

FINDING OUR PEOPLE: Wendy and Ryan Kramer's Story

One of the ways that we try to enrich the lives of our members, as well as to educate others about donor conception, is to tell stories. We offer you a voice and believe that when you share your stories of discovery, you embolden others to “find their people” and to understand their own feelings about donor conception in new ways. Each family story is different, but there are themes that run through many stories and inform us. DSR founders, Wendy and Ryan Kramer have a story that now spans more than 2 decades and expands all of our understanding of donor conception. It is a story of ups and downs, twists and turns, determination and patience. It is testimony to the magnificence you may encounter when you open yourself to possibilities.

The Beginnings...

“Here we go again...” Since 2000, Wendy Kramer has been helping people whose lives have been touched by donor conception connect with each other. Every day new members join the Donor Sibling Registry (DSR) and most days 2 or 3 or more people are connected with their own, or their child's first-degree genetic relatives. Each new connection is exciting and in some way, Kramer celebrates alongside those who are newly matched. But at the beginning and end of the day, this indefatigable head of the DSR is “just a mom.” *“In some ways I am no different than any other parent on the DSR, signing on to see if any new half siblings have joined.”*

The history of the DSR, and Wendy and Ryan Kramer's personal history are inextricably linked. Wendy recalls the evening of her own donor insemination, lying in bed quietly repeating the words *“Pick me. Pick me. Pick me.”* Two weeks later she learned she was pregnant. By the time Ryan was two years old, it was clear that he was exceptionally intelligent, asking, *“did my dad die, or what?”* after noticing that other children at his preschool had both moms and dads. By age six he was clear he wanted to meet his genetic father. Had a different child picked a different mom, it is unlikely that the DSR would exist: the organization was conceived and gestated because one curious little boy asked questions that one loving and determined mom could not answer. And the rest, as they say, is history.

Wendy and Ryan's personal history of exploration, discovery and connection along with their experiences as the public faces of DSR chronicle major shifts in the practice, public perceptions and private journeys of donor conception. Their story, which began Labor Day weekend 1989, with Ryan's conception, was last updated this 2016 Labor Day weekend when Ryan, who waited seven years for his first match via the DSR, had another. The first time it was a sister. This time it is a brother. There have been others in between. Each experience is new, different and comes with it's own brand of pleasures and challenges.

The history of the DSR is linear—it is an organization that began small—tiny to be exact. Wendy posted a small notice on a Yahoo group, *“I’m the mother of an awesome 10 year old donor child—I know that he has at least three donor siblings and we would love to connect with them. We are looking for donor 1058 from California Cryobank and hope that this will help others looking for their children’s donors (or their own).* By the end of 2000, there were 6 members. After a year, there were 14. By late 2002, membership numbered 37 and as of November 2016, 52,500 people in 105 countries are members of the DSR. Steady, strong, magnificent growth in membership and alongside it, influence in policy and ethics surrounding donor conception.

The Kramer’s family story is not linear. Yes, Ryan has grown from a young boy asking questions to a 26 year old at Google answering questions. Yes, Wendy has evolved from a mom trying to help her son “find his people” to a dazzling leader of a large and influential non-profit. However, their family story of donor conception and donor connections is one of meandering journeys in kinship. Along the way, there have been connections with Ryan’s biological father, grand parents, and an array of half siblings. Some matches have been “easy” (relatively speaking) and others, frustrating.

We are grateful to Wendy and Ryan for sharing their story and hope that it will help DSR members and others see and appreciate their own stories in new ways. For in the words of sociologist and dad through donor conception, Joshua Gamson, *“Stories help make things make sense. They put things in order. This is how it happened. They are also the stuff from which identities are built. Creation stories, in particular, are about selfhood. ‘In telling the story of our beginning, as an individual, a nation, a people,’ as the sociologist Francesca Poletta puts it simply, ‘we define who we are.’ This is how it happened.”*

Modern Families, Joshua Gamson

PICK ME, PICK ME, PICK ME

Donor conception has changed exponentially since Wendy and her then husband chose “DI” when they learned that he was infertile. *“Over 27 years have passed but I can still remember that August day when the doctor told us, “You will never have children together. I felt like I’d been kicked in the gut.”* Always a person of action who does not know what it means to procrastinate, Wendy picked herself up, dusted herself off and along with her ex, moved quickly to the next step. *“In those days people seeking sperm didn’t get baby photos or questionnaires, voice recordings or ‘staff impressions.’ We met with a woman at our local clinic who took a look at my husband’s coloring, height, weight and asked about ethnicity as she tried to make a match. By Labor Day weekend, I was undergoing two inseminations having no idea at all about the man who would be the genetic father of my child.”*

Wendy says that many people have gone on the DSR website or seen her on TV and have assumed that she was a single mother by choice. On learning that she was married when Ryan was conceived, they ask about Ryan's "father". Wendy explains that her ex-husband was Ryan's dad for Ryan's first 18 months but from that point forward, Wendy was Ryan's only parent.

