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Family Album / A weekly profile of a family--its history, joys and trials
Now They Know

* They worried and waited for years. But Ken Herman and his birth mother finally reunited. And despite discovering a dark side to his family's past, Herman is happy he made the connection.

By MARNELL JAMESON, Special To The Times

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Ken Herman remembers he was shaking when he made the phone call in December.

After asking a professional to help him find his birth parents, the 52-year-old adoptee finally had what he wanted: both their phone numbers.

Joanne Fellner was standing at her kitchen sink when the call came. The man on the other end said he had something important to discuss: "I have reason to believe I'm your son." The 71-year-old Fellner paused: "Would you hold on a minute?"

"I thought maybe she passed out," Herman remembers.

But she had gone to her wallet for a piece of paper she had been carrying for five decades. From it she read: "A boy, Oct. 9, 1946. 3:30 p.m., 7 pounds, 20 inches. Father: Sidney T. Herman, South Corning St., Los Angeles."

"That's right," said Herman.

"I've been waiting 52 years for this call," Fellner replied.

Like many adoptees, Herman, who now lives in Glendora with his wife, had had reservations about searching for his birth parents. His adoptive parents had given him every opportunity along with plenty of love. "I didn't want to be disloyal or show my parents in any way that I wasn't grateful."

But last year, for medical reasons, he decided he should find them. "Every year I have a physical, and every year, when faced with the form

about family history, I leave it blank. I'm at an age when this information is meaningful," said Herman, a managing director for a major bank corporation.

Fellner, too, had hesitated about trying to find the child she'd given up for adoption when she was 18.

"I was told that if I ever made contact, I could go to jail. I didn't want to cause any trouble," said Fellner, from her home in Gresham, Ore., near Portland.

Around Thanksgiving last year, Herman paid \$1,250 to Marilyn Miller, an adoption researcher in Torrance, who found both of Herman's birth parents and a passel of relatives in just three weeks. She also uncovered a saga that seemed more like fiction than real life.

Although his biological roots were buried among some difficult truths, Herman, his birth mother, and her sister and brother are planning reunions this month.

According to Miller, who has been doing adoption research for two decades, adoptees and their birth parents are seeking out each other more than ever before, largely because the Internet makes searching easier.

Fellner has already seen her son, Herman, twice since they found each other in December. Saturday they had planned to celebrate his 53rd birthday together.

"I've been having parties for him in my mind every year. Now I'll be able to celebrate his birthday in person," said Fellner.

Placed in an Orphanage

Joanne Armstrong LeBrun Fellner was born Angelina Armstrong and placed in an orphanage at age 2. She was adopted--or so she thought--by the LeBrun family at age 5, and renamed Joanne LeBrun. As a girl, Joanne remembers working hard to please her parents, yet didn't feel she lived up to their expectations. When she got pregnant as a teenager, she concealed it.

Adoption researcher Miller, intrigued by the information that an adoptee's birth mother was also adopted, took it upon herself to delve into Fellner's records. She learned that Fellner was never legally adopted.

"For some reason my father dropped the petition for adoption," Fellner

said. "[Learning this] was heartbreaking."

Though she's not sure, Fellner suspects this decision had something to do with the relationship of her birth parents. Fellner was one of six children, all the offspring of her young mother and her mother's elderly stepfather. That incestuous situation--which made Fellner's father also her grandfather--was news to Fellner, who thinks that may be why the LeBrunns never made her adoption official.

Fortunately, Fellner doesn't remember her first home, where her traumatized mother--showing signs of abuse, according to social work records--ultimately gave up three of her children for adoption at birth. She later sent Joanne and her oldest sister, Mary Beth, to an orphanage and a brother, Jimmy, to a boys' home. There was hardship at that orphanage, Fellner recalls. For years after, she would wonder what happened to her sister, Mary Beth, who was age 11 when she last saw her.

An Adoption Was Arranged

Ken Herman's story really starts in Laguna Beach in the 1940s when Fellner met Glen Wilson. Two years later, after she became pregnant, the 16-year-old Wilson's parents terminated the relationship. Wilson's parents then set up the pregnant Joanne with family friends who arranged for a private adoption, without the knowledge of her parents, who were vacationing out of state that summer.

A nurse in the hospital accidentally gave Joanne her baby to hold, though the mother was not supposed to see the child she was relinquishing. With the baby was some confidential information, which Joanne hurriedly scratched down in a small address book.

