

Support for S.B. 972

Dear Members of the Planning & Development Committee:

Please pass Senate Bill 972!

I am an adoptee who was born, raised and adopted in New York City. I am passionate about Adoptee Rights, Adoptee Equality and restoring adult adoptees' access to our original birth certificates nationwide. I am particularly connected to the access movement in the State of Connecticut, having spent the better part of the fall of 2016 traveling throughout your beautiful state presenting my award-winning autobiographical play, 'The Good Adoptee', that I also directed, doing lengthy in-depth talk-backs in each community following the show and raising funds and awareness for the incredible non-profit grassroots advocacy organization, Access Connecticut. We did 9 shows over a 7-week period.

'The Good Adoptee' is the totally true story of my search for the truth of my origins in the face of New York State's sealed records. In it, I share my absolute conviction, based on my lived experience and deep reflection, that adult adoptees must have access to our origins, history, heritage, ancestry and genealogy.

I am lucky in my adoption experience in many ways—I have wonderful parents (whom I would never dream of calling my “adoptive” parents, they are my parents) and I have always felt in sync with my family and that I belong with them. I also always knew that I was adopted, there was never an event of discovering this, I just always knew. I grew up with a narrative that began with my adoption—the joyous experience of my parents of my “arrival” when they brought me home at 9 weeks old. I clung to this narrative of belonging, of identity connected to my nonbiological family, of being intensely wanted by my parents, all of which eclipsed the underbelly of the part of the story that was missing, the story that no one knew, the story that involved two families that never became one and kept and raised me, that didn't know me or consciously reject me. I had two very serious genetically-related disorders that surfaced at ages 11 and 15 that we knew nothing about. I didn't know where my illnesses had come from and on a daily basis, as an adoptee in survival-mode, I didn't know the basic questions that most people take for granted: where do I come from? Who are my ancestors? Who am I?

You cannot underestimate the damaging impact of trying to grow up and form an identity with the presence of such glaring blanks, or to put it another way, with the absence of such essential personal information. We adoptees are called upon to pretend that we are blank slates who can be raised by any family and shape-shift to make that work, to pretend that all life begins at adoption and that biology doesn't matter. That it is normal and acceptable to not honor or understand biological ancestral connection, one's own complex ethnicity and history, that trying to stay healthy with a complete question mark on a basic medical form asking for family history is okay. The first time I was faced with filling out a doctor's form on family medical history, I got half-way through it having filled it out with my (adoptive) family's information before I crossed

it all out and wrote: N/A - NOT GENETICALLY RELATED TO MY FAMILY. I've had to get a mammogram every single year since age 35 due to this particular blank.

The existential toll of the blank is even greater. What happened to me before I was born, before I was adopted? When I was in foster care for those 9 weeks? If your biological parents are essentially erased from your known history, made to be non-human, fruit flies who just concocted you to be adopted, if no one who you know was at your birth, were you really born like other human children? I began to feel like an alien being, like one of my favorite adoptees, Superman/Clark Kent, shot-put from outer space into my parents' arms. This creates a real sense of genetic isolation and an existential crisis, which I suffered from until I started searching for my origins and found some answers. Little by little, I started filling in those blanks, shifting and transforming my identity with a new sense of wholeness. Like Superman, a domestic adoptee has two identities that are not integrated by the design of government-sanctioned sealed records: the identity of the adoptive family (the one she grows up with) and her original identity associated with her original family. The latter identity, the "Superman" identity is currently sealed under lock and key to most adoptees in this country and in the state of Connecticut. Thus adult adoptees are denied knowledge of our superpowers and denied the opportunity to integrate these identities so that we can be the strongest, healthiest, most fulfilled people we can be—for not only ourselves but for our families—adoptive, biological and chosen. How do you raise children when you're passing on that same dangerous, undermining legacy of blanks?

Having worked with the blanks as I formed my identity and came into adulthood, it was scary to even think about finding out what the blanks were since I had become the person I was at that point without them. But finally, I was ready. I thought that that once I was ready, all I had to do was go into my adoption agency and request my file. I could not have been more wrong. What I discovered, as an adult in my 30s, was that my very own file did not belong to me: it was the property of the government and of the adoption agency, Louise Wise Services (yes, that Louise Wise, the one featured in the documentary 'Three Identical Strangers') who had overseen the transaction of my adoption, the transfer of me from my family of origin to my (adoptive) family all those years ago. How could this be? How would this information be kept from me? This very basic, essential information about my life and my origins. I am an adult, a contributing member of society who pays taxes! How could this random social worker at the agency have access to all of my personal information and not me? A social worker, who, by the way, like the tremendous majority of professionals in the industry, did not agree with these laws in any way, but was forced to enforce them.