"This makes people really uncomfortable," Wendy says, "They understandably worry about the idea that a non biological parent can have his/her parental rights and responsibilities removed." Wendy goes on to explain that her ex's exit from Ryan's life had nothing to do with genetics—they divorced because of substance abuse issues and because Wendy had other worries about Ryan's safety. Wendy's goal was for Ryan to grow up in a safe and happy environment and looking back, Wendy believes that this was her ex's goal as well. *"I believe he gave up his parental rights and responsibilities in part because he knew it was best for Ryan. In so doing he was able to leave our lives and return a few years later as a friend."*

Having had her son with a husband and having taking the extraordinary steps of ending his fatherhood, Wendy says prepared her to respect and respond to Ryan's desire to know his genetic dad. This was not always how donor parents felt though. She reminds us, *"In those days people did not ask questions. Those of us who used donor sperm had no idea that we, or our children had the right to be curious or the right to search. Similarly, donors assumed they had no rights."* But back to Wendy on the exam table receiving sperm, origins unknown.

"I just lay there looking up at a poster of Kevin Costner on the ceiling and mumbling to myself, "Pick me. Pick me. Pick me. I wanted this more than I could have ever imagined and within a week or so, I knew that my plea had been answered. An early pregnancy test was positive and on May 22, 1990, I gave birth to a beautiful baby boy." Wendy, who is neither a religious nor a spiritual person, felt certain that Ryan had picked her. And so she was not surprised when at 3, her young son said to her, *"You know, I picked you."* So there they were—an exceptionally bright and curious boy and a mom who had mortgaged her heart forever.

One of the first things every parent learns is that the child you get is not likely to be the child you anticipated. In Wendy's case, the surprises began with Ryan's remarkable mind. Wendy and her then husband had requested a donor that resembled him physically, never asking for anything particular in regards to academics or intelligence. Wendy jokes, *"I put in for regular, but they gave me premium"*. And so Ryan's exceptional intelligence came as a complete surprise. By the time he was in first grade, testing confirmed that Ryan was profoundly gifted. Along with this news came the psychologist's prescient observation *"People like Ryan don't usually find 'their people' until they are in graduate school."*

Wendy took the psychologist's words to heart and early on had a profound respect for what she anticipated would be Ryan's need to find "his people." Ryan had tutors and

mentors and a wonderful big “Big Brother” who was a scientist. This also meant navigating an educational system that isn’t set up for a child who needs to accelerate or a boy who begins as a full time aerospace engineering student at 14. It also meant responding to Ryan’s stated desire, beginning at age six, to meet his biological father. Unable to offer him this, Wendy did what she has now had lots of practice doing: she followed her son’s lead and tried to figure out a solution.

“From the start, Ryan and I were clear that we didn’t want to search for someone. Instead we wanted to make it possible for us to be found. Even then, at a time when people understood little about donor conception and the need that some have to find genetic kin, we knew this was not the realm of private detectives. It had to be grounded in mutual consent.”

But how does someone go from knowing nothing to know something and more? Wendy says that her path—and Ryan’s—began with her contacting her clinic when Ryan was three and asking if they could tell her anything at all about the donor. The woman who spoke with them offered this startling reply, *“Oh, you never received the long form? You were given Donor 1058 from California Cryobank.”* With that she requested that the long form be mailed, and when a thick envelope arrived a few days later from California Cryobank, Wendy let it sit on the counter for a few hours. *“It was daunting to think that it included all sorts of information about Ryan’s biological father—and hence, about Ryan.”*

