



POST ADOPTION CENTER FOR EDUCATION & RESEARCH

“Our purpose in holding this conference is to provide a forum for all triad members to speak safely, listen respectfully, and learn from each other. All of us are touched by adoption in one way or another. Each of us has a unique story. We invite you to sit back, make yourself comfortable, listen to others, speak if you’d like. This day is for all of us.”

—opening remarks by Kathy Waddill

The Changing Picture of Adoption: Voices of Adoptees, Birth Parents and Adoptive Parents

By Judy Norris

Men and women, whose lives were impacted by adoption, gathered on May 20th for a day-long conference at the historic Headlands Institute in Marin County. The event was co-hosted by PACER and the American Adoption Congress. Triad members of all ages filled the Sunset Building, over-looking the Pacific Ocean. The youngest adoptee was only eight months old – a baby boy, who spent the day sitting placidly on his adoptive mother’s lap.

PACER President Malcolm Pearson welcomed conference-goers and turned the floor over to Kathy Waddill, who opened the program. She introduced keynote speaker, Jean Strauss, author and film maker, who showed two short documentaries, “Vital Records,” which details the campaign for open records, and “The Triumvirate.” The latter is a warm account of Strauss’ life as an adopted child and her search for birth family that reunited three generations.

Strauss moderated the first panel, “Yes, We Can Talk About It,” which drew on the collective experience of adult adoptees, birth mothers, a young birth father in an open adoption, and several adoptive mothers.

“All in the Family of Open/Closed Adoption,” a frank discourse led by Virginia Keeler-Wolfe, followed the lunch break. The third and final panel, “What Did You Say?” was facilitated by Melissa Holub, Ph.D., an adoptive mother and therapist. Dr. Holub led the committee that planned the topics and enlisted panelists.

Ellen Roseman, the A.A.C California Southwest Regional Director, manned the book table. She smiled with pride, as she listened to an adoptive mom telling her story. The woman had chosen open adoption through Roseman’s “Cooperative Adoption Consulting.” Across the nation, Roseman and many others are ‘helping shape a future that’s open – instead of secretive,’ as Kathy Waddill said, in bringing the day to a close.



Jean Strauss, keynote speaker

Turn to page 5 for more pictures from the conference

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PACER

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PACER, the Post Adoption Center for Education and Research, is a nonprofit, volunteer-run organization established in 1978. It serves the adoption community in the greater San Francisco Bay and Sacramento areas by offering monthly support groups, peer counseling, workshops and seminars, a quarterly newsletter, and referrals to related services.

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Editor's Note: The opinions expressed in articles published in the PACER Newsletter are those of the individual authors and do not necessarily represent PACER's position as an organization.

President's Message

by Malcolm Pearson

This May PACER put on our first major educational event in five years. *The Changing Picture of Adoption: Voices of the Adoptees, Birth Parents and Adoptive Parents* was the title of our day-long conference that consisted of three interactive panels. These panels represented a broad sweep of the adoption triad, each bringing a wide range of perspective on life's little adventure we call adoption.

So much work goes into developing, publicizing and producing an event such as this. It never fails to amaze me that all of it happens via volunteers. No one gets paid (except the caterer). The motivation is the desire to be of service and the passion to create something important. On behalf of the PACER Board of Directors I wish to thank those volunteers for their contributions. Melissa Holub for creating the program and Melissa, Kathy Waddill and Virginia Keeler-Wolf for executing it, Julie Case for securing the site for us, Jeff Anduza for creating the brochures and programs, Jim Gabbard for handling the financials. We also wish to thank Jerilyn Wagner, Sally Caldwell, Doug Johnson, Mark Kunkel, Ellen Roseman, Coco Brush, Vicki White, Gene Sperring, Judy Norris and Gudrun Pearson Finn, for things too numerous to name in a single 8-page issue.

On a sad note, our condolences go out to Sally Caldwell on the passing of her mother, Eleanor S. Caldwell. Many of us met Eleanor at one of the several facilitator trainings held at Sally's house. We will miss her. Our hearts open and our prayers go out to Sally in her time of mourning.

