Bastard Nation

Adopted PWAs line up for the TIES that find

January 1, 1998 By Andrew Katz

“I’m shaking as I type this,” the e-mail began. “My name is Grady. I’m 26 years old and have AIDS. I was adopted at birth. I have no idea what to do. I want to meet my mother so badly. I don’t want to die never having known who she is.” Grady Broyles, founder of Bay Positive, a support group for twenty something PWAs, sent this spare, elegiac request for help to a fellow adoptee. His predicament was typical of American adoptees, who are denied the most rudimentary details of their biological history, including even names of those who bore them into the world. The ones who eventually search for their birth family undertake the quest without knowing whether time has ambushed them by leaving only an obituary at journey’s end.

Broyles’ plea did not fall on deaf ears. His correspondent, Denis Castellucci, is a member of Bastard Nation (BN), a recently formed collective whose raison d’être is to agitate for the unsealing of birth records, adoption decrees and other documents with the potential to identify the adoptee’s original family. In all but two states (Alaska and Kansas), these papers are inaccessible, sealed by legislation that replaces an adoptee’s original birth certificate with an amended one, listing the new, adoptive parents as the only ones on record. While some states do permit the opening of these records for compassion’s sake or in case of medical emergency, the process of petitioning a court is recondite, that you have the time and money for litigation. Broyles had neither.

The sealing away of the adoptee’s birth certificate was intended – back when movies cost a nickel and syphilis was treated with mercury salts – to protect the child and new family from the taint of illegitimacy. But today, when bastardly isn’t enough to get you on Montel Williams, surely suppressing the facts of an adoptee’s biological heritage as though they were top secret has gone the way of the Berlin Wall, right? Not so fast. Those who advocate a continuation of sealed adoption records – like the National Council for Adoption (interestingly enough, founded several decades ago by one of Texas’ largest adoption businesses, the Edna Gladney Agency) – persuade lawmakers to back their bills by arguing that, faced with the specter of once-abandoned offspring at their doorsteps like Eumenides in polyester blends, birth mothers will chose to abort their fetuses rather than surrender a baby to deserving but infertile couples. Never mind that many birth mothers say otherwise: The prospect of never knowing about their offspring’s fate makes abortion a more, not less, palatable option, they argue, because it is impossible to imagine bad things happening to a child who has never been born.

Advocates of openness were not nearly as well-organized as NCFA and allies like the Christian Coalition, PTL and other “family value” groups – until a frequent contributor to a web newsgroup, alt.adoption, began appending “Bastard Nation, By Any Means Necessary” to the article she posted there. "When I came up with the term Bastard Nation,“ founder Marley Greiner says, ”I was thinking along the lines of Queer Nation, ACT UP and the Greens.“ Greiner’s approach to the moral status of original birth records was breathtakingly simple: ”They’re mine,“ she says. ”That’s reason enough for them to be open. Why do I want them is not relevant.“ This resonated with other alt.adoption readers, who quickly began adding Bastard Nation to their own notes and then creating self-appointed positions in fanciful departments, bureaus and agencies, such as one goth’s ”Bureau of Exploding Catfish." What Greiner had proposed as a loose cyber-collective was given anchor when bastard National created a BN web page (www.bastards.org). Then another open-records activist guided BN through incorporation as a nonprofit. Paid memberships, an e-mail discussion list and an executive committee followed. Organization, Bastards discovered, equals power.

Castellucci forwarded Grady Broyles’ request to other Bastard Nationals, who saw an opportunity for the group to do more than simply promote the liberation of records: While letter-writing, boycotts and the public immolation of amended birth certificates were all part of the activists’ drill, now they could make open records a reality for someone who urgently needed them. The solution hit upon by the BN cognoscenti was to form TIES, or Terminal Illness Emergency Search. Headed by Deb Schwartz, TIES, which can be accessed at the BN website, operates without charge to the adoptee and utilizes the skills of professional searchers – usually adoptees with private-investigator licenses and access to massive database – whose methods, albeit legal, don’t bear publicizing: Adoptees who search are generally dismissed as neurotic by the public, and this permits legislators to bow to conservative pressure to close available loopholes.

Phoenix Aguila had in common with Grady Broyles close proximity to the Pacific Ocean, HIV infection and a tendency to get things done. After testing positive in 1994, the navy vet-turned-activist who had broadcast Cleveland’s first gay radio show, “Gaywaves,” shifted to a quieter, more contemplative existence. The time had come to get his house in order. Aguila remembered having another life, being another person: Kenneth William Flottmann. Unlike many adoptees relinquished shortly after birth, Aguila had stayed around long enough to have memories of living in motel rooms with his birth mother, Carol, and his sisters, Kim and Peggy, in the Midwest of 1963. Overwhelmed financially, Carol had faced an agonizing dilemma: To keep the family together in poverty or place the children for adoption into families with sufficient resources that her babies need never be tucked into bed with empty stomachs. Carol’s own mother took Kim, the eldest, but Aguila and Peggy would rely on the kindness of strangers. But kindness was slow in coming. Separated from Peggy, Aguila encountered a series of foster homes – along with the abuse all too common inside them – until finally a new family gave him a few years of stability.

Now Aguila wanted answers. He wanted to know what happened to his mother and sisters. He wanted to know why their father, Robert Flottmann, had disappeared. And he wanted to know what his own future might hold in the way of health problems. But, like Broyles, he lacked the wherewithal – even the spelling of Flottmann remained uncertain. Then he learned about TIES

from an internet e-mail discussion list.

