

responsibility," as they said in Spiderman. Moreover I hope you will work to enable us to be more intelligent as a race.

I hope you'll cultivate a love for reading, especially about leadership: the world needs smart leaders.

You look a little like me at your age in your picture.

I have an above average IQ, but so does virtually everyone I work with – smarts are helpful, but methodology and people skills are also vital in life.

I don't want ANY publicity for being a sperm-donor father right now, but I am thrilled to be your genetic father.

I'm happy to exchange emails with you for now, but we will have to build any relationship slowly.

Best regards,

Lance

Ryan responded....

Lance,

I am very pleased to hear from you as well. Your email was very inspiring, and you seem like a very good person, the kind I would get along with. I don't know if you remember this or not, but on the profile you filled out when you were 19, you said "Educate the child, raise him or her without any bias of any kind. Teach him or her to trust in others, but to rely on self. Instill in him or her a sense of humor, and the ability to enjoy life." I was blown away by your intelligence and insightfulness at such a young age. It was one of the few things on that profile that was personal, not just a physical characteristic. I always took it to heart and used it as a golden rule for life.

1st of all, thank you for answering my questions, I could not help smiling as I read your responses. We share a lot in common, and it is no surprise. I often see things in myself that clearly did not come from the maternal side of my family, and wonder about their origins. Things I'm interested in, physical traits, ways I move or speak, foods I like or (more often) don't like, and much more. Learning more about you will be an enlightening experience for me, no doubt.

In regards to your questions, college went very well last semester. My 1st semester (fall 2004) was actually quite shaky. I took General Chemistry, Calculus 1, and Introduction to Aerospace

Engineering. I got an F, C, and A respectively. The truth is, college was a kick in the teeth at 1st. I had become so accustomed to being bored in high school, when I started college, I had a rather large rude awakening. Chemistry (which is not my favorite subject, to say the least) was the most difficult for me. Calculus was very fun and very easy to understand, but due to a few stupid mistakes on exams, I ended up with a C. Intro to Aerospace, however, was very easy and enjoyable. Second semester was a lot easier. I took Chemistry again, and just for the GPA, I took calculus 1 again as well. I also added an Engineering Projects class. This time around, I landed A's and B's.

My projects class proved to be quite enjoyable. I was the leader of a team of 5, and we had the semester to design and build a "sustainable development project". My team built a hydrogen collection and storage system, using electrolysis.

This summer, I plan to relax and ride my mountain bike. In May, my mother and I spent two weeks in Turkey, which was very fun. We spent some time in Istanbul, then a few days on the Mediterranean coast, as well as a 5-day boat ride. We have traditionally gone to Europe every year since I was 8 with the exception of last year. Traveling has

been perhaps the greatest learning experience of my life. I've learned so much about history and culture, much more than I could ever find in a textbook. I am grateful to her for providing me with that opportunity.

For this fall semester, I am registered for Calculus 2, Physics 1, Introduction to the Humanities, Introduction to Civil Engineering, and a 1-credit work group. I have been set on Aerospace for many years now, but recently have developed an interest in Civil. I am taking the intro to see if it's really what I want to pursue a degree in or not. I am also looking forward to physics, as it was one of my favorite subjects in high school.

Finally, I have a few more questions for you, if you don't mind answering them. For starters, what kind of music do you like? Music is a large part of my life, and my iPod is usually running at least a few hours a day. I recall you liking modern rock on your profile. I'm a classic rock kinda guy... Led Zeppelin or Bob Dylan would be my favorites. How about movies? I like *The Thing*, *The Shawshank Redemption*, the

original Star Wars and The Shining. You said that Keyboard was to be a “future hobby” of yours. Did you ever pick it up? I began playing keyboard when I was 5, and played until I was ten. I then studied violin for a year, and then cello for a few years. I recently bought an electric guitar and have been learning a few things on it here and there, but am looking forward to learning the bass as well. You also mentioned playing ultimate Frisbee. Do you play on any sort of a team, or just for fun? I ask because it one of my favorite sports. Anyway, I hope I didn't overload you with questions. Remember, you don't have to tell me anything your not comfortable with.

Also, I would like to assure that that I completely respect your request for no publicity. I understand completely, and I will make sure not to mention any of this to anyone other than close friends and family. Your requests are my top priority.