PACER'S MISSION...

is to foster understanding of adoption as a lifelong process and intergenerational journey, and to serve members of the adoption triad (adoptees, birth parents and adoptive parents).

We provide comprehensive information, support, public education and advocacy for positive change in adoption policy and practice.

Newsletter Submissions Invited

Are you a writer? A poet? A reader or filmgoer who would enjoy reviewing books and movies? Perhaps you have suggestions for adoption-related pieces that would interest our audience. Or an unusual or compelling adoption, search or reunion story, but just need some help writing it.

We welcome your ideas and submissions.

For more information, contact Judy Norris at 925/952-4853 or charlottesfirst@aol.com.

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Open Records Would Protect Birth Mothers' Privacy

By Janine Baer

One of the bizarre things about the movement for adoptees to have full and equal access to their own birth certificates is the unlikely alliance that opposes state bills to open these records. The Catholic Church, feminist groups like Planned Parenthood, adoption agency lobbyists, and the American Civil Liberties Union often will unite in opposition to these bills. All of these groups say they are worried about the mothers who gave birth, who allegedly had been promised confidentiality. In reality most had not been promised confidentiality from their adult children, but groups that arranged adoptions grew comfortable with secrecy, and sealed records became the norm.

This year three such bills were presented in northeastern states – Maine, Connecticut and Massachusetts. Their advocates hoped past successes in New Hampshire (2005) and Oregon (1988) could be repeated, but before spring 2006 was over, all three had failed. This was a great disappointment to the people who worked hard for the bills, not to mention those who had hoped to learn their birth parent(s)' names. In each of these states, a pure open records bill was presented, discussed, then modified to restrict access to some adoptees, and then voted down, vetoed or dropped.

Still, it was a learning experience. One of the things I learned from listening to the Maine hearings over the internet was why an emphasis on knowing our family medical history is not a good argument for changing birth certificate access. After several speakers before the committee mentioned the importance of adoptees obtaining medical information from birth family members, someone else countered that birth certificate access wasn't necessary – that the state could set up a health history database - and an intermediary could then relay the information to the adoptee.

Personally, I was horrified by that idea. My own birth mother, now in her 70s, wanted to be as unknown as possible to the outside world. She still does not want her own extended family to know I exist, much less a government bureaucrat. She and I have had a relationship over the past 32 years (we're not close, but I know where to reach her with medical concerns, as they arise). Unsealing birth certificates to adoptees would,

ironically, protect women like my birth mother, more than employing state-run intermediary systems would do so.

Regardless of its effect on birth parents, sealed records discriminate against a group of people – those who were adopted – without cause. All adoptees should be able to access their original birth certificates. Adopted adults are not dangerous to their birth parents, and they do not need state protection. In the five states where adoptees can legally obtain their birth records, no problems have manifested. Alaska and Kansas have always had accessible birth certificates. The other three with open records have passed laws since 1998 through the efforts of activists who have used the internet as an organizing tool. The three recent defeats in the northeast are not the end of the movement but have taught us what to avoid, as we proceed with future bills.

*Janine Baer can be reached at janine.baer@comcast.net. She is the author of **Growing in the Dark: Adoption Secrecy and its Consequences** which details how and why birth records were sealed in California. To order: www.xlibris.com/growinginthedark.html or Amazon.com. For more information on open records activism: www.bastards.org.*

FROM MY HEART TO YOURS

By Rachel Smith

Can reality reach from
My heart to yours
When what lies between
Are miles of detours?
We are family by birth
And strangers by choice
It was mine at the start
It's now yours to voice.
It's dark in this cave
Of timeless tarry
The opening is guarded
With fear its sentry.
The sunlight of hope
Once danced on my hair
But truth is now captive
To doubt and despair.
Let the prayer of my heart
Flying daily to you
Replace pain and loss
With healing and truth.
We are family by birth
And strangers by choice
Let us dare to embrace
Giving life its full course.

