

Donor Babies Search for Their Anonymous Fathers

All grown up, some children of sperm donors are trying to break through the secrecy that keeps them from knowing their family history

By Craig Malisow

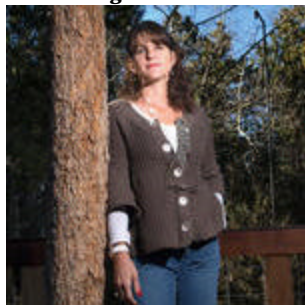
published: November 06, 2008

Daniel Kramer



Kathleen LaBounty believes anonymous sperm donation should be banned.

Mark Manger



Wendy Kramer created the Donor Sibling Registry in 2000.

Subject(s):

[sperm donation](#),
[anonymous sperm donors](#),
[American Society for Reproductive Medicine](#),
[Donor Sibling Registry](#)

On the morning of May 4, 1981, Nancy LaBounty was ready to conceive a child.

She went to the Baylor College of Medicine infertility clinic, located in what is now St. Luke's Episcopal Hospital, and rode the elevator to the 22nd floor. As she waited in the clinic lobby, a receptionist picked up the phone and called the father-to-be. The details of the conversation are not known, but the purpose of the call was simple: The patient is here. Bring your semen sample.

He would've entered through the clinic's back door, handed off the cup and disappeared. He was probably a Baylor medical student, as the clinic collected most of the samples from students in need of pocket money.

Nancy had requested a guy with blond hair, but this was pretty much on an as-is basis. Fifty bucks a month, and you got a crack at motherhood. Her husband was infertile, and instead of adopting, she wanted a child who was biologically hers. Nancy had actually had one baby — a boy — this way, just over a year previous. He was born with Down syndrome. She put him up for adoption.

Nine months later, Nancy gave birth to Kathleen Ruby LaBounty, a healthy girl. Twenty-five years later, Kathleen would start her search for the young medical student who walked out of the clinic's door that day. The way she describes it today, it's just as much a search for herself. She feels like she was robbed of half her family, half her medical history, half her identity. It's a feeling shared by many other donor-conceived children who are now in their late teens and twenties. They say that no one anticipated — or even considered — how these children might feel when they reached adulthood. They're calling for the United States to follow in the footsteps of the UK, Australia, Sweden and others and abolish anonymous donation.

"I just think it's a transferring of loss," Kathleen says today. "The parents are pursuing this, and by going through anonymous donation, they get their dream of parenthood. But then that loss is just transferred to us. And it's so preventable — it doesn't need to happen."

Or maybe this is more to the point: "I look in the mirror," she says, "and I don't know whose face is reflected back."

The faces stare out of the yearbooks with stone stares and goofy grins; most are victims of horrible

late-'70s, early-'80s hair and couture.

Big glasses, shaggy or feathered hair, wide ties, collars that look like they could flap away into the sky. One of these guys might be Kathleen's biological dad.

In 2006, she went to Baylor's med school library and pored over yearbooks from 1979 to 1984. In the beginning, she was naive enough to think he'd jump right out. She paid close attention to eyes and smiles. She photocopied the pages and asked friends to flip through them and star the best - candidates.

But before she knew it, she had come up with a list of 600 candidates whom she alphabetized and stuck into binders. She Googled them and checked them out on Docfinder.com, and when she had their addresses or e-mails, she sent them an inquiry saying, hey, this is going to sound strange, but I'm trying to find out if you're my biological father. If you ever donated sperm to Baylor, would you be willing to take a DNA test? She included pictures of herself: just under one year old; eight years old with a mustache from leftover Halloween makeup; in a black gown before a college formal; present day.

The 250 replies were overwhelmingly good-natured — from donors and non-donors alike.

"Wow. Your letter was unexpected, but very exciting and very welcome...I am completely open to exploring the possibility of me being your birth father."

"Sorry to say that I am not the lucky person who is your genetic dad, as I did not donate sperm...I hope your search is successful, and that your genetic father has the same kind face and warm smile as you do."

"Judging from your pictures, your father would, I'm sure, be proud....However, that man would not be me. Actually, I would be excited if it was..."

