

Siblings

conceived by donor sperm are finding each other

By Amy Harmon

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Like most anonymous sperm donors, Donor 150 of the California Cryobank probably will never meet any offspring he has fathered through the sperm bank. There are at least four children, according to the bank's records, and perhaps many more, since the dozens of women who have bought Donor 150's sperm are not required to report when they have a baby.

The half-siblings – twins Erin and Rebecca Baldwin, 17, (right); Justin Senk, 15, (center); and McKenzie Gibson, 12, and her 18-year-old brother, Tyler – found each other in a registry. Even the mothers know only the code number the bank uses for identification and the fragments of personal information provided in his donor profile that drew them to select Donor 150 over other candidates.

But two of his genetic daughters, born to different mothers and living in different states, have been e-mailing and talking on the phone regularly since learning of each other's existence this summer. They plan to meet over Thanksgiving.

Danielle Pagano, 16, and JoEllen Marsh, 15, connected through the Donor Sibling Registry, a Web site that is helping to open a new chapter in the oldest form of assisted reproductive technology. The three-year-old site allows parents and offspring to enter their contact information and search for others by sperm bank and donor number. Donors who want to shed their anonymity are especially welcome, but the vast majority of the site's 1,001 matches are between half-siblings.

"The first time we were on the phone, it was awkward," Danielle said. "I was like, 'We'll get over it,' and she said, 'Yeah, we're sisters.' It was so weird to hear her say that. It was cool."

For children who often feel severed from half of their biological identity, finding a sibling – or in some cases, a dozen – can feel like coming home. It can also make them even more curious about the anonymous donor whose genes they carry.

The popularity of the Donor Sibling Registry, many of its registrants say, speaks to the power of biological ties as it is becoming easier for women to bear children who do not share a partner's DNA, or even their own.

"I hate when people that use D.I. say that biology doesn't matter (cough, my mom, cough)," Danielle wrote in an e-mail message, using shorthand for "donor insemination." "Because if it really

didn't matter to them, then why would they use D.I. at all? They could just adopt or something and help out kids in need."

The half-sibling hunt is driven in part by the growing number of donor-conceived children who know the truth about their origin. As more single women and lesbian couples use sperm donors to conceive, children's questions about their fathers' whereabouts often prompt an explanation at an early age.

Unlike adoptees, whose primary question is often why their birth parents gave them up, donor-conceived children are typically focused on learning the donors' identity – and whatever it might reveal about their own. Donor-conceived siblings, who sometimes call themselves "lopsided" or "half-adopted," can provide clues to make each other feel more whole, even if only in the form of physical details.

Liz Herzog, 12, and Callie Frasier-Walker, 10, for instance, carry the same dimple near their right eye.

"She looks up to me," said Liz, who was an only child before learning of Callie and six other half-siblings but seemed to have had no trouble stepping into her older-sister role. Finding her brothers and sisters, Liz said, "was the best thing in the world," even if Callie does copy her sometimes, like when Liz got her hair dyed red and Callie did the same.

Many mothers seek out one another on the registry, eager to create a patchwork family for themselves and their children. Seven from one group say they, too, feel bonded by the half-blood relations of their children, and perhaps by the vaguely biological urge that led them all to choose Fairfax Cryobank's Donor 401.

Carla Schouten sent a leftover vial of sperm to another mother who wanted to have a second child and found there was no 401 sperm left to purchase. In July, Schouten and her 2-year-old son, Matthys, went camping with another Donor 401 family, Louisa Weix and her twins, Eliza and Julia, who turn 2 next week.

While many donor-conceived children prefer to call their genetic father "donor," to differentiate the biological function of fatherhood from the social one, they often feel no need to distance themselves, linguistically or emotionally, from their siblings.

Several who have met describe a sense of familiarity that seems largely irrational, given the absence of a father and unrelated mothers.

"All I can say is, they feel like siblings," said Barry Stevens, a filmmaker who has discovered several half-siblings through research and DNA testing since the release of his 2001 documentary, "Offspring," depicting his search for his donor.

Even as the Internet makes it easier for donor-conceived children to find one another, some are calling for an end to the system of anonymity under which they were born. Sperm banks, they say, should be required to accept only donors who agree that their children can contact them when they turn 18, as is mandated in some European countries.

That is partly for accountability. Sperm bank officials estimate the number of children born to donors at about 30,000 a year, but because the industry is largely unregulated, no one really knows. And as half-siblings find one another, it is becoming clear that the banks do not know how many children are born to each donor, or where they are.

Popular donors may have several dozen children, and critics say there is a risk of unwitting incest between half-siblings. Moreover, they argue, no one should be able to decide for children before they are born that they can never learn their father's identity. Typically, women can learn about a donor's medical history, ethnic background and a wide range of physical characteristics.

More recently – for a premium – sperm banks have begun to provide some donors who agree to be contacted by their offspring when the children turn 18. But they say far fewer men would choose to donate if they were required to release their identity. Men are paid about \$65 to \$100 per sample, and customers pay about \$150 to \$600 per vial, plus shipping.

Still, Wendy Kramer, who founded the sibling registry with her donor-conceived son, Ryan, 15, said its appeal means a new generation of donor offspring may pose a greater challenge to the sperm banks' insistence on anonymity.

"Most of the kids Ryan's age and older don't know they're donor-conceived," she said, "but as this next wave crests adolescence, many of them are very curious. It's an innate human response, and they're going to want answers to their questions."

Many of the 5,000 registrants at www.donorsiblingregistry.com hope that the donor himself will contact them. But others are happy to settle for contacting their half-siblings, who actually want to be found. As they do, they are building a new definition of family that both rests on biology and transcends it.

"It's so weird to know that you're going to meet someone that you're going to know for the rest of your life," Justin Senk, 15, told his half-sister Rebecca Baldwin, 17, when they spoke on the phone last summer before meeting for the first time.

Justin, of Denver, was the most recent half-sibling to surface in a group that now numbers five. Rebecca and her twin sister, Erin, found 18-year-old Tyler Gibson and his 12-year-old sister, McKenzie, through the registry a year earlier. (Tyler and McKenzie's mother, Tina Gibson, used sperm from the same donor to conceive them.)

Introducing his newfound family to friends after they attended a recent choir concert, Justin's mother, Susy Senk, overheard him saying with a self-styled sing-song, "This is my sister from another mother, and this is my brother from another mother, this is my other sister from another mother" and so on.