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HAVASU SUNDAY

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Siblings Beth Rice, Della Williamson, Billy Rice and Teri Clark were reunited when Teri Clark initiated a search for her biological family. They hope their younger brother will be open to meeting them someday.

Second chances

Parents and adopted children struggle to locate their biological relatives. A Lake Havasu City woman's mission is to make it happen.

By BUCK DOPP
SPECIAL TO TODAY'S NEWS-HERALD

Debra Allen's face glows and her eyes tear up when she talks about reuniting families that had been separated by adoption.

A licensed confidential intermediary, Allen is certified by the Arizona Supreme Court. The Lake Havasu City resident has seen plenty of reconnections.

"Daily…I'm changing lives," Allen said. "It never gets old. I'm called all sorts of nice names, like Angel."

On average, the former homicide detective and deputy sheriff reunites five to seven people each week from around the world. It can sometimes take more than a year to locate a biological relative, but sometimes the search is completed in three minutes. It all depends on the research information available for the case.

Most of her clients are referred by people Allen has helped in the past, which is a testament to the effectiveness of her detective work. Some find her through an Internet search, while others come across her website or Facebook page.

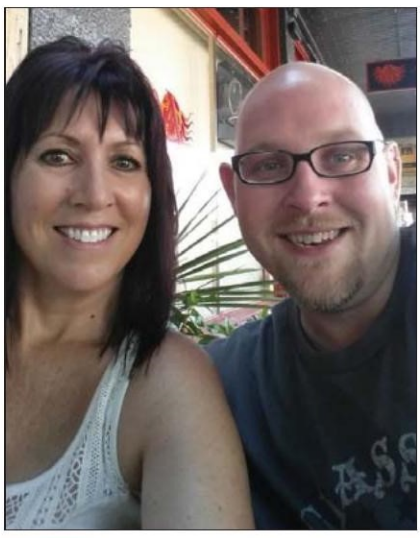
An adopted child must be 18 to enlist the services of a CI and must be 21 before the birth parents or biological siblings can initiate contact.

When Allen tracks down an unknown biological family member, she requires that person and her client to return signed and notarized consent forms before she begins the process of exchanging information.

"I'm the wall that protects the privacy of both sides," she said.

Allen noted that 80 percent of the time, those whom she contacts are eager to exchange information with the family member who initiated the search. In many cases, she gets their consent forms back the same day.

Of the 20 percent who are not yet ready for reunification, 3 percent are the adopted children. Those not ready may fear rejection or that the contact will stir up past feelings of pain and hurt. If a spouse was kept in the dark about the adoption, that issue will need to be addressed first.



Margie Zunick hired Debra Allen to find her son and mother. She is seen above with her biological son, Konrad Apfel, and below with her birth mother, Karen Stevens.

Allen noted that even those not prepared to connect with their past are still willing to share non-identifying medical or genealogical history. That is one of the biggest benefits of hiring a CI to make contact with biological family members.

After speaking to several of her clients whose lives have been made richer by feeling the connection with family and the closure of reunification, it's easy to understand why Allen puts in 80 hours a week. Her work is a labor of love. Her clients come to her after a lifetime of experiencing a constant, nagging loneliness from not knowing who belongs to them or to whom they belong.

Margie Zunick's summer romance went sideways. She was 17 when the freshly-minted high school graduate learned she was pregnant.

"When the guy found out, he was history," she said. "My parents forced me into adopting. They said I was in no position to raise a child and had brought shame to the family for having a baby out of wedlock."

Zunick was sent to a Phoenix home for unwed mothers where she lived for seven months. It was understood that she would come home without her son. She eventually got married and had two daughters. However, there remained a few missing pieces to the puzzle of her life.

"Completely by chance," she found a search group on Facebook that steered her to Allen.

"I told Debra I was adopted and gave my son up (for adoption) as well. I felt the need-to-know overwhelming," Zunick said.

"Debra asked, 'Which one first?' Her fee was so affordable, I said, 'Both.'"

Zunick, 54, recalls off the top of her head the date she gave Allen permission to begin searching for her son and mother — May 18, 2015. It took about a month for Allen to find her son, Konrad Apfel, 36, who grew up in Tempe, and her birth mother, Karen Stevens, 72, who makes Orlando her home.

"I had to be prepared for rejection, but I had to know. I needed the closure," Zunick said.

Apfel is single and works in the automotive industry in Phoenix.

See SECOND CHANCES, Page 2B

SECOND CHANCES

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1B

"(Hearing about my birth mother) definitely caught me off guard — it took me back — I thought it would be me who would be searching for her," Apfel said.

