

They Grew Up Believing They Were Half Brothers From The Same Sperm Donor. A DNA Test Revealed The Truth.

With little regulation in the sperm bank industry, stories of mistakes and sloppy record-keeping are growing. It's blowing up the lives of donor-conceived children.



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Courtesy Lauran

Since he was born, Tylen has known he had a half brother on the other side of the country. In 2008, Tylen's mother, Christy Coyle, had used the same sperm donor as the other mom, Luran, and they found one another online. The kids were born weeks apart, met as infants, and played together. Their single mothers spoke weekly on the phone and raised them as half siblings so they would always have someone just like them whom they could turn to. For years, a large canvas photo print of Coyle holding the two boys hung on a wall in Luran's house.

"We had planned that when they turned 18 and got to meet the donor that they were going to do it together," Coyle said. "It was just our life plan."

With their children approaching 10, the two women paid for an AncestryDNA test to provide the boys with a piece of paper confirming their ties and breaking down their genetic history. One evening, while on the phone with Coyle, Luran looked up the results.

"And then it was just dead silence," Coyle said. "There was no noise at all. And she just said, 'They're not related.'"

Coyle, now 41, was given the wrong sperm sample. The discovery sent her into a spiral. She felt violated, having been inseminated by a strange man whom she did not choose. She felt foolish, having searched in vain for physical similarities between the two boys. But she also felt that she had failed as a mother, as if she had betrayed her son and robbed him of the life plan she had envisioned.

"It was a couple of months of just sitting there, being devastated for my son," she told BuzzFeed News. "Lots of no sleeping or crying because you don't know what to tell your son. You feel like you've been lying to them about where they came from."

It would take months — and a DNA test from an unsuspecting middle-aged woman living far away in Texas — before the mystery would be solved.



Tylen (right) with Lauran's son (left) as toddlers.

Courtesy Lauran

In the multibillion-dollar sperm bank industry, stories of mix-ups have become increasingly common. While federal regulators require that samples be tested for communicable diseases such as HIV, there is little to no national regulation beyond that: No laws punishing sloppy record-keeping at the clinics, no laws mandating that the personal information provided by donors is verified, no laws ensuring that women are being inseminated with the exact samples they have selected. And there's currently no major lobbying effort to change any of that.

Wendy Kramer — cofounder of the Donor Sibling Registry, a website that connects children who were conceived using sperm donors — said most people don't know how little the industry is regulated. "I think for so many of us when we had to use a donor in order to have a child we all thought, *Oh, it's the medical industry. These are medical professionals, so there's going to be the same ethics and morals and responsibilities and record-keeping,*" she said. "What many of us have come to realize over the years is this isn't the medical profession. These are sperm-sellers, and that's very different, and their ethics and responsibilities are very different."

The increasing ubiquity and availability of at-home DNA testing kits, genealogy websites, and social media has been a slow-building storm for the donor industry, gradually exposing more and more cases of samples or records being mishandled. Just as police departments are cracking decades-old cold cases using genetic testing, donor-conceived children are learning shocking information about themselves and their families.

The mistakes from clinics span the country and stretch back decades, taking a profound human toll not only on children such as Tylen but also on donor-conceived adults, shattering their understanding of themselves and their families — as well as the bonds they have painstakingly built.

“We obviously didn’t grow up with one another, and we obviously didn’t live close to one another, so that already makes it difficult to maintain a relationship,” said Sam Johnson, a 29-year-old New Yorker who unearthed shocking information about his donor and his supposed half siblings after taking a DNA test. “But then when you add the fact that we’re not even related, it’s like, what’s really holding it together?”

These stories from Coyle and Johnson touch on fundamentally human questions: What is family? And what is its purpose?

For most people, of course, family goes beyond simple blood bonds but involves social connections built over years of shared experiences. It’s also a central means by which we get to know ourselves and build our identity.

For donor-conceived children, discovering new relatives with similar lived experiences can mean they’re extending their family in both the genealogical and social sense. The half sibling could fill in gaps in their biological identity and build a relationship that fills in part of their social identity and self-awareness.

