

To beat COVID-19 boredom this only child is connecting with multiple newly discovered half-siblings

'Life-changing' sperm donor registry has connected 18,250 people with genetic relatives

[Chris Glover](#) · CBC News · Posted: May 01, 2020 4:00 AM ET | Last Updated: May 1



'It feels like a whole community,' says Maya Cooperstock, 16, about the new family she has been able to create thanks to the online Donor Sibling Registry. (Chris Glover/CBC)

Growing up as an only child, Toronto teen Maya Cooperstock would sometimes ask her single mother for a sibling as a present, but now she's learned she has more than 30 of them.

"If someone's like, 'Are you an only child?' I'm like, 'Well, technically yes, but I have 30 siblings,'" the 16-year-old laughed. She says she enjoys watching people "wonder for a bit" when they get the stunning information.

Maya's mother Sue Cooperstock got pregnant using sperm from an American donor.

"It was never a secret in our family," said Maya. "I don't even remember being told; I just remember always knowing this was my situation."

Half-siblings scattered all over U.S.

About a year ago, Maya used an online directory called the Donor Sibling Registry for the first time. With her biological father's donor number, 2046, and the sperm bank, Fairfax Cryobank, she learned she's a half-sister to 32 people, but there still may be others out there.

Amid the boredom of COVID-19 lockdowns, last Wednesday she started a group chat with three of her half-siblings. It started small, but in less than a week, the ongoing chat has grown to 17 of her half-brothers and half-sisters, many of whom she had not talked to before.

"It feels like a whole community and when we find new people we welcome them in and we all say, 'Well, you have a whole crew of brothers and sisters now; you're not alone.' So we welcome each other as really part of the family."



Maya Cooperstock, top right, chats with three of her half-siblings on an online video call: Chloe Wilson, top left, 17, who lives in Philadelphia, Fabiana Berenguer Gil, bottom left, 23, who lives in New York City, and Alexa Rothborth, bottom right, 19, who lives in Long Island, New York. (Maya Cooperstock)

Maya is the only Canadian sibling they're aware of. The rest are scattered across the U.S., from Tennessee to the west, Florida to the south and New Jersey to the east. The half-siblings range in age from 23 to 11.

While many have formed a "strong bond," for others it's "too much for them at the moment," she said.

"They left the group chat and we all respected that and we were all like, 'Well, when you're ready, you've got a whole army of brothers and sisters to help you out and we're all here for you.'"

'I felt like I had talked to her my whole life'

Maya says she'll never forget last year when she was eating at a diner on Danforth Avenue in Toronto and a half-sibling messaged her for the first time. It was Fabiana Berenguer Gil, 23, from New York City.

"I got a notification and I screamed," she recalled gleefully. "I stared at my phone and I think I almost started crying. I was like, 'This is someone I am blood related to, this is crazy!'"

They continued texting all day and it was just "natural," Cooperstock said.

"I didn't feel like I needed to hide anything from her. It wasn't like talking to a stranger. I felt like I had talked to her my whole life," she said.



'I'm so happy for Maya, it just makes my heart swell,' says Sue Cooperstock, right, whose only daughter has learned she has more than 30 half-siblings. (Chris Glover/CBC)

Father was 'pretty popular' donor who 'resembles Patrick Swayze'

Maya's mom first went on the registry more than five years ago and was contacted by Berenguer Gil, who she now lovingly calls "the mother of the pack" of siblings.

Back then, Sue Cooperstock didn't think Maya was "ready," but she knew she would facilitate an introduction one day. She always wanted her daughter to have a bigger family and when Maya was two years old she had tried for a second baby.

"I really wanted Maya to have a sibling for her sake so that she would have ... a family member to grow old with, and sadly, it didn't work," she said. "I felt sad about that and I knew that Maya was in some ways sad about being an only child, so I was just delighted for her to meet siblings."

She says Maya's biological father was "pretty popular" because of his "good genes." He was a champion skier, the president of his college fraternity and "people think he resembles Patrick Swayze," according to his sperm bank profile.

Still, the thought of having more than 30 half-siblings was stunning, and "unnerving," Sue Cooperstock said. "It is shocking that there are so many and I can't wrap my head around it."

Siblings meet for first time

In July 2019, the Cooperstocks drove to Ithaca, N.Y., to meet Berenguer Gil and another half-sister, 17-year-old Emma Baker-Kenyon, from Rochester, N.Y.

"It didn't even feel real, to be honest," said Maya, reflecting on the first — and so far only — in-person meeting with any of her half-siblings.

"At first, I didn't really see things [in common] but when we got in person we could kind of be like, 'Look, we have the same eyes!'"



In July 2019, Maya Cooperstock, left, met two of her half-siblings for the first time in Ithaca, N.Y.: Fabiana Berenguer Gil, middle, and 17-year-old Emma Baker-Kenyon, right, from Rochester, N.Y. (Maya Cooperstock)

The similarities don't stop there.

She says many of her siblings are tall with brown, wavy hair and small teeth. But it's not just physical attributes they share.

"The majority of us hate tomatoes. There's only one of us that likes tomatoes. Not me, definitely not me. I really don't like tomatoes," Maya laughed.

Berenguer Gil is the eldest and says meeting her half-siblings has been "life-changing." She hopes they can rent a van "or several vans, actually" and meet up for a road trip.

"We don't all know each other very well yet, but I definitely do feel like I'm a big sister now, which is a really nice feeling."

Berenguer Gil also grew up as an only child with a single mother and thinks that played a role in her quest to find siblings.

"The family dynamic that you grew up with, I think, also definitely influences your desires to meet other ones," she said.

Largest group on registry: 206 half-siblings

In 2000, Wendy Kramer and her son, Ryan, created the Donor Sibling Registry. Ryan was born from a sperm donor and was curious about his genetic family.

"It was one of those, 'Build it and they will come,' and they came!" said Wendy Kramer from her home in Nederland, Colorado. "There was a need that wasn't being filled."



Wendy Kramer, right, and her son, Ryan, left, created The Donor Sibling Registry together in 2000 as Ryan hoped to learn more about his biological father. (Wendy Kramer)

Kramer says around 1,500 of the world-wide registry's 18,250 matches are Canadians, and she is happy to hear about Maya's success.

"It's awesome, but it's also regular. It's not like every once and a while we get a match ... They come through every day, but it doesn't mean they're less special," she said.

Amid the positives, Kramer also says the registry exposes a sperm donation system in America that lacks necessary oversight and limits, particularly on the number of times one donor's sperm can be used. One of the groups on her registry has connected 206 half-siblings.

As Canada's sperm donation laws have become restrictive in the past couple of decades, Kramer says an unintended consequence has been a push to use unregulated American clinics.

In Maya's case, her biological father was an anonymous sperm donor, so she doesn't know his birth date, location or name.

"All of a sudden, I'm as close as I can be to knowing who he is. I have all his other kids with me," said Maya.



Maya Cooperstock chats with several of her new half-sisters on a virtual video chat. She says one of the positive consequences of COVID-19 is that they all have more time on their hands and are better able to form lasting friendships. (Chris Glover/CBC)

Maya is grateful to the Donor Sibling Registry for making the connections, but also acknowledges the COVID-19 pandemic has created plenty of free time for her to get to know her half-siblings.

"We've all kind of agreed out of all our boredom, we've connected," she said.

"I think COVID has some good things coming out of it. I mean it sucks not being able to see people, staying inside and no school, but it's definitely had some good things that I don't necessarily think the world knows yet."