Kathleen narrowed the pool of 40 candidates willing to be tested down to 14, many of whom insisted on covering the cost. (New to the process, she started off with legally binding DNA testing, which cost \$600-\$900. She then discovered nonbinding tests were only \$99.)

This tenacity, and this need to connect with other people, was nothing new to Kathleen. At age seven, in the midst of a career rescuing wounded baby birds, she became a vegetarian. She says she hasn't slipped once. In high school, she did volunteer work with kids with Down syndrome — a way for her to connect with her unknown half-brother. At Houston Baptist University, she majored in psychology and sociology, and is now finishing a master's degree in psychology.

As interesting as this experience has been for her so far, Kathleen hates the fact that she has to look through old yearbooks to find her biological father.

"This is intentionally creating children who have no access to half of their family," she says. Which is not to say she blames her mother and the man who, though he may not be genetically related, is her "real" dad. When her mother chose donor sperm, Kathleen says, no one had any idea that the kids might feel this need to track down the donor. She says her parents have been tremendously understanding and supportive of her search — which is saying a lot, because Kathleen has not been shy about putting her family's business out there. She's told her story on *Oprah* and *The Today Show*, to *People* and *Parade*.

Kathleen found out about her origins when she was eight. Her mother always planned on telling her.

As Nancy explained in an e-mail: "I knew that *not* telling her of her method of conception would be a lie. She had the right to know. She needed to know."

For months, Nancy LaBounty had told her daughter that she was special. She told Kathleen that, whenever she was ready, she'd let her know exactly *how* she was special.

So when Kathleen was ready to know, she says, her mother took her up to Kathleen's room, sat her down and told her how she was conceived.

"I just felt like it made sense," Kathleen recalls. "It felt like a missing piece of the puzzle."

Kathleen says she had always felt different, and now she knew why.

It would be another seven years before Kathleen requested her donor's medical records from Baylor. She says she was told they were destroyed. Not only would she not be able to find out anything about the donor, she couldn't find out how many times his samples had been used. Did she have two half-siblings, or 200?

Later, when she started doing her online searches, she became familiar with the weird history of sperm donation — how it was only relatively recently that it had emerged from the shadows.

Critics of anonymous sperm donation have (perhaps unfairly) emphasized the bizarre tale of the first recorded donor insemination. The 1884 procedure was performed in a Philadelphia medical school, and involved a couple who were having trouble conceiving. The doctor's solution was to secretly chloroform the woman and inseminate her with semen from a medical student voted "best looking" by his peers. When the doctor subsequently told the husband, they decided it was best not to tell the mother.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, couples choosing this method of conception were routinely told by their doctors to keep it a secret. It wasn't until 1973, with the passage of the Uniform Parentage Act, that the practice was openly addressed in law — it gave the non-donor husband legal parental rights.

In the U.S., anonymous donation is the industry's bread and butter. But beginning with Sweden in the 1980s, some other countries abolished anonymous donation and mandated that donor-conceived children have access to their donor's identity after they turn 18. Of course, those countries experienced sharp declines in sperm supply, as the American Society for Reproductive Medicine likes to point out. Critics like to think of the society as a sort of Big Pharma of sperm, an industry umbrella group interested in profits over people.

Wendy Kramer is one of the most vocal critics.

The mother of a donor-conceived son, Kramer established the online Donor Sibling Registry in 2000. She says she separated from her husband when her son Ryan was an infant, and he asked her at age two if his father was dead. Blindsided, she tried to figure out what this meant for Ryan, and what other donor-conceived kids might be experiencing. After chatting with others on various online forums, she believed she saw a need for the registry, which invites donor-conceived kids to post whatever information they have about their respective donors and see if they can't find a sibling match. So far, she says, she's registered 22,600 donors, parents and kids, and connected 5,815 siblings. (Ryan, by the way, discovered he has nine siblings).

"I know what it's like to be part of the couple where the doctor says, 'I'm sorry, you two cannot have children.' So I understand...I'm a mom of a donor kid, I had no other way to have my kid, but at the

same time that doesn't negate all that we've learned in the last 18 years. We didn't know back then what we know now."