“It’s hard enough for these donor-conceived people to kind of jockey around the whole idea of identity: Who am I when I don’t know where half of me comes from?” Kramer said. “Connecting with others who also share that unknown half of yourself can be very important, can be profound and life-changing. Relationships are made, bonds are made, and friendships are made. Their family has expanded.

“Then to have the rug pulled out under you, to say those people are not actually your biological relative, is extremely upsetting.”

Johnson knew at an early age that his family was different. Born to two moms in the early 1990s, he grew up an only child in northern Manhattan. Liberal New York was

something of a bubble, but kids were still kids. “I definitely got shit ... Every time somebody would say, ‘Oh, that’s gay,’ I would fucking correct that,” he said. “People would definitely make fun of the way that I was born, the fact that I was conceived through artificial insemination.”

He loved his moms, but there was an occasional nagging feeling — a sense of mourning, as he described it, for not knowing exactly where he had come from. The only clue Johnson had was the donor information card from the New York clinic, Repro Lab, that his birth mother, Nicole Johnson, had used to conceive him. According to the donor sheet, “Donor #19” was Italian, Catholic, and worked as a doctor. He had green eyes and dark brown hair. He was married and enjoyed soccer and antiques. He didn’t smoke or drink, and he had a spotless medical history. “Describes himself as,” read the sheet, “optimistic, exciting, and honest.”

As he grew older, Johnson internalized what little information the paper provided him. He tried picking up some Italian using Duolingo and even had a friend teach him some recipes, soon perfecting the simple Neapolitan dish spaghetti aglio e olio. Occasionally, he’d search online for doctors’ photos, wondering if he looked like any of the men in the results. In 2007, his googling led him to Kramer’s website, the Donor Sibling Registry.

Within a year, he had connected with a woman who had the same “Donor #19” card from Repro Lab. And then another. And another. And another still. He was overwhelmed.

One of the women, Genna Ellis, was the same age as Johnson; she had grown up in Brooklyn, also with two moms. When she and Johnson met at Manhattan’s Union Square, what could have been an awkward encounter quickly eased into an hours-long walk as they discussed their similar childhoods. “It was a powerful experience for both of us, considering that was the first time we thought we were communicating with someone we were blood-related to,” Ellis said.

For the next decade, Johnson reveled in these newfound connections: A social worker by trade, he helped Ellis with an addiction problem. He visited one half sister in California when he helped a friend move across the country. He helped a third through a bad breakup and let her sleep on his couch. He was there when she got her first tattoo. She even came to his wedding.

“I was always proud to be like, yeah, this is my sister — to be able to say that,” he said. “I liked the idea of it.”

The first crack came when one of the supposed half sisters took a 23andMe test and learned she had Baltic, not Italian, heritage. She later matched with a Slovakian man who confirmed he had been a donor at the New York clinic in his youth.

Johnson took a 23andMe test. Ellis took one too. None of them were related to each other. Their donors were all different.

“It definitely hurt to find out that these relationships — not to minimize their significance — but to find out that the foundations that they were built upon were false,” he said. “Over the course of 10 years, I spent time forming relationships with these people. Not that they weren’t still meaningful, but it’s like the foundation is, like, what the fuck?”



William Henry Pancoast (1835–1897), an American physician and surgeon.
Hulton Archive / Getty Images

Secrecy — and fraud — have been present since the very first recorded case of successful artificial insemination in the US when in 1884, a 41-year-old wealthy Philadelphia business merchant and his 31-year-old wife came to see one of the city's most prominent physicians, William Pancoast. The doctor and his medical students inspected both and ultimately concluded the man's semen contained no sperm. After months of treatment failed, Pancoast came up with a plan B when one of his students joked that “the only solution to this problem is to call in the hired man.”

Pancoast invited the woman to his clinic and knocked her unconscious with chloroform. Then, without her consent and with his students present, the doctor used “a hard rubber syringe” to inject “some fresh semen from the best-looking member of the class” into her uterus before plugging her cervix with gauze. The students and Pancoast made a pledge of “absolute secrecy.”

