

Bill would help adoptees find birth parents

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There is power in a name.

"I don't know how people do it without a name to start with," says Natalie Hamilton of Lakewood.

She's talking about adoptees who are looking for their birth parents, and the name with which to begin the search would be found on the original birth certificate.

If a bill passed by the state Senate last week and awaiting a vote in the Assembly becomes law, it would allow adoptees access to their original birth certificates. This would at least aid adult adoptees if they should decide to search for their birth parents.

Republican Sen. Diane Allen cosponsored the bill this time around.

"I've been working on this issue for 10 years," she says. "When I first became aware of the issue, I wasn't sure which side of the issue I was on. But I came to see it as a civil rights issue."

Some adoptees are denied the right to know their ethnic background, the medical backgrounds of their birth parents, even whether they have siblings, she says.

Allen contends that adoptees should have the right to that information.

But Allen understands that the bill faces a tough fight in the Assembly, and she knows where the reasoned opposition comes from.

"Some people are against the bill because of the retroactivity," Allen said. "If this bill becomes law, birth parents will have two years to have their names whited out from the original birth certificate. Some feel that this takes away the guarantee of anonymity that some birth parents felt they received."

And although the proposed legislation does allow birth parents to declare their desire not to be contacted, or to be contacted only through a third party, or even whether they would be amenable to contact, Allen points out that historically, adoption records were sealed to protect the interests of the child, not the parents.

Besides, she says, there was never an ironclad guarantee of anonymity.

"Anybody with the desire and the money to hire a private investigator can discover the identity of their birth parents," she says.

For Allen, it's a matter of weighing competing interests.

"It's not my desire to have anybody's life turned upside down," she says.

If the bill became law, says Karen Bostwick, an adoption social worker at the Hazlet office of the Adoptions From The Heart adoption agency, it would simply catch the law up to the reality of the adoption process today as it is practiced in many agencies.

"We're an open adoption agency," she says, "although there are degrees of confidentiality and access to information. But everyone has the right to have access to certain information, such as medical histories."

It's her opinion that the fewer secrets families have, the better off they will be.

At Adoptions From The Heart, both parties in the adoption process work out a contact agreement, outlining the extent and type of contact between the birth parents and the adoptive parents.

"It's a moral commitment," Bostwick says, "not a legal contract."

The agency insists that the adoptive family send a photo and a letter to the birth parents through the agency at least once a year for 18 years.

Natalie Hamilton received no letters down through the years. She knew she was adopted, but the circumstances of her birth and her adoption were never made clear to her. She never sought out her origins until her adopted daughter began a search for her birth parents and the birth parents of her adopted brother.

"At the time, I felt threatened by my daughter's search," Hamilton remembers.

But, she says, she saw the peace that came to her children's lives once they knew where and from whom they came.

It's a peace Hamilton herself knows now as she discovered the circumstances surrounding her adoption and the realization that she has brothers and sisters.

"I feel so passionate about this issue," she says, "that I work for a nonprofit organization, in an online support group that focuses on search and reunion for adoptees," Hamilton says.

Sometimes, even if a full reunion and full telling of the story is far off, birth mothers prepare for it.

At Adoptions From The Heart, adoption counselor Lindsay Conover brings out a large scrapbook that a birth mother has prepared for a child. It's filled with pictures of the birth mother when she was a child, how she looks now, and her family.

There is a poem she wrote in the scrapbook as well, poignant and full of hope at the same time:

"We will meet some day/You and I," it reads in part. "How sad the day I said goodbye. . . . As the years pass on, my love for you will grow/Everyday I say 'I love you' and pray that somehow you know."

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