Anyway, the picture in the Denver Post was kind of small, so if you're interested in seeing a larger picture of me, I have attached one. It is of me hiking walking in a river in turkey. Anyway, I'd better go, but thank you again for your response, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Ryan

P.S. I was happy to see that you mentioned spider-man in your message :).

Ryan and Lance communicated by email over the summer months following their initial exchange but the length and frequency of messages diminished during that time. But Ryan was buoyed by all the positives that had happened—he had found Lance and confirmed that Lance is a good person. Lance was kind towards him, and Ryan now had a complete medical history. He was jubilant also to have freed himself from the control of the sperm bank. So all was mostly good. Ryan reminded himself that even if contact petered out, “when I turn 18 I can get on a plane and go shake his hand.”

As it turned out, Ryan would not be waiting until age 18 for a visit with Lance. In August, a surprise email arrived. In it, Lance wrote the following, “Would you like to come to California to meet me and your grandparents?” This unexpected invitation, with it's clear declaration that Ryan and Lance's parents are kin, sent Ryan and his mom over-the-moon with excitement. Their state of wonder increased

exponentially when Lance sent detailed, yet Mission Impossible-type instructions for their travels. Determined to keep Oprah out of the picture, Lance was sending them to a specific airport, with continued instructions to rent a car and check in at a specific hotel to await further instructions. Wendy and Ryan, veterans of some “our lives feel like a movie” moments when they went on national TV, surely felt this all the more as they dutifully followed Lance's instructions.

“Check it out. See that kid? He's my son.”

Wendy remembers cascading feelings of gratitude when they arrived in their hotel room and were greeted by a basket of treats and a sweet note from Lance's mom. A retired teacher and art professor, she provided them with an educator's welcome—there was advice on where to go and what to do and just the right mix of “munchies” for a teenage boy and his mom. She also included her phone number. Later that evening Wendy called the number. The two women spoke for about an hour, with Wendy taking detailed notes for Ryan to read while he (literally) bounced around the room. The following afternoon, after a visit to the museum that Lance's mom had suggested, and while waiting in line at Banana Republic, another call came. Caller ID declared this one was from Lance.

“You answer it.” “No you!” “No you get it.” “No YOU!” Wendy and Ryan ended this comical rapid-fire phone volley with Wendy taking the phone and hearing Lance's voice for the very first time. He gave instructions to meet in one hour in the lobby of the hotel. Wendy and Ryan raced back to the hotel to change and then moved rapidly into meeting-our-donor-for-the-first-time rehearsal mode. Ryan again was (literally) bouncing off the walls as they prepared for the meeting- jumping from one bed to the other and doing flips in over-the-top emotional and physical exuberance.

“We decided we'd time it perfectly so that we would exit the elevator and casually stroll into the lobby. There is only one chance to make a first impression and we were on it. We wanted that first impression to go well. We wanted to look a lot more nonchalant than we were actually feeling. So we rehearsed- we took the elevator down, found no Lance, took the elevator up and repeated this drill several times. I wanted to instill some humor into a potentially stressful scenario for Ryan, so the comedy routine really helped. Ultimately, we opted for perching

ourselves behind the adjoining bar, giggling all the while, and making our 'casual' entrance from that direction." And then it happened.

Young men walked in and out of the hotel lobby but when he arrived, there was no mistaking Lance. He was tall and physically similar to Ryan but the real giveaway was his smile. As he came closer Wendy noticed, "he has Ryan's teeth!" and then, "he has Ryan's eyebrows!" And there they were moments later; Wendy is shaking the hand of the man who *"is just as much related to Ryan as I am."* It was humbling for her to be with *"the other half of Ryan's DNA"* and utterly magnificent to be able to watch her son's dream come true.

Mom, son and donor dad proceeded to a restaurant where Ryan and Lance promptly raised their hands to touch each other to compare, then their feet. Wendy observes, *"I guess it is a 'guy thing.' This was how they first connected."* She, meanwhile, was fascinated to see how similar their walks were and as they strolled to the restaurant, Wendy staying behind a few feet, amused at how other women were watching Lance.

So what does a teenager, who has been searching for years, say to this man he has finally found and what does a man, who never sought to be found, say to his newly discovered biological son? Theirs was, not surprisingly, simple conversation. Lance asked Ryan about school. They asked each other about interests, tastes, preferences in music, food, etc. The three talked for more than an hour and then Lance offered up another unexpected invitation: to his parent's home for dinner.

