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In Search of Identity

*Most kids
grow up
knowing that
weird thing
with their hair
comes from
Aunt Martha,
and that they
get their off-key
singing voice
from
Uncle John.
But kids who
were adopted
under a
shroud of
secrecy look in
the mirror,
and never see
anybody but
themselves.*

By SUSAN OPPAT
NEWS STAFF REPORTER

For people raised the way most people are raised, by the families they were born into, it's a difficult concept to grasp. "What's the big deal about being adopted? Why do you have to find your birth parents?" people ask.

But adoptees who don't know their birth parents, don't even know who their birth parents are, often say they feel like there is something missing.

They wonder. "Who do I look like?" Or, "Why am I artistic?" Or, simply, "Why?"

In Michigan, adoption has historically meant adoptees and their birth families will probably never get answers to those questions. Because in Michigan, adoptions have always been, and largely remain, closed, sealed, secret.

In recent years, some adoptions in Michigan are more open, with exchange of information between families and,

sometimes, contact.

But thousands of children born between 1945 and 1980, and their birth families, have been left, waiting, behind a closed door, knocking, getting no answer.

The door is opening just a little now, if on creaky hinges, with a law that hit the books in January.

That law requires probate judges to appoint "confidential intermediaries" to perform searches whenever an adoptee or a birth family, even birth siblings, asks. The program became active this month in Washtenaw County — far ahead of most other counties.

Confidential intermediaries will not violate the confidentiality that birth families — and adoptive families — were promised at the time of adoption.

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Adopted daughter finally meets her birth mother

By SUSAN OPPAT
NEWS STAFF REPORTER

Marianne Bach is one of those kids who used to stare at a mirror, and wonder who she was.

A social worker and post-adoption counselor at the private, non-profit Catholic Social Services, Bach works with adopted kids and families to get through the myriad issues that often come after adoption — "why didn't my parents want me?" and "who do I look like?"

Bach is now also a confidential intermediary at the Washtenaw County Probate Court who helps adoptees and birth families search for each other. The program was created under a new state law

that went into effect in January.

Bach brings a special understanding to her work.

As an adopted child, Bach has had to face many of those issues herself. She knows personally that, "there are people out there who are not able to complete the bonding process, and need that to be whole."

Adopted at birth, Bach "grew up knowing about it, and thinking that kids were there on the grocery shelf, and moms and dads would go and pick out a kid. I thought all kids were adopted."