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Adopted teens: Their need to know

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By **J.T. MORAND** Staff Writer

Faith Riemer just found her birth mother after being separated 20 years.

Billy Dempsey is still looking for his. The 20-year-old has tons of questions as he considers having children of his own one day.

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Billy Dempsey, 20, wants to know more about his biological mom. The Libertyville High School graduate now lives in Chicago.
(Joe Shuman/For Pioneer Press)

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Faith Riemer, 20, of Libertyville, has found her birth mother.
(Joe Shuman/For Pioneer Press)

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Suzanne Slade of Libertyville wrote a book about helping teenagers who are adopted and want to learn more about their birth parents.
(Joe Shuman/For Pioneer Press)

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That's how it goes for adopted young adults, who, beginning when they enter adolescence, want to know more about their birth parents. By the end of their teenage years, they begin to think there's a part of themselves they don't know about.

Suzanne Slade, an adoptive parent in Libertyville, hopes she can help them on their path with her book, *Adopted: The Ultimate Teen Guide*, just published by Scarecrow Press. It's part of the *It Happened to Me* series, which offers help to teens dealing with various issues. Both Riemer and Dempsey, also from Libertyville, are in the book, along with other local teens who were adopted.

Sharing space on a couch in a Libertyville coffee shop, Riemer and Dempsey, friends since they attended Libertyville High School together, told their stories about searching for their birth mothers.

Slade said adoptees tend to search for their birth mothers before they search for their birth fathers because the adoptee shared the pregnancy and birth with their mother.

"I think, in general, people are more emotionally attached to their mothers; mothers are usually more nurturing and affectionate than dads," Slade said. "Often in the case of adoptions, the birth father may not stick around for the pregnancy, and I think teens know that."

Some adoptees go looking for their birth father after finding their birth mother, especially if she doesn't have hard feelings toward him, she added.

Riemer and Dempsey said Slade has been tremendously helpful to them as they dealt, and still deal, with adoption issues. Here are their stories.

Faith Riemer's story

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When Faith Riemer, 20, was a toddler, she didn't understand what being adopted meant. She knew no other family and doesn't remember being adopted.

"When you're younger, life is much easier," she said. "When you're younger, you think you know who you are."

But when she was 4 years old she started to have questions when her parents adopted a baby boy, who became Riemer's brother.

The question of her identity didn't start to weigh on her until about 10 years later.

"It hit me when I was in junior high," Riemer said. "I wanted to know more."

At age 14, Riemer wondered if her birth mother was alive and if she was OK. She wanted to know if she had any blood related brothers or sisters.

Her adoptive mother Donna shared some information including a photograph of Riemer's birth parents with her adoptive daughter.

Riemer noticed she looked like her birth mom.

"It was something to put my heart at rest," she said.

At age 18, Riemer began searching for her birth mother in earnest.

Donna Riemer helped by doing some Internet searches on Web sites where adopted children and birth parents can place postings in hopes of letting each other know they're being sought.

Then, one day last September, Donna pulled Faith out of class at Tricoci University of Beauty Culture, a cosmetology school in Libertyville, for an impromptu shopping spree. While mother and daughter ate lunch, Donna revealed Faith's birth mom called and was interested in meeting Faith.

"Wow! I can't believe this is happening," Riemer recalled thinking. "Do I want to meet her? Do I want to call her? It didn't feel real. It was just something I dreamt about, like my birth mom is this princess who lives in a far away land."

Riemer finally met her birth mother about a month ago, in the central Illinois town of Gridley, where her birth mother's family lives. Her birth mother flew in from Dallas, Texas, where she now lives with her husband and three other children.

Riemer said she was nervous as she and Donna waited in a restaurant parking lot for her birth mom to arrive.

Then she saw her birth mother get out of a car.

The two stood several feet apart, just looking at each other.

The two were dressed alike.

Then, birth mother and daughter walked toward each other and hugged for several minutes and both began sobbing.

Now, Riemer said she feels as if she has another friend. The two text message each other and talk on the phone every other day. They plan to rendezvous again in Gridley over Christmas.

Billy Dempsey's story

Billy Dempsey began noticing differences between himself and his adoptive family in photos the older he got. For example, he said he's a little taller and he has darker features than his adoptive parents.

"None of us grew up with people who look like us," he said about adopted people.

He wonders about his genes and the people he does look like. What if he wants to have children one day? What will he be passing on to them? Does he look more like his birth mom or his birth dad?

And, as Dempsey considers what he'll do for a livelihood, he ponders what talents or skills he might have that may be evident in blood relatives.

He also wants to know about the well-being of his birth mom and why she gave him up for adoption.

"Just finding her is the biggest thing," he said. "I want to hear her story, her side of it."

Dempsey knows this much about his birth mother: She was a 5'8" brunette with green eyes and Catholic. She was 13 or 14 years old when she gave birth to him.

Dempsey managed to get a copy of his birth certificate, but his birth parents' names are whited out except for a vertical line that sticks out where his birth mother's name is. He and his friends have tried to figure out what letter it could be.

As badly as Dempsey wants to find his birth mom, he takes heart knowing where his adoptive family is and who they are. As far as he's concerned, they are his family.

The love between these adopted children and their adoptive parents isn't any different than love between children who live with their birth parents.

Adoptive parents have provided a life for them that isn't any different than the lives of their friends who are not adopted. For example, Dempsey said he's had arguments with his family members, and he loves them.

His love and respect for his adoptive father, also named Bill, is evident in the poem he wrote called "Hero," which was published in Slade's book.

Most of who he is, Dempsey said, he owes to the family he knows. Environment has played a bigger role in his life than DNA, he said.

"Ninety-five percent of who I am is due to my adoptive family," Dempsey said. "Be happy with your adoptive family."

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