When she did open it, Wendy found, as expected, that it contained much that would be important to Ryan. *“Perhaps the most profound experience was simply seeing his hand writing. Donor 1058 was no longer a vague hint of a person—he was real!”* Wendy goes on to say that reading about hobbies and interests, talents in school and physical characteristics of the donor and his family would all prove important to Ryan over time. *“It wasn’t like we combed the profile daily but we did look at it from time to time. Ryan would go to it when he had a new interest or learned something more about himself. It helped so much to begin to put the pieces together. It was an important part of Ryan’s identity formation.”* Wendy offers, as an example, hair and eye color. Wendy and her family all have dark hair. Ryan was very blond as young child, a feature that constantly called attention to the family. *“Where did he get that blond hair?”* strangers would declare in wonder. Wendy remembers shrugging and answering quite honestly, *“I have no idea!”* Reading the profile and learning that Donor 1058’s brother had blond hair and dark eyes was immensely helpful.

The questionnaire included a message from the donor to future offspring that read *“Educate the child Raise him/her without biases of any kind. Teach him/her to trust in others but to rely on self. Instill in him/her a sense of humor and the ability to enjoy life”*. To Wendy and Ryan this spoke volumes. It assured them that Ryan’s biological father was a good person and the message spoke to his maturity and sensitivity. Ryan’s interest in meeting him increased and mother and son began to think more seriously about how they might put themselves in a position of being found. *“We didn’t want to intrude upon*

him but we wondered if he might feel as we did—a desire to make contact. We wanted to let him know that Ryan existed, and give him the opportunity to choose to connect.”

Over the years Wendy had called California Cryobank with some regularity. *“I would ask them if there were any updates, any changes in policies, any-anything.”* Eventually Wendy would have a call that hit pay dirt but in the meantime, she wondered if it would help for Ryan to write a letter. *“My first goal was to help Ryan feel that he had some control of the situation.”* Sadly, *I’ve heard from so many DSR members that they feel powerless as their sperm banks, doctors, medical clinics, and egg donor agencies work very hard to withhold some of the most important information that a donor child can desire. I suggested to Ryan that he write a letter to the sperm bank. Although I knew the letter would likely end up in a file and never be shared, it was the process of writing the letter and sending it off that I felt could be empowering for Ryan.”*

How do you ignore the poignant letter of a seven-year-old child? California Cryobank did and their non-response further provoked Wendy Kramer’s ire. She upped the volume in her yearly calls to the sperm bank. Sadly, her pleas on her son’s behalf yielded only, *“we promised our donors anonymity and our obligation is to maintain this.”* *“But what about an obligation to the resulting children? They never signed any agreements.”* Wendy wondered. Unnerved and unwilling to remain passive, Wendy began honing her detective skills. Over the years she has mastered them.

Wendy looks back with amusement at her first foray into searching, when Ryan was three, long before the Internet. *“A friend put an ad in the LA Times misc. classified section that read, ‘Donor 1058, we want to thank you.’ It included our phone number. We placed it and we waited. A week later I received a collect phone call from the LA County jail. Surprised, I reminded myself to be open-minded. I said to myself, ‘Ryan’s donor is a good person who must have made a mistake.’ I accepted the call and soon realized that the voice on the other end was an African American man. Although Ryan sure did not look African American I went with this information as well—ok....so Ryan’s genetic father was African American and is in jail. Ok, I can be open-minded! It didn’t much matter—what mattered was that he was contacting us. He wanted to be found.”* As it turned out, it was a wrong number. The caller was responding to an ad for a Christopher Darden (attorney in the OJ trial) look-alike pen pal.

A few years later, Wendy obtained some startling news from a lady at the sperm bank and her mother quickly passed it on to Ryan before she had time to fully process how to tell a child who would immediately want answers. *“I had wanted to wait a bit,”* Wendy says. *“I knew that he would become over-the-moon excited by it and I wanted to have a plan before telling him.* The information, which Wendy had learned somewhat inadvertently, was that Ryan had several half-siblings “out there.” The information had come from an atypically talkative woman at California Cryobank, that usual fortress of secrecy.

As anticipated, Ryan was fired up by the news that he had half siblings. *“If I want to know them, then maybe they want to know me? How can we know about each other if the*

sperm banks won't put us in touch with anyone?" Like many parents and their children, Wendy and Ryan had their best conversations in the car. "We used to brainstorm in our commute from Nederland to Boulder, and back." Wendy remembers. "We would try to figure out ways that Ryan and his half siblings could find each other. Then Ryan began learning about Yahoo groups and we decided to give it a try." Their first message, "I am the mother of an awesome 10 year old donor child. I know that he has at least 3 donor siblings and would love to contact them. We are looking for Donor #1058 from the California Cryobank. I hope that this board will serve others looking for their children's (or their own) siblings."

