adoption's past mistakes with anonymity, pretense and denial? We absolutely have not.

And that leads me to the worst that could happen: these laws could promote baby abandonment, not of those children who otherwise would be dumped unsafely, but of boys and girls who otherwise would be raised by biological family members or placed for adoption through traditional means.

I worry that some supporters of these laws are people who, for religious, personal or business reasons, don't like the openness now spreading through the adoption system and see anonymous safe havens as a way of creating an alternative process, modeled on the bad old ways that you all have worked so hard to change.

Whether that's their intention or not, it could be the result anyway if adoption reformers don't make a concerted effort to educate the people making these laws—now and in the foreseeable future—because this battle is going to be a long one.

I have similar concerns about some high-tech reproductive technologies, though I don't think the people devising them are deliberately trying to subvert the open adoption movement. Mainly, the researchers and clinicians making it possible to achieve pregnancy through frozen embryo trans-

fers and donor egg insemination provide these services for one reason: because they can.

They are not social workers or child-welfare professionals. They rarely, if ever, give a second thought to the reality that the children they help to create, like the sons and daughters of sperm donors before them, will one day want to know where—and whom—they came from.

They are not counselors who can advise the embryo and egg donors that they might some day want to know what happened to their biological offspring, or that those children might one day want to make contact with them. Nor do the doctors and clinicians counsel the women and men receiving the donations in this modernized version of adoption—again, we need new vocabulary—about the genealogical, cultural, and other identity questions their children will confront, or how to prepare for the possibility that they might get a phone call or letter from the biological parents sometime down the line.

It's hard to learn anything from secrets. So the people providing these extraordinary and potentially promising services, as well as the people availing themselves of them, are behaving as though they, too, are starting from scratch. We know better, but (as if you don't have enough on your plates already) it's going to take a lot of persistence, patience and hard work to explain to the medical and political communities that new reproductive technologies—like safe haven legislation—are indeed adoption issues.

The only way to avoid the need for an updated version of CUB and Bastard Nation twenty years from now, the easiest way to avoid repeating the mistakes

of the past, and the best way to ensure that these new-age families are formed morally, ethically and thoughtfully, is by learning adoption's lessons.

One more big problem the reform community needs to deal with. I write in my book that money threatens to supplant secrecy as adoption's worst enemy. Well, it's happening already. Even as we make real progress on other fronts, we are quickly losing ground on this one.

I don't much like that we allow the transfer of dollars in a procedure that involves human lives, but I fully recognize that in our country we pay for services like legal work, medical care and counseling—and I want high-quality people doing all of those things in adoption. So unless and until governments and businesses underwrite the process, money will continue to play some role. But how did we get so immersed in *laissez faire* thinking that most states barely re-

**It's hard to learn much about secrets,  
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quire any training, licensing, regulation or even monitoring of the people who forever change our lives? They can just hang up a shingle and go into the adoption business, with minimal worries about the consequences if they act unprofessionally, unethically or unscrupulously. We, as a nation, should be ashamed of ourselves for allowing it.

And how did we get to the point where adopting a baby in this country, or a child of almost any age from abroad, can cost \$20,000, \$30,000, \$40,000 or more? Maybe even worse, how did we become so jaded and so deeply persuaded that the marketplace should rule in every realm, that many people barely flinch when they hear those numbers. Hey, it's expensive to buy a kid, isn't it? No, it's illegal.

But when the sums get that high, it's fair to guess that not everyone gets involved in the process because they believe every child in need of a home should get one.

It's also reasonable to assume that some people are going to perceive adoption as tantamount to baby selling, a view that damages every member of our world, as well as all the adoption practitioners who try to do the right thing for the right reasons.

One final prediction: adoption's progress will accelerate most rapidly as the current and next generations of adopted people feel increasingly at ease expressing their wants and needs, and as they move into positions of authority within reform movements, in politics, and in shaping policy.

And one final recommendation: as you consider the challenges before you, think of NCFA not only as an organization that gets your aggressive juices flowing, but also as a role model. I mean it. The records in many states remain sealed today largely because one determined man—Bill Pierce—supported by an influential organization, did a hell of a job getting his views across, while his opponents either got steamrolled or remained silent. Well, just as surely as the era of secrecy and lies has passed, so has the time for silence. And I have no doubt whatsoever that, win or lose in a given battle, that you will never allow yourselves to be steamrolled again.

Adoption's past didn't happen by accident, and neither will its future.

Determined men and women, supported by influential organizations, are going to shape it. Changing the world is a

tough job, but hey, somebody's got to do it. It might as well be us.

So let's act as though our cause is truly important, because it is. Let's act as though our work is urgent, because it is. Let's finally swallow hard, get ready to make some short-term compromises and maybe even some personal sacrifices. Victory isn't just possible; it is in sight. And unity is the key.

**And how did we get to the point where adopting a baby in this country, or a child of almost any age from abroad, can cost \$20,000, \$30,000, \$40,000 or more? ... Hey, it's expensive to buy a kid, isn't it? No it's illegal.**

*Presented by Adam Pertman, Keynote Speaker, the American Adoption Congress, July 2005. Reprinted here by permission. This is the second of two installments.*

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Please include your full name, state you live in, and that you heard about Adoption-News-Service (ANS) in the *Decree*. The group is moderated and edited by Pam Hasegawa, adoption reform activist and AAC board member. Its focus is limited to the subjects mentioned; it is not for chats or editorializing, nor does it publicize support groups.

