

Connecting the chromosomes: Adoptees find, reunite with birth mothers through online DNA services

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Though she was adopted as a newborn, Anita Mattingly said she never questioned where she came from while growing up.

"I was happy and satisfied. I grew up with a loving mother and father, a wonderful sister and a brother and cousins. No one thought of me any less," said Mattingly, 63. "But there's always something that's inside of you that wonders who else looks like you."

It wasn't until the Conway, S.C., resident began a family of her own that questions about her medical and [family history](#) arose. That's when she decided to search for her biological mother.

Mattingly said she ran into multiple dead-ends before she finally tried an online DNA testing service called AncestryDNA in 2014. She mailed a sample of her saliva in exchange for a percentage breakdown of her genetic ethnicity and the possibility of matching DNA to any relatives who had also registered for the service.

Within weeks, Mattingly found out she was 94 percent European and roughly 6 percent Asian, but it wasn't until last year that she received an alert that she had matched with a first cousin in Maryland. The connection, paired with additional research into her family history, led her to her [birth mother](#)'s doorstep in Nanjemoy, Md., a Charles County town not far from La Plata, where Mattingly spent much of her

childhood.

"I already had a mom," said Mattingly, whose adoptive mother died 14 years ago. "Now, I have a mother. ... It is a pretty amazing story, a miracle."

What Mattingly and her biological mother, Lillian Haughawout, describe as a "miracle" is now happening all over the world as curious people and adoptees pay as little as \$69 for DNA testing services like AncestryDNA, MyHeritage DNA and 23andMe to learn about their genealogy and to connect with relatives.

One of the leading DNA testing companies, 23andMe, has more than 23 million customers worldwide. The company breaks down ethnicity by comparing a customer's DNA with over 31 reference populations from around the world, according to product specialist Jhulianna Cintron. About 2 million are genotyped, allowing them to be matched with up to 2,000 relatives and to build online family trees. Ninety-five percent of customers match with a third cousin or closer, Cintron said. The company recently added genetic health risk and wellness reports to its offerings, serving customers who, like Mattingly, lack a family medical history.

Varda Makovsky, a clinical social worker and director of post-[adoption](#) services at the Barker Adoption Foundation in Bethesda, said that within the past two years, she has seen a spike in the use of DNA services among adoptees and parents who gave their children up for adoption. (The National Council for Adoption, awareness and education agency, estimates that there were nearly 70,000 unrelated adoptions in the U.S. in 2014.)

Makovsky, who counsels people involved in or affected by adoptions, said the experience is often an emotional roller coaster for all involved

parties. It often draws up a mix of feelings and a struggle to figure out how a new relationship with a parent or child fits into daily life.

For some, the experience can be invasive.

"In previous years when birth parents were promised confidentiality, these genetic tests did not exist, and no one was aware that this technology was coming down the road," she said. "Adoptive parents need to be prepared that things may open up. Even if both parties of an adoption assume the adoption is and will be completely closed, they still need to anticipate that one party -or their relatives - may connect with the other. This may also affect how and when adoptive parents explain aspects of their children's birth story to [others]."

Still, the experience is riveting for many adoptees.

Rachel Jabin, 48, of Sauk Rapids, Minn., connected with her birth mother in 2015 after using 23andMe. Initially, she wasn't looking for her mother; her intent was to determine her ethnicity.

"I wanted to find out what I was. When you're adopted, you can't really identify yourself. You can't lock it in," said Jabin, who noted that her adoption papers stated that she was Italian and German.

After taking the test in 2015, she found that roughly 67 percent of her heritage was British and Irish. Later, when she connected with a cousin, she decided to search for her biological parents using Census records and other DNA services like GEDmatch and Promethease to get more information.

"I didn't have a name. I had an age and kind of a background," Jabin said.

Eventually, it led to her mother, Abingdon resident Deborah Bradley, who had run away from home around the age of 19 and had given birth to Jabin after a short love affair with her biological father.

Bradley, 68, said she was sitting in her home when the telephone rang that summer two years ago.

"For a moment or two, I was surprised, unusually surprised," she said, but almost immediately, she began confiding in her daughter. "I told her everything I could possibly tell her about me."

