

February 27, 2014

Public Health Committee Co-Chairs, Senator Terry Gerratana, Representative Susan Johnson, and Members of The Public Health Committee:

As a member of The American Adoption Congress -in particular, Access Connecticut- I do not present myself as your typical adoption triad member. I come to you, not as a birth mother, adoptive mother, or adoptee, but as a researcher with a strong passion for family history.

I am writing to you today with a request to support Raised Bill 5144, an Act Concerning Access to Birth Certificates and Parental Health Information for Adoptive Persons.

About eighteen months ago, as my youngest sister lay dying in the final days of her eleven-year battle with breast cancer, she asked me to call her beloved coach and mentor to her death bed. She thought very highly of this man because he mentored her all throughout high school as a coach and teacher, when my mom became a single mother raising nine children. The two (my sister and her coach) had become extremely close on-and-off the field, winning tournaments together and feeding off their profound competitiveness and victorious spirits. Coach became one of the most influential people in her life and it was obvious in her last days that she felt the need to thank him before she passed. Little did I know, I, too, would play a role in this parting gift of thanks.

As is the case with most big sisters, I wanted to see my little sister's wish fulfilled. However, because of circulated rumors, I was hesitant to do so. You see, Coach had become ill over the past five years. It was well-known amongst members of the community that he was suffering from a debilitating form of depression that had forced him into early retirement and prevented him from coaching. This driven, hard-working, competitive man was reduced to a poorly-functioning state, unrecognizable to those who knew him. Additionally, he was not responding well to any forms of medication or treatment.

Much to my surprise, four days before her passing, Coach accepted the invitation honoring my sister's wish. Upon arrival, I could see that the man who I knew as my teacher in the past was not the same man I remembered. He appeared weak and withdrawn, and certainly a victim of his affliction. After spending some time with my sister in her dying moments, Coach came out of the room visibly shaken. As he collected himself for a moment, he said: "Valentine, it pains me to see my star athlete in there dying. She was the epitome of health and athleticism. It makes me so sad to see her this way!" He appeared heavily affected by what he saw, and from the parting words they exchanged. Collecting himself and sitting quietly, he then said: "I hear that you were the one who recently helped Mr. So-and-So (an adoptee out of Rhode Island) find both his birth families". *If you recall, Rhode Island Adoptees were granted the right to their original birth records in 2011. At this time, the work I had done involving family research was not part of a business – it was the work of an avid genealogist who had developed a passion for her family heritage and wished to assist others to solve their own family research problems.*

Catching me by surprise (Since I never knew coach was adopted), he said to me "will you help me find my families?" He then elaborated, saying: "I only want to do it for *medical purposes!* I need to know if

the disease I have is something that I caused or something that is genetically passed down through my lineage.”

Wow! How sad is that! I thought. Coach is a man who knows nothing about who he is - neither his heritage nor his medical history! This struck me profoundly! In all the years of doing my research, I never considered what it must be like to not know who I was or where I came from.

As a young girl, I was given a taste of my heritage through my maternal line. I had two elderly great uncles who passed down all of their research and information to me throughout my life. When they passed away several years ago, I became the recipient of their research and ultimately the (new) keeper of the family history. To this day, some twenty-five years later, I continue to add on to that research. I see it as a work in progress – something never to be finished!

However, as valuable as my great uncles’ research was, the things that I have added over the past few years have taken on quite a different meaning - considering my sister passed of breast cancer at the age of forty in 2012, and my younger brother passed in 2001 from a rare form of appendix cancer at the age of only thirty-eight. Losing two of my nine siblings at young ages has forced me to take on a keener interest in the medical side of my family history, well-documenting all of its components. Via death certificates, family member medical records, and interviews, I have been able to analyze and archive the afflictions that my relatives suffered from throughout the years. This information has become invaluable to me, my immediate family, and all of my ancestors throughout the United States who are aware of my research findings.

For an adoptee, one cannot be so lucky. Without knowing their familial origins, adoptees do not have any real chance to develop and solidify their medical prevention programs, diagnoses, prognoses, or treatments which could be passed down from their relatives. Does this seem right? Not to me.

In regards to Coach, he was given that right when Rhode Island passed the law allowing him access to his *original birth record*. Within two weeks of my sister’s death, Coach and I made a visit to Rhode Island’s Department of Health and followed the procedures necessary to acquire his original birth record. Paying the fee and filling out the required forms, Coach was well on his way to receiving the one piece of paper which would allow him to unlock his medical history by way of his lineage. Upon receipt of that precious document (without going into all the details involving his case), Coach received the answers he waited so long to obtain.

At the age of sixty-seven, some five years after the onset of his affliction, he was told by the four siblings on his father’s side that I had located, that every one of them, as well their (shared) father (now deceased), suffered from the same form of depression. I was amazed how the simple delivery of this information heavily impacted the life of this very special man. Knowing that there was a genetic component attached to his disease was highly significant - it was the missing link which gave him the ability to pass along important health information to his doctors, siblings, and offspring.

As I write this testimony, I cannot help but wonder about the multitudes of people out there who are left completely unaware of their lineage and family medical history due to the inability of individuals to obtain their birth records. As I often say, “to put our feet in other people’s shoes, we need to get out of our own!” **Please restore the right for adoptees to obtain their original birth records!**

Most passionately,

Valentine lamartino
Thompson, Connecticut