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# Bringing Adoptive Fathers into the Fold

## When the Fold is Mostly Ewes



Mary Martin Mason

By Mary Martin Mason

### Introduction

*To address the growing numbers of American children who lack a relationship with fathers, researchers have begun to study the impact of fathers, missing and present, in children's lives. Studies show that a nurturing father is integral to the optimal well-being for a child. Beyond his ability to provide financially, a father's role as nurturer and caregiver assists with:*

*Helping his children form positive relationships with others*

*Overall healthy child development, translated into success in school, positive self-esteem, avoiding risky behaviors, including substance abuse and delinquency*

*Responsible sexual behavior*

*Stronger academic performance in school*

*Given the importance of fathers in the lives of their children, a movement has taken hold to help fathers take a more active role in parenting their children. Even so, in adoption there are huge gaps in services both for birth and adoptive fathers throughout the adoption process from the pre-stages to the adult years of the child. All too often "parent involvement" means "mother involvement" and almost always, "birth parent" really translates to "birth mother." The research and literature about both types of fathers is practically non-existent.*

*This Father's Day essay provides a broader and seldom-addressed perspective on ways to enrich children's lives through father inclusion.*

Now that he is retired, John Hushman has time to occasionally accompany his wife, Diane Martin-Hushman, to trainings she does in her capacity as Parent Group Coordi-

nator at North American Council for Adoptable Children (NACAC). Sometimes finding himself as the only male in attendance, he wonders, "Where are the dads?"

The question has bothered him for the 35 years that he's been an adoptive father, leading him to organize and participate in men's groups. First, says Hushman, "Don't call it a *Support Group* since that says to fathers, 'Oh, we have to go to another meeting and listen to our wives talk again!' In some communities people equate support groups with Alcoholics Anonymous, so the language needs to be adapted."

Hushman believes that, for men to truly be free to talk, gatherings need to be restricted to males. This exclusion is based on gender differences, cultural norms and historical influences that cause men to communicate differently than women. Other gender differences are that men need a reason to meet such as sports, playing cards or eating. Men also observe strict time limits. "If a men's group is an hour, then it's an hour," says Hushman. "With women, an hour group can turn into hours."

Occasionally Hushman has let go of the "male only" rule, inviting women to join. He says, "It's always a mistake. The last time there were more women than men. I should have put up a "No Women Allowed" sign. The women in the group asked why I didn't." He laughs as he answers, "My wife said I couldn't."

Hushman finds it ironic that, while many women are naturally hungry to know how men think, feel and communicate, when women participate, "the men shut up and it impedes the process. With women around, men adapt themselves in their language, often saying what they think they are expected to say."

Hushman says, "Men are not going to talk in a mixed group about how they are viewed by other males who think

that adoption is a second choice. Men have to feel comfortable with each other to talk about this.”

For some dads, an athletic field becomes a setting for instilling values about sportsmanship, fair play and larger life lessons. When children don’t share the genetics of their adoptive parents, or if they lack athletic interest or ability, there may be difficulty. “The expectation for physical achievement is usually higher for dads than for moms,” says Hushman, “especially in sports. Our wives would say, ‘Who cares!’ but for men, we do care.”

“When we first adopted 35 years ago, we thought that love was all we needed.” With six children now grown, there has been a history filled with both joy and sorrow, one daughter dying young of cancer, one son in prison and another struggling with mental illness.

Even so Hushman says, “I wouldn’t have traded this experience for anything in the world. One son reached over one day when we were with his biological dad who was in the room. After his birth dad left, he reached over and put his arm around me and said, ‘You’re my dad, Dad.’ Every time I remember, I get emotional.”

#### **Prioritize to Keep Healthy**

“When we first adopted,” says Hushman, “we said to each other that we have to make time for us. That is critical. When I talk to dads, I talk about how if you want your marriage to work, you need time together without kids and you need alone time as an individual. I play volleyball as I have for 35 years as a way to release my stress. For my wife, it’s going to a book club.”

Given the risk of divorce for adoptive parents, Hushman points to how men tend to remain in the background. “I think women push harder for adoption. It’s that maternal thing that is stronger. If men take a back seat from the beginning in the adoption instead of talking things through, then things can go wrong. When things get really bad, some fathers walk away. That’s the ultimate loss to everyone.”

Dads need to find ways to take time for themselves and their marriage. Hushman says, “The order is first, take care of their marriage; next, take care of themselves; then, take care of the children. We totally reverse that order. We take care of the kids first, then take care of ourselves and wonder why our marriage breaks up if it is last on the list. Single parents need to take care of themselves first and then the

children. If we’re not healthy, our kids aren’t going to be healthy.”

“When Diane and I talk to couples, we talk about the need to be able to dance or move to the music. Sometimes the music isn’t always what we want it to be, but you have to keep dancing.”

#### **Fathers Need Validation from Other Fathers**

The camaraderie and support that adoptive and birth fathers need can happen through mentoring or one-on-one support. Hushman says, “I think that adoptive fathers need to find other fathers and have separate time together. One thing I’ve done to make that happen when I’m in a group setting is to identify a shared interest. So if you like to fish and he likes to fish, the two of you might go fishing together.”

Hushman suggests that men make opportunities to spend time with supportive peers. “I play volleyball with a minister who gets up to the area where my son is in prison. He wants to go see him. Men get support in different ways

than women, whether it’s on the golf course, baseball game, or having breakfast together. Women don’t always see this as an outlet for men to take care of themselves, which both men and women need to do.”

“The whole idea of a village is a good idea,” Hushman adds. “Diane and I didn’t always have that, and it would be nice if that support was available to men. I helped one man by taking his shift one summer so he could go coach his grandson and his daughter in baseball.”

Hushman concludes,

“Fathers need to hear that they are necessary and important to their children. They need to know that kids without fathers are hurting. Fathers aren’t validated publicly. People think that all they do is play with the kids.”

*This article was published previously in Family Voices and is reprinted here with permission. Mary Martin Mason, Legislative Committee Chair for AAC, is an author of one of the few books written about birth fathers, Out of the Shadows: Birthfathers Stories. She is a national speaker on the need for post-adoption lifelong connections and access to records, relying on her and her son’s life experiences, each growing up in an open adoption.*

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# Access Legislation Pits Facts Against Mythology

*"The great enemy of the truth is very often not the lie:  
deliberate, continued, and dishonest;  
but the myth: persistent, persuasive, and unrealistic."  
President John F. Kennedy*

**By Mary Martin Mason**

On January 1, 2005, New Hampshire joined Oregon, Alabama, Delaware and Tennessee plus the never-sealed states of Kansas and Alaska, in becoming the seventh state to pass legislation to restore access to their original birth certificates for adult adoptees. Similar bills await the decision of legislators in Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Connecticut this year. Legislation was recently defeated in Maine and Missouri.

