

Finding natural parents becomes a new career

By DEBORAH SMITH

Many of us can look in the mirror and see our father's eyes or our mother's nose, but there are many more who look in the mirror and see a question mark.

That question mark comes from not knowing who their natural parents are - from not knowing their roots. Sharon Chianelli tries to get some of the answers to adoptees' questions. A licensed private investigator, she searches for, and often finds, birth parents.

"I was adopted and my curiosity was aroused... I decided that maybe there was a need," she says in explanation of why she started her aptly titled business - Adopted? We Search. That was in February 1983 and since that time, she has had 50 cases, most of which have been solved successfully.

What would cause someone to search for their natural parents? "Often there's nothing more than the same blood and who you look like," she says. Often adoptees want to find out some medical information, which adoptive parents can't provide. Does heart disease run in the family? What about other diseases? That's information only natural parents or next of kin can furnish.

The first thing Chianelli does is find out what is called "non-identifying information" about the birth mother. Adoptive parents have that information, which includes such details as the age of the natural mother when she gave birth and a bit about her background. It only skims the surface of the search but it does provide clues for Chianelli. The other piece of information which Chianelli needs is the birth name, also available from the adoptive parents.

From there she has a lot of leg work and telephoning to do before she finds a name and address for the birth mother.

Once she knows her identity, she gives it, and the woman's address to the adoptee. Then it's up to her client to pursue.

Chianelli doesn't wash her hands of the matter once she has the information for her client. She's there to provide support and suggestions for the adoptee. "There are so many nice cards in card shops that say everything without you saying anything," she says.

If her client's birthname is Jane Jones, Chianelli would suggest she send a card saying she have been checking into the family background of Jane Jones and that she would like the woman to get in touch with her about it. That way, the mother needn't feel threatened. Chianelli does not advocate marching up to the door, ringing the bell and announcing she is the woman's daughter.

"There are three needs. The adoptees' needs, the rights of the birth parents and the adopted parents' needs." She does not want to see any of those rights and needs violated.

If adoptive parents are leary about their child looking for his natural parents, Chianelli tries to get them involved and helps them to understand the importance of the search to the adoptee.

Part of the reason people hire her, she says is because she's objective. "They get a family that looks like they fit and they freeze. I don't freeze because I'm not emotionally involved," she says.

For her objectivity and hard work, she charges \$500 for a successful search. Clients don't have to worry about starting the search in their 20s and not having Chianelli find anything until they're grey. She sets up a three-month contract and if the mother isn't found in that time, Chianelli refunds half the money; she keeps \$250 as a non-refundable retainer. If clients wish, she does consulting. She charges \$100 for one hour of her time to tell the client what she would do if she were doing the search. She also charges \$100 for out-of-town telephone calls; if she pays less than that, she reimburses her client the difference.

Lately, she has found some natural parents are coming to her and asking her to find their children. She is currently



SHARON CHIANELLI

trying to develop a system which will work in reverse of what she does now to find natural parents. Although she is hopeful about the process, she says, "to say there's a hope for every birth parent is going too far."

Although Chianelli says she doesn't do anything anyone else can't do, she does know the ins and outs of the system. In order to charge for her services, the law requires that she be licensed with the Ontario Provincial Police. Producing her badge, she says she found that out when the OPP knocked at her door and wanted to see her licence.

Tact and discretion are part of Chianelli's creed for searching. "No one ever knows what I'm up to... I have to protect myself too because I don't want to be slapped with a lawsuit for harassment."

"I'm not out to hurt anyone - not the birth parent, not the adoptive parent. I'm just there to do what I'm paid for and to be sensitive," she says.

Chianelli has never been wrong - she's sure of that, even if mothers of adoptees deny their relationship. "Adoptees have to put their trust in me."

She recognizes that sometimes natural mothers don't want to become involved. "Most of the time they've loved somebody and have made a silly mistake and weren't ready for marriage," she says of the birth mothers. Now they have families and established lives of their own. Often they don't want to be reminded of their past.

Adoptees aren't out to destroy anyone's lives, she points out. They don't want another parent, just a connection with their past. She speaks from experience, for she is an adoptee who searched for, and found her own mother.

It was mostly curiosity which made her begin the search. "I didn't start to actively seek until I was in my late 20s. The curiosity is always there but you have to put it on hold a lot of times," she says.

She was 37 when she found her birth mother and says she was "exhilarated" with the discovery - but found it "frustrating" when the woman wouldn't talk with her. Another relative gave Chianelli pictures of her mother when she was younger, and although the woman won't acknowledge she is Chianelli's mother, the resemblance is

strikingly clear.

Chianelli doesn't understand what the woman has to hide. At one point, she actually threatened Chianelli with legal action if she didn't leave her alone. Now Chianelli is considering legal action to find out the information she wants to know from her mother.

But most natural mothers are willing to provide the information their child wants. Her case is rare, she says.

Many of her success stories have been very sweet, indeed - true love stories of parted families being re-united. She has found the mother of a private investigator who wasn't able to find her himself. She also connected a mother and daughter who were both searching for each other. She tells about an older woman, who hadn't told her husband she had a son. When her son found her, she risked her marriage by going to him - it turned out her husband did understand. The list goes on.

With Chianelli's continued hard work, empathy and skill, who knows what the next moving success story will be... perhaps even her own.