Dinner with Ryan's biological grandparents, like lunch with Lance, went very well. Wendy recalls both visits beginning primarily with nervousness, giddiness and light conversation—people simply getting to know each other. Yes, there was no mistaking that Lance had identified his parents as Ryan's grandparents but at this initial visit, there was no defining or categorizing of relationships. This was simply a time of getting to know—and like-- each other. In the first few minutes Wendy gently and with humor acknowledged the nervousness felt by all, as Lance's dad quickly offered up a glass of wine.

As the evening unfolded, everyone became more relaxed and when the doorbell rang there was even a moment of levity when Lance quipped, *"That better not be Oprah."* In fact, it was the pizza delivery guy.

Although things got easier and more relaxed over the course of that first visit, Wendy says that it would be a long time before she would see her son relax and truly be himself with his newly found genetic family. *"For one thing, the stakes were high. They could not have been higher. Ryan needed and wanted them to like him. For another, we are very different people. Ryan and I and our family are all expressive, exuberant people who are not the least bit reluctant to show our feelings. Lance and his parents tend to be more reserved. At one point, years later, Ryan's donor grandmother said to me, 'we're just not very funny people.'"* Which Wendy actually thought kind of funny.

The final morning of that weekend visit was breakfast again at Lance's parent's home. *"I remember the smell of cooking French toast, watching Ryan and his grandfather sitting at the piano, grandfather playing a beautiful tune, with Lance looking on."* Wendy adds that it was all with a sense of unreality and disbelief and sheer wonder. This was a family gathering together. This was all so natural and yet so wildly unexpected. *"The icing on the cake or the cinnamon on the French toast came when Lance's mom pranced into the room wearing an apron, spatula in hand and began singing. I'm not sure how—or if—I held back tears at this point. I was witness to Ryan's most fervent dreams—and then some—coming true."*

More than eleven years have passed since this initial meeting and by now, Lance's parents and Ryan have long since established a grandparent-grandson relationship. How did this unfold? It advanced when they all came to Colorado for several vacations, including for Ryan's graduation and celebrated with the Kramer family over the course of a few days. And it was surely catapulted along by Ryan's decision to attend graduate school at USC (obtaining the same engineering master's degree as Lance), a very short distance from the grandparent's home. It was furthered also by his decision to rent a place only a bike ride away from them and by their gracious welcome and offers of delicious home cooked meals. And Ryan's gracious response to his grandfather's questions about his printer helped a lot. No longer was Ryan walking on eggshells. They were all off good behavior. The man who somewhat reluctantly introduced himself to Ryan's landlord as his grandfather, was increasingly comfortable peppering his grandson with computer and printer questions and offering valuable grandfatherly advice.

Ryan remained in Pasadena, living near his donor grandparents for 18 months, finishing his master's in engineering and then onto a job at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory. Long since secure in his relationship with his grandparents and they with him. Meanwhile, Wendy had grown close with Ryan's new grandmother and that relationship has flourished over the years. *"Ours is a relationship that cannot be defined by words,"* Wendy says. She goes on *"it cannot be said to be 'like a daughter-in-law or like a sister-in law.' She is the grandmother to my child, and I am the mother of her grandchild. It's a unique, stand alone, one of a kind special bond."*

Ryan's relationship with Lance was also helped along by geography and by mutual effort. Ryan moved to San Francisco in 2014 for a new job, making it easier for him to get together with Lance "as friends." In 2016 Ryan took a job at Google's Life Sciences division called Verily. These days the two men might meet after work at a bar, as San Franciscans do and there are times when Lance includes Ryan in a party or gathering he at his house. Wendy has on occasion been part of these visits and one bar outing in January 2015 as a stand out event.

*"I was in town visiting Ryan and Lance suggested we all meet for a happy hour party at a bar in downtown San Francisco. We arrived to a packed house but spotted Lance at a distance. Ryan and I began snaking our way through the crowd and as we got close, I heard Lance say to a few guys around him, 'Check it out. See that kid? He's my son.'" Wendy realized then how much she had longed for Lance to be proud of Ryan and there it was, loud, clear, determined confirmation of that pride. **"Check it out. See that kid? He's my son."** Words that this mother, who had done it all, had waited 24 years to hear.*

It got better. Lance continued and expanded his praise of Ryan and seemed to absolutely delight in peoples' responses to Ryan including, *"You guys look alike. Are you two brothers?"*

And as much as Lance relished bragging about Ryan, he did not, for a moment, attempt to take any credit from Wendy. Only too happy to give credit where credit was surely due Lance told all that would listen, *"She gets all the credit. She raised him. She is Ryan's mom."*

Sibling Connections—Found and Not Found on Oprah and 60 Minutes and the DSR

Although finding his donor was Ryan's original goal and remained central, the Donor Sibling Registry's name speaks to the significance that sibling connections took on along the way. As of this writing, Ryan and Wendy are aware of seven half siblings. These include the two girls whose mom contacted the Kramer's with the email heading 1058 and include one half-brother whom they learned about only recently. However, it was the connections made with four young women between 2005 and 2008 that have also been important in Ryan's experience of "finding my people."