In Canada, the most recent access bill passed in Ontario on November 1, 2005. The bill will take effect 18 months after passage following an extensive public awareness and advertising campaign. Ontario joins British Columbia, Alberta and Newfoundland in legislating reform.

States and provinces are following a well-defined trail forged by New Zealand reformers. In 1985, New Zealand became the first country to allow both adopted people and birth parents to get identifying information from official records. The Adult Adoption Information Act has led to over 20,000 reunions, thanks to Kiwi grass roots efforts and advocacy. Today, over half the adult adoptee population in New Zealand know their birth origins.

New Zealand found that the greatest impediment to reform was a body of mythology that had sprung from decades of secrets. Keith C. Griffith, the author and reformist who led the charge in New Zealand, spent ten years educating the public and elected officials before proposing legislative changes. When speaking of his decade-long effort, he noted, "The acceptance of untruths did much harm by creating false hope, false stereotypes and a potentially destructive zealotry that denied the truth."

Statistics and data gathered after passage of New Zealand's Adult Adoption Information Act proved that birth mothers did not need protection from adoptees, that a majority of adoptees did wish to search and that the reunions that occurred did not disrupt adoptees' connections with their adoptive families. Dispelling commonly held beliefs normalized search and reunion, created an expectation of fully disclosed adoption for the future and ushered in an adoption healing movement needed to address past hurts.

The same myths and zealotry exist in the United States and Canada, slowing legislative progress to a trickle. Until the myths are dispelled and the zealotry exposed as fear-based, reformers must carefully strategize ways to overcome such obstacles. This requires allaying the fears of

those who provide adoption services and who, with the onset of access, will be forced into systemic change. Adoptive families may feel threatened by access as potentially leading to the loss of their children. And although statistics reveal that the majority of birth parents want information about their children, if not contact, access raises the specter of unrequited grief.

Lessons can be drawn from child advocate Marian Wright Edelman, who describes the forty years in which the Civil Rights Movement took hold as one in which "men tried to hold on to dying ideologies and modes of control." Here is where the hard work for coalitions begins.

## **First, Educate the Bill's Sponsor**

Delaware and New Hampshire's victories were largely based on the strength of the respective sponsors, according to Carolyn Hoard, recent AAC Membership Chair and long-time legislative advocate. "The object must be to cultivate a sponsor who completely understands the issues and is not only totally committed to achieving the goals set by the grassroots coalition, but also respects the coalition enough to pull the bill if it is changed so much by other legislators that it is unacceptable to the grassroots folks."

"We need to have strong sponsors who will stick with us," says Barbara Busharis, AAC Legislative Committee member. "I would prefer to cultivate a relationship with a sponsor and get nothing introduced in a given year than to pick a sponsor who will introduce something, but then back off when things get nasty."

## **Repeat the Mantra: No Harm Done**

To answer pervasive fears, coalitions must be armed with the hard data collected in states and provinces showing that reform measures benefit rather than harm participants. Just as important is to cite a growing body of research that reveals that denying the adopted person important life information creates immediate as well as generational harm.

Paul Schibbelhute, immediate past AAC President, was the force behind New Hampshire's victory. He advises other states to let the statistics answer the claims that damage would result from adoptee access. As of January 2006, a year after the bill went into effect, only eleven New Hampshire birthparents have stated their preference for no contact, while 784 adoptees have requested their original birth



certificate. In more populous Oregon, 7,687 adult adoptees have received their birth records since implementation of Measure 58 in 1999, with 79 birth parents requesting no contact in year one, one in year two, and one in year three. The number requesting no contact has been estimated to be 0.08% of the birth parent population in Oregon. In both states, no ill effects have been reported.

Schibbelhute says, "When SB335 passed in New Hampshire it became the third consecutive state to pass legislation that guarantees all adoptees access to their original birth certificates. This legislation is working extraordinarily well in states where it has been enacted."

### **Keep the Faith... For as Long as It Takes**

The recent defeat of Maine's LD1805 was especially bitter for Bobbi Beavers, the AAC Maine representative who had spearheaded the bill with the ACCESS 2006 coalition. LD1805 was patterned after New Hampshire's bill, providing access for adult adoptees with a non-binding Contact Preference Form for birthparents. ACCESS 2006 added an amendment that descendants of adoptees would be included in access. LD1805 was then battered by amendments that proved unacceptable to Beavers and other proponents, who ultimately lobbied against the final replacement bill to ensure its defeat. Today, Beavers says, "We are proud of our accomplishments, which include progress in educating legislators and the general public on the issue of adoptee rights and bringing together many adoptive parents, adoptees and parents who have lost children to adoption. We will be working on a name change for our legislative group since ACCESS 2006 is no longer applicable and will re-submit a clean bill in 2007, along with exploring other alternatives."

In New Jersey, Judy Foster (AAC State Representative), Pam Hasegawa and Jane Nast have championed access rights for twenty-six years. The latest hitch with their bill was a surprise appropriations note of \$1 million attached as a last minute defeat measure. Hasegawa says, "While sabotage worked in the short term, it strengthened our resolve, especially when we realized that even those legislators who did not support the bill were shocked at the tactics used to defeat it. Now we are happy to report that the bill has been restored to its original wording without the appropriation." Foster, Hasegawa and Nast, along with colleagues in the New Jersey Coalition for Adoption Reform and Education (NJ CARE), anticipate a hearing on the original bill.

### **Be Willing to Compromise**

The American Adoption Congress supports state-by-state legislative efforts to restore access to original birth certificates for adult adoptees. AAC prefers unrestricted

access to this document for all adult adoptees but will accept compromise legislation if, in the opinion of AAC and local supporters, such a compromise is necessary to obtain the greatest access for the greatest number of adopted persons.