"I was happy, shocked, sad — in a good way — a lot of emotions, which took me a minute to process."

Zunick and Apfel talked on the phone and hit it off right away. They met in person for the first time in September 2015 and immediately felt a chemistry.

"I always knew she was adopted, too, so I always felt she did (the adoption) for the right reasons," Apfel said.

He added, "We have similar handwriting. We both love the outdoors. We're happy people and try to help others."

"Konrad is the most incredible human being. I love him so much," Zunick said. "He's wonderful."

She added, "I would tell anyone, don't be afraid. Not knowing is the worst. The puzzle of my life is now complete."

A BIRTH MOTHER'S STORY

Zunick's birth mother, Karen Stevens, was three months pregnant when she graduated from high school in 1961.

"Being a teenager and pregnant was not normal," Stevens explained. "We were Catholic, so I had to go to a home for unwed mothers."

"I was 17, very immature and not in love with the birth father. The father and I had only dated. He offered to marry me. We kept in contact until her birth," she said.

"Margie was born on Dec. 10, 1961. At first, the doctor didn't want me to see her. I told the nurses, 'I've got to see her.' She was beautiful. She had big brown eyes like me. I didn't get to hold her."

"My brother contacted me first. He said Debra had left a voice mail for Karen Cecile Johnston, my maiden name, and that she was calling about Natalie Ann, which was the name I had given to (Margie). (My brother) told me (Margie) was looking for me."

"I couldn't believe it. Never in my wildest dreams did I think we'd be put together."

Stevens's answer to Debra about a reunion "was a yes — absolutely, without hesitation."

"I thought about (Margie) every year on her birthday and on Mother's Day. All I wanted was for her to be healthy and happy. She's amazing," Stevens said.

Stevens and a friend wrote to the Florence Crittenton Home in Phoenix about 20 years ago, requesting information about Zunick, but never received an answer.

Stevens's husband Chuck knew about the adoption from the beginning of their relationship. Cancer treatments left Stevens unable to bear any more children, so Karen and Chuck adopted a daughter, Andrea, in 1981.

"I think adoption is a personal thing. It's a hard decision to make," Stevens said. "People should do whatever their heart tells them to do, so they too can have a happy ending."

ANOTHER SUCCESSFUL CONNECTION

Teri Clark was a Facebook friend with Debra Allen for a couple of years before enlisting her to find her biological mother. She got a call back within 24 hours.

"Debra called and said, 'Are you sitting down? You have two sisters and two brothers.'"

Clark's mother, Jackie Rice, already had three children when she got pregnant and was living with her mother.

"'You already have three children and no husband'," her mother said.

She convinced Rice to place Clark with an adoption agency.

"I don't blame her," Clark said.

Although Rice had already passed away, Clark has been reunited with three of her four siblings: Beth Rice, 66, Della Williamson 64, both from San Antonio, and Billy Rice, 53, from Peoria.

"When my sisters and I got together, we hugged and cried. It was exciting and scary all at the same time," Billy said.

"If it hadn't been for Teri hooking up with Debra, we wouldn't be together. We're one big happy family now. I'm forever indebted to Debra."

Clark's mother got pregnant again and gave a second son up for adoption, too.

Her younger brother is not ready yet to reconnect with his four siblings. It's been over a year and he still hasn't signed the consent form to exchange information.

Billy is hoping the younger brother will eventually come around and will want to meet his brother and sisters.

He believes their younger brother is afraid of being rejected a second time.

"We're all a bunch of goofballs," Teri said. "I'm really blessed to have finally found my connection with my family."

Times have changed, but yearning has not

Investigator Debra Allen said that in the 1950s and 1960s, most unwed mothers were convinced to place their infants up for adoption. The young, pregnant women were sent to homes for unwed mothers where they lived.

Once they gave birth, the babies were given up for adoption. In many cases, these young mothers were not allowed to see their newborns, know their genders or give them names.

In 1973, the Supreme Court ruled in Roe v. Wade that a right to privacy under the Due Process Clause of the 14th Amendment extended to a woman's decision to have an abortion.

After that landmark ruling, Allen said the counseling of young mothers-to-be shifted to include the abortion option. This led to more women choosing abortion over adoption as the solution to their unplanned pregnancies.

The introduction of the birth control pill and other legal contraceptives also reduced the percentage of unwanted pregnancies.

Those searching for biological family members may contact Allen Investigations/ Debra Allen, 1990 McCulloch Blvd. #D-252, Lake Havasu City, AZ 86403, call 928-846-7208, email debra@alleninv.com or visit www.alleninv.com.