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The Adoptee Rights Bill (HB 162)

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Mary O'Leary Wiley

Testimony in support of House Bill 162: Adoptee Rights Bill

Dear Chairpersons Watson and Bishop and Members of the House Committee on Children & Youth:

My name is Mary O'Leary Wiley and I am from Altoona, where I practice full time as a Licensed Psychologist in my hometown. I attended Villanova University, graduated from Penn State, and did my master's and doctoral work at the University of Maryland. I am Co-Chair of the Special Interest Group on Adoption Research and Practice within the American Psychological Association, a group I co-founded in 2005. I, along with my colleague Amanda Baden and others, have published several integrative reviews of the research literature in APA journals on counseling people whose lives are touched by adoption, including adoptees, original families, and adoptive families. I co-founded the Center for Adoption Education of Central Pennsylvania, a group that serves as a resource to Central Pennsylvanians whose lives are touched by adoption. I have been a keynote speaker at several national conferences including Resolve, the Barker Foundation, and the American Adoption Congress. In my practice, I have provided psychological services to hundreds of clients whose lives are touched by adoption. For more information about my professional credentials, please feel free to check out my website at www.wileypsychologist.com.

I was adopted by my parents, James and Patricia O'Leary at six months of age in Minnesota, where my Dad was a Surgical Resident at the Mayo Clinic. We moved home to Altoona when I was a year old so he could practice surgery in his hometown, which he did until his death in 1982. My Mom died only four years ago and I am blessed to have been able to spend time with her daily since I lived only a few blocks away from her. My parents were both supporters of adoptee rights and would be proud that I have the opportunity to be here today. I am deeply honored to have the opportunity to speak about a topic so near to my heart.

I am the oldest of the three adopted O'Leary children. My brother Denis, who is two years younger than I am, was adopted at ten days of age and came to us straight from the hospital. My brother John, who is three years younger than I am, was adopted at two years of age, and I clearly remember picking him up from the orphanage in Cresson. After he had walked across a big room in a blazer and tie to where my Mom, my Dad, my brother and I were sitting on a sofa, the Sister said to him, "Anthony, your name will now be John, and this is your new family." He started to cry and I started to cry and even then I knew something was very wrong in erasing a

child's identity. John always asked me to tell that story over and over, as I realize now that it was his only tie to the first two years of his life. My brother is still the closest person in the world to me, along with my husband and three children, and it is on behalf of my family that I became a psychologist whose practice and research focuses on adoption.

It is well known in adoption circles that it seems that adopted children somehow never grow up. We are treated as children for the rest of our lives. Our adoption as children defines us. The law treats us as children. I am 59 years old and I am testifying today in front of the Committee on Children and Youth about a law that has an effect on all my adult clients and my adult brothers. In psychodynamic jargon, this is referred to as infantilization: The treating of adults like infants.

Knowing the truth about oneself is part of healthy emotional development for all people. Recently, I had a client who was seeking information about herself from Catholic Charities, the agency she had been adopted through. Now I have been on the Board of Catholic Charities of Altoona-Johnstown for the last 12 years and their Executive Director, Jean Johnstone, is a close colleague and friend of mine. She came to my office and was nervous about telling my client the circumstances of her birth. I understand this. But I assured her that no matter what the truth is, it is far better than the millions of other scenarios that run through adoptees' minds. My client was so very grateful for this information and so appreciative for information, ANY information, about herself.

Adoption is a lifelong process. Lack of knowledge about oneself affects people differently at different stages of their lives. When I was young I wanted to know who I looked like. When I was a teen I wanted to know medical information. When I was a bit older I wanted to know information to help my children. At this stage of my life, I am most concerned about the principles upon which adoption is based. I would like adoption and all structures within our society to be based on principles of which we can be proud.

Principles such as honesty and integrity. Principles such as care for the well-being of all citizens in our Commonwealth. Principles such as positive attitudes toward adoption and all those whose lives are touched by adoption. And most of all, I would like our principles about adoption to never be based on shame.

I'm afraid that our current legal structure around adoption is not fully based on these principles. Adoptees are the only class of people to be denied information about themselves by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. They are denied their Original Birth Certificate. If they are under the age of 18, their parents are denied their Original Birth Certificate. Original birth certificates are denied to adoptees from step-parent and older children public adoptions.

HB 162 would change this. HB 162 would help adoptive families to have accurate information to help their children. It would help adult adoptees to have accurate information about themselves. It will allow positive principles to serve as the foundation of our adoption laws.

I am asking each of you to recommend HB 162 to the House of Representatives for a vote. It is the right thing to do. Every person born in Pennsylvania should have the right of access to information about themselves without government intrusion. Even adoptees. Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony

Sincerely,

Mary O'Leary Wiley, PhD, ABPP
Licensed Psychologist