And that is how the Donor Sibling Registry was born. In its earliest, embryonic form it was the Yahoo group, and that very first message that Wendy and Ryan launched on September 3, 2000.

"The Yahoo group helped get us started," Wendy remembers. "But the process was cumbersome—we had to make all the connections ourselves. Fortunately, I'd made contact with Sheri, a computer savvy mom through the group and she offered to build us a matrix. That matrix—which led to our website—enabled us to be way more efficient and effective." And so the DSR website as most of us know it was born.

Looking back, Wendy identifies herself primarily as a mom on a mission. She had a child with questions and she was fearless and determined to do whatever she could to get Ryan's questions answered. She felt that she had brought Ryan into this world with this particular set of circumstances, and she therefore owed it to him to do whatever humanly possible to help him find the answers to the questions that he had about the missing pieces of his identity. However, somewhere along the way, Wendy realized that what she was doing and what she was building went beyond her family story. *"In many ways, I had no idea what I was doing. I was creating something out of nothing. It was something that had never existed before. It did not fit in any existing category. Putting one foot in front of the other, I decided to talk with a lawyer and form a non-profit organization."*

There have been a few people who have been instrumental in helping Wendy and Ryan grow the DSR. One was a former donor in the UK who sent Wendy a \$1000 donation to help her get the DSR off the ground. Another was an attorney, a woman who provided vision when Wendy had none. As they talked together, Wendy remembers the lawyer saying to her, *"You will be writing papers and talking at conferences and educating the public."* Wendy remembers glazing over and thinking the lawyer was a little crazy when she heard these words—words that felt so foreign to her at the time. *"The lawyer offered me vision when I had none."* The lawyer also offered the legal expertise that enabled the DSR to gain non-profit status in 2003, after 9 months of wrangling with the IRS.

Today the DSR website is a very lively place. There are emails literally flying around the world, among people in 105 countries. Each day matches at least 2-3 people. But at the beginning, things moved very slowly. Wendy and Ryan, two people who thrive on action, had to wait patiently for three months after their first Yahoo post before hearing

from another donor mom. She, too, was seeking her donor or her son's half siblings. To this Wendy, who was beginning to learn to wait, replied, *"It may take some time."*

And it did take time. These days some people who sign on to the DSR and have an instantaneous match. But many wait. That second mom to sign on with the DSR waited twelve years before her son's biological father finally signed onto the DSR. For Ryan, seven years would pass before he became the 2,910th person to match on the DSR. But that does not mean that in the interim, his mom embraced patience. In 2002, with only 37 members on the Yahoo group, Wendy "took the show on the road." After sending emails to Denver's three local TV stations, telling them about Ryan and of his quest to find his biological father, the NBC affiliate decided to run a story. Two weeks after that, Diane Sawyer was interviewing Ryan and Wendy on Good Morning America in New York.

OPRAH FINALLY CALLS

Appearances on the other major talk shows and newspapers followed and with them, Wendy and Ryan's voices were heard across the US and beyond. Along the way, they realized that their quest was not only to find "Ryan's people," but also to educate and support all those whose lives were touched by donor conception. *"Before then,"* Wendy remembers, *"People did not know they had rights. Donor offspring and parents did not know they had the right to be curious, the right to search, or the right to connect with their first-degree genetic relatives. Additionally, the donors, who were promised (or forced into) anonymity, also had curiosities and desired to know about the children that they had helped to create."*

Wendy sets her sights high and although proud and tickled to have a national audience, she would often quip with family, *"Oprah still hasn't called..."* The words may have been said half in jest but Wendy acknowledges full force delight when her phone rang with the caller ID *HARPO Studios*. A few weeks later she and a 12-year-old Ryan were in Chicago taping their first Oprah (Harpo spelled backwards) show.

The Oprah show was transformative. On a personal level for Wendy and Ryan, Oprah was simply affirming. She took them seriously. She respected and admired Ryan's search and understood his need to be known. She told Ryan, *"I believe you will find your biological father."* And Oprah was kind and gracious with Wendy, taking her by both hands and jubilantly greeting her as *"Ryan's Mom, Ryan's Mom, Ryan's Mom."*

Wendy, Ryan, and Wendy's mom Jacki shared the excitement of being on Oprah all over again when the show aired on May 22, 2003, Ryan's 13th birthday. Going live at different times in different time zones, the family spent hours watching the TV monitor and running between 2 computer screens where flocks of people were joining the Yahoo group. There, in the midst of frantically signing people on, Wendy received the email that mattered more than any of the others. It was titled, "Donor 1058?" Ryan had not identified his donor's number on Oprah.