First came Tiffany in 2005. She is 6 months younger than Ryan and born to a single mother who later married. In telling her she was donor conceived, Tiffany's mom admonished her from ever searching. But as a bright and curious teen, Tiffany searched on her own and found Ryan. She contacted him and a flurry of excited emails followed between the two half-sibs. Ryan was jubilant, as until this point, the only siblings he had "found" did not even know they were donor conceived. Wendy, however, was cautious. She told Tiffany that they would have to bring her mom into the loop.

Timing can be everything and for a time, it seemed that timing offered Tiffany an ideal way of telling her mom. The previous fall, Wendy and Ryan had been contacted by 60 Minutes and the tape of their show was going to be aired in March 2006. Tiffany told the Kramers that she would watch the show with her mom and that when Ryan came on, she would say, *"that boy—he is my brother."* On board with this plan, Wendy sent Tiffany a note for her mom, explaining who they were, and how this connection between the two kids could be a positive experience for all. She and Ryan watched 60 Minutes with multifaceted excitement—they were thrilled to have yet another national and respected voice and they were equally eager to get Tiffany's call.

First, the good news. The 60 Minutes show was a huge success. It brought 28,000 visitors to the DSR in March, up from the usual 8,000. And more important, in a typical month there are 30-50 matches. In March of 2006 538 people matched. Another big triumph for Ryan was that he was able to successfully navigate some delicate territory of privacy and secrecy. Lance had made it very clear that he would cut off contact if

Ryan acknowledged he had found him but aware that 60 Minutes would have to ask the donor question, Ryan came up with the following response to the “did you find your donor?” question. *“I prefer not to talk about my personal situation with my donor because it could compromise any future contact I might have with him.”* Correspondent Steve Kroft agreed that this answer was acceptable.

Now the tough news...the call from Tiffany never came. As they waited for the phone to ring, Wendy and Ryan came to realize that something must have gone wrong. Indeed, Tiffany’s sweet and innocent efforts to share her good news with her mom fell on harsh ears. Her mother declared, *“Those people are not your family”* and with that, took Tiffany’s phone and shut down her MySpace account. A few months later Tiffany sent Wendy a lovely Mother’s Day card accompanied by a sensitive note. There were a few additional communications but Tiffany eventually stopped all contact.

Ryan has always felt different—he was exceptionally intelligent and donor conceived—and he longed to connect with others like him. “Like him” could be through genetic connections but their experience on the DSR reminded both Wendy and Ryan that this was not all about genetic connections: simply meeting others who were brought into this world through anonymous donation would be helpful. And it was with this knowledge of what it meant to “find his people” that Ryan became an honorary member of Donor 66’s offspring group. It happened something like this...Wendy received a call from a mom who had two children through Donor 66. She had connected with a mom whose twin girls also came from Donor 66. She was calling to say how grateful she was to the DSR and to ask advice about the family’s first meeting. And then came along two other moms and two more kids. Six Donor 66 offspring and Ryan. Four Donor 66 moms and Wendy. They all lived in the Denver area and they enjoyed spending time together. The pieces of Ryan’s complex identity puzzle were beginning to fit together. It was meaningful for him to be with others who had the donor offspring experience regardless of who their donors were. And he continued to seek genetic connections. He would find his people in both groups.

Getting together with the Donor 66 group was been easy for Ryan and Wendy as they live in the Denver area. They got together on a fairly regular basis

enjoying barbecues, media events, holiday celebrations and in some instances, strong friendships. Although not connected genetically, for Ryan the Donor 66 teens and young adults are very much his people.

February 2007: Ryan becomes the 2,910th person to be matched on the DSR. Enter Anna.

Wendy was at work when the match came on her computer screen. Her initial surprise and delight was soon clouded by fear. Seeing that Anna, who was born three years to the **day of Ryan**, was only 13, Wendy feared that they would have yet another Tiffany situation. She was relieved to quickly learn that Anna’s parents were on board, so much so that it had been with her dad that she signed on to the DSR.