Rachel Smith, Cameron Park co-facilitator, may be reached at rheartsongs@comcast.net.

The Circle of Connection

By Kathy Waddill

In closing the conference, Kathy Waddill offered some personal insights.

Now that we've had a chance to hear so many different stories, I'd like to share mine with you. I gave my son up in a closed adoption in 1979. There was no such thing as an open adoption at that time.

In the years since, as I've gotten to know people and felt I could trust them, I've shared my story with friends and extended family members. But it certainly wasn't something I'd bring up to just anyone. Then, in 2003, he found me. From that moment on, my son wasn't a secret anymore – he was a person.

When people asked me what was going on in my life, I told them, "When I was in college, I got pregnant, had a baby and gave him up for adoption. In May he found me."

When I shared my story, people began to tell me theirs. They weren't necessarily adoption stories. I heard about abortions, miscarriages, early marriages to a virtual stranger because of a pregnancy, stillbirths, and infertility. One of my friends said to me, "The same thing happened to me" – and she turned out to be a birth mother, too. Another person I'd just met said, "You blew me away when you said you were a birth mother, because you seem so put together."

Since I was found, I've been learning so much about the complexity of adoption. But, two sets of facts stand out. The first is this:

No child comes into this world without parents.
No child survives in this world without parents.
But these are not necessarily the same people.

The fundamental relationship between parent and child, however it is forged, is the foundation for all human relationships. The emotional connection is deeply, profoundly human. The adjectives do not adequately describe its importance.

I believe that the more we share our parent/child stories, the more universal we find out our stories are. For instance, the motherless child is the basis for every fairy tale – think about it – and so many movies. Once you start looking, you realize

even such diverse tales as Star Wars and the Da Vinci Code are essentially adoption stories. The tale of a child, cared for by other than the birth parents, is completely interwoven into our cultural history.

The second set of facts I've come to see clearly is this:

Our lives as individuals are irrevocably intertwined with the times in which we live.
We can't change the past.
We can't undo the choices we've made or the ones that were made for us.

People ask me, "Would you have chosen an open adoption, if you could?" The truth is, I don't know. I don't know because I CAN'T know. That option wasn't available to me in 1979. I have no way of taking that other path.

What I DO know is that we have the power to help change the future. As you leave here today,

I invite you to go out, tell your story, and listen to the ones you hear in response. By a simple act of sharing, we can accomplish so many things.

We can begin to heal the pain of the past.
We can help shape a future that is open instead of secretive.
We can replace shame with respect.

In an open world, the circle of connection between children and all of their parents never has to be broken, because we'll all be able to care for our children. As my son's other mother said, when we first met, "Now he has even more people to love him. What can be wrong with that?"

Kathy Waddill is a professional organizer, speaker, trainer, and author (The Organizing Sourcebook, 2001). She is working on a new book, a memoir of secret motherhood. To reach her, go to: www.theuntangledweb.com. Kathy also facilitates the East Bay Birthmothers support group.

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2006 Conference on the Changing Picture of Adoption

For story, see page 1



Panelist Linda Orozco



PACER Board Member, Mark Kunkel



AAC Co-Chair, Ellen Roseman



Vicki White and Jerilynn Wagner



View from the Sunset building



PACER President, Malcolm Pearson



Past President Martin Brandfon and Jim Ansbro



Melissa Holub, panel chairperson



BOOK REVIEW

The Girls Who Went Away: The Hidden History of Women Who Surrendered Children for Adoption in the Decades Before Roe v. Wade

By Ann Fessler

Penguin Press, 2006

Reviewed by Denise Roessle

For years, I wondered if I'd imagined it — not my pregnancy, nor the birth and relinquishment of my son, but what happened on the fringes. My parents' hardhearted reaction, the indifference with which I was treated at the hospital and by the adoption attorney, and the collective expectation that I would walk away unscathed, played in my head like a bad movie. When I reunited with my son, 25 years after his birth, the memories came back with a vengeance. And yet, I couldn't help but think that I imagined it worse than it actually was. Surely, I could have done something to keep my baby, and barring that, I should have been able to bounce back, instead of letting the experience so profoundly impact my life. Reading about adoption issues and participating in support groups helped free me from the cruel grip of "what ifs." But if I still harbored any fantasies that, as a frightened 19-year-old, I could have bucked the giant adoption machine of that time, Ann Fessler's book would have put them all to rest.