Knowing she could find her baby was a comfort, though she knew better than to try.

Most women of that time were told not to look back or there would be trouble, said Marlou Russell, a psychotherapist specializing in adoption and the author of "Adoption Wisdom: A Guide to the Issues and Feelings of Adoption" (Broken Branch Productions).

"But the maternal instincts keep rising up, and women don't get over them."

It's also not uncommon for adoptees to run into painful situations or unpleasant information, as Herman and Fellner both did.

"After all, if these children were born into ideal circumstances, they

wouldn't have been adopted.

"But that balances out by finding the people you're connected to biologically," added Russell, herself an adoptee who as an adult sought out her birth parents. "Once you have all the information, you can feel better knowing. The truth really does set you free."

What Fellner has to offset the hard truth of her past is the renewed contact with her son and the rediscovery of her siblings, for which she credits Herman and Miller.

Miller found three of Fellner's five siblings. One had died. The oldest sister, Mary Beth, lives in Minnesota. Last weekend, Fellner flew to meet her for the first time in nearly seven decades. Herman and his wife were planning to join them. And this week, the Hermans and Fellner plan to fly back to Los Angeles, where Fellner will be reunited with Jimmy Ferguson, the brother who went to the boys' home.

"I just feel my life has come full circle," said Fellner, who later married a man named Jack Fellner and with whom she had three more children. But that marriage was troubled. He had affairs, she said, and threatened to tell her parents about her out-of-wedlock baby if she left him. She divorced Fellner in 1987.

"I've had so little love in my lifetime. I feel very lucky that this has happened before any more of us have passed away. I'm just so grateful and so thankful. This is probably the best thing that has ever happened to me."

Father and Son Reunite

It's also been a bright spot for Glen Wilson, Herman's birth father, who had wondered about the son he lost.

Herman called Wilson the day after he called Fellner last year. They soon visited in Alabama, where Wilson and his wife winter.

The rest of the year, the Wilsons travel in their motor home doing genealogy research. When Herman first contacted him, Wilson responded: "So you want to know about your family history? Well, have I got a Web page for you."

Herman now laughs: "In two days, I'd gone from only child to this unbelievable extended family with bloodlines tracing back to 1540."

In July, Herman's birth father and his wife spent five weeks at the

Herman home. "We've had a marvelous time getting acquainted," said Wilson. (Wilson also met Herman's adoptive parents, Sidney and Elinor Herman of Laguna Woods, during his visit.)

"Though I'd often thought about Ken, I had no way of tracking him down with the meager information I had. Even with all my expertise in genealogy, I was lacking basic facts, like his name."

The Wilson clan note the resemblance between Ken and Glen, right down to the cleft chin and the short temper.

"Why he doesn't share my ability to gain weight I don't know--with the quantity of ice cream he eats," said Wilson with a laugh. "We're both extra-extroverts, and we both are motivated to learn about our past."

After 52 years, Wilson has also been in contact with Fellner, his long-ago girlfriend.

"Joanne and I both marvel at what a wonderful job the Hermans did raising Ken," said Wilson. "We both agree that we can only be responsible for what our genes have given him. The man that he has become is a product of his adoptive mother and father."

Herman agrees; his adoptive parents get full credit from him.

Recently, when Ken Herman and his wife--coincidentally also named Joanne--were at dinner with the elder Hermans, Ken broke the news that he would be seeing his birth mother and her sister.

Ken's wife remembered that the moment was a little awkward. His 91-year-old adoptive father didn't quite hear what Ken had said.

At that point, Elinor Herman leaned closer to her husband and said loudly, "Ken is going to see his mother."

But Ken Herman put his hand on her knee, and said gently: "No, I'm going to see Joanne. You're my mother."

PHOTO: Ken Herman holds a high school graduation photograph of his mother. At 18, Joanne LeBrun gave him up for adoption .

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PHOTOGRAPHER: PERRY C. RIDDLE / Los Angeles Times

PHOTO: Joanne LeBrun Fellner, with Tuffy, lives in Gresham, Ore.

Now she says, "I just feel my life has come full circle."

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PHOTOGRAPHER: Associated Press

PHOTO: Ken Herman with his adoptive parents, Elinor and Sidney Herman.

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PHOTO: Glen Wilson says that he lacked the "basic facts" to find his son.

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