Compromise based on looking beyond myths and relying on the results of other legislative efforts can be a wise tactic. Various Ontario governments for over 25 years have tried to open up access to original birth information. In November 2005, the current Liberal government was finally successful. Facing formidable opposition from the province's Information and Privacy Commissioner, Ann Cavoukian, the Liberal Party examined the results of contact preference with attached fines in other provinces and states. Finding no reported violations, they opted for the fine but fought against the "information veto" that Commissioner Cavoukian favored. The strategy resulted in the most progressive bill to date in Canada.

When compromise is considered, however, it is crucial that terminology is clear and that the compromise should not create a new blockage to access that did not previously exist. Reformers in each state need to pay close attention to the effect of bills that may sound more benign than they actually are. In 2006, for example, at least one state legislature considered legislation that used "contact preference" terminology, when the actual effect of the legislation would have been to create a binding veto on the disclosure of identifying information. Rather than being a step forward for adoptee rights in that state, the bill would have been an endorsement of secrecy. A true "contact preference" system, which is working so well in Oregon, Alabama, and New Hampshire, is a progressive compromise that does not limit adoptees' rights to access their own identifying information.

In a perfect world, the passage of "clean bills" that give all adopted adults their original birth certificate with no attached conditions would be the norm. The current political climate and the deep pockets of the lobbyist-based National Council for Adoption require the consideration of negotiating. Strong coalitions have to factor in the impact of compromise on the future and, like ACCESS 2006, decide to pull a bill if compromise is carried too far. The acceptance of persistent, persuasive, and unrealistic myths about the impact of access calls for broader strategic thinking. For an aging population of adoptees, the middle ground may be the only access to holy ground in their lifetimes.

*Mary Martin Mason, Legislative Committee Chair for AAC, is an author of one of the few books written about birth fathers, Out of the Shadows: Birthfathers Stories. She is a national speaker on the need for lifelong post-adoption connections and access to records, relying on her and her son's life experiences, each growing up in an open adoption.*

# Coming Full Circle

By Karen D. Sterner



I cannot remember the face of the woman who carried me inside her body for nine months and then relinquished me to adoption in 1970 in Pittsburgh almost 36 years ago. I know her name, but don't know the sound of her voice, or the person she was.

Since I have found my birth family, I've often felt blessed that I have a few items that were something tangible of hers—a letter, a charm, photographs and an article of clothing; these material items reconnect me to the few minutes that I was in her care. I have no conscious recollection of the first four days of my life except for the detailed medical records I obtained after learning of her death.

The focal point of the medical records is a few sentences that describe my birth mother's emotions prior to, during, and after holding me for a matter of minutes. I imagine I was wrapped in a blanket as she cradled me in her arms. I imagine my expression reflected the blunt trauma of being separated from my birth mother just days before. I have no idea of whether she spoke to me as she held me in her arms. I have always felt close to her and, whether it was because of her holding me or the message she possibly spoke to me, I believe that she loved me.

I would like to tell you that I made an easy peace, as a child, with my birth mother and my early losses. But I did not. I was discharged from the hospital with my birth mother. She carried me out of the hospital to the parking lot and handed me over to the intermediary who handled the adoption. The intermediary then took me to my adoptive family. I was given a new name, a new national identity and a new life. When I tried, as a teenager, to make sense of who my birth mother was and the events that had led her to give me up, I was often overwhelmed by feelings of confusion and helplessness. I was unable to challenge the sense of safety and normalcy I experienced in my home by dwelling too much on the birth mother I had left behind.

I always thought that day would come when I would be able to see, hear, touch my birth mother, and learn of the circumstances that led to our separation. It would only arrive after I mustered the courage to make the long journey through search that I could reach reunion.

In 1993, two weeks after learning of my birth mother's death fifteen months earlier, I sat in the living room of a

close friend waiting to meet my biological sister and her boyfriend for the first time. This turned out to be my closest living lifelong connection to my birth mother and I actually tried to convince myself that I had come full circle. In 2005, as my husband and I struggled to conceive and maintain a healthy pregnancy, I couldn't help but think about adoption and the possibility we would adopt our first and only child.

In making a phone call to the adoption agency that was founded by the intermediary who handled the adoption for my adoptive family, it felt as if I had crossed the threshold of coming full circle. I also thought about how my parents felt more than 30+ years ago when they first inquired about adoption.

I spoke with the agency director, whom I have known for years, and through the phone I could see her smiles, her body language, and her kind gestures as I explained the reason for my phone call. She was a part of my two-year search that ended with finding a grave in 1993 and was willing to help us as we considered the journey of adopting a child.

After our phone conversation I talked with my husband and started to reflect on everything I know about my birth mother. A few days later, while I was going through some photographs, I came across one of my birth mother and realized how differently this woman looked to me through the eyes of a grown woman hoping to become a mother. It took my breath away as I began to visualize some of the probable events leading up to my birth mother's life-changing decision.

I saw a woman only five years younger than I am today struggling to survive on her own in Pittsburgh. Her parents were deceased, and her nearest living relatives were miles away. I could see her residing in the home of the intermediary while pregnant with me, and her holding me in the hospital for the first time. I felt her anguish as she realized that, if she gave me up then, there was hope I would be strong and have a life that she could not provide for me as a single mother in the early 1970's.

My heart ached for her and the loneliness of her sacrifice. I thought about her struggling with the decision to relinquish me to adoption or attempt to care for me in a society that did not support unwed mothers. I wonder, if she

were still alive, what she would say to my husband and me about our infertility issues, and I hope that she was not haunted by her choice. Finally, I feel how much my birth mother must have loved me.

When we learned I was pregnant for the first time after trying to conceive for over a year, I imagined holding my son or daughter close to me. We had hopes and dreams for this baby and, when we experienced a pregnancy in my fallopian tube, those thoughts all came crashing down. As we wait for the time to pass where we can try again, we are considering the risks to my health and well being, the need to have a biological child of our own, and adoption, but I also hope that my birth mother came to peace with the decision she made so long ago.

I may have never seen my birth mother in this life, but I believe that one day we will be reunited in a place where nothing can keep us apart. I may not have a conscious memory of her appearance other than photographs, but I believe we will recognize each other instantly.