Having beamed his story out into the universe, Ryan was overjoyed to have someone beam back. The content of the email read, *“Was that your Ryan on Oprah today?”* To this Wendy replied, *“Yes!!!”* And the writer beamed back, *“I guess I knew that when I saw him. I gave birth to his two half sisters. They are 10 and 7. Like him they are brilliant and beautiful..... ”* Wendy, Ryan and his grandma all hugged, laughed and cried together. Ryan’s birthday celebration was now in Technicolor. He was over the moon elated to know he had two half sisters, to see photos of *“two little girls who looked like me with wigs”* and perhaps, most of all, to be known. On hearing of his two half siblings, he replied to their mother, *“I am screaming with joy. We are all screaming with joy. Please write back as soon as is humanly possible.”* And off the family went to Ryan’s birthday dinner, his head hanging out the car to declare to everyone in his home town world, *“I have two sisters! I have two sisters!”*

The story of the DSR is one of twists and turns, joyful moments and frustrating setbacks. And so it was to be with Ryan and this first contact. No sooner were Ryan and his mom thinking about flying to the east coast to meet his sisters, then their mom beamed back a devastating message, *“We have not told our daughters that they were donor conceived and we do not plan to do so...”*

Had Ryan picked a different mom, it is easy to imagine the story ending there. How much hurt and disappointment and frustration was he to take and was this quest leading anywhere good? Fortunately, Wendy’s unbridled feistiness and immeasurable patience kept them going. There is no other way to say it than that Ryan was crushed. So much had happened in so short a time. He had gained a national voice. He had been heard. He had been found. He had taken a giant leap forward towards finding “his people.” And now this gigantic setback: the girls were out there but not only couldn’t he meet them, they could not even know that he existed. But as one door closes, another opens. Before moving on to that next door, a bit of follow-up...

Although Ryan has not met these two half sisters and they do not know about their own biological origins, or about him, he and his mom have been able to learn more. Their mom exchanged more emails with Wendy and it was she who provided them with Donor 1058’s updated profile, a document that proved instrumental in later sleuthing. She also told them more about the girls and even provided a photo. Perhaps even more helpful has been Facebook. Wendy and Ryan have been able to follow the girls and at least see updated photos.

“BUT THAT’S JUST ANECDOTAL”

Although their original goal was to help people who were genetically related make mutual consent contact, Wendy and Ryan discovered early on that other important connections were happening. A community was forming. When the DSR website emerged as the place where matches were made, the Yahoo group became the place that people went for conversation, news and advice. Information was shared. People told anecdotes. Issues were raised. Themes emerged. Much of this was warm and enlightening—participants affirmed the need to know each other. However, some of

what they learned from each other was troubling: sperm banks were not keeping records. Medical information reported to them was being ignored. The sperm industry did not seem to care about its constituents. Troubled and ever eager for change, Wendy took her concerns to the American Society for Reproductive Medicine. *“I expected they would be glad to hear from us and would have our backs with the sperm banks. Instead their spokesperson said that he didn’t value the information coming from the DSR as the reports were purely ‘anecdotal’”.*

One does not say no to Wendy Kramer. In her words, *“I drive the train and when I am driving the train, it always leaves the station. And on time.”* That said, Wendy was an accountant/business manager and restaurant owner who did not know how to conduct formal research. Enter Dr. Susan Golombok, Director of the Centre for Family Research at Cambridge University, in 2006. *“Dear Wendy”* Dr. Golombok began, *“I was interested to read in the UK papers about your website.....”* Conversations followed, Wendy travelled to Cambridge and research partners came to Wendy’s home. Golombok and her colleagues from Cambridge were on board and the research train could leave the station. The Cambridge group offered their academic expertise and their belief in the significance of the DSR and its work. Within a short time, the Cambridge University—DSR collaboration was publishing research that was being presented at conferences around the world. People were listening. Maybe not the ASRM. Surely not the sperm banks or egg clinics. But others were listening and the voices of the donor conceived were being heard- both anecdotally and via peer reviewed published research in prestigious academic journals.

