

Thank you, Madam Chair and members of the committee, for the opportunity to speak in front of you today. My name is Annette O'Connell. I am a founding member and the Spokesperson of the New York Adoptee Rights Coalition. I am also a Search Angel.

I was born in the Bronx in July of 1967 and placed for adoption in January of 1968. Like many who contacted you and testified in front of you last week, I am both amazed and heartened by the thorough means by which your committee handles pending bills and testimony. I have been an adoptee rights activist for eight years and, even as the leader of a state organization that was critical to enacting adoptee rights legislation in NY, this is the very first time I have given committee testimony.

To begin, I'd like to tell you what a "Search Angel" is. Basically, we volunteer our time helping adopted adults find their biological families. We use our own funds to subscribe to publicly available searching databases such as Been Verified, People Finder, WhitePages, etc. We subscribe to consumer DNA companies such as Ancestry, 23andMe, and Family Tree DNA, and we donate our time to dig in and help adopted people. Some of these adopted people have already obtained their original birth certificate. Many have not. We use public birth indices, marriage records, census records, voting records, criminal records, obituaries, driving records and newspaper archives. In the seven or so years that I have been a Search Angel, I have assisted over 200 people – across the United States – in finding their biological families. I have many cases that have yet to be solved. Subscriptions to databases - not including Ancestry which costs \$300 annually - have cost me about \$1,500 and I'd estimate a minimum of 5,000 hours of my time has been spent working on other people's searches. Some searches can take only minutes, others can take years. I don't only use DNA results, I combine those results with non-identifying information provided to the adopted person from their state or adoption agency. I am not a professional genealogist or scientist nor am I a private investigator. I am a wife, mother, and adopted person who tries to pay it forward. I don't accept money or gifts. I ask only that people try to pay it forward to another adopted person in any way they can.

In 2012, ABC News stated that genealogy was listed as the second most popular hobby in the United States (with gardening having been the first). I should be clear that it is termed a "hobby" only to non-adopted people. To adopted people it acts as a lifeline to feeling tethered to the universe. For myself, the first person I knew who I shared DNA with was my own son, and I was 36 years old when I had him.

Consumer DNA testing totally changed the game for adopted people. We pay approximately \$100 for a DNA kit, spit in a vial, and wait, anxiously, for the results to come in hoping that they will lead to a parent or sibling match. I assume you are all non-adopted. If any of you were to do DNA testing, you'd reach out to an unknown match to say "Hey! How are you? I see we are related on my father's side. I'd love to figure out how." It isn't that easy for an adopted person. Most times, we have no idea if a match is a maternal or paternal match. Even those who have the right to obtain their original birth certificates often have no father listed.

It's hard to explain in a matter of minutes what a search angel does. I like to let my "clients" know what the process entails and what the emotional ramifications are. I like to let them know that it could take 10 minutes or 10 years and that it will be THE most emotionally gut-wrenching experience they have had. I let them know that they may be welcomed by family members, or shunned and blocked. I ask if they have received their original birth certificate or any identifying information about either of their birth parents. I

also like to be sure they have received non-identifying information from their state and/or the adoption agency their adoptive parents used. Non-identifying information can consist of: parents' and grandparents' ages at the time of an adopted person's birth; occupations; ethnicity; number of siblings. Sometimes, if an adopted person is lucky, the non-identifying information will give details of the pregnancy, their health at the time they were born, and care they received in the time span between birth and placement with the adoptive family. This information can be absolutely vital to solving a case.

Once someone's DNA results come in, the fun begins. The companies give you an estimate of what your relationship is to a person, unless that person is your parent – in that case they make it clear. For example, you might have a "Close Family to 1st Cousin" match. Depending on the company, you are given either a percentage of DNA that you share with that person or you are told how many centimorgans you share with them. The centimorgans or percentage of DNA shared, ultimately, decide what your relationship is to that person. Let's say you share 1,725 centimorgans. This would mean that this match could be your grandparent, aunt/uncle, half-sister/half-brother, niece/nephew or grandchild.

IF the match uses their name in their profile, I turn to my databases and research the person to find out where they live and how old they are, and who their parents and siblings are. In this case, if the person is within 10 or so years of the searcher's age, I can eliminate the possibility of grandparent and the searcher would know if the match was their grandchild – unless, of course, they were a birth parent. This would mean the match would be either a half sibling, aunt/uncle or niece/nephew. If the match only uses a screen name or initials it becomes even more challenging and I would need to research the shared matches with this person, find one with a family tree and create what we call a mirror tree. Anyone with kids knows that a big middle school project is creating a family tree. For adopted people and children of adopted people that task is a chore – a painful chore.