She became pregnant, and Pancoast eventually felt guilty enough to tell her husband. He turned out to be “delighted with the idea” but asked that his wife not be informed. She later gave birth to a son. The insemination was only revealed 25 years later when one of the students, Addison Davis Hard, published a piece in a medical journal recounting the procedure. By all accounts, the woman was never told.

In the 1950s, scientific breakthroughs came with the freezing of sperm — and the early pioneers immediately envisaged grand commercial potential. One of the first researchers in the field, Raymond Bunge, predicted in a letter to his mother, “It won't be long before my icicles will be in the deep freeze section” of supermarkets. But the research remained controversial; a 1954 headline about three babies born through Bunge's method of freezing and insemination declared, “Fatherhood After Death Has Now Been Proved Possible.” Fear of so-called test tube babies abounded.

The first sperm banks didn't arrive until the 1970s, mainly as a place for men to deposit and store their own samples for later use, say, if they were going through cancer treatment. Fertility doctors were still mostly using fresh sperm samples — not frozen ones — to inseminate women. When the AIDS crisis began and several women contracted HIV from fresh donations, medical preference shifted for the first time to using frozen samples for the procedure. The only real regulation implemented involved screening the samples for STDs. “But the list of diseases that are tested are relatively short,” said Naomi R. Cahn, law professor at George Washington University and author of *Test Tube Families: Why the Fertility Market Needs Legal Regulation*. “And for all we know the same donor that could be rejected at one bank is going to another bank and trying again until that donor succeeds.”

There are no records of how many sperm donations are made every year in the US, nor of how many children are conceived, but it is frequently said to be between 30,000 to 60,000 births per year. Kramer with the DSR argues that number is woefully out of date.

Still, the scandals tend to find the media spotlight. There was the man whose samples were used to produce more than 150 children, the many parents who end up unintentionally having children of different races (in one instance because a clinic was said to have confused “Donor 380” with “Donor 330”), the woman whose dead husband’s samples were misplaced and allegedly used to impregnate other women, or the Georgia clinic that allegedly marketed a donor to hopeful parents as a neuroscience genius studying a PhD in engineering but who was in reality an ex-con who had never attended college and had a history of psychiatric hospitalization. His sample has been used to conceive at least 36 children.

Many of these mistakes would not have come to light had it not been for the arrival of the DNA genealogy market — an industry estimated to be valued at over \$3 billion in the US alone. Even if donors had requested decades ago to remain private, genealogy websites and social media have made that largely impossible. A 2018 survey of almost 500 donor-conceived people conducted by Kramer’s website found that almost a quarter of them had used DNA testing to track down their donor.

As more donor-conceived children find their biological parents and half siblings, new and extended family units are forming. One 2016 study of 419 donor-conceived children found more than a third of them get together once a year with the half siblings they’ve discovered, and a fifth of them meet up together several times a year. Some 42% of them said they considered their half sibling to be part of their immediate nuclear family.



Tylen as an infant.
Courtesy Christy Coyle

Tylen had been Christy Coyle's miracle. In 2008, she was single and working in the records department of a police department in Chicago's suburbs when she was told she needed surgery to treat cervical cancer. If she wanted to ever have children like she had always dreamed, her doctor said, she needed to move quickly. She got to work.

Within three days, she had selected a sperm bank that would mail her a sample, NW Cryobank in Washington state, and begun printing out information sheets about possible donors, organizing them on the floor in stacks. She made lists of her preferred qualities — blue eyes, blonde or brown hair, athletic, good eyesight, and above all healthy — and circled donors who met her criteria.

Some nine months later, she was holding her son after he was delivered via C-section. “He was just beautiful,” she recalled through tears. “It was like every dream that I had was in my hands, and I didn't think that was going to happen.”

Using a forum on the sperm bank's website, Coyle connected with Lauran, who was in South Carolina and had selected the same donor (Lauran asked that she be identified only by her first name and that her son not be named to protect their privacy). She, too, was a single woman now expecting a boy. “I always thought that I would have a child in a marriage where I have somebody to share it with,” said Coyle. “And it was like she was somebody who, even though we're just friends, she was able to understand what I was going through at the exact same time, and that was huge. It got me through a lot.”