## Wanted—Birth parents to Support Adoptee Access!

If you as a birth parent are willing to publicly acknowledge your support for adoptee access to identifying birth information, please contact AAC. Your willingness to add your name to a list of supporters will contradict the myth that birth parents fear contact. Names may be used in state-by-state legislative efforts to enact legislative reform.

Send your name, state and year of relinquishment to Carolyn Hoard, [choard@comcast.net](mailto:choard@comcast.net).

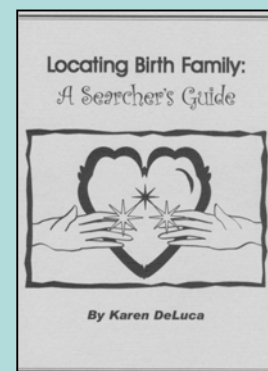
## Locating Birth Family: A Searcher's Guide

Karen DeLuca, an adoptee, has written a 54-page book designed to prepare members of the adoption triad for reunion. The bulk of the book focuses on issues that face adoptees as they begin to consider looking for their birth family. The author's own search ended with the discovery that her birth mother had died, although she did discover a sibling. Since this discovery 14 years ago, she has assisted others both in conducting searches and in preparing for the possible outcomes of a search.

As a "reunited" birth mother, I found her advice very wise. Particularly helpful is the author's counsel to carefully consider what a searcher wants to get out of a reunion. Also to be considered are the possible current life situations that might cause the subject of a search to be less than enthusiastic about being found.

Although this is not an exhaustive "how to search" manual, the author offers very concrete steps for conducting research and making contact by phone, mail or through a third party. She also relates the positive role that confer-

**Locating Birth Family:  
A Searcher's Guide**  
**Karen DeLuca (2003).**  
*Reviewed by Jo Ann Van Reenan*



ences and search and support groups played in her own process of making peace with what she found.

While the book provides sound advice for birth parents and adoptees, the book is self-published and could benefit from another round of editing. Nonetheless, this is a helpful book and good starting place for those beginning a life-changing search.

*Jo Ann Van Reenan, a librarian by profession, is a birth mother.*



# Call for 2007 Workshop Proposals

## Call for WORKSHOP PROPOSALS AAC 28<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference



Take the Freedom Trail to  
Truth in Adoption

March 7 – 10, 2007 in Boston, Massachusetts

The American Adoption Congress (AAC) cordially invites you to submit a workshop proposal for its 28<sup>th</sup> Annual International Conference to be held March 7 – 10, 2007 at the Sheraton Colonial Hotel in Wakefield, MA. Workshop presenters and panelists, like all AAC members, are true volunteers and receive no monetary compensation. We do offer presenters a \$50 discount toward registration fees (*maximum of two presenters per workshop and only one discount per person, regardless of the number of workshops presented*). AAC membership is not a requirement for proposal submission or presentation.

**Proposals** In March 2007, we will be coming together in one of our country's most colorful and historical cities. It is a city within a state that has long mandated secrecy in adoption. Our theme states boldly that we shall no longer accept secrecy as a solution. We shall throw open the doors and walk to our freedom. In this spirit, the AAC invites you to submit a proposal that fits the theme of Freedom and Truth in Adoption. Remember that this is your organization. What has it offered you in the past that you can now offer to others? What was missing from AAC's past conferences that you would like included?



# Call for 2007 Workshop Proposals

## Proposal Areas:

Proposals will be accepted in the following areas. Please feel free to submit more than one proposal and in more than one area.

### Triad Issues

(Adoptees, Adoptive Parents, Birth Parents)

- Building Bridges
- The International Trail in Adoption
- Personal Journeys

### Family Advocacy and Preservation

- Search and Reunion Journeys
- The Impact of Reproductive Technologies
- Advocating for Families
- Preserving Family and Cultural Ties

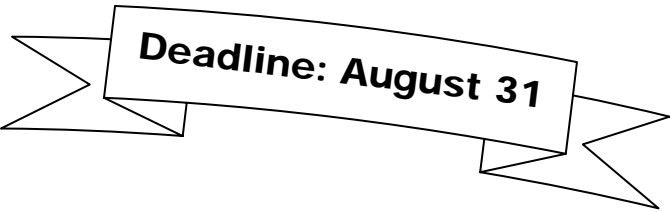
### Agencies and Social Workers

- Navigating Foster Care
- Ethics in Adoption

### Public Policy and Activism

- Legislative Reform
- The Role of Grass Roots Organizations

**Proposal Deadline** The deadline for workshop proposal submissions is **August 31, 2006**. All proposals are reviewed by the Education Committee, who will provide acceptance notifications prior to **November 1, 2006**. For a copy of the workshop proposal form, please visit the AAC website at [www.americanadoptioncongress.org](http://www.americanadoptioncongress.org) or contact the AAC Education Chair.



Deadline: August 31

Thank you for considering the AAC for your workshop proposal. We will make every effort to accommodate all special requests and proposals. Should you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact us. We look forward to seeing you on the Freedom Trail in Boston!

Sincerely,

**Amy Winn, Education Chair**

105 E 96<sup>th</sup> Terr  
Kansas City, MO 64114  
816-523-8678 (fax)  
[amy.aac@gmail.com](mailto:amy.aac@gmail.com)

**Sharon Pittenger, Conference Co-Chair**

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**Ellen Roseman, Conference Co-Chair**

(415) 453-0902  
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**Paul Schibbelhute,**

**New England Director & Local Organizing Committee Chair**

(603) 880-7790  
[pschibbe@aol.com](mailto:pschibbe@aol.com)

The 2007 Conference Committee is looking for volunteers to help make the Boston conference run smoothly and without detours. Can you help? Volunteers are needed to help with workshops, the book room, registration and other areas. You will help make the conference a great experience for all attendees.

If you're willing to give four or more hours of your time, please contact me at the email address below.

As we get closer to conference time, I'll be contacting you to determine your availability.

Thanks in advance for your willingness to help.  
See you in Boston!

