

Please find attached file with my testimony supporting Senate Bill 972

My testimony in support of the CT adoptee rights bill.

Susan Merkel: Testimony for CT Adoptee Rights bill Tuesday, 15 March 2019

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First, I want to thank the committee for allowing me to share my adoption story. My name is Susan Merkel and I am an adoptee, adoptive parent and a clinical therapist who works with members of the adoption constellation at the Adoption and Infertility Counseling Center in Pennington, NJ. While I am not a CT resident, my parents lived here when they first married, my mother was an ER/OR nurse at Yale, my dad worked for Winchester, and my biological ancestors, including my 9th great uncle Oliver Ellsworth, played a large role in your state's history.

My adoption story is like other adoptees born between 1940 and 1990, recognized today by the industry as the "closed adoption period". I found my birthmother in 1986 through my adoption agency who initially served as mediator in our reunion. Today in states with no access to birth certificates, adoptees and birth parents are reaching out to each other via social media or phone calls to virtual strangers, potentially disrupting lives and relationships. CT Senate Bill 972 provides birth families with privacy that they do not currently possess.

That said, adoption related empirical peer reviewed research has shown the majority of birth mothers welcome contact, and reunion with their child often provides comfort from the trauma of not knowing what happened to their child. My birth mother was one of the women who were sent away to hide her pregnancy. She delivered me early on the morning of Friday, April 26, 1963 at Mountainside Hospital in Glen Ridge, NJ. She labored for over 40 hours and after losing maternal and fetal heartbeat, doctors performed an emergency cesarean section to save my life, followed by a total hysterectomy to save her life. When she left the hospital fourteen days later, my birthmother was not sure if I had lived or died, if I was brain damaged, normal, or adoptable. For the next 25 years, she carried a newborn photo of me in her wallet, placed carefully behind her social security card where no one else but her would see it. When I spoke to her for the first time, she explained that she had never told anyone besides her parents about me, including my birthfather who she had married seven years after I was born. The irony of an outspoken, award winning, highly regarded journalist who was an editor at The Star-Ledger, never uttering a word about her lost daughter is astonishing. We met for the first time at a restaurant located in a converted county park building she had played in as a child, and her relief that I was ok was palpable. We were both so thrilled to meet each other, and she never considered my contact an intrusion into her 'privacy'. During that first lunch, I showed her photos of my family, of me growing up, and she gave me a newborn photo of me hidden in her wallet behind her social security card telling me that she no longer needed it. Since I was not adopted until I was nearly 4 months old it is the only newborn photo I possess. Imagine if you had a photo of your baby and carried it with you for the rest of your life not knowing where that child is, or what happened to them.

From our first meeting, until her premature death at age 70, I knew that my birthmother was incredibly thankful that I was ok, very respectful of my parents, and relieved that I had a loving family who had given me a good life. She was thrilled to meet my parents and we were astounded to discover that she and my father, Gus Merkel, shared many business contacts and experiences. She took me to interviews for stories she was writing for the Ledger; and out to lunch with my birthfather at the country club her family had been a member of for three generations and would tell waiters and acquaintances walking by that they were proud that I was their daughter. My birthparents came to my family's annual Christmas Party and my wedding. I am confident that our reunion had a curative and positive impact on her life.

My birthmother, Joan Babbage, died on October 11, 1997. During her funeral, I was fortunate to meet many of her professional colleagues from The Star Ledger and childhood friends who shared stories about her. Yet, there was added trauma to this event since I had no documents to prove Joan was my mother. Initially I could not bury her and had to go to court to establish my rights and become my birth father's legal guardian and execute her estate. Losing Joan was extremely difficult and the legal circumstances unusual, yet the silver lining was knowledge gained when I had to contact my siblings about legal and medical status of our father. This initial contact connected me to my half-sister in Florida and two sisters in TX, and led to relationships with multiple, nephews, nieces, and cousins. I have reaped immeasurable comfort from my connection to my birth family. Moreover, since today's medical professionals believe sibling medical history is more important and useful than that of biological parents, knowing my sibling's medical history is of incalculable worth. Discovering my risk of breast cancer and melanoma led to early detection and saved my life. Moreover, my birth family has welcomed me with open arms and all of us wish I had been able to connect with them earlier in our lives.

My brother, also an adoptee, was rushed to the hospital early on the morning of November 1st, 2017 with severe abdominal pain. During emergency surgery, most of his large colon was removed and he had three strokes leaving him blind in his left eye, without use of his left leg, arm and hand (and he is a true lefty). He was in the ICU for three weeks, then spent another month in the hospital being treated for massive infection from "dirty" surgery, followed by three more weeks in rehab and still receives physical therapy. We learned from his doctors that the stroke was caused by a GENETIC heart defect and GENETIC disease named Crohn's. If we had access to his up-to-date health information my brother would have gotten treatment sooner and would not be unemployed, seeking social security disability and dying of advanced terminal illness. Imagine the stigma and danger if you had to tell your doctor every time you went for a physical, or any kind of exam that you did not know your parents or sibling's health history. Ask yourself if you want to put the lives of every adoptee born before 1983 at risk. This change to CT law will save lives.

An amended birth certificate is an oxymoron. Everyone gets original birth certificates; except adoptees. I am not asking for anything special, no exceptional privileges, or a unique set of rights apart from what every human being in this country enjoys. I am simply asking for an item that everyone born in CT received upon birth and something most take for granted. This is not a separate set of rights, just as marriage is a universal right. I am asking for equal protection for CT born citizens, affirmation of civil rights for adoptees born in CT, and passage of Senate Bill 972

which will restore unrestricted rights to CT born and adopted before October 1, 1983 to obtain their original birth certificates. Thank you for your time and consideration of this matter.

Thank you for your consideration of this important and life saving Bill.

All the Best,  
Susan Merkel, MSW, LSW