

ANNALS OF INQUIRY

THE FAMILY FALLOUT OF DNA SURPRISES

Through genetic testing, millions of Americans are estimated to have discovered that their parents aren't who they thought. The news has upended relationships and created a community looking for answers.

By Jennifer Wilson

August 18, 2025



Paternity has historically been tricky to pin down. "Mommy's baby, daddy's maybe," as the saying goes. But now the milkman's kid can buy a DNA test from Target. Illustration by Alexander Glandien

Lily Wood is forty-three years old but considers April 9, 2019, to be her “rebirth day.” That was the date she received her results from Ancestry, the direct-to-consumer DNA-testing company. A self-described biohacker, Wood had been curious to see whether she had a genetic predisposition to diseases like Alzheimer’s. “I wanted to get ahead of things,” she told me.

It was actually her second time testing. The first time, Wood had used 23andMe, but the results had seemed off to her. “The ethnicity was wrong,” she said, before correcting herself. “I *thought* it was wrong.” Her heritage, as she’d always understood it, was French on her father’s side and Norwegian on her mother’s. And yet the 23andMe customers who had come up as genetically close matches had Italian names. Wood, who lives in Minneapolis, where she grew up, called her sister, who speculated that a strand of hair belonging to a lab technician had gotten into the vial. Her sister advised her to try Ancestry. When the new results came in, Wood learned that there was a man in the company’s database with whom she shared fourteen hundred centimorgans, a measure of genetic overlap that typically denotes a half sibling. But this man was a stranger to her—and the site said that he had Sicilian ancestry.

Wood drove to her mother’s house, a few miles away. When she arrived, her mother, Vicki, was sitting at the kitchen table with her husband, Wood’s stepfather. At the mention of the close match’s surname, Vicki’s face turned bright red. She replied that it was the name of her old boss at FedEx. Wood was nonplussed. “I was, like, ‘What are you saying right now? Are you . . . ? What?’ ” she recalled. Wood’s stepfather looked at his wife and said, “You never thought this was going to come back and bite you, did you?” Vicki then filled in a few details. She had gotten pregnant after sleeping with a higher-up on a business trip in Memphis while married to her first husband, Wood’s presumed father.

The next week was emotionally confusing for Wood. Money had been tight when she was growing up; the man she now calls her “birth-certificate father” had driven a cab, and she’d swept the floors at a local private school in exchange for tuition. Suddenly,

here she was, Googling her biological father, a longtime executive at the shipping company, and finding pictures of what appeared to be him and his children riding horses at their ranch in Wyoming. She felt like her world was “shattering,” she told me, but no one around her registered the news that way. She remembered being asked, in the family group chat, what side dish she was bringing for Easter dinner. “We’re a sweep-it-under-the-rug sort of family,” she said. But, as Wood saw it, this wasn’t exactly her family anymore. She confronted her mother, telling her that she did not seem very remorseful. Her sister thought their mother might interpret this as sex-shaming. Wood protested. “I don’t care who she slept with or if the marriage was closed, open, whatever,” she said. “This isn’t about sex. This is about the lie.”

Wood tracked down her biological father and introduced herself. His initial response was encouraging. He said that he remembered her mother. “We will help bring clarity to this,” he assured her, and told her he’d be in touch soon. A week later, she heard from him again, but the tone had shifted. By then, she had reached out to the man Ancestry had indicated was a half sibling. Her biological father chastised her. “His words were like ‘We don’t do shock and awe in my family’—as if I’m this, like, Jerry Springer–Maury Povich person.”

But Wood did ultimately get into the paternity-surprise media business. Six weeks after her rebirth day, she purchased a mike and, using her living room as a studio, launched a podcast devoted to interviews with people who, like her, had found out through commercial DNA testing that they had been misinformed about their biological parentage. Wood named her podcast “NPE Stories.” The term N.P.E. is often credited to a 2000 study conducted by a pair of geneticists at Oxford who examined whether male Britons with the last name Sykes could be traced to a single shared ancestor through their Y chromosomes. But they kept coming across men named Sykes who didn’t even share their father’s Y chromosome. They called these subjects, diplomatically, “non-paternity events.” In 2017, the acronym became a more entrenched online community when a woman named Catherine St Clair created a Facebook group, eventually called N.P.E. Fellowship, for people who had discovered misattributed parentage through commercial DNA tests. She rebranded N.P.E. to stand for the less technical “not parent expected,” and welcomed late-discovery adoptees (L.D.A.s) and donor-conceived persons (D.C.P.s) to join the family fray.