Amy Winn  
[Amy.AAC@gmail.com](mailto:Amy.AAC@gmail.com)

Carolyn Pooler  
[gapmother@aol.com](mailto:gapmother@aol.com)

## Spotlight on State Representatives



Massachusetts State Rep.  
Cindy McGuigan

Cindy recently became the state representative for Massachusetts and is already active on the conference committee and local organizing committee for the 2007 conference in Boston. Cindy's life experience, including a strong desire for access to information, led her to join AAC. She does not believe that any good comes from keeping secrets, and she wants to help ensure that everyone has their information before it is too late.

Twenty-two years ago, after dating for about a year, Cindy and her boyfriend found she was pregnant. At the time, Cindy was in foster care, having left her home at age thirteen. Her boyfriend Jim, an adoptee himself, did not have the support of his family, who wanted the child given up for adoption. After looking into many options, Cindy and Jim decided that the best choice was to give birth to their son and place him for adoption.

Ironically, on the same day that Cindy and Jim signed the surrender papers for their son, Jim received his non-identifying information. Eight years after this, they married, and have been married now for sixteen years. They began Jim's twelve-year search, which ended with a wonderful letter from his birth mother, who passed away before they were able to meet. Not long after this, Cindy and Jim were put in contact with their son's adoptive family. At age twelve, he wasn't ready to meet them, but five years later, they had a reunion. Now they are working on building the relationship. Cindy is happy that she knows he is safe and grew up loved. Cindy and Jim both look forward to more contact with him in the future.

In addition to their birth son, Cindy and Jim have three beautiful daughters. Cindy looks forward to working with AAC in order to make this experience turn into something positive.



Colorado State Representative  
Margot Wurst

Margot Wurst becomes the second state representative for Colorado. Margot, a reunited birth mother, learned of AAC from a counselor. She attended her first AAC conference in Anaheim and also participated in the 2005 Las Vegas conference. Margot has also been involved with a Concerned United Birthparents (CUB) support group in Los Angeles where she has come to love the process of giving and receiving support in the triad setting. A strong proponent of family preservation, Margot looks forward to volunteering with AAC and sharing her experiences as a tool to help others, recruiting new members, and educating others about adoption and what AAC has to offer.

Margot lost her son to adoption in 1974. A month later, she was able to meet David's adoptive parents, so they have always known each others' names. In June 1999, when Margot received a phone call from a searcher, she and David were reunited immediately. David's finding Margot changed her life. While the reunion has had ups and downs, overall it has been an excellent experience. Margot has a great relationship with David's adoptive mother, who is open to learning and understanding more about the experience of adoption. According to Margot, "I have experienced the joy and grief that come with forced relinquishment and reunion. I have come up and out of my grief and see our experience as a gift. David and I cannot change what happened to us. We can make the best of what we have now."

In 2004, Margot moved to Colorado and married her childhood sweetheart. Bob, Margot's husband, has a grown daughter and son from his first marriage; David is her only child. Margot is the Office Manager for Habitat for Humanity of Montrose County—a small community on the Western Slope of the Rocky Mountains, where she and Bob enjoy spending time outdoors.

## Spotlight on State Representatives



North Carolina State Rep.  
Roberta MacDonald

Roberta becomes the second representative for North Carolina. In 2000, she attended her first AAC Conference in Tennessee and learned a tremendous amount about adoption reform legislation from Caprice East. In 2001, the North Carolina Coalition for Adoption Reform (NCCAR), which Roberta founded, became a member of AAC. Since then, Roberta has attended conferences in Georgia, Pennsylvania and Kansas, each time learning more about educating the public and promoting reform of adoption laws. She looks forward to participating in future AAC conferences and continuing to work with both AAC and NCCAR to develop good reform legislation for North Carolina.

Roberta, a reunited adoptee, was born in New Jersey and adopted by her half-sister. While growing up, Roberta knew her birth mother but did not realize their actual relationship. With help from a NJ searcher, she was reunited with her birth mother on Mother's Day, 1996, 25 years after they had been separated. This became her first revelation about adoption—even if she and her birth mother both requested a copy of her original birth certificate, the staff of the Bureau of Vital Statistics was legally bound to deny her request. Her second revelation occurred two years later. Upon applying for a passport, Roberta received a letter from the passport agency denying her application and requesting submission of acceptable evidence of her U.S. citizenship. Because her amended birth certificate had been recorded over a year after her birth, the passport agency found it unacceptable. Once it was amended further, the passport was issued. These revelations have led Roberta to work for adoption reform legislation.

Living within fifteen minutes of the NC legislative building, Roberta is in close proximity to the "action." A mother of one son and one daughter, and a grandmother of three terrific grandsons, she also is the president of her own company, Computer Magic Services, Inc., established in 1998.



Virginia State Representative  
David Horne

David Horne, a reunited birth father, is the new state representative for Virginia. One of his first interactions with AAC was when he presented a reunion workshop in Baltimore with his daughter. In addition to AAC, he is active in several other adoption organizations.

In 1994, David and his birth daughter, Sue, were reunited after a 36-year separation. Since then, they have had a successful reunion relationship, remaining on good terms with Sue's adoptive family and her birth mother's family.

In the past, David worked for the Naval Air Systems Command as an engineering consultant and as an appellate attorney representing veterans at the U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims. He holds degrees from Palomar College, Old Dominion University, and George Mason University School of Law. Now retired from the U.S. Marine Corps, David is busy with adoption reform and also his three additional children.

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Iowa State Representative  
Mike Badeaux

A native Iowan and adoptee, Mike Badeaux is the new Iowa State Representative. Mike joined AAC and offered to volunteer for two reasons. First, he strongly shares AAC's belief that "the ongoing state-sanctioned support of laws that encourage secrecy in adoption are counterproductive and discriminatory against adoptees." Mike looks forward to working with like-minded individuals within the state that he loves to educate its citizens and elected representatives in an effort to change the law. Second, through his own search and self-education about what it means to be adopted, Mike states, "I've come to view fellow adoptees almost as an extended family, and I want to lend those with questions a hand by making information available to them that is specific to Iowa and to offer them an opportunity to join an organization that will work to right the wrong that

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# Book Reviews

## Growing in the Dark: Adoption Secrecy and its Consequences

*Growing in the Dark: Adoption Secrecy and its Consequences* is a concise (157 pages, including a helpful bibliography and endnotes) exploration of the negative effects of sealed records. It grew out of the author's master's thesis and focuses in particular on the history of sealed records in California, the author's birth state. Rather than limiting the scope of the book, however, this focus makes the history of sealed records easier to understand; California's history can be seen, in many ways, as representative of the national experience.

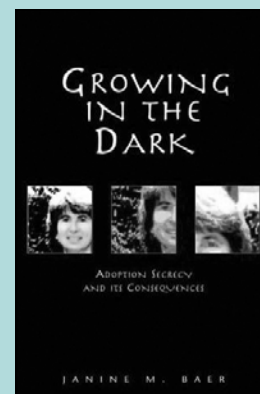
The first three chapters of the book provide an overview of sealed records, followed by increasingly detailed descriptions of California's treatment of adoption information. The author notes that adoption files were sealed to the general public in 1927 and then, in a separate step, sealed to the parties in 1933. The author identifies a number of trends and events that played a role in the timing of California's move to seal records, including the economic effects of the Great Depression and an increase in agency regulation of

*Growing in the Dark:  
Adoption Secrecy and its Consequences*

Janine M. Baer. (2004).

(Xlibris Corporation)

Reviewed by Barbara Busharis



adoptions.

The next chapter, titled "Information is Power: Agency Secrets," provides additional perspective on the legislative history by describing evolving attitudes towards secrecy within the social work establishment, as represented by the Child Welfare League of America and the Children's Bureau. The author describes the shift from acknowledging the important of information to, in the 1950s, promoting "confidentiality"; the chapter concludes with the Child Welfare League's 2000 standards, which endorsed the belief that adopted adults should have access to their own identifying information, and stated that agencies should not encourage birth parents to believe that information would be kept secret from the adoptee.

A chapter on "The Consequences of Sealed Records" succinctly describes how sealing records facilitated illegal baby-selling, encouraged adoptive families to keep secrets, and legislated birth parents into invisibility. Another ironic consequence the author describes is that, as adoptees had less and less access to information about themselves, they were increasingly the subject of both study and speculation in the mental health community. Finally, the author points out that searching, both within and outside of legal avenues, continued despite restrictions on access.

For a number of years the culture of secrecy allowed widespread acceptance of the myth that "records have always been sealed." In recent years researchers (Elizabeth Samuels, E. Wayne Carp, and others) have dispelled that myth. Sealed records are simply a 20<sup>th</sup>-century social experiment that did more harm than good. *Growing in the Dark*, by virtue of its modest length and accessibility, can be used to educate people both within and outside of the adoption reform movement about the effects of sealed records and the faulty premises used to support them.

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## Iowa State Representative

*continued from page 15*

we're all living with today." Mike hopes that soon the barriers placed by the state of Iowa will be removed and that every adoptee born in Iowa will have the legal right to answer the most basic of questions about themselves and their biological history.

In southeastern Iowa in the early 1970's, Mike was relinquished for adoption immediately after birth. After growing up as an adoptee under the closed system, he began his search for information about his origins soon after the birth of his first child. In late 2005, Mike located his birth mother and recently initiated a gentle request for direct contact with her. According to Mike, "I'm hopeful that she can show the same courage she did back in 1973 and respond to my delicate letter."

A technology professional within the banking industry, Mike holds a degree in criminal justice and also is an European-theatre USAF veteran. He still resides in his native Iowa where he is a husband and the father of two beautiful little girls.



# Book Reviews

## Surrendered Child: A Birth Mother's Journey

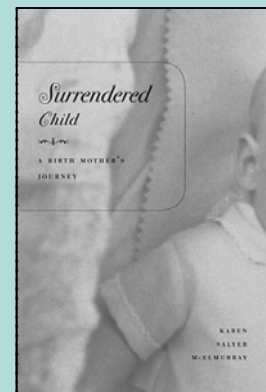
This is an important book for all interested in adoption and, especially, the birth mother experience. The writing is far superior to the usual adoption memoir: liquid, lyrical, poignant, vivid and emotionally true. The poetic stream of consciousness style is perfect to convey the ambiguity, pain, guilt, and clouded memory of a mother who gives up a child, especially the aftermath suffered alone in secrecy and self-loathing. The author's skill in making specific sights, sounds, smells stand out like objects coming into focus through a thick fog is especially effective in anchoring the narrative in reality while questioning the very nature of that remembered reality.

This is not an easy book to read, especially for birth mothers, but so many of my unspeakable feelings were captured by Ms. McElmurray that at times I was not sure if I was reading the book or writing it. The more I read, the more I fell into the black hole of the years surrounding the birth and surrender of my firstborn son, when I was a college student in the late 1960s. What this book captures so well is not a specific, linear story, moving from childhood to pregnancy to surrender to eventual reunion, but the shifting, viscous nature of time and memory, how it is all happening all the time, back and forth and around and around, in the mind and heart of the surrendering mother.

The endless private retelling and restructuring the story that Ms. McElmurray portrays so well are also very familiar: the constant rumination over what really happened, and why, and who was to blame; the sad shades of misty gray, where it would be so much easier to make it all black and white and clear. Those who are looking for the usual adoption reform saga will be frustrated; there are no evil social workers, greedy adoptive parents, or cruel grandparents forcing surrender. There is only a mother, barely sixteen, making her own choice to save her son from the abused and pain-filled childhood she has known, due to her own mother's insanity, then never forgetting or recovering from the awful echoes of that choice. She is forever alone, forever standing at the edge of some high mountain road with the choice to jump or fall, as the years and ghosts swirl beneath her feet.

The author's voice is clearly Southern, the way she endures and prevails worthy of a Faulkner heroine; but this poetic narrative is both particular and universal, the anguished cry of a mother who could not keep her son, and could not, in her heart and soul, ever let him go. I especially loved her modest depiction of their eventual reunion, letting

*Surrendered Child:  
A Birth Mother's Journey*  
**Karen Salyer McElmurray (2006).**  
**(University of Georgia Press)**  
*Reviewed by Mary Anne Cohen*



the reader fill in what that was, so reminiscent of my own reunion with my adult son, for which there really are no words. This book is filled with truths beyond mere facts, in the way of the most resonant stories and myths. I am in awe of the author's talent and courage, and highly recommend it.

