

Sperm Donor Siblings



Find Family Ties

CBS 60 Minutes

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(CBS) All over the United States, new kinds of extended biological families are springing up that no one ever

anticipated or dreamed possible. As correspondent Steve Kroft reports, these families are made up of something called "donor siblings," and if you don't know what they are, neither did we until we began working on this story.

Every year an estimated 30,000 children are born in this country to mothers who have been artificially inseminated with sperm from an anonymous donor. Most of these children grow up never knowing their biological father — but now, with the help of sperm bank records and the Internet, some of them are finding half-brothers and half-sisters they never knew they had, who were sired by the same anonymous donor, forging family ties they never knew existed.

Wade Anderson is a pioneer of sorts, an unwitting participant in an unanticipated drama. He was conceived four years ago with the help of an anonymous sperm donor, a man that neither he nor his mother, Robin, have ever met.

Robin and her partner, Cindy Brisco, had been together for 15 years when they decided they wanted a child; they went to a San Diego sperm bank, looked through a donor catalog, and paid \$320 for two vials from a man identified only as donor "48QAH."

Asked what she was looking for in a donor, Robin Anderson says: "What was important to me, was heart. That the donor had heart. And I didn't know how we were gonna find that."

They knew from 48QAH's profile that he was a doctor, one of many who have helped defray the cost of medical school by donating sperm. He described himself as 6 feet 4, 190 pound with brown hair and green eyes and an interest in caring for critically ill children.

"And I thought, this is a sensitive man," Cindy says. "I like this. I like the way this feels. This guy's gotta be deep."

As it turned out, 48QAH proved to be a popular choice. At a party last summer, Robin was introduced to a single mother named Maren, who said she had conceived her daughter, Lila, after a visit to the Fertility Center of California.

"And just then, Cindy walked up. And she said, 'Oh, that's where we went. What donor number did you use?' " Robin recalls. Cindy told her they had used 48QAH.

"And she said, very calmly, 'That's it.' And we're like, 'What?' " Robin says.

In that moment, the three women realized that this was more than a just a coincidence. Their two children were half-brother and half-sister.

"And to think that this baby girl was his half-sibling," says Robin.

Cindy and Robin say they really consider Wade and Lila to be brother and sister.

"They have each other. They don't have the donor, the father; they have each other," Robin explains.

The two children live just 10 minutes apart. Their mothers talk frequently on the phone, get together every few weeks, and say they have begun to raise Wade and Lila as siblings.

"We love Maren, the mother. We love baby Lila. I mean, we have a lot in common. We're a great family match," says Robin.

"But you have to admit this is a little unusual," says Kroft. "I'm still trying to get my mind around it. This is not a traditional family in any stretch of the imagination."

"I mean, what is a traditional family today? I mean, I didn't have a father growing up," Cindy says.

They don't have the donor, the father; they have each other,

It may seem like something out of "Brave New World," but this extended family of five, with its complicated genealogy is not as unusual as you might think.

A decade ago, donor insemination was used almost exclusively by married couples with fertility problems, often keeping the children in the dark. Today, roughly half of the people going to sperm banks are lesbian couples and single women.

With no male in the household, it's harder to conceal the truth, so a generation of donor kids, like Ryan Kramer, has stepped out of the shadows and begun to seek answers to some of life's most basic questions: Who am I, and where did I come from?

Asked why this became so important to him, Ryan says: "Having that half of my family and half of really where I came from be a complete unknown was something that I was very curious about. I feel that I'm a whole person, but I'm missing part of where that person came from."

When somebody asks who his father is, Ryan says he tells people he doesn't know. "I was born through anonymous donor insemination. So, I don't know who he is exactly," he explains.

Asked what he puts down on forms he has to fill out for school, Ryan says, laughing, "N/A (Not Apply)."

Ryan lives outside Denver with his mother, Wendy. She conceived him with an anonymous sperm donor because there were fertility issues with her and her husband. That marriage ended in divorce when Ryan was 1. Over time, her son's endless curiosity about his biological father and potential half-siblings piqued her own.

"You said that there were traits that obviously didn't come from you. What were the traits?" Kroft asked.

"His brain," Wendy replied, laughing.

Ryan is a mathematics prodigy. At 15, he is a sophomore at the University of Colorado, studying aerospace engineering. Lots of mothers hope to raise a rocket scientist; Wendy Kramer got one.

She says that didn't come from her. "And I used to joke that, ya know, as far as, ya know, the sperm goes, I put in for regular and somebody gave me high-test," Wendy says.

Hoping to find Ryan's biological father, Wendy contacted her sperm bank. The California Cryobank is one of the largest in the country, and has supplied the sperm to create as many as 200,000 babies. But like other banks, it is built on the bedrock of anonymity, insulating donors from paternal obligation — legal, financial, or otherwise. So Wendy Kramer went to the Internet and began building an online database called the Donor Sibling Registry.

It's a worldwide registry for donor conceived people. Wendy says the response has been huge.

"Adult donor conceived people, parents of the donor conceived and, now more than ever, even the donors themselves are coming to the site saying, 'I had no idea that I had the right to be curious,' " she explains.

