

# A boy tracked down his sperm donor and I was hooked

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**Fifteen years ago, a boy finding his anonymous sperm donor was a sensation. Now it's commonplace. Some musings.**

My intense interest in assisted reproduction was kickstarted in October 2005. I can pinpoint the moment. I was in Montreal, reporting from a joint meeting of the American Society for Reproductive Medicine and the Canadian Fertility and Andrology Society. There were many interesting stories coming out of the meeting, but one in particular got me in its claws.

It was just a poster. At a scientific meeting, posters are where new research often makes its debut. Sometimes it never gets beyond that iteration, but often the work is published in full, a few years later, in a scientific journal. As a result, poster sessions are a great place to find edgy research to report on, so I always spend a lot of time nosing around in them.

The poster that so intrigued me had a title something like, "Contact among families who share the same sperm donor." The Sperm Bank of California had started a family-matching project, where families who'd used the same donor could be put in touch with each other, and the poster was reporting on how that was going.

I remember finding the idea unfathomable. I remember wondering how families who'd used the same sperm donor could possibly want to have anything to do with each other. It was something I had never considered.

I returned to the poster later in the day, when the researcher, Joanna Scheib, was there to discuss it. Not only did she tell me more about her work (subsequently published in *Fertility and Sterility*), she also told me about a

meeting that was taking place the following weekend in Toronto, organized by the Infertility Network, a small charity. That meeting, she suggested, would dig deep into issues around donor conception.

And did it ever. For me, the Toronto meeting was transformational. It not only introduced me to some of the major movers and shakers in the field at that time — Jo Rose, Shirley Pratten, Rachel Epstein, Eric Blyth, Olivia Montuschi, Wendy Kramer, and the meeting organizer herself, Diane Allen — but it also delivered a great story, one of the best scoops I've had in my career. It was there that I learned that a teenage boy had managed to track down his anonymous sperm donor, using only a genetic test and some clever internet sleuthing.

I know it doesn't sound remarkable now. But when I published that story 15 years ago, it caused a sensation. Dozens of reporters from around the world called to interview me about it. My voice ended up on the BBC news that night. It was clear to anyone who thought it through that anonymity would soon be toast.

The boy, who'd been conceived using anonymous sperm, had done a genetic test through a site called FamilyTreeDNA.com. His Y chromosome connected him to two men — distant relatives of the donor — and because surnames tend to follow the male line like Y chromosomes do, the two men provided the boy a vital clue about his donor's identity: a potential last name. The donor profile had contained a birthdate, birthplace and university degree, and, with the additional help of the surname, the boy was able to identify and contact him.

In the years since, there has been an explosion of such discoveries. Most of the donor-conceived people I once watched searching have now found their donors. Every day, someone in the DNA Detectives Facebook group tracks someone down with the same sort of tenacity and innovation. But that boy was a trailblazer.

The boy in my story has since been publicly identified as Ryan Kramer. Together with his mother, Wendy Kramer, he had founded the Donor Sibling Registry in 2000 — an organization that promotes the very "contact among

families who share the same sperm donor" I'd found so counterintuitive. But contacting other donor families was one thing, and contacting an anonymous sperm donor was another. When Ryan first reached out to his donor, it was not at all clear how he would react to being found. Years later, Wendy told me how she just kept hoping he'd be kind.

He was, and their story continues. Over the years, the two men have become close. They are in regular contact. For a while, they lived in the same community, and even worked at the same large tech company. Ryan got to know and to spend time with his paternal grandparents. "We are family," says Wendy. (Read the [book](#).) He's also, of course, been in touch with people who "share the same sperm donor" — his half-siblings.

Everything we thought we knew about donor conception, family relationships and anonymity has been up for revision these past two decades. In this field, things move fast. Surprises are everywhere. It keeps you on your toes.

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Joanna Scheib and Alice Ruby. "[Contact among families who share the same sperm donor](#)." *Fertility and Sterility*. 2007.

Alison Motluk. "[Anonymous sperm donor traced on internet](#)." *New Scientist*. 2005.

(Or read it [here](#).)

Wendy Kramer. [Donor Family Matters](#): *My story of raising a profoundly gifted donor-conceived child, redefining family, and building the Donor Sibling Registry*. 2020.

[Infertility Network](#)

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