*Mary Anne Cohen is a birth mother and activist, and edits the Origins newsletter, where an earlier version of this review first appeared. She has been involved in adoption reform since the early days of AAC and was a founding member of Concerned United Birthparents in 1976. She can be reached at [maireaine@hexatron.com](mailto:maireaine@hexatron.com).*

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## The Cruellest Con

The world of adoption is riddled with ethical conundrums, uncertainties and challenges. Even the most legitimate, carefully licensed, reputable adoption agencies may stumble at times under the weight of too-large caseloads, overworked staff, insufficient operating budgets and inescapably ambiguous ethical dilemmas. Tragically, the adoption world is also peppered with intentionally unscrupulous people who purposely deceive, exploit, manipulate, extort for personal gain.

*The Cruellest Con* is the true story of how Sonya Furlow, posing in the 1990s as an independent adoption facilitator, robbed 44 prospective adoptive families of their money and dreams. The book, while painful to read, is also an essential source of information for anyone contemplating domestic adoption. It details how even reputable adoption attorneys, licensed agencies and intelligent consumers can become unwittingly entangled in the shenanigans and peccadilloes of an ingenious, creative, resourceful liar who preys upon the vulnerabilities of infertile people who long to love a child.

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# Book Reviews

## Cruellest Con

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Kelly Kiser-Mostrom wrote *The Cruellest Con* as part of her effort to heal, move on, and cull some good from her family's traumatic experiences as Sonya Furlow's "clients." The book explores why and how even sophisticated, intelligent prospective adoptive parents fall prey to con artist tactics. Most importantly, the book spells out ways prospective adoptive parents might protect themselves from unscrupulous con-nivers. It details how state laws and legitimate agency practices unintentionally facilitate illicit scheming. Thus, it is a crucial resource not only for prospective adoptive parents, their families and friends, but also for legislators, adoption attorneys and ethical agency personnel.

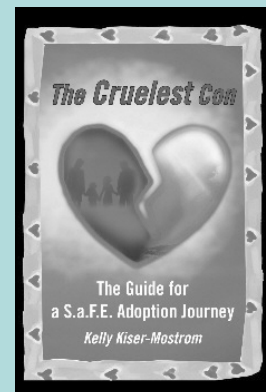
Kiser-Mostrom also summarizes the story of Teresa, a birth mother who allegedly is manipulated and deceived into placing her newborn into the home of adoptive parents who lead her to believe that they are committed to an open adoption, and then slam the door on contact almost as soon as the child is legally theirs. Thus, the book attempts to address the notion that adoption scams run both ways.

*The Cruellest Con* explicitly favors open adoption. While the book mentions reasons why open adoption is best practice, more thorough discussion is needed to spell out how the principles underlying successful open adoption may help people resist others' attempts at scams. Clearly, the ruse of open adoption can be used to create opportunities for

### *The Cruellest Con*

**Kelly-Kiser-Mostrom (2005).**  
**(iUniverse, Inc.)**

*Reviewed by Deborah Siegel*



manipulation and deceit.

Adoption issues strike primal chords. Kiser-Mostrom's story has blockbuster potential. It's all the more riveting and emotionally consuming because it is true and written with passion and sincerity. Extensive, detailed technical editing would have vastly enhanced the book's readability and expanded its audience. Ignorance spawns problems in lives touched by adoption. The issues identified in *The Cruellest Con* deserve widespread attention.

*Deborah H. Siegel, Ph.D., LICSW, DCSW, ACSW, is a professor at the Rhode Island College School of Social Work in Providence, RI. She is the parent of two children adopted domestically, a consultant for several adoption agencies, and a frequent workshop presenter for adoption professionals and adoptive parents.*

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### We welcome your membership in the AAC!

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☐ RENEWING MEMBER 1 Year Renewal  
☐ RENEWING MEMBER 2 Year Renewal

Please check all that apply

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**Please mail to: AAC Interim Membership Chair c/o Carolyn Hoard, 20 Yeates Dr., New Castle, DE 19720**

Fee Schedule	New member:		Renew:	
	1 year	2 year	1 year	2 year
Individual	\$50	\$90	\$40	\$70
Student (with student ID)	\$40	\$70	\$30	\$50
Senior (62+)	\$45	\$80	\$35	\$60
Household (same address)	\$60	\$110	\$50	\$90
Search and support group	\$70	\$130	\$60	\$110
Friend of AAC	\$110	\$210	\$100	\$200
Organization or adoption agency	\$160	\$275	\$130	\$250

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## WANTED!!! AAC State Representatives

If you have some time each month that you can give to AAC, consider becoming a state representative. If you are a “people” person with an interest in recruiting members to AAC, consider becoming a state representative. If you would like to see the laws changed in your state to allow adoptees to access their birth information, consider becoming a state representative. If you have been sitting on the sidelines for a while and feel it is your time to get involved with the organization, consider becoming a state representative.

### State representatives are needed in the following states:

NEW ENGLAND REGION  
Rhode Island and Vermont

MID-WEST REGION  
Ohio

SOUTHWEST REGION  
Hawaii and Nevada

MID-ATLANTIC REGION  
Pennsylvania and West Virginia

MID-SOUTH REGION  
Arkansas, Missouri and Texas

NORTHWEST REGION  
Alaska, Idaho, Montana, North  
Dakota, and Wyoming

SOUTHERN REGION  
Alabama and Mississippi

For more information, please contact the Regional Director, Pat Lubarsky or Paul Schibbelhute. Email addresses for all board members are found in the *Decree* and on the AAC website.

Remember—Life is not a spectator sport—you have to get involved! AAC is an all-volunteer organization, and we need the support of our members to sustain its growth.



### American Adoption Congress

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Washington, DC 20015

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