

Brotherton supports bill for adoption information

By JACKIE KLEIN

Mary, 23, was adopted when she was 10. For years, she has been following every possible clue which might lead her to her real parents.

If enacted into law, a bill passed in the State House of Representatives would enable Mary and others like her to learn about their births and backgrounds.

The bill, which is now in the State Senate, would require child placement agencies, court or department of social services to keep a record of non-identifying information on adoptions.

This would include the place of birth, pre-adoption medical history, ethnic background, religion and education of the natural parents and whether there were natural brothers and sisters at the time of adoption. The real parents wouldn't be identified.

This information would be available to adoptive parents when children are placed in their homes. Later, when the adopted person becomes an adult at 18, he or she could request and receive the information.

If adoptive persons wanted to contact their natural parents or brothers and sisters, the request would be relayed by the agency or court. The contact could be made with mutual consent.

"UNDER PRESENT law, adoption records and information are strictly confidential," said Rep. Joseph Forbes, an Oak Park Democrat who voted for the bill. "They can be opened only by probate court order for very good cause."

"An adult who was adopted as a child is legally prevented from learning about his or her heritage even if the natural parents agree to release that information. It takes tremendous effort for these persons to find something about their backgrounds. They're likely to be unsuccessful."

The measure, Forbes said, would continue to protect natural parents' right to privacy, if they didn't want to be identified or contacted. But if there's mutual consent, the proposed state law wouldn't stand in the way, he said.

Rep. Wilbur "Sandy" Brotherton, a Republican from Farmington, also supported the house bill. The measure, he said, was designed for adoptive parents and adopted persons to find out if there are any congenital health problems which may become apparent years later.

"We have two adopted children, and they're old enough to understand," Brotherton said. "When they're adults they should be able to find out about their heritage and ethnic backgrounds. If there is a history of illness in their natural family which they might inherit, at least they'll be prepared for it. They'll learn more if at least one par-

ent consents to have his or her name released."

THE CASE of a Southfield couple and their adopted daughter illustrates Brotherton's comments.

"We adopted Margaret when she was 6 weeks old," her adoptive mother recalled. "She was a beautiful baby, but after about a week we noticed the muscles in one of her eyes were weak. We wanted to find out if the problem was congenital."

"If the damage was going to be permanent, we thought we'd better know that right away before we became too attached to the baby. We decided not to keep her if there was a defect. But we couldn't find out anything from the adoption agency."

Margaret's eye condition cleared itself. But other problems followed. When she learned she was adopted, she ran away from home because she felt guilty that her adoptive parents were spending money on her which they couldn't afford.

When she finally came back, she sobbed and begged to be told the identity of her real mother and father. Margaret is now married and has three children of her own. But, she said, thoughts of her natural parents still haunt her.

"Young and older adopted persons often have a burning desire to find their real parents," said Thomas Frommeyer, Southfield Human Resources Department director. "They take difficult steps to contact their mothers and fathers. If they find out who they are, some adopted individuals are very hurt by the circumstances. It could make matters worse instead of better."

"People have an inherent desire to find their roots. They have to settle something within themselves. A law making information about natural parents available can be a good thing with professional counseling and evaluation. But those who try to do it themselves can spend a lot of time, effort and money and be frustrated at the end."

SOME PERSONS, who aren't adopted but lose contact with their parents, try to re-establish their relationship. Frommeyer said. Many parents and children welcome the opportunity to get back together and help each other, he said. But occasionally the results are disappointing.

Robert Wright, a Southfield School Board trustee and director of St. Peter's Home for Boys in Detroit, said he has received a number of calls this year from adopted children who are determined to track down their real parents.

"There's an aggressive organization of adopted persons who are like detectives," Wright said. "They find clues and put them together, trying to find their real parents."

"In certain cases, getting identifying

information is all right. But some can be spooky unless the adopted person is ready for it. People don't put kids up for adoption for no reason. There's brutal stuff in some of these records and they should be read by social service workers before they're released. There should be more care taken of what goes in those records to begin with."

WRIGHT SAID he was contacted by a young woman who belongs to the organization of adopted persons. She said her birth certificate led to clues about her background and she discovered the city where her natural mother is living.

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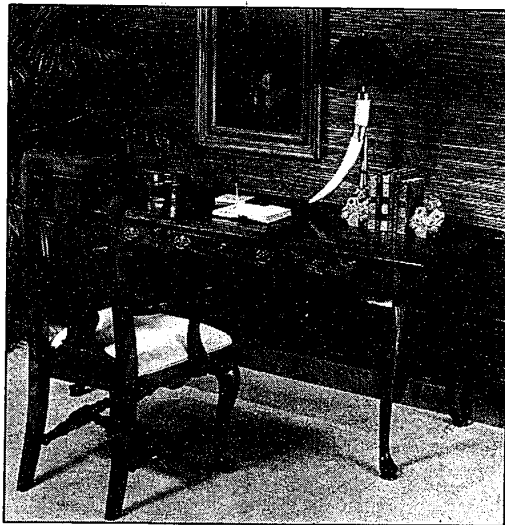
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