I was further flabbergasted to discover that the government-issued birth certificate that I had grown up with for my entire life was a fake. It was not my original, authentic BIRTH certificate but rather, what is known as an Amended Birth Certificate, which was created when my adoption went through a year after my birth and lists my (adoptive) parents as if they gave birth to me instead of adopted me. Up to that point, I realized that I was at a distinct disadvantage due to the prevalence of the blanks, but it was then that I became aware of what a shocking civil rights violation was being perpetrated on me and my

fellow adoptees—we were second class citizens under the law, denied access to the basic essential information that most take for granted. All other Americans have access to their original birth certificates. This is not right.

Then I found out that adoptees used to have access, that this was a fight to RESTORE access. The sealing of OBCs had been perhaps well-intentioned, to protect adoptees from the stigma of “bastard” status. But that was in the 30’s and 40’s when potential single mothers were defined as “unwed” and their children labeled “illegitimate”. Thankfully, the stigma around single motherhood and “illegitimacy” had ended in our culture but ironically, the sealed records that remain actually perpetuate the shame and secrecy around adoption that existed years ago. It’s time to put an end to this. We adoptees are still being treated like children who need protecting from our true selves throughout adulthood in an obscene and inappropriate way.

Due to sealed records, I had to become Nancy Drew and conduct a search to find my origins that was extremely challenging and costly—both emotionally and financially. Again, for information that most people take for granted and have had the opportunity to integrate into their identities since early childhood. My search was successful in that I found both of my birth parents, however because of the road blocks, when I finally found my birth dad, he was dead. If the records had been open, I may have been able to meet him. He passed after a 15 year battle with Multiple Myeloma a year after I started my search. This was heartbreaking.

I have had the good fortune to reunite with my birth mom, grandmother, uncles and brother. It turns out that my birth mom had been searching for me too. Most birth mothers want to have contact with their adult kids and to know what happened to them. Many search themselves and many are open to being found but don’t search themselves. Birth mothers are used erroneously and disingenuously in the argument against adoptees having access to our OBCs. My birth mom’s original name was Smith, so it was a bit of a needle in a haystack—a miracle, that in a system of closed records, I was able to find her at all. And now I have at least the maternal side of my medical history which has delighted my doctors. One of the reasons my birth mom was trying to find me is because breast cancer runs in the family, she had recently survived it and she wanted to warn me. The whole process and the reunion has been incredibly transforming, healing and life-changing.

I began to reconnect with my Superman and the most amazing thing about this is the stronger my Superman became, the more I integrated her (my Superman is a she), the stronger my Clark Kent became. The more wholeness and fewer blanks, the more I could reclaim myself, my true self, my whole self and the more grounded and confident I became, the more available I became to myself and to my husband, dear friends and wonderful family. My parents (The Kents) have been supportive of my search, particularly as it unfolded and they found that this was not what they had been told to fear, but a gain for all involved. The more I could share of myself, now knowing who I truly was and am, the more I could show up and contribute—and yes, pay taxes!

It is much easier to search now than when I did it less than a decade ago. Facebook and social media in general have transformed the face of adoption search. The prevalence of consumer DNA has further burst the field wide open. Adoptees and birth families need to find each other and we will, one way or another. The stakes are literally life or death. I cannot stress how high the stakes are when you are searching or when you're trying to get by with just the blanks. But social media and DNA are very public enterprises and don't honor the privacy of the individuals trying to find each other. It is not the best way. Unsealing records is the best, safest most direct way to ensure privacy for all individuals involved. Even if using consumer DNA gets the job done in terms of finding answers, it does not restore the civil rights of adoptees which I believe is long overdue. An adoptee needs to be treated like every other citizen. Otherwise we remaining stunted as children, forever denied equality, civil rights and true citizenry (while every other obligation is required and met). We need Equality.

I wanted to share my personal story with you. One of my favorite articles about this topic is this fantastic piece,

Why All U.S. States Should Allow Adoptees Access to Their Authentic Birth Certificates by Mirah Riben

Please read it here:

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mirah-riben/why-all-us-states-should-_b_8858162.html

In addition, if you would like to hear more of my story, in much more depth and in a theatrical presentation with an exquisite and award-winning performance by actress Anna Bridgforth, please feel free to take a look at the video from an early Off Broadway performance of 'The Good Adoptee'. It seems so appropriate that it is on a previously inaccessible, secret page on YouTube.

Trailer: <http://www.thegoodadoptee.com/media.html>

Show: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mD6roVEFgmg&feature=youtu.be>

Even though I have discovered so much through my search, there are still missing pieces. And there is still a missing piece of paper, my original birth certificate. It would mean the world to me to have access to this, like every other non-adopted American. This is an incredible opportunity for Connecticut to be on the right side of history on this issue and help propel the tide to restoring civil rights, and yes, human rights, to Adopted Americans living in Connecticut and lead the way for the remaining states that need a little inspiration and leadership. Including my fair state of New York. We are counting on you to do the right thing.

All my best,
Suzanne

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Suzanne Bachner
Adoptee, Playwright, Director, native New Yorker

www.TheGoodAdoptee.com

212.758.3820