

Sunday, August 22, 2004

## **DNA registry offers tool for adoptees**

By Karen Gutierrez  
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Gale Sipple spent years unraveling the mystery of her own birth.

Now the Northern Kentucky woman is on a related mission. Next month, she will launch the nation's first DNA registry designed to match adoptees with birth parents and other relatives.

Already, 600 people have requested kits for swabbing the inside of their cheeks and mailing in samples, Sipple said. Most seek reunions with children they gave up years ago or parents they never knew. If they have only sketchy facts about each other, stumbling across genetic matches in a national database may be their last hope, Sipple said.



Gale Sipple with her daughter, Jodie, 20, and Jodie's son, Jacob, 13 months; Gale has worked for years through her web site to help adoptees get information about their birth parents. (Enquirer photo/PATRICK REDDY)

The project underscores how deeply some people have been scarred by the one-time secrecy of adoption in the United States. It also illustrates the power of the sprawling, informal network that has sprung up to help them. "That's the beauty of it. It's just everyday, normal people who have all bonded together to achieve a certain cause," said Sipple, a mother of three who manages a concrete construction company in Walton.

Among those wrestling with long-ago adoptions, Sipple is known as a "search angel," one of hundreds around the country. Often inspired by their own struggles, these volunteers use their knowledge of public records, Web sites and state adoption laws to help others track down unknown relations.

For decades, adoption was considered shameful. Biological and adoptive parents lied on official documents, and adoptees were blocked from reading their files.

Many records remain closed, but groups such as the American Adoption Congress are pushing for reform of state laws. At the same time, the

Internet has given rise to the search-angel network, which helps people overcome the inaccuracies in what records they have.

Sipple, 45, got hooked after a four-year search for her own birth mother, who died before they could meet. She now spends as many as eight hours a day on adoption-related sleuthing for others.

"It's just to repay the kindness everyone showed me when I was searching," Sipple said.

It was through this work that she met her partner in the DNA venture, Linda Hammer of Sarasota, Fla. Hammer does a radio show and writes a newspaper column about adoption searches.

Together, the women formed a nonprofit company and created a Web site, [touchedbyadoption.org](http://touchedbyadoption.org). DNA Diagnostics Center in Fairfield has agreed to conduct the testing. The women expect to collect 5,000 DNA samples in the first year and raise \$1.1 million in grants and donations to pay for labwork, which will be offered free to participants.

If the center finds matches among DNA samples in the database, Touched by Adoption will notify the parties and let them decide how and when to reunite.

"I believe adoptees and birth parents should have the opportunity to find each other and decide for themselves whether they'd like to have a relationship," Sipple said.

DNA Diagnostics Center, a 10-year-old company with nearly 200 employees, already conducts three out of every four paternity tests done for private citizens in the United States, spokesman Jim Hanigan said. It agreed to work with Touched by Adoption because the cause was worthy and the women understood their market well.

"You just don't know these things are out there until someone who lives it comes to you and says, 'Hey, there's a whole world of adoptees out there who could benefit from this sort of thing,'" he said.

Sending samples to the registry will be voluntary, so only birth parents and adoptees who want to find each other will be affected. The more who participate, the more successful it will be, which is one reason the testing is free.

"I think it would be a wonderful thing to help people find each other," said Mimi Janes, president-elect of the national support group Concerned United Birthparents. "I hope they get the word out. That's always been the

problem with registries. If the other person doesn't know it exists, it won't work."

Sipple is counting on the search-angel network to help with publicity. Already, an adoptee in Texas has volunteered to help raise funds through her expertise as a professional grant writer, she said.

Of the 600 people interested in submitting DNA samples so far, about 25 percent want to confirm relationships with possible siblings, Sipple said. The rest are split evenly between adoptees and birth parents, 22 of whom are fathers. They have no idea where their biological children might be.

Sipple's journey began in the mid-1990s, when her then-10-year-old daughter, Jodie, was afflicted with a rheumatic-like illness that caused muscle stiffness and fever.

Sipple had known she was adopted but had never investigated further. Now, having her blood family's medical history seemed imperative.

Jodie recovered, but her mother had become absorbed in the mystery of her own beginnings. Doggedly, she exposed the half-truths in her adoption file, which was open to her review under Ohio law.

Sipple thought her birth mother's name had been Anne Marie Bennett. She located six such women in the United States and sent form letters to them all, following advice she received through the search-angel network.

All of the women wrote back - kind letters expressing regret that, no, they weren't the person she was seeking.

Finally, a search angel in Texas made a suggestion: Try searching under the name Joan Janine Bennett instead. On Sipple's original birth certificate, that had been listed as her own name.

It worked: There was a person with that first and middle name living in Illinois. Sipple sent a certified letter, but weeks went by and she heard nothing. She wrote again, this time directing the letter to others listed at the same address. A woman named Carol Landis responded immediately.

Yes, Landis wrote, she thought her mother had given up a girl for adoption. Yes, she and Sipple might be related. But Joan Janine had died just two weeks before.

Sipple felt a flash of regret, but it quickly faded. After all, she already had parents - the wonderful couple who raised her.

Genetic testing confirmed that she and Carol indeed were blood relatives. They were thrilled, and Sipple resolved to help others harness the power of DNA.

"I've spoken to many, many people who think they are siblings but who are not 100 percent sure," Sipple said. "Without that absolute conclusion, you're right back into the search again. It doesn't give any closure if there are any maybes at all."

### **How it works**

Birthparents, adoptees or others who want to participate in the national DNA registry should contact Touched By Adoption Inc. for a free DNA collection kit.

Contact or contributions to the non-profit effort can be made by logging onto [touchedbyadoption.org](http://touchedbyadoption.org), e-mailing [Gale@touchedbyadoption.org](mailto:Gale@touchedbyadoption.org) or writing to 10459 Travis St., Walton, Ky. 41094.

Touched by Adoption will keep strictly confidential records of all DNA submitted and forward the samples to DNA Diagnostics Center of Fairfield.

The DNA will be regularly run through a computer program to look for similarities with other genetic material in the database. Sixteen markers in the DNA will be compared, which is enough to confirm paternity or maternity. When possible sibling relationships are detected, further testing may be necessary.

*Article available at:*

[http://www.enquirer.com/editions/2004/08/22/loc\\_loc1dna.html](http://www.enquirer.com/editions/2004/08/22/loc_loc1dna.html)