The Donor Sibling Registry's earliest listing for a Baylor donor was a post-graduate who donated between 1971 and 1973. He was 6'1" and a Methodist whose interests included music. And there's no telling how many offspring were produced by the 5'11," 220-pound wavy-haired Jewish med-school graduate who donated between 1989 and 1993.

Kramer says, "I think the question we need to ask in this industry is, 'What's the best interest of the child being born?' Now, I think it's a really obvious answer. But I think, publicly, we need to ask that question, like they have in other countries. And when they've asked that in other countries, what they end up doing is banning anonymous sperm donation."

She says the donor-conceived kids of Kathleen's generation are just the tip of the iceberg.

"About ten years from now, we're going to have this...huge tidal wave of donor-conceived kids who are going to demand accountability [and] want to know where they come from, and I think this industry is not going to know what hit them."

But the American Society for Reproductive Medicine approaches it as a civil-rights issue — no government should be allowed to interfere with how an individual or couple chooses to have a baby.

The Society's spokesman, Sean Tipton, also points out that while the folks on the Donor Sibling Registry might criticize the industry, there are thousands of donor-conceived children out there who don't appear to have these identity issues, and who don't make any noise.

Tipton adds that "People make decisions for their children every day about all kinds of things and that's what has happened here. The rearing parents in this situation made a decision about how to conceive that child and how to deal with the circumstances surrounding the fact that...a donor was used. And as any parent will tell you, sometimes the decisions you make for your children are not popular with them, and may not be the right decision, but you do the best you can do."

Phil Maher is 31 and could have anywhere between 15 and 30 kids.

Of course, he'll probably never meet them, and he's never met their mothers, who could be scattered across the country. They simply used the sperm he donated at least once a week for two years, when he punched in a code on the back door of San Francisco's Pacific Reproductive Services and walked back to the little room with the same old dirty magazines.

He got \$80 or \$90 a sample, but toward the end, they offered him nearly twice that if he would become a known donor.

"Frankly...I just wasn't comfortable kind of with this idea of having some random kid kind of tracking me down," he says. The most he felt comfortable with was taking a few extra bucks for conducting a 20-minute audio interview. A counselor asked him about his job, his passions, his advice, all recorded in case any of his unknown progeny would want to at least get an idea of what their old man was like. Or at least what he was like in his mid-twenties.

Maher, who now lives in Denver, had moved to San Francisco shortly before the dot-com bubble burst, and when he found himself without a job, he turned to sperm donation. He had donated plasma in college — as he says, "I was kind of comfortable with the idea of donating bodily fluids, I suppose."

Maher runs Spermbanker.com, a site for prospective donors who want to get an insider's perspective on the process and to find out where they can donate locally. But while he doesn't address it on his site, he says he's thought about donor-conceived children in Kathleen's shoes. Would a concession like a 20-minute audio clip even be enough?

"It almost seems a little bit cruel, having this audio tidbit," he says. "It's like, 'Okay, this is all you get. You get to hear your father answer a couple questions and that's it.' You know — 'get away now.'"

Ultimately, he doesn't think anonymous donation should be banned, but he feels donors should have both options clearly explained to them when they begin the process, something, he says, that was never offered to him — not that he would've opted for known donorship.

"That's the beauty of it, is not having this sort of this responsibility [you have] when you have a marriage, and you have a kid with someone," he says. "That's the beauty of the system, and that's what I signed up for. And I would just want future sperm donors to know the real difference..."

At California Cryobank, one of the country's biggest donated -sperm providers, that difference is explained up front, according to spokesman Scott Brown.

Five years ago, Brown says, the company implemented an "open" donor option, where the donor agrees to at least one contact with his offspring when they turn 18. The company acts as the go-between, arranging a phone, e-mail or personal visit. However, even before the program started, the company tried to help those offspring who wanted to find their donors.

"Historically speaking, our donors have been very receptive, very open to meeting the offspring," Brown says. "And it's really led to some great reunion stories. We are certainly very supportive of all children having the opportunity to meet their donors. At the same time, we greatly respect the privacy our donors may prefer."

Brown says he sees both sides of the anonymous donor debate, and, like Wendy Kramer, he predicts an increase in the number of donor-conceived children wanting to locate their genetic fathers.