A DOOR OPENS ENTIRELY UNEXPECTEDLY

2004 brought major changes in Ryan and Wendy’s lives. Ryan graduated from high school at age 13 and somewhat unexpectedly, soon became a full time undergraduate in the University of Colorado’s Aerospace Engineering program. It was also a year in which commercial DNA testing sites were just getting off the ground. When one of these sites, Family Tree DNA contacted Ryan and asked if he would like to submit DNA, he did a cheek swab and sent it off with low expectations. He was told that it might give him insight into some paternal information, like countries of origin. Indeed, he soon learned that his paternal heritage was mostly English, some Irish, and even 4% Icelandic, which he thought was pretty cool. What he could not have anticipated was that nine months later a connection with two very distant relatives would set him on a path to finding his donor. This path began with the following email from a man named Michael C.

“I am part of a C. family DNA project. I was just checking my closest Y-chromosome matches and came up with two people who were a three-step mismatch with me on the 37 marker test; Robert Gene C. (the one person in the project that I know to be a relative) and Ryan Kramer. I then checked Robert C.’s results and his closest match, a two step mismatch, was also Ryan Kramer.” Michael C. then goes into some genetic details and continues, *“In other words, Ryan falls between Robert and me as if he were from a third branch of our family. We are descended from two brothers from North Carolina, Alexander C. (b. 1710) and Thomas C. (b. 1722)...”*

Things got interesting quickly. Michael C. wrote on, *“I did a web search for “Ryan Kramer” thinking that if he was into genealogy, he might have posted on one of the message boards or even have a website devoted to his family history. Instead what I found was a Denver Post article from last November about Ryan and his situation. A second search using your email address posted with Family Tree DNA confirmed it was the same Ryan Kramer...”*

The plot was thickening. Ryan, who had been waiting as patiently as he could for four years on the Yahoo group, was now several steps closer to knowing the identity of his donor. Because Family Tree DNA identified links via the Y chromosome and names are passed down traditionally from father to son, Ryan’s donor’s last name was likely to be C. or some variation. The irony of all this did not escape Wendy and Ryan. They had established the DSR as a place for mutual consent contact, not wishing to track down or “out” anyone who wished to remain private. Prior to Wendy and Ryan’s going live on Good Morning America and Oprah, few acknowledged the rights of donor offspring to seek genetic kin. By contrast, Family Tree DNA and countless genealogy groups fully supported the pursuit of one’s “people.” How fitting that Ryan’s most significant lead would come from a distant genetic relative curious about genealogy. The mother and son Kramer amateur detective agency was in business.

Looking back, Wendy is lightly amused by the unexpected supporting cast of characters that were there to assist Ryan in his search for his donor. There was the “lady who answered the phone” at the sperm bank who let them know there were many offspring. Diane Sawyer helped and Oprah helped more. And there was the mom who wouldn’t tell her daughters they are donor conceived but provided Wendy and Ryan with the secondary donor profile that contained the exact birthdate of donor 1058. Now there were the two C. men beaming in help from distant shores. In their own way, Wendy and Ryan had assembled their team of helpers but it was this mother and son detectives who were leading the way.

Wendy and Ryan now had three critical pieces of information that would lead them—without much further delay—to their donor. The additional California Cryobank donor profile passed along by the mom of Ryan’s half sisters offered his exact birthdate and place of birth and thanks to the genealogy sleuths on Family Tree DNA, they had the lead on a last name. They requested a public list from in Los Angeles County of all male births on that particular day a couple of years before, and had tucked it away in a drawer. Wendy remembers that eerie feeling of pulling out that list of around 250 names and knowing one of them belonged to the man who had given her Ryan.

And there it was. Lance C. Born on that exact date. The pieces fit together but Wendy, ever the accountant, is one who covers all bases before reaching conclusions. She taped up a large piece of white paper on the wall and drew a line down the middle. On one side it said, “Donor 1058” and listed all they knew about him from the donor profile. On the other side, “Lance C.” and all they were learning about him. Everything that matched on both sides of the middle line, would be highlighted in bright yellow.

