

Adult adoptees seek their roots

By ANNE WAKEMAN

Soft-spoken, 20-year-old Jan is looking for her natural parents.

Knowing no family other than her loving adopted one, she is curious about the man and woman who divorced when she was born and gave her up for adoption four days later. She has only a last name for a clue in her search.

Jeanette, 44, married a soldier when she was still a minor, only to discover two startling facts after he left for service: she was pregnant and the marriage was illegal because he had another wife.

Jeanette's parents, unwilling to admit an illegitimate grandchild to the prestigious family, committed their daughter to a mental institution for three years and gave the baby up for adoption.

Now married and a mother of six other children, Jeanette is searching for her 24-year-old son. She only knows he is somewhere in Michigan.

Another victim of parental divorce at birth, 43-year-old adoptee Mary is trying to locate her real mother and father, like Jan. Both women claim to have ultimate feelings of security and love within their adopted families, but both are "just curious to know who we are."

Who are they? These three women are members of the Lansing area chapter of the Adoption Identity Movement of Michigan (AIM), a non-profit organization dedicated to assisting adult adoptees in their search for natural family members. Its efforts are also directed toward changing the Michigan adoption laws as they pertain to the adult adoptee.

"If all eight million adoptees in the United States were permitted to see their entire, state-owned personal records, everyone would be familiar with his natural family history and organizations like AIM would be unnecessary," explained Andrea, 23, coordinator of the Lansing chapter and an adoptee herself. She spoke at a

recent AIM meeting in her East Lansing apartment.

Under current law, adult adoptees must make all personal information requests through Michigan juvenile courts, regardless of their current age. Consequently, they are often still treated as children and are not granted any information pertaining to their natural families' names or locations, Andrea said.

So it is up to the individual adoptees to try and put together the pieces of their puzzling histories themselves. The search often involves hundreds of futile telephone calls, letters, personal investigation and even lies, Andrea said.

Preliminary procedures include checking old telephone directories in the library, sending for original birth certificates and talking with friends of the relative or relatives being sought. Helpful leads depend on how much information is already known, such as married names, address changes, or names of other relatives.

"Normally, it's not a good idea to contact human sources unless it's absolutely necessary," Andrea said. "The parents or the child have a right to privacy, too. You have to remember that if there's an instance where natural parents are forced to give up a child, the situation is most likely an unhappy one. They might not want to be reminded of it at all."

However, most reunions result in "happy endings," and almost all attempts at finding a natural family are successful, Andrea said, despite the discouraging laws.

When an adoptee or natural parent has completed his search and has obtained the crucial telephone number or address, AIM encourages them to have a third party make the initial contact. This is to ease the initial emotional shock which usually occurs, she said.

"I would feel very badly if a reunion resulted in bitter feelings or even rejection," Andrea said, who has often acted as the third party, "but so far, it just hasn't happened, fortunately."

"We're not trying to invade anyone's privacy, we're

just trying to satisfy a curiosity about who we really are, what our parents look like and if we have any brothers or sisters," she said. Andrea was reunited with her natural parents in June, following a long, frustrating search.

Their reunion was one of the happy ones, she said. Andrea discovered that she is the "spitting image" of her natural mother and that she has several brothers and sisters. She spent a week in Maine with her parents and "caught up on the past 23 years."

Jan, Jeanette and Mary said they hope to be as fortunate as Andrea in their own searches. Jeanette's present family is fully aware of her attempt to find her first natural son, and they're very encouraging, she said.

Like Andrea, however, Jan and Mary do not wish to let their adopted families know that they are looking for their original parents.

"I love my adopted family dearly," Jan said, "and I wouldn't want to hurt them for the world. I know they'd feel insecure about my love for them, if they knew I was searching. They could never understand why I just have the need to know everything about myself."

Andrea echoed Jan's feelings, saying, "It's great to know everything about my nationality, medical history and heredity, in addition to knowing my original family. All the gaps in my life are finally filled."

Adult adoptees from the Lansing area who are interested in AIM can write to AIM, P.O. Box 762, East Lansing, Mi., 48823, or call 351-2055 in the evening.

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