The Girls Who Went Away is the first book to fully capture the birthmother experience in the years before choice, sex education and birth control, when shame and secrecy ruled, and options other than marriage were virtually nonexistent. Like Rickie Solinger's *Wake Up Little Susie* (1992), it portrays the socio-economic climate that allowed 1.5 million babies to be relinquished in the U.S. between 1945 and 1973. However, in Fessler's book, statistics and analysis take a back seat to the birthmother's personal and powerful stories.

The hauntingly similar tales of more than 100 women paint an accurate picture of the era I remember. There were no "adoption plans," no choices offered. Only desperate girls, sent away to wait out their pregnancies in disgrace, until the babies they would not be permitted to mother were born and taken away. They were chastised by religious figures, sometimes tricked by social workers and adoption agencies, and ultimately scorned by a society with black and white rules.

Fessler, herself an adoptee, had been producing short films and audio-visual installations on the subject of adoption for fifteen years, when she began recording the birthmother stories that she found "so powerful that they transformed my understanding on adoption." Framed by the author's own story of waiting to search while her adoptive mother was alive, and then finding and reunited with her birthmother, while still working on the project, the stories are told with courage, insight, and refreshingly little whining.

(The tapes, on which the book is based, will be housed in the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America at Harvard.)

Thank goodness, Ann Fessler saw the significance of a time in history that will hopefully never repeat. Like many adoption books, this one is not an easy read. But for birthmothers, the validation is worth the discomfort. And for adoptees who were relinquished during those years, and parents adopted them, the potential for understanding is vast.

Denise Roessle is a former PACER board member and support group facilitator, who has since relocated to Arizona. She can be reached at droessle@mac.com.



MOVIE REVIEW

Northeast

Reviewed by Geneva Anderson

Northeast is Argentinean filmmaker Juan Solanas' new documentary-style feature film that tells the story of two women whose radically different worlds intersect over adoption. Helene (Carole Bouquet) is an affluent, confident French woman in her 40's working in the pharmaceuticals industry. When she decides to adopt a baby, she finds herself unexpectedly caught up in the corrupt world of Argentinean baby-brokering. The film opens as she travels from Paris to wealthy Buenos Aires to pick up her baby and finalize the adoption. When the adoption falls through, she learns of a place in the forsaken northeast region of Argentina where poverty is endemic, babies are for sale, and adoptions are quick. Helene is connected with lawyer Gustavo and proceeds east to this miserable area determined to get a baby.

Down the road from the hacienda where Helene is staying, we meet Juana (Aymara Rovero), a single mother who is increasingly keeping company with trouble-makers. When she learns that she is pregnant again and about to be evicted from her adobe hovel, her utter desperation leads her to think about ending her pregnancy or adopting out her young son, whom she is told will have a better life abroad.

Inevitably, Helene and Juana meet. After trying to abort her baby, Juana, now very ill, comes to Helene. While Helene waits and aches for a baby, her confidence crumbles and she becomes prey to ruthless people brokering children for adoption or child-prostitution, as well as organ donation. As her awareness grows, she begins to see how she might use her resources in this horrific environment.

Northeast was the highlight of the recent San Francisco International Film Festival, now in its 49th year. The film exposes the long-standing and inconvenient truth of adoption in the developing world — children as commodities and money talks! Juan Solanas did his homework well: this gripping story is anchored in enough fact that it has already had tremendous impact in Latin America. In Argentina, some officials were indicted recently for corrupt adoption practices. *Northeast* is highly recommended for all triad members, especially for anyone considering a foreign adoption.

