

To the Senate Judiciary Committee, 3/23/22: Personal testimony of Marge Garfield, adoptee.

I'd like to thank everyone here for their vote to restore adoptees' dignity by unsealing our original birth certificates.

Today is my birthday. It's supposed to be a celebration of the first day I set foot on Planet Earth. For me, that day was the day I was removed from my birthmother and welcomed into my adoptive family. That was also the day the record of my own birth was sealed from my sight for 99 years, until March 23, 2043, at which time I would undoubtedly be dead and thus never able to learn my true heritage. It was a cruel joke – on me. Whoever thought up that number 99 sure had a sadistic sense of humor. My birthmother's irresponsible behavior in getting pregnant at age 16 penalized me for the rest of my life, causing me to live in the false fairyland that all adoptees are consigned to, where your adoptive parents are your only parents – even though they're short, dark-haired people and you're tall and blond.

At the age of 42, when I finally had the courage to start a search for my origins, I was immediately stymied in my quest by the 99-year seal that shrouded my pre-adoptive life. When I hit that wall, it was one of the most painful moments in my life, and certainly the most humiliating. The implicit message was that my very birthright, my needs, my mental health amounted to nothing – and the information I needed was so horrible I should never know it. Although I had accomplished many solid achievements in my life up to that point, I suddenly became a zero in the eyes of the law and of society. My official core identity became cemented into the shameful unwanted child who got relinquished by her immoral birthmother, and I would never know the true story of my very own origins, good or bad. And only 57 years to go until my records were unsealed! (By the way, are sealed adoption records EVER unsealed? I doubt it. I don't believe the Vital Records department has special staff working to unseal records on their 99th anniversaries. Do they?)

In 1989, as a result of the frustrating search for my pre-adoptive history, I became an activist for open adoption records. I founded an adoption search support group in central Vermont and was soon connected with others of the adoption triad who thought it was time for the laws around sealed birth records to be changed. We persuaded the general assembly to create the 21-member VT Adoption Reform Task Force whose work ultimately culminated in the 125-page Vermont Adoption Act of 1996. This law granted adoptees limited access to their adoption information, a way to reunite by mutual consent through the Registry, and a way to possibly learn the identity of their birthmother through a court proceeding. This was a huge improvement at the time over the brick wall that had preceded it. We made tremendous progress but we hadn't yet reached the end zone.

Here we are in 2022 - 23 years later! - and adoptees still must beg the 'authorities' for permission to know to their own histories. Strangers are still telling adoptees what information they can and can't have about their very own life! This system is corrosive and degrading. I dearly hope the good people on this committee and in the Senate chamber are ready to end this forced humiliation and restore to adoptees what was confiscated from them without their consent – their original birth certificates. When this is done, the scales will at last be balanced, and ALL parties to adoption will be equally treated, with respect and understanding.

Please support H.629 as received from the House.