The connection deepened once the boys were born. “Once they were here, we could see what they looked like and how big they were,” said Lauran, now 44. “We were constantly comparing: ‘What size clothes is he in? Is he crawling yet?’ We went back and forth like that for years.”

When the boys were almost 2, the families met. The two women booked adjoining hotel rooms in Atlanta and watched as the kids played together in parks and water fountains and fed each other fruit. Soon enough, the door between the two rooms remained open and the boys ran back and forth freely.



Coyle and Lauran's children playing together in the Atlanta hotel room.

Courtesy Christy Coyle

Despite living far apart, the families remained exceptionally close. Lauran and Coyle even decided to use another matching donor for their second children to further connect their families.

But when Lauran logged on to AncestryDNA during the phone call with Coyle one evening in 2018, they finally discovered the truth. A subsequent DNA test performed by California Cryobank — which purchased NW Cryobank’s assets in 2016 from another company, Cryo — confirmed that only Lauran had been impregnated with the sample both women had requested. Coyle felt like all the planning she’d done years ago, all her best intentions, had been for naught.

“I thought I was doing what was best. I picked somebody who he would get to know when he turned 18. I had a piece of paper telling me what he looked like. I had all the information, and suddenly you find out none of that was true. You don’t even know who you got,” she said. “It’s a really hard thing to process. And you have to go back and really reevaluate if you made the right decision. I question myself a lot. It made me feel horrible.”

There was grief, too. The vision the women had for their sons’ futures — a half brother to call their own, a donor whom the boys could meet together when they turned 18 — had disappeared. “We thought, *Well, if something were to happen, if the donor decided he didn’t want contact, or he turned out to be a jerk, [my son] and Ty would have each other. No matter what, they’d have each other,*” said Lauran. “And it just completely took that away from us.”

Sitting on their couch in 2011 in California, Bryce Branzell and his new fiancé, Ariel, were watching a TV show when one of the characters went to a sperm bank. The show brought up an old memory for Branzell, then 23, about the time he’d almost donated to a clinic. When he told Ariel, they laughed about it. “I was like, good thing you didn’t!” she told BuzzFeed News. “We joked about it like, good thing you didn’t and you don’t have 10 kids out there!”

In 2008, Branzell had returned from basic training with the Army Reserves in Montana. Money was tight. As he scanned the classifieds for jobs he saw an ad promising \$500 for every sperm donation. It was easy money. He filled out an application detailing information about his physical condition, health, and education. Within a few weeks, he was called in to provide a sample so the clinic could test his fertility and determine if he could donate.

That’s when he started having doubts. He liked the idea of getting his fertility tested, but he still wasn’t sure if he was comfortable with donating for real. When he turned up at the clinic for the awkward experience of masturbating into a cup, the nagging doubts were suddenly alarm bells.

“At the time, I was thinking prior to this, *Yeah, it’s a good idea. I like the fact that I can help a family have a child,*” he said. “But then I actually got in there, and I’m thinking about the long-term things that could potentially come from this and the fact that I want to have my own kids and how awkward it would be to say, ‘Hey, boys, girls, guess what? You’ve got an older sibling that you never knew about.’”

Branzell handed his test sample to the male technician and then apologized. He was backing out. He said he was assured his sample would be disposed of and he had nothing to worry about.

A decade passed. Branzell deployed to Afghanistan twice, first with the Army and then the Marines. He met Ariel. They married and moved to Texas, where he became a police officer in Round Rock. Ariel began flipping houses. Together, they had two boys: Conrad, 5, and Asher, 2.



Bryce Branzell and his wife, Ariel.
Courtesy Branzell Family

Then in January 2019, Branzell received a text message from his mother. She had been building a family tree and was given an AncestryDNA kit for her birthday. Now, a woman in Illinois had sent a message seeking medical information about her own son, who was conceived using a donor linked to Branzell's mom. Had he ever made a donation before?