The process becomes significantly more complicated if you only have, let's say, an estimated 2nd to 3rd cousin match as your closest match and share 182 centimorgans with this person. Here, things get a bit dicey. Again, a non-adopted person could reach out and say "Let's figure out how we are related." An adopted person needs to refer to a centimorgans chart or [calculator](#). They are readily accessible online. There is a 50% chance that a 182-centimorgan match would be: a half 2nd cousin, 2c1R, half 1C2R, or 1C3R. There's about a 40% chance this match would be a half GG-Aunt/Uncle, 2C, Half1C1R, 1C2R, half GG niece/nephew. With so many choices on the board we would follow the same protocol of trying to find out who this person is and how old they are to discern what a relationship could be.

Now, I realize you may already be overwhelmed, but we haven't even gotten to the complicated part yet. In my own personal search several years ago, I had a 182-centimorgan match who lived in Kansas and grew up in Massachusetts. I had little to no non-identifying information because I was told all of my records, like so many in Catholic agencies, were "destroyed in a fire." The agency did, however, have an index card that contained my parents' ages and education levels. I had to figure out who my DNA match's parents were and start a family tree based on them. I had to look at census records, birth records, death records, obituaries, and immigration records and develop his family tree. Searching for an 18-year-old woman or a 27-year-old man in an Irish family is akin to searching for a needle in a haystack. By now, I'd already been contacted by several matches and had to let the cat out of the bag that I am adopted. After that, in most cases, come group emails and phone calls asking which woman was 18 years old with a high school education and which man was 27 with a college education. People are calling their cousins asking if they gave a child up for adoption around 1967, and the family rumor mill has taken

on a life of its own. The non-identifying information is often extremely helpful, because if we know, for example, that a birth mother was one of six children and her father was an ironworker we can eliminate people in the tree who were only children or had only one or two siblings and whose father was a lawyer. Several cases I have solved were solved because of non-identifying information.

There are many more details I could go into about the process and the myriad of dehumanizing and demoralizing ways adopted people are forced to search and circumvent the system. But I'm sure I've already made your brains hurt. These examples are just a handful of ways in which adopted people are already marginalized. These are the lengths we go to in order to find our ancestry and to find people with whom we share DNA. THIS is what we do to feel biologically tethered to the universe. This is how we "enjoy" the second most popular hobby in America. None of these things, however, have anything to do with one's right to obtain their own record of birth; besides the fact that almost all of these things would be unnecessary if adopted people had the right to obtain their original birth certificate upon reaching the age of majority.

The inner strength and courage it takes an adopted person to conduct a search cannot be understated. We are pathologized as ungrateful to our adopted families and faced with stereotypical questions and comments, some of which your committee has heard. Questions and statements such as "Why are you doing this? Aren't you glad you were adopted? God knows where you could've ended up. Your mother, obviously, didn't want you so why are you even bothering? Aren't you worried you're going to break your parents' hearts?" Non-adopted people who do genealogy searches, in contrast, are told things like "Wow! That's so cool! You found out who your great-great-great grandparents were? Oh, my God! You look just like them!" Sadly, another part of that process is often taking the demoralizing step of creating handmade posters – such as you'd make for a garage sale or lost pet – listing all of our known personal history, and posting them online for the entire world to see. This is in a last ditch, sometimes desperate attempt to find our own histories. We feel forced to prostitute the details of our life in order to find our truth. I, myself, had one (see attached image) that circulated in almost every country. I also had a stalker. This is something no non-adopted person will ever have to do. For adopted people, we lay our souls bare in order to find our own fundamental truths.

In conclusion, I ask you the same thing I asked of New York's legislators. Please reread both House Bill 629 and your existing law. When you do, replace the word "adoptee" with any other group of people. Choose anyone: A marginalized group or a non-marginalized group – firefighters, LGBTQ, police officers, Jewish Americans, teachers, African Americans, deli workers. Would you vote for its passage then? Would you want Vermont's current law to stand as written? Adopted people represent all of those groups and deserve to be treated with the same dignity and respect; they deserve the same freedom and unity that non-adopted Vermonters enjoy.

Thank you for allowing me this time and I would be happy to answer any questions regarding search angel methodology, New York's process, or my own story.

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**Adoptee in Search of Natural Family
Born 7/31/1967
Misericordia Hospital Bronx, NY**

Birth Name: Kimberly Saxen

**Natural Mother Stayed at Rosalie Hall Maternity Home
She was 18 yrs. old, Catholic, German Descent, had HS diploma, worked as a receptionist**

**Natural Father: 21 yrs. old, Catholic, Irish/German Descent, had some college
education, held a part-time office job**

If you have any information PLEASE contact:

July311967kimberly@aol.com

**No piece of information
is too small**

Please "Like" and "Share"

THANK YOU!!



