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As an adoptee and resident of Pennsylvania, I respectfully submit this article as my written testimony in support of HB162. This piece was originally posted to the Lost Daughters blog on Tuesday, Sept. 9, 2014 and it has been revised to serve as official testimony for legislative purposes. My words are just as applicable now as they were then.

Connecting the Dots: Adoption, Religion, Money, and Birth Certificates in Pennsylvania

The Pennsylvania Catholic Conference is the most politically influential opponent to HB162. The organization claims that its opposition is based on the beliefs that relinquishing parents were legally promised a right to confidentiality and that adult adoptees accessing their own birth certificates would somehow result in an increase of abortions. Both of these claims have been proven time and time again as having no reputable data or evidence to support them.

Regardless, many people, some of our legislators included, seem to buy into these claims. Or at least, they buy into the idea that a religious special interest organization should have influence over the vital statistics function of a secular state government. A closer examination of the relationship between Catholic adoption agencies operating in Pennsylvania and the state's own adoption system reveals that perhaps another claim might be closer to the truth.

Who Really Cares?

In examining why a religious special interest organization would care so much about adult citizens accessing their own, factual birth certificates, it is important to first strip away emotions and red herrings. Let's ask ourselves if it really matters to the rest of society if adults who were adopted as children have access to the accurate records of their births. I'll use myself as an example.

I'm a Connecticut-born adoptee who currently lives and votes in Pennsylvania. If you visit my website, you will find information about my professional background. You will find links to my Amazon author page that promotes books about the adoptee experience. The fact that I am an adoptee is made quite clear. Now, I would challenge anyone reading this testimony to discern if I am in possession of my original birth certificate and consider if the answer is of personal relevance to them. For all of the supposed concern about confidentiality and abortions, does anyone know, or care, if I have my original birth certificate or not?

The truth is that I successfully petitioned the court in the city of my birth and was granted access to my original birth certificate 17 years ago. And what I have decided to do, or not do, with the information featured on it has been a personal, private matter. I have managed my own affairs as an adult citizen without the interference of the Connecticut state government or the agency that facilitated my adoption, Catholic Charities of Fairfield County. I also have yet to hear from anyone about how the accessing of my birth certificate has somehow impacted

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society-at-large. As far as I know, no woman has had an abortion over the past 17 years because I have my original birth certificate. I'm also unaware of how any relinquishing parents other than my own feel about the fact that I have my original birth certificate. Perhaps, this is because my personal life truly isn't of any concern to those not related to me or within my circle of confidants.

So why is my personal life, and those of other adult adoptees, of such interest to the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference?

The Bottom Line

There are currently several Catholic adoption agencies providing post-adoption services in Pennsylvania. These agencies charge fees to adult adoptees in return for third-party intermediary services. The adoptee pays the fee and the Catholic agency reviews the adoption file, contacts the natural parents, and determines if contact between the two parties can occur. Of course, if the natural parents do not want contact with their son or daughter, the Catholic agency keeps the fee paid by the adult adoptee--for services clearly not rendered to the paying individual's satisfaction. The interesting thing about this arrangement is that in some circumstances, these Catholic agencies are providing post-adoption services to adult adoptees whose adoptions were not facilitated through the agencies themselves. I'll use Centre County as an example.

Centre County refers its adoptees to Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown for post-adoption services. This means that adults who were adopted through Centre County itself (as opposed to through a private agency such as Catholic Charities) are referred to a third-party religious agency that did not facilitate their adoptions. After receiving permission from the Centre County court, the authorized representative from Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown is then granted access to the adoption files of those adoptees. This means that a religiously affiliated party not involved at all in the adoptions has full access to all of the identifying information about the adoptees and the birth parents involved. So much for those concerns involving confidentiality for birth parents.

In the fall of 2014, I placed a call to Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown to inquire about these services. The authorized representative was friendly, helpful, and more than happy to provide me with the fee structure. She also shared with me the fact that she currently has several Centre County cases ongoing and only one case in which the adult adoptee was actually adopted through Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown. Each of these adoptees is being charged an initial \$25 to start the process of possibly obtaining identifying information. An additional \$100 will be charged upon completion, I am assuming regardless of whether the adoptee feels the outcome was satisfactory.

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One could conclude that restoring the access Pennsylvania-born adoptees had to their original birth certificates prior to 1985 would remove the need for the post-adoption services offered by Catholic agencies. In accessing their original birth certificates, adult adoptees born in Pennsylvania would be able to make important decisions pertaining to their own lives--such as what to do with the information featured on their own birth certificates--in a personal, private manner without third-party involvement. This is typically how non-adopted adult citizens born in Pennsylvania make decisions pertaining to their personal lives and the rest of society seems to be okay with that.

So, if we set aside red herrings about mythical confidentiality rights and the nonexistent rise in abortion numbers, what's left? What could possibly cause the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference to fight so hard to ensure that adult adoptees--many of whom were adopted through its own affiliated agencies--are treated differently under law to all non-adopted adults? I propose that the reason has nothing to do with altruistic motives and everything to do with concerns regarding loss of revenue. So let's just call it what it is.

Thoughts for legislators

I have faith that my legislators are capable of doing the right thing. I am confident that my legislators are capable of showing Pennsylvania-born adoptees that equal treatment under law for all citizens is more important than the highly biased desires of religious special interest organizations. And I ask you to please consider the substantiated facts and available evidence. Please do not allow yourselves, as elected representatives in a secular state government, to be influenced by claims offered by religious organizations that have no supporting data. .

We acknowledge and affirm that providing adopted adults access to their original certificate is not only good practice, but also, more importantly, the right and just thing to do.

~ From testimony offered in support of a similar bill submitted by the Catholic Conference of Ohio on March 13, 2013. Ohio's bill passed and is currently in effect.