Anna’s mom’s initial email:

Dear Wendy,

My daughter, Anna just responded to a posting by you regarding donor number 1058. This is the first time we have explored the registry and are very anxious to find out if your son is indeed a match.

My husband and I allowed Anna to register herself last night, with our supervision. She is 13 years old, and was born on May 22nd, 1993. Our donor was an Engineering student. He was born in 1967. He has one brother who is a pilot. Does any of this sound familiar to you?

As you can imagine, we are looking forward to a response and hope to hear from you soon.’

Regards,

Ann Marie (Anna's Mom)

Robert (Anna's Dad)

“When I read this I was giddy. And in shock. Ann Marie and I spoke by phone and during our call, I told her that even though we’re essentially strangers, that we shared something so precious. We quickly shared a little about each of our kids, and Anna asked to speak with me so that she could ask questions about the other half siblings that we knew about.”

Later that evening Ryan and Anna connected online via instant messaging. Over the next few weeks Ann Marie and Wendy had several phone calls and eventually they all had a group phone call. They talked about meeting and all wanted that to happen ASAP.

ABC's Primetime had expressed interest in updating a story that they had done more than four years ago on Ryan and the beginnings of the DSR, and they thought that Ryan and Anna's meeting would be a perfect update.

A month later, Wendy and Ryan flew to NYC and almost in front of live cameras (the camera folks were thankfully a bit off track), Anna and Ryan met in Central Park. Wendy remembers it as if was yesterday, *"We were all extremely excited. Ryan bought Anna a University of Colorado sweatshirt. The morning of the meeting each family had a camera crew to walk with towards each other in Central Park. They had set a meeting place, but because of disorganization, our two families basically bumped into each other walking along the park road. It was tremendous. We all hugged, and the smiles on Anna's and Ryan's faces were telling. There was an undeniable bond and recognition of the familiar in one another. The parents were scouring the faces of the kids, looking for similarities. It was very emotional for us, and amazing to meet this young girl who had bits and pieces of my son in her. I was overwhelmed with gratitude for Anna's parents that they had been honest with Anna and honored her curiosity and need to search for and connect with Ryan. While Anna's mom and I had a more obvious bond, I felt extreme gratitude for Anna's dad. I was so impressed that he had put any possible fears or concerns about Anna finding biological family to the side, instead honoring his daughter's needs to connect to that invisible and unknown part of herself.*

"We spend the first hour or so asking each other questions, taking pictures and comparing notes. Ryan and Anna's smiles seemed permanently adhered to their faces. There was a sense of peace about the both of them.

"We spent the next 48 hours getting to know each other and marveling at the similarities (and differences) in Ryan and Anna. It was clear to us, that even though we had just met, that we were connecting as family. Strange to be getting to know family for the first time. We were laying the groundwork for a connection that could last their lifetimes. We made it clear that Ryan and Anna would be defining the relationship and that there was no pressure for it to look any certain way. We also made sure the kids knew that their relationship at 13 and 16 would certainly change and develop as they years went on. For now, the parents would most likely make the logistical

planning, but this would only be based on the desires of both Anna and Ryan. Anna wore her CU sweatshirt with pride, despite the 75 degree weather."

The two families shared a lovely weekend and Ryan finally had his long awaited half sibling. A year later they got together a second time celebrating Ryan's 18th birthday and Anna's 15th. They would be together again for Ryan's college graduation where Anna and her parents would get to meet Lance and his parents. Although Lance had earlier on "banned" photos, Wendy is happy to report that she has any number of photos of any number of family mixes at Ryan's graduation party.

2008 and another Oprah show. As with the first, the show brought many new members to the DSR and among them were Natalie and Kristina who turned out to be Ryan and Anna's half sisters. Their mom had watched the Oprah show and reached out to Wendy about *"that lady and her son I just watched on Oprah,"* not fully realizing that Wendy was "that lady"! The mom posted her two daughters onto the DSR as she and her husband were in full support of their right to be curious and to know their donor kin. Since they lived in Boston and Anna and her family were in New York and all wanted to meet, Wendy and Ryan flew east for another NY meeting.

