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## **DNA project could reunite adoptees, birth parents**

By Mitch Stacy  
Associated Press

SARASOTA, Fla. — Linda Hammer remembers a caller to her radio show who told of spending \$100,000 for medical tests trying to find the cause of a young daughter's mysterious illness.

The child eventually died, without doctors ever figuring out exactly what happened. It wasn't until two years later — when the girl's mother found her own birth mother after years of searching — that she learned of a rare genetic disorder in her biological family, a problem that likely killed her child.

If she had found her birth mother earlier, the woman lamented, her daughter might have been saved.

Hammer, a Sarasota resident who has helped thousands of adoptees find birth families through her people-finding Web site, weekly radio show and newspaper column, loves the warm, fuzzy side of those reunions. But she's also seen how profoundly they can impact lives.

Now the former private investigator is hoping to incorporate science into the effort with an ambitious new project: a DNA bank where samples from adoptees and birth parents who are searching for one another can be added to a central database to be compared with other samples for possible matches.

The theory is that the genetic fingerprint could be the only way to reunite adoptees with birth parents in the many cases where names were changed, birth certificates were altered or babies were bought on the black market. Sometimes no paper trail existed, and adoption records remain closed in all but a handful of states.



Linda Hammer stands behind DNA sampler kits in the control room where she hosts a weekly adoption-themed radio program. Steve Nesius, AP

"This isn't really about search and reunions, it's about knowing who you are," said the 50-year-old Hammer, co-founder of the nonprofit Touched by Adoption advocacy group, based in Walton, Ky. "A lot of this stuff is life or death."

Hammer, who is not an adoptee herself, wants the service to be free to everyone, which means her organization is starting to raise money for the project, to be based at DNA Diagnostic Center in Cincinnati. An initial fund-raising dinner is set for next month and others are planned. It's expected to cost more than \$1 million to set up the project and bank the first 5,000 samples.

Adoptees and birth parents who want to participate will be sent a kit with cotton swabs to take three samples from the inside of their cheeks, said Jim Hanigan, a spokesman for DNA Diagnostic Center. The swabs are then mailed back to the lab, where 16 DNA markers will be extracted for comparison with other samples in the database.

While many labs offer DNA banking, paternity testing and various other services, Hanigan believes this is the first time the technology has been used to assist people searching for family members. DNA Diagnostic Center is one of the country's largest labs, currently doing about 75% of all DNA paternity testing.

"The opportunities for DNA testing are widening all the time, and it's more than the normal forensics things you see on TV," Hanigan said. "And this is a great one."

The National Council for Adoption, based in Alexandria, Va., estimates that 5 million to 6 million people in the United States have been adopted. Lee Allen, spokesman for the nonprofit advocacy group, said many states already have registries for adoptees and birth parents who are looking for each other, which is basically the low-tech method of doing what Hammer wants to do with DNA.

The organization welcomes any effort that will help bring together adoptees and birth parents who want to find each other, Allen said, but he questioned whether the cost will warrant the relatively few reunions such a project is likely to produce.

"I think it could be helpful," Allen said. "I think the difficulty will be promoting it and getting this kind of registry well known."

Hammer, whose Saturday afternoon radio show is heard in the Sarasota-Bradenton area on WTMY-AM, is undeterred by the cost and the legwork

involved. She's trying to promote the project among health care professionals and others who realize the importance of people knowing their medical histories, and hopes to spread the word with public service announcements for TV and radio.

She even envisions being able to reunite babies who were airlifted out of Vietnam by the thousands in the 1970s with birth parents still in that country.

"They have a right to know who they are," she said. "I know who I am, and if I didn't I'd be jumping up and down and making ugly faces about it. It's just not fair."

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