Wendy and Ryan knew what engineering degrees Lance had and approximately when he had earned them. And they had researched about possible colleges or universities he attended based on areas of study and geography. Ryan called the three or four institutions that were likely matches and told his story, asking if anyone named Lance C. had earned a degree there within a likely three-year period. Bingo—the name and the year and the degree matched up. Lance had earned his Masters of Engineering in 1990. This news transformed the white paper to a blaze of yellow. But there was to be remarkable icing on this richer and richer cake: Lance’s degree was dated May 22, 1990, the very day that Ryan was born.

So there they had it. Ryan’s donor had gone from a distant blur to a person in the form of Donor 1058 to real, live Lance C., living in San Francisco and working for Google (he would, of course, be amused when he later asked Ryan how he had found him and Ryan’s one word sheepish reply was “*Google.*”). Ryan became the first donor-conceived person to locate a formerly anonymous sperm donor via DNA testing. But what to do next?

Wendy is bold but she is also cautious. Had things been left to her, she would have let Lance’s identity marinate in her mind and in Ryan’s for a few days or more and then they’d figure out what to do next. But Ryan was a 15-year-old teen who had just completed mission impossible. For him, there was no waiting. He woke Wendy up in the middle of the night to let her know he had written a letter to Lance and he’d already pushed “Send.” Wendy remembers thinking, “*So much for collaboration!*”

Wendy remembers reacting with fear. She had seen her son go from the ecstasy of learning he had two sisters to the crushing news that they might never know him. More hurt could surely follow with Lance. Wendy worried that Ryan, bright as he is and wise beyond years, might have put Lance off by his letter. She was relieved and quite proud when she read Ryan’s letter and felt somewhat hopeful that it would be well received. “*I wanted one thing,*” Wendy recalls, “*I wanted Lance to be kind.*” For 48 hours her mantra was, “*please be kind, please be kind, please be kind.*” Two nights later Ryan awakened her a second time to jubilantly announce, “*he wrote me back!*” Wendy knew the answer to her question when she saw her son’s smile mixed with tears but still asked the question. “*Was he kind?*” The answer was a resounding “YES!”

Ryan has shared his letter to Lance, a few excerpts from Lance’s reply and his second letter to Lance.

On 6/14/05, Ryan Kramer wrote:

Lance,

Where to begin... my name is Ryan Kramer, I'm 15 years old and I live in Nederland, Colorado I just completed my first year at the University of Colorado, majoring in Aerospace Engineering. Recently, my mother Wendy and I have been doing some research trying to complete my family tree. As you understand in a moment, I have been

missing a large chunk of my ancestry. After much work, DNA tests, private investigation and public record searching, I believe that I have finally found the man I'm looking for. You may want to sit down for the next part.

15 years ago my mother was impregnated with a sperm donation from California Cryobank Donor 1058. According to the brief amount of information we have about him, he was born ****, 1967, is 6 feet tall, has light brown hair and brown eyes. He holds a BS in industrial engineering and an MS in Engineering Management. His father is an urban planner and his brother is a pilot. He likes poetry and his favorite place to eat is the In and Out Burger. You and this man, I believe, are one in the same, which incidentally, makes you, my father.

Now, before you jump to any conclusions, I'd like to reassure you of a few things. 1st of all, I am not contacting you for money, I am not looking for you to put me through college, nor do I seek any other form of financial aid. Secondly, I respect the fact that when you donated as a teenager, you signed up for complete anonymity. Thus, I am not asking for a relationship, nor am I asking you to become a father figure or a part of my life if you are not comfortable with it. While getting to know you would be the best case scenario for me, the level on which we connect is entirely up to you.

Because I advanced 4 grades and went to college early, The Denver Post did a rather large article about this past November. It contains almost everything you could ever want to know about me, so I am attaching the link:

http://www.denverpost.com/boywonder/ci_0002556220/ci_0002556220.

When you are ready, you may contact me by whatever means you feel most appropriate. To start with, I would like to hear a bit more about you. What are your hobbies? Interests? Are you married? Where do you work, and what do you do? Where did you go to school? Grow up? Since I started asking about you at the age of 2, I have always been curious about you. Anything you are comfortable telling me about yourself would be more than I know now.

With that, I leave the ball in your court. I look forward to hearing from you, and hope you are well.

Sincerely,
Ryan Kramer

Excerpts from Lance's reply:

Dear Ryan,

I'm very pleased to hear from you.

My great hope is that you will use your gifts for the service of mankind, solving the problems that threaten the survival of the human race in the long run, or building tools

that will enable others to solve these problems. "With great power comes great 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 its 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 its 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 were 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.