Bradley shared stories about her tough life growing up, about being pregnant with Jabin at a time when she was "young and dumb, not very worldly." She didn't want to be unmarried and pregnant, and she knew she wasn't going to be with the father of her child, she said.

"There was a moment where I had to sign a contract and sign her over to her future family. The tears ran down my eyes onto the paper on the contract. It was hard," she said. "But I was glad it was over with. I wanted out of there."

It wasn't an easy decision, but it was the best decision, she said.

"I believe because of her parents, they brought her up with so much love, and she is love," Bradley said, adding that she wishes she could have met Jabin's late [adoptive parents](#) and thanked them.

Jabin said that her birth mother seemed worried that she harbored negative feelings about the adoption, but after hearing about Bradley's volatile family history and relationships, Jabin says she understands.

"She was so worried that I was mad at her. But I said 'Why? You gave me a wonderful life. You gave me wonderful parents. Why would I ever

be mad at you?" said Jabin, who also tracked down her birth father. She said she decided not to contact him after finding that he was convicted of molesting a child.

"I am extremely blessed that my [adoptive] mom and dad picked me up, and that Deborah gave me up for adoption ... I dodged a bullet," Jabin said. But through the DNA service, she gained various relatives - aunts, uncles and cousins from both sides of the family - with whom she shares a resemblance.

"It has been so wonderful and meeting all these people who actually look like me," she said.

The experience has also led Jabin to a passion for genealogy. Today, she helps other adoptees search for their birth families at no charge to fill that "missing piece that you always have as an adoptee."

"I just enjoy doing it. I think everybody should know where they come from ... and people who are adopted are not given the luxury," she said.

Naomi Shinaul-Wright, an adoptee and Laurel resident, agreed. She was thrilled to learn about her Nigerian ancestry around five years ago after taking an AncestryDNA test in hopes of finding her biological mother.

Though she wasn't successful, Shinaul-Wright said that learning that she was 95 percent West African was an affirmation of her identity.

"It came together and made sense. I have all this African art in my house," she said, and she has long worn African prints.

"It gave me a base of who I am," said Shinaul-Wright, who, later this year, plans to petition the courts in Cleveland to open her adoption records to aid her search for her mother. "I'm proud, and when I find my

mother, I'll still be proud."

That experience could provide closure, as it has for Mattingly.

"I wanted to tell my mother that it was OK. If I gave up a baby for adoption, I would feel really bad," Mattingly said. After meeting her biological mother and learning that she run away from home and had given birth at 17, Mattingly said, "she did the right thing."

The two had lived in Charles County for around 40 years but had never crossed paths. Mattingly decided to try and meet her mother last December while visiting a daughter who lives nearby.

When no one answered at Haughawout's home in Nanjemoy, Mattingly left behind a bouquet of flowers and a handwritten letter that explained she was looking for her birth mother. They connected later on the phone, and, at first, Haughawout seemed defensive and confused, Mattingly said.

"I don't know what you're talking about, a mother," Mattingly remembers her saying. "She was kind of mixed up, and the last thing I wanted to do was upset anybody, so when we talked, I said, 'Do you mind if I come see you?'"

Haughawout, 80, agreed, and when Mattingly arrived at her home and the door opened, Mattingly said, "she put her hands around me, and she hugged me and hugged me and hugged me."

"It was such a surprise to see a grown woman who was so beautiful, and she was my daughter," Haughawout said. She had wondered, over the years, what happened to her child but didn't have the resources to find her, she said.

When Mattingly asked why she was put up for adoption, Haughawout said the answer was simple.

"I had run away from home. I wasn't able to take care of myself, much less a child. I knew there were people in this world who wanted children but couldn't have them," she said, adding that life after the adoption also had its hardships.

Haughawout went on to marry and have a son, but her son died in 1992, followed by her husband, just a year later. The next year, Haughawout had a heart attack.

But after reuniting with Mattingly, Haughawout inherited an extended family, which includes Mattingly's daughter and grandchildren. She and Mattingly talk on the phone at least once a week.

Mattingly still hasn't found her birth father, but she's hopeful.

"If it's meant to be, I'll find out who it is," she said.

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