"By this time Ryan and Anna were pros." Wendy remembers. *"They led the way and made it easier for Natalie and Kristina. They provided the girls with medical information and answered questions they had about Lance. They also helped set the pace and tone for how the four teens would get to know each other and begin to establish sibling bonds. Games were played, and teens hung out, as teens do. As Ryan had long since learned, "It begins with simple conversation."*

It would be so nice to be able to report that all proceeded smoothly and uneventfully with Ryan and his half sisters but this has been a story of joy and disappointment, unexpected delights and some bumps in the road. While they have enjoyed some good times together, including a weekend in which all three East coast girls spent a weekend at the Kramer's home in Colorado, one bump in the road came via DNA testing—the very tool that had led Ryan to Lance.

In 2012 Wendy was contacted by a new DNA testing company who were offering a new testing tool that could be of great benefit to donor families in

particular. The company—which will surely go unnamed here—needed three donor family groups to test the mothers and the half siblings. Wendy and Ryan signed on, Anna and her mom joined in, as did Natalie and Kristina along with their mom. The curve ball that no one ever saw coming was the news that Anna was “not genetically related” to Ryan, Natalie and Kristina. This scientific untruth, tested twice, and declared “100% accurate” by the noted scientist at the DNA company, sent all the participants into a tailspin. It was confusing and hurtful to all but most difficult for Anna who had her unfolding identity temporarily challenged and snatched away from her. Ultimately and only after Wendy’s sheer grit prevailed, Anna’s genetic connection to the others was confirmed.

As with many half-sibling groups, distance can be a main factor when determining the progression and closeness of newly found genetic relatives. Having half siblings spread across the country (or the world) can make the connections more difficult to deepen, as spending time together is more challenging. As with any family, it’s the people you see most often, and those with whom you have the most in common, that you seem to hold most close. Ryan and his half sisters now have busy adult lives, so get-togethers just don’t happen as often as everyone wishes.

And Here We Go Again...

Over the years, Wendy and Ryan have had many conversations about how many siblings he might have. They have worked with various numbers and somehow landed on “between 20-30.” Wendy explains that they really don’t know. At one point, California Cryobank had told them “one.” Then the talkative woman there told them “many.” The bank told Lance 12. Those were the reports. Then there were the facts. Lance donated three times a week for five years. Each donation could have been split into between 8-24 sellable vials. When Wendy and Ryan ran the numbers, they found that there could have been as many as 18,000 sellable vials of sperm. “We’ll go with 20-30.” Wendy said.

In 2008 Ryan was aware of 6 half sisters, the three he had met, the two whose parents would not tell them that they were conceived with a donor, and the one whose mother had forbid all contact. Wendy says that in some ways, this was enough. Ryan had had his questions answered and he also felt that he and the DSR were visible enough that others could find him. “*Still there was some curiosity,*” Wendy says. “*Why all*

girls?” Ryan couldn’t help wonder if he was the only male offspring. August 2016: enter a new half brother.

The email came August 22, 2016. The heading was familiar. “Donor 1058?” It was another mother writing. She had read an article about Wendy, Ryan and the DSR in the NY Times and asked, “*Is your actual donor number 1058?*” Wendy replied that it was and within moments the two moms were talking by phone. The other mother explained that she had a son, who is a year younger than Ryan, who did not yet know he was donor conceived. His parents would soon be telling him about his conception and about Ryan.

Wendy would soon learn that it is very different when people are matched as adults than as children. And she observes, “*men do things different than women.*” While Wendy and Ryan’s new half brother’s mom are forming a really nice friendship and have enjoyed long telephone conversations, Ryan and his new half brother have thus far had limited contact. They have exchanged emails, and spoken by phone but neither seems eager—at this point—for more. Although close in age and sharing ½ their DNA, they are in different places in their lives and have had vastly different life experiences regarding donor conception.

What the experience with the new half brother and his mom confirms for Wendy is that donor conception connections come in all flavors. She is especially fond of this new mom and they seem to have a lot in common that goes beyond their sons’ DNA. Wendy hopes they will forge strong bonds. In some ways this is similar to her experience with Lance’s parents—she is close with the grandmother, Ryan is close with Lance and his parents and Ryan’s half sisters and their families have no on-going contact with Lance or his parents, although one half sister recently expressed interest in reaching out to Lance and his parents. Wendy is friendly with one of the moms, but not so much with the other (since the DNA debacle). All flavors. All shapes and sizes. Ever changing.