When Wood started her show, there was already a podcast of N.P.E. tell-alls called “CutOff Genes.” Soon came others: “Everything’s Relative,” “Family Twist,” “Sex,

Lies & the Truth.” Before long, anyone with a Spotify account could listen to hundreds of hours of adults trying to make sense of their parents’ sex lives. (Episodes about people who found out that their parents had been swingers in the seventies practically formed their own subgenre.) A man named Jonathon told the hosts of “Sex, Lies & the Truth” that, after being contacted by a daughter he never knew he had, he was upset with her mother at first, but then he reflected that thirty years earlier he had been a “weed-smoking hippie” while she had also been involved with a man training to be an engineer. “In that race, I was Seabiscuit,” he said. Not all episodes are so convivial. Many N.P.E.s look back on their childhoods and—cataloguing every slight, every time they felt different—wonder, Was *that* why?

Paternity has historically been tricky to pin down. “Mommy’s baby, daddy’s maybe,” as the saying goes. But now the milkman’s kid can buy a DNA test from Target. (Occasionally, people learn that their mother used an egg donor, but paternity surprises are more common.) Since the first commercial DNA test debuted, in 2000, the market has exploded. A 2025 YouGov poll found that one in five Americans has taken a direct-to-consumer DNA test. A few years ago, a research team at Baylor College of Medicine surveyed more than twenty-three thousand customers of these kits and learned that three per cent of them had discovered that a person whom they’d believed to be their biological parent wasn’t. (That number is in line with a 2005 study from a university in Liverpool which found a 3.7-per-cent median rate of misattributed paternity in the general population.) If the ratio holds, that means around two million Americans who have taken one of these tests are N.P.E.s.

A cottage industry has sprung up to service them. There are therapists who specialize in treating N.P.E.s, and “DNA detectives” who can track down relatives who haven’t taken tests by triangulating the results of those who have. There are coaches who guide parents in breaking the news about their child’s origins. Brianne Kirkpatrick Williams, of Watershed DNA, is a genetic counsellor who advertises on her website that she spent years delivering bad news to expectant parents, which makes her uniquely qualified to aid clients who want to inform their grown children that they were donor-conceived, say, or to let their spouses know that they were “contacted by a previously unknown biological child.” She charges eight hundred and ninety-nine dollars for a four-session “Prepare to Share” package.

I became interested in doing a story on N.P.E.s after a friend’s ex-boyfriend found out in his thirties that he was one. Hunter (not his real name) was a state-level politician

who ran a campaign on his working-class roots, only to find out that his mother had had an affair with a well-off scientist. Hunter had known his biological father his whole life as a family friend; sometimes this man dropped off hand-me-downs that his sons—Hunter’s half brothers—had outgrown. Hunter told me that he had joined Facebook groups devoted to N.P.E.s but promptly left them. “It was too much,” he said.

It turns out that anger at your mother and a hobbyist’s understanding of genetics is a potent, and potentially politicized, combination. Some factions are trying to transform N.P.E.s from an identity group into an interest one. A guest on Wood’s podcast, for example, an N.P.E. named Richard, who is a clinician by profession, argued that people could be entitled to sue their mother for keeping the identity of their father secret, on the grounds of “parental alienation.” *Severance*, a magazine that covers N.P.E.s, was launched in 2019 by a Pennsylvanian writer named B. K. Jackson; it takes its name from a belief that N.P.E.s have been “severed” from their biological families. Alongside extramarital affairs, the magazine lists “adoption, kidnapping, undisclosed step-parent adoption, paternity fraud, donor-assisted conception” and “nonconsensual sex” as causes of severance. Such rhetoric, which places gamete donation next to criminal acts, has alarