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Registry Helps Donor-conceived Offspring Find Information

Every year, an estimated 30,000 to 60,000 babies are born as a result of sperm donation. When those donations are anonymous, as many are, children grow up knowing only half their genetic makeup at most. Families may have no more information than a donor number and the name of a sperm bank. The sperm banks in these cases have guaranteed their donors confidentiality.

Direct-to-consumer DNA testing, Google, and online social networks are helping donor-conceived offspring connect with half siblings and, in some cases,

circumvent the barriers created by sperm banks and find their donors.

The Donor Sibling Registry (DSR) has 47,000 members, including donor offspring, parents, and donors. A donor number and the name of a sperm bank helps to find half siblings and donors, although people without numbers and names may find matches by posting information on the DSR website.

Jen Moore, the mother of two sons by the same donor, joined the registry a few years before she told her boys how they were conceived. If they had siblings out there, Moore felt it was her responsibility to find them. "It would be unconscionable for a parent to keep family or genetic information from a child. It's their information, not ours," she says.

Two years after joining the

registry, Moore received an email from a Midwestern woman named Chris. "She said, 'I have three boys by this donor.'" The boys were triplets, born two weeks after Moore's oldest. In minutes the two women — strangers and mothers of five half brothers — were exchanging photos.

"When the baby pictures came, it was like having children all over again," she says. "One of the pictures was indistinguishable from baby pictures of my youngest."

With intensive guidance from a clinical psychologist, Moore and the boys' father told their sons how they were conceived. It had been a long road to this day. Moore wanted to tell the boys. Her ex-husband did not. On the psychologist's advice, before they sat the boys down, they laid out pictures of the triplet half

brothers. Moore's youngest picked one up and said, "I don't remember taking this picture." He opened the door for Moore to explain.

To Moore's relief, her sons were happy to learn they had half brothers. They worked with the psychologist to process the new information. The psychologist encouraged the oldest brother to initiate contact with the rest of the clan.

"As soon as we got in the car, Instagram, Twitter, everything on their phones was going off like lightning," Moore says. "By the time we reached the house, everyone had contacted everyone."

The half brothers met in the Midwest last year. The entire weekend, the five talked, played games, threw a ball or just hung out, Moore says. "It was like they'd known each other all their lives."

"I found them — brothers. Then I found their mom." If his detective work was right, the mom would be Varela's aunt. "When I found their mom, I found her parents. When I found her parents, I was able to come back down and find all three of their children. Two boys and a girl." One of the two boys, Varela hoped, was his father. Varela then used Ancestry.com to reconstruct the entire Cohen family tree.

Varela reached out to a few members of the family — a woman and a man, potential half siblings or cousins — via Facebook. The woman responded right away, "If you're a brother, we want to help." After talking to her cousins, including Matthew and David, and her two brothers, they decided to tell her father — one of the two men who could be Varela's father. He was a businessman in the healthcare industry — not exactly a doctor. The other man had severe dementia, which Varela knew was in his own genes, and didn't know his own family anymore.

The possible father responded with kindness. "He said, 'It's impossible, but he seems like a nice guy. I'd be happy to test for him.'" Varela was relieved that the man who might be his father was compassionate.

The could-be father underwent paternity testing at a clinic in Colorado and had the results sent to Cincinnati, where Varela tested.

When the results came in, Varela was stunned and numb, he says.

"Could not be excluded as father. I was in shock for a week." After the initial shock wore off, that old anxiety he'd known all his life had worn away, too. "Suddenly, I felt okay in my own skin." He was no longer a book that started in the middle. "I have continuity. I have a beginning, and now I can move forward because I know where I've come from."

In the search for biological family, some people get close only to get rejected by potential relatives. Varela's new-found family welcomed him. Shortly after the paternity test, he, his father, his two half brothers, and his half sister met for Thanksgiving at a restaurant in Colorado, where his half sister lives.

"I'm pretty gregarious, outgoing, and opinionated, and they were all the same. That was the table I belonged at." They went back to his half sister's house and talked late into the evening, Varela capturing everything on a digital audio recorder. The next morning, Varela took his father out for coffee. They sat in the car and talked for an hour. "Tell me everything," Varela asked him.

Since then, one of his half brothers has been to Cincinnati to visit. Varela exchanges regular emails with his half sister. In a few weeks, Varela and his wife will take the children to Los Angeles to meet their grandfather.

Varela's father has Alzheimer's now. The two talk on the phone weekly. "He always says, 'Hey, you seem like a great guy. I'd love to get to know you at some point. I'm sure I'm going to be proud of you.'" The conversation has gotten repetitive, but it's one Varela never gets tired of having. ❧