When California Cryobank opened its doors in 1977, it catered to heterosexual couples with infertile males. But in the last ten to 15 years, Brown says, the company has seen a shift in clientele. Now 60 percent of the clients are single moms and lesbian couples.

The children of such couples "know pretty early on that they weren't born in a traditional way, and that their daddy has to be somewhere, so who is he and where is he?" Brown says. "I think there is going to be in the next ten, 15, 20 years, a lot more of these kids looking for answers."

But, Brown says, most clients don't choose a donor based on his anonymous-or-open status — they want the best available candidate, period. And right now, there are more anonymous donors to choose from. And clients can start their search online, by choosing hair and eye color as well as ethnicity. They can even purchase audio and video clips as well as baby photos, if the donor has made them available.

In early October, Kathleen was in Toronto, delivering the keynote address at a symposium organized by the Infertility Network, a Canadian nonprofit opposed to anonymous donation.

She was honored and nervous, and she took the stage and told the crowd about how she felt cheated. How she believes the industry is purposefully creating damaged products. A special breed of human

with built-in loss. She talked about how there needs to be a sea change in how the industry reaches out to donors. Hell, they're not even "donors" — there's no donation going on here. There's a sale of goods, and it's not relatively benign, like giving blood. It's not sustaining life, Kathleen likes to say, it's creating it.

"The men who are targeted are so young," she says, "...and I think a lot of them are naive, and they're just trying to help another family. They also need money, usually. So I don't think that they go into it fully understanding that they're creating a person, not just helping a family."

At its base, the industry is a guy jerking off into a cup. He gets to walk away with a fatter wallet and, depending on the clinic, some coupons and movie tickets.

The sample he gets to immediately forget about goes to a woman who gets her chance at motherhood. And the result might be a child who winds up flipping through old yearbooks looking for eyes of a certain shape or the way a pair of lips curl into a smile.

Kathleen says that even when she gives up her search, she'll never really give up. It's not like her life is terrible — she has two loving parents. But there's this undeniable pull toward a man who could be anywhere now, or who could be dead. He could be one of the men she's already written to; a man who never expected to receive such a letter, and who may have thrown it away or folded it neatly and tucked it away in a drawer. But if there's one thing she's learned from this search, it's that there are men out there who, though they probably never thought of it at the time, are thrilled at the idea of meeting their child for the first time.

"I'm sorry I didn't test positive," one of the men who underwent DNA testing wrote Kathleen. "I tried to. I've been thinking for days what I would say to you when you told me I was your donor dad."

Kathleen's been thinking about it for years.

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Are You My Mother?

Women who donate their eggs make a lot more than sperm donors

Men, of course, aren't the only donors out there. In recent years, egg donation has become more common. Just ask Ginger Green at the Houston Fertility Institute.

When the clinic opened six years ago, Green says, it assisted between ten and 20 women looking to conceive via egg donation. In 2007, the clinic helped 80 women; the clinic has already served 80 women as of October 2008.

Unlike the \$80-\$100 a sperm donor receives per specimen, egg donors at the Institute get \$3,000-\$5,000.

As Green says, "A lot of times [the donors] are in college, but we also have a lot of young ladies who have started their family early, have had a couple of children and really are about finished with their family. And they just want to help someone else — they can't imagine life without a child."

She says the increase in women seeking donors has followed general demographic shifts — as more women get older, they're taking serious steps toward motherhood. It's also become more visible in recent years.

"A lot of Hollywood is doing this and so you read about it in *People* or in [the] tabloids," she says.

The compensation donors receive via the Institute is in keeping with ethical guidelines established by the American Society for Reproductive Medicine.

According to the society, "Total payments to donors in excess of \$5,000 require justification and sums above \$10,000 are not appropriate."

And according to a 2007 study published in the Society's journal, *Fertility and Sterility*, there aren't a lot of confirmed reports indicating that egg donors are paid astronomical sums.

According to information from the study, "Despite scattered and largely unverified reports of amounts of \$50,000 or more appearing repeatedly in the media...the average level of compensation provided for egg donors was less than \$5,000."

— **Craig Malisow**