"It was one of those moments where I'm like, there has to be some sort of mistake here. There's no way something could have happened," said Branzell. "And then all of a sudden the thought popped in my mind that this did happen; I did provide a test sample to the company. Could that have been it?"

Branzell began pacing the room as Ariel went to the woman's Facebook account and began scrolling. She saw pictures of the woman's son. She was shocked. He had the same chin and ears as her husband. She found photos of the boy as a baby. He looked just like their own son.

Branzell couldn't help but agree: "She pulled up a picture of Tylen," he said, "and I thought, *Yep, he looks just like me as a kid.*"

A DNA test would later confirm it: Branzell was Tylen Coyle's father.

The first phone call between Branzell and Tylen was full of awkward fits and starts. "Hi, I'm Bryce," he recalled saying to his son months later. "Yeah, I'm your dad? I guess? Maybe?"

"You could tell he was nervous about it. He wasn't as talkative, according to Christy, as he usually is," Branzell said. "It was kind of awkward to begin with. Just, *how do we handle this relationship now?*"

For both Branzell and Coyle, there is no guidebook for families suddenly joined together — or, in the case of Sam Johnson and Genna Ellis, torn apart — as a result of errors in the donor industry. Their relationship — their understanding of what their family is — is whatever they and their children want it to be.

How Branzell's sperm sample ended up being used to conceive Coyle's son is now the subject of a federal lawsuit. He is suing California Cryobank and Cryo for negligence, fraud, and infliction of emotional distress, among other things. (Reached for comment, lawyers for California Cryobank referred BuzzFeed News to their motion they filed on May 13 to dismiss the case. Cryo also filed its own motion to dismiss. Both companies argue they did not inherit NW Cryobank's liabilities when they purchased its stock and are not responsible for any wrongdoing.)

The Branzells had decided to contact Coyle the day after they learned of her request. She'd merely been asking for medical information about her son's donor, and they reasoned that if they were in her situation they would want the same. (Branzell has a history of blood clots, and the couple test their boys routinely.)

When the message arrived, Coyle felt like she could breathe again for the first time in months. "It was a relief that — oh my gosh, I finally know that at least there is a person and he's a real person that gave that donation," she said. "I know it sounds dumb, but I was finally able to put a face with my son's other genetic half."



From left: Coyle and Tylen.
Courtesy Christy Coyle

This hunt for medical information is also the driving force for Johnson in wanting answers about his donor. He's a father himself now; he worries for his son, Phoenix, who was born last year with gastroesophageal reflux disease, despite it not running in Johnson's nor his wife's known family. What else could be lurking? "He may have another rare disease that we could get tested," said Johnson, "but I have no idea what the fucking medical history is."

Johnson knows that family is about more than DNA. He has good friends he considers to be Phoenix's uncles. And the relationships he built with the women he thought were his sisters still mean something to him; he's just not sure what.

"I spent most of my life always wondering what the other side of me was," he said. "You sort of start to piece together an identity based on this collective understanding of you guys having the same sort of situation and we're like, oh, we're related. We can form our own weird sober family thing! And then as soon as you start to do that and it's taken away, it makes it feel like not necessarily that your time has been wasted but...yeah, it also does."

"It definitely does feel like a loss," he said. "It feels weird now if I were to contact them and try to talk to them, there's this voice in my head that's like, why? Not that they're no longer important to me. I still care about them. Feelings like that don't go away, but I envision this cruel audience in my head being like, *You're being weird reaching out to these people. They're not even related to you.*"

In 2018, after he learned he was not related to his supposed half siblings, he wrote to Repro Lab, but the company said it no longer had the appropriate records on file. "We understand how you feel," a company representative wrote back to him in an email provided to BuzzFeed News. "There is a lot of confusion from the findings you described and we understand the emotions it has surfaced."

The reply infuriated Johnson. "Have you been through this exact same experience?" he told BuzzFeed News of their response. "Then don't fucking tell me you understand. I'm pissed."

Awilda Grillo, director of Repro Lab, told BuzzFeed News she could not say definitively what occurred in Johnson's case as she started working at the clinic after his mother ordered the sample in 1990. "I don't know if it was an error in record-keeping," she said. "We're talking about 28 or 29 years ago. 'Donor #19' was, I think, probably one of the first donors of the Repro Lab, and back then things were different."