“I didn’t know at first if just having HIV made me eligible,” he recalls, referring to the recent perception of protease-treated HIV as a chronic, manageable disease. Eligibility for an emergency search requires certification of a terminal illness by a licensed physician. Progress aside, HIV positive adoptees and birth parents still qualify for TIES assistance. People with HIV need only access the TIES application linked to the BN website, have their doctor certify it, and return it to Deb Schwartz along with any additional information from the amended birth certificate. Then the hunt begins, and searchers usually locate birth-family matches within days. Less often, it’s necessary to do footwork, such as searching archives for marriage records or strolling through cemeteries for surnames and dates of birth and death.

For a while, Aguila hesitated, experiencing the inevitable self-doubt that Betty Jean Lifton in her classic, Journey of the Adopted Self, has labeled “the Bastard Moment:” “Why would they want to know some queer with AIDS?” he says. Then, in late 1996, his CD4-cell count began to drop. The time had come to fish or cut bait.

The motives of the portion (numerical estimates are inexact because their quest is unofficial and uncounted, but figures range from five percent to 30 percent) of the nation’s five million or so adoptees who try to locate their birth families are diverse. Some hunger for the unconditional love that ends for many as soon as the umbilical cord is cut, while others seek a sense of completeness that they believe can be found only among blood ties. “The search for Home,” writes Lifton, “reflects the adoptee’s need for biological, historical and human connectedness. It is an attempt to connect to forces larger than oneself.” And some reasons are more practical than metaphysical: The family medical history. This hits home for many adoptees with HIV, who are, like PWAs in general, unusually well educated health-care consumers. And while infectious diseases like HIV do not run in families, and AIDS-related cancers are not hereditary, people savvy about health care realize that what they don’t know can eventually kill them., especially as the odds on beating HIV improve.

But getting a name and address is one thing, actual contact another. Any adoptee’s reunion can be difficult; society offers no definition for the relationship. Should the two strangers be parent and child? Pals? Victim and perpetrator? Some reunions are true homecomings. Others go like that of the adoptee reunited on Sally Jesse Raphael with her 600-pound junkie birth mom, who admitted to having tried to sell her daughter and then spent the next few years extorting serious bucks form her with promises (never kept) of the identities and whereabouts of two blood brothers. Reunion can bite birth parents in the ass, too. They have had many years in which to mold and polish an idealized image of the long-lost child – and how often does reality fail to disappoint" Some adoptees search and locate merely to return the birth parent’s early rejection with their own later one.

Now add HIV to the list of imperfections. Suffice it to say that not everyone entertains enlightened notions about the disease. So Broyles and Aguila were taking a gutsy risk opting for reunion. Locating Broyles’ birth mother, Shirley, turned out to be a slam-dunk for TIES. Establishing a

healthy relationship with her was another matter. The two first spoke on the phone, ecstatically. Then came the meeting in the flesh. Shirley stayed at Broyles' home (he'd moved to Seattle), and stayed, and stayed. Having never raised a child, Shirley was a mother but no parent. She needed more from Broyles than he was able, at so stressful time, to give; he needed someone mature enough not to use his home as a crash pad. Their relationship foundered rapidly on the shoals of conflicting expectations. They moved apart.

Aguila's reunion was happier. Two weeks after he contacted TIES, he learned that his birth father was right across San Francisco Bay in Contra Costa County. Just like that. Adoptees are almost always surprised by the banality of a birth parent living only a few miles away and taking the same freeway to work each morning, instead of being a charter member of the Federal Witness Protection program. Now Aguila grappled big-time with the bastard moment: How to clue Flottmann in to what his only son had been up to in the intervening years? "I wanted him to know about me – but I was scared," he says. "Finally I decided to have my lover, James, along for our first meeting." After 20 years living in the Bay Area, Flottmann took one look at the two men together and got it. Photos reproduced in The San Jose Mercury News show father and son embracing with the desperate passion of men who know that fortune has given them a second – and possibly last – chance.

Flottmann's first question to Aguila was "How's Kimmy?" He didn't know that Aguila and his sister had been separated since the Kennedy administration. Flottmann says he always regretted the breakup of his family, but what ought to have been a routine hospitalization for minor hernia repair 34 years ago turned into a lengthy, life-threatening bout of peritonitis, which he survived only to discover his family, having mistakenly thought they were abandoned, gone. Could such a simple misunderstanding have truly been the switch that jettisoned Aguila into a maelstrom of pain and loneliness" Apparently. But for Aguila, dwelling on the past is counter to survival. Let concern about the road not taken come up, if at all, at the next junction. Nearing 60 and on disability, Flottmann has had four separate bypass operations. "I guess you've got a few health problems of your own," he commented to his son. AIDS and coronary disease were the icebreaker for this bastard moment.

Now Aguila and Flottmann's relationship proceeds, with the highs and lows that come with their imperfect health that has caused many canceled meetings. Aguila has been introduced (or reintroduced) to an extended family of aunts, uncles and cousins, though not yet to his mother or sisters, who remain out there somewhere, likely harder than ever to find because of having changed surnames through marriage. Still, Aguila has found the man who helped bring him into the world, who looks, talks, and even at times seems to think like him. "There are other ways to heal, of course," Lifton writes. "But finding one's heritage is the best, for it enables the adoptee to become grounded in biological and historical reality. The very difficult of the search is a commitment to the transformation of the self." At a time when he might have wondered whether his life was coming to an end, Aguila is finding instead an opportunity to heal.

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