Lessons Learned: Why Tell One Family’s Story

Looking back at the 26 or 16-year point depending on how you count (from Ryan’s birth or from the birth of the DSR), Wendy and Ryan have learned a lot that they feel is relevant to other donor families. While every family is different, these are some of the messages that they want to pass on to others.

1. Parents need to listen to and hear their children and trust they will guide them. As they look back

on the origins of the DSR and on Ryan's search for his donor, Wendy and Ryan both acknowledge that theirs has been a journey in which she follows his lead or they move forward together. In Wendy's words, "Ryan and I held hands and jumped off the cliff together. We didn't know who we would find or who would find us but we were able to take each step—and make each leap—because we had each other's hand."

Sadly, Wendy and Ryan have encountered parents who in Wendy's words, "*act out of fear not love.*" "*It is not enough,*" Wendy observes, "*for parents to tell their children they were donor conceived. They must also accept and honor their child's right to be curious, their right to search, their right to find and to connect with their first degree genetic relatives.*"

2. Wendy is often puzzled when people ask her why she didn't close down the DSR when Ryan found his donor. She is equally puzzled, when people assume that for her, the DSR was simply a business venture. It was neither a business venture nor a tool just for Ryan. As the DSR has unfolded, it has become clear to Wendy and Ryan and all those active in it, that the DSR's mission extends beyond searching. It includes support for the donor family community, education and advocacy. Wendy can easily remember a time when sperm donors were often women's gynecologists, when sperm banks offered almost no information about donors and surely when no one considered the rights of donor offspring. Change would not have come and will not continue without education and advocacy.
3. Many assume that the donor conceived people posted on the DSR are only interested in knowing about who their unknown biological relatives are. For many though, it's much more than that. It is a desire to be known. Ryan wanted to find his donor but more importantly, he wanted his donor to know that he existed. It also mattered a lot that he could seek and search on his own terms and not be dictated by the sperm bank's seemingly self serving rules. The age 18 is arbitrary, as many donor-conceived people, like Ryan, have established enriching relationships with their donors long before the age of 18. Ryan did not feel it was right for a sperm bank to withhold essential information about his ancestry and

biological relatives, not even offering up a possibility of mutual consent contact.

4. Donor conception relationships cannot be named. People may try to say, "It is like a special aunt" or it is "like a close cousin" but donor kinship cannot be named. Donor family connections rely on mutual consent. This was something Ryan fully understood at a young age. As Wendy and Ryan identified donor sibs, there were times when there was mutual consent and sadly, times when it was absent.

It has also been interesting to Wendy and Ryan to see how Ryan's half siblings have responded to connections. Anna, for example, met Lance and his parents at Ryan's college graduation and all shared a warm family weekend together. And yet, to Wendy and Ryan's knowledge, there has been little follow-up. Lance's parents are very clear that Ryan is their grandson. In fact, Lance's mom says she went through a grieving period over having missed the first 15 years of Ryan's life. By contrast, they do not seem to regard Anna as their granddaughter, nor does she reach out to them as grandparents. Take away message? Sometimes genetic connections lead to a strong sense of kinship and other times, they do not.

5. Living in an "instantaneous" time makes it difficult to wait. Being on the DSR involves waiting. Not for all. Not all the time. But long stretches of time can pass when one is simply waiting. Ryan Kramer is Exhibit A—he founded the DSR and waited seven years to become the 2,910 donor offspring to match. His half sister Anna matched the very second she joined the DSR.
6. Navigating donor relationships always involves the balancing of privacy and secrecy and sorting out when, if ever, the "rights" of the donor supersede the rights of the child.
7. Language is powerful and can be unsettling for donor families. Wendy's approach, from the start, was to have Ryan take the lead with language. From the time he was in preschool, she listened as he tried on and experimented with ways to tell his story. She realized along the way that he needed to try words on, to experiment with them, to determine for himself, what felt right. She knew that words are just words and they do not define relationships. She stood by as

Ryan tried on words like “dad”, “donor dad” and “father” and “grandparents,” knowing always that nothing Ryan would say would diminish his relationship with her. In fact, at one point he said to her, *“You know that I have only one parent and that is you.”* There have been times, also, when she has seen that words can be used for convenience. For example, Ryan was at Lance’s home for a small party recently. Another guest

walked in and said, *“Hey Ryan, where’s your Dad?”* Ryan remembers pausing for just a moment and then responded with a smile, *“He’s in the kitchen.”* Wendy’s advice to other donor parents is to take notice if there is a word that really troubles them and if so, to think about why it sets them off.

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