She also suggested that the physicians who inseminated the different women may have made errors. "You can't say because you have a piece of paper that you were inseminated with that donor. The only thing that could confirm that is the record of the procedure," Grillo said. "I don't want to point fingers and say 'they're guilty [or] we're guilty.' Who knows? Who knows who's guilty? But I'm saying there's so many possibilities."

The New York Times reported last year — in a story Grillo said was "misleading" — that the New York State Health Department had found poor record-keeping at the clinic. The investigation was prompted when a woman discovered her 21-year-old daughter had been conceived using a sample from Repro Lab she had not originally selected.

Grillo said Sam's story was "unfortunate" and "upsetting," but she had no answers for him. "There's no clarity," she said. "There's a lot of unknowns, unfortunately."

In three states — California, Indiana, and Texas — so-called fertility fraud laws now make it a crime for a doctor to knowingly inseminate a patient with a donor whom they have not selected and given consent. These laws mainly came in response to doctors who used their own samples to impregnate unknowing women. (One Indiana doctor parented more than 60 biological children through this fraud.) But courts have been loath to find that families have suffered as a result of an accident or negligence as long as the child is healthy. The Utah Supreme Court called this "the supposition that the road not taken would have led to a better result" and described it "a common human fallacy."

This was the judgment Coyle said she feared receiving in sharing her story with BuzzFeed News. "It seems like the moms in these kinds of stories usually get responses like, 'You should be happy that you just have a healthy kid,'" she said. "But they don't understand the emotional strain that it puts on you, and I think that they really need to change regulations and be held responsible for what they did."

Lauran, too, is sympathetic to her friend's plight. "I've read stories of other moms. The judge kind of says, 'You've got a healthy kid. What do you care?' Well, because this is a person, and I've been telling him one thing for 10 years and now I've been lying unknowingly," she said. "He's a person. He's not a product."

Months after the Branzells reached out to Coyle, the couple's attorneys arranged for a meeting in Los Angeles. Ariel arrived first and had the awkward experience of meeting a total stranger who had given birth to her husband's child years before she had. "It's just the weirdest," she said. "You're instantly connected, but you've never met them. You don't know any of their history, but you have this really strong connection."

It was there that Coyle pulled out her phone to FaceTime her son so he could speak to his father for the first time. She had waited until it was confirmed that Branzell was his donor before telling him about the mix-up. For Coyle, sharing the painful news that Tylen was not related to Lauran's son was tempered somewhat by his excitement at knowing at last who his father is. He now peppers his mother with questions about Branzell's work as a police officer and time in the military — cool to almost any 10-year-old — and wants to know if he, too, liked science when he was a kid.

Branzell, though, is taking it slow — for now, at least. He and Ariel haven't told their sons yet about their new half brother. He also doesn't know how many other children he may have out there, or how many times his supposedly discarded sample may have been used. He wonders what might happen if someone else turns up at his door at age 18 asking to be part of the family.

Still, he envisages a future relationship with Tylen one day. “I know that he wants to have a relationship with his father, and it wouldn’t be fair for me to say I don’t want that,” he said. “He’s a kid, and I want to give him the things that he wants because he didn’t get this choice. None of us did.”

In South Carolina, Luran also had to sit her son down and break the news about Tylen, but she isn’t sure he really understands or has emotionally processed what happened. “I don’t know that he feels the full brunt of it just yet,” she said.

But, she told him, Coyle and her boys are still family even if he is no longer related by blood to them. Ten years of bonds don’t vanish overnight.

In her home, she still has on the wall the canvas photo print of Coyle and the kids, taken on that Atlanta trip in the hotel pool. Tylen wears a life vest, and Luran’s son has floaties on as he reaches up to the camera for his mom. Coyle is beaming as she cradles them both.

“It’s just a good memory,” said Luran. “I still think of it as when my son met his half brother, even though I know biologically it’s not true. That’s how I still like to think of it.” ●



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