Northeast, 104 minutes, will be in theaters this fall.

Geneva Anderson, a freelance writer, can be reached at genevaj@comcast.net.

SUPPORT GROUPS

Single-focus groups are for the adult individuals specified only (birthmothers, adoptees, etc.).
Triad groups are open to all adult members of the triad plus spouses or significant partners.
Guests: It is important that you notify the facilitator prior to bringing a guest.
First-timers: Be sure to telephone prior to attending your first meeting so that the facilitator may welcome you, provide location and directions, and answer any questions you may have.

CAMERON PARK (SACRAMENTO AREA)

Second Tuesdays (6:30 p.m.)
 Rachel, 530/558-5336
 Beth, 530/677-5650
 CameronParkTriad@pacer-adoption.org

CONTRA COSTA TRIAD

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 Judy, 925/952-4853
 CCTriad@pacer-adoption.org

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 Malcolm, 510/336-9284
 Or Mark, 510/207-0142
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EAST BAY BIRTHMOTHERS

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 Orinda
 Kathy, 925/254-4044
 EBayBirthmom@pacer-adoption.org

MARIN TRIAD

Last Thursdays (7 p.m.)
 San Anselmo
 Ellen, 415/453-0902
 MarinTriad@pacer-adoption.org

SACRAMENTO TRIAD

Last Tuesdays (6:30 p.m.)
 Sacramento
 Linda, 916/359-6777
 or Diane, 916/442-1812
 SacTriad@pacer-adoption.org

SAN FRANCISCO ADOPTEES

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 or Shelly, 415/225-7669
 SFTriad@pacer-adoption.org

SAN MATEO TRIAD

Third Thursdays (7 p.m.)
 Burlingame
 Sally, 650/344-7789
 Alison, 650/738-9178

SanMateoTriad@pacer-adoption.org

SONOMA COUNTY ADOPTEES

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SonomaAdoptee@pacer-adoption.org

SONOMA COUNTY TRIAD

First Wednesdays (7 p.m.)
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If you aren't already a member, or if you haven't renewed your membership, please take the time to do so now. You may also use this form to send a donation of any amount. If you would like to volunteer your time to work on one of our upcoming events, please contact us at webmaster@pacer-adoption.org.

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Are you currently attending a PACER support group? If so, which one? _____

This is for a NEW MEMBER, RENEWAL DONATION: \$ _____

I am ADOPTEE, BIRTH PARENT, ADOPTIVE PARENT, OTHER: _____

Type of membership: REGULAR (\$40), PROFESSIONAL (\$75), AGENCY (\$100), SPONSOR (\$125).

TOTAL ENCLOSED: \$ _____

ANNOUNCEMENTS

PACER Reading Group Proposed

In the fall, Kay, an adoptive parent and professor emerita from Sonoma State, will host a monthly reading group to be located in the East Bay. The selection each time will be a book with an adoption theme. For information or to start a reading group in your area, email Kay at ktrim@berkeley.edu.



The Board of Directors Welcomes New Members

We are very pleased to announce the recent additions to the Board of Jerilynn Wagner and Kathy Waddill. Jerilynn facilitates the Sonoma County Triad and has led successful adoption conferences in her area. Kathy is the new facilitator for the East Bay Birthmothers. She is a professional organizer and author (*The Organizing Sourcebook*, 2001).

2006 CUB Retreat

Author Ann Fessler, "The Girls Who Went Away," will speak at the annual retreat on October 6 – 8 at The Inn at Little Harbor, Ruskin, Florida.
www.CUBBirthparents.org



PACER Thanks Sally Caldwell and Arylss Anderson

After years of generous service, Sally has resigned from the Board of Directors. She will continue in her role as the San Mateo Triad's facilitator. For over ten years, Arylss inspired many women who came to her East Bay Birthmother's group and built a unique camaraderie. Previously, she served as the treasurer for the Board. Through their commitment, both women have helped keep PACER alive and available for newcomers.

Visit our website at <http://www.pacer-adoption.org>

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