The Web site now has more than 7,000 members. They send in their contact information, along with the name of the sperm bank that was used, and the donor number. The Web site collates the information, allowing donors, their offspring, and half-siblings to contact with each other.

On the site, one can spot quite a few matches, highlighted in yellow.

And some of these new family trees can be quite large. It's not unusual for an anonymous sperm donor to make multiple deposits in a sperm bank. Some of them, whether they know it or not, have fathered more than a dozen children.

Asked who the record holder is on her Web site, Wendy says one donor has fathered 20 children.

So far, more than 1,600 people have found biological family members through Kramer's Web site they didn't know they had.

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That looks exactly like I did when I was 11"*

"And there've been many stories of people meeting," Wendy says. "First e-mailing on the Internet and then, you know, flying all over the country to meet each other and it's like — it's redefining family. It's making family where there was none."

They are new families like Justin Senk, Erin and Rebecca Baldwin, and McKenzie and Tyler Gibson. Just looking at them you wouldn't know there is anything remarkable about them, aside from a certain family resemblance, until you hear their story.

They're the sons and daughters of three different mothers, and each of them was conceived with the sperm of the same anonymous donor, No. 66 at the Rose Medical Center. The kids met after finding each other online through the Donor Sibling Registry and, incredibly, they all live in the Denver area.

Tyler thinks there is definitely a bond between the five children, beyond the fact they know they are half-siblings.

"Even the first time that we've met each other, it was just kind of like, you know that there's something more to than just knowing who they are," he explains. "There was something else there."

As soon as they met, they noticed striking similarities, more than just the same fair skin and blonde hair

"When I saw McKenzie, my jaw dropped because I was like, 'That looks exactly like I did when I was 11,'" Rebecca remembers.

They share half their DNA, and provide a fascinating study of nature vs. nurture. They can see aspects of their personalities reflected in each other — but that only makes them more curious about where it all came from.

"It's always been really interesting to me to know where my personality came from. And, yeah, I see it a lot more in these guys," says Rebecca. "And it's great to have half-siblings, to see that, 'Oh, that's where my personality came from, that.' But it'd be even more interesting to see it straight from the source."

They'd like to see a picture of donor 66, and know why he decided to donate the sperm that helped create them. But unless he decides to step forward, that is not likely to happen. Only a small percentage of donors have shed their anonymity, which is why Robin Anderson and Cindy Brisco were shocked when they went online and saw that their donor had posted a note saying that he was willing to be contacted.

"That night, I clicked on his e-mail. And I said, 'Are you 48QAH? And if you are, I have an incredible child to tell you about,' " Robin recalls.

Behind the mysterious 48QAH was now a face, and a name: Matthew Niedner, a 34-year-old pediatrician living in Ann Arbor, Mich. "QAH," it turns out, stood for "quite a hunk" at the clinic where he had donated sperm for seven years. Niedner says he got paid about \$50 a specimen and estimates he donated between 150 and 200 specimens. Conceivably, he could have more than a hundred children.

Matthew Niedner doesn't know how many children he's fathered, although he thinks it's no more than a couple of dozen.

"If I have information or can answer questions that nobody else can that can help those kids, then I feel very good about participating in trying to bridge that informational gap," Niedner explains.

"I have seen pictures. They e-mailed me some pictures," Niedner says.

Asked if they're good looking kids, Niedner says, laughing, "Well, there's a loaded question."

Niedner began donating sperm when he was single, and continued to do so after he got married. He and his wife, Nicole, are now expecting a child of their own.

What was his wife's reaction when he told her that he had gotten these e-mails?

"Well, I shared them with her and she was ecstatic," Niedner recalls.

Asked if it was delicate in any way, he says: "Yeah. I mean, you know, I tried to be very thoughtful and cautious about the whole thing. But she's been nothing but wonderful and loving and supportive."

Kroft asks: "When you decided to become a sperm donor, did you actually sit down and think that there were going to be babies created out of this and that someday they might try and contact you? Or you might try and contact them?"

"I guess I entertained the possibility of that. You know, I look at it a little differently," Niedner says. "This may sound a little detached, but I don't really look at these children as my children or, you know, that I'm their father. I was somebody who provided a tool or a necessary ingredient for a family to have a child that was wanted."

Niedner says he is not interested in fulfilling any sort of parental role.

"Do you think the children will think that way?" Kroft asks.

"Well, I don't think there's a blanket answer to that. I think different children will feel differently," he says.

His donor children, Wade and Lila, are each growing up without a father, which might make it harder for him to keep his

distance.

Asked if he really thought this through and thought of all the possibilities, Niedner says: "I'm not sure it's possible to think through all the possibilities. I don't have to be able to predict the future exactly to be willing to wade into it."

For now, he's proceeding cautiously, and since the mothers of his donor children have never met Niedner or heard his voice, 60 Minutes decided to surprise Cindy and Robin with a little video preview.

What did they think?

"He's animated, like my Wade," Cindy says, laughing. "He's cute."

"Kind, you can see the kindness," Robin says. "And look at the eyebrows."

"There is my boy's eyebrows," Cindy adds.

Just this week, they met another donor sibling, Alexandra, a half-sister to Wade and Lila. Their 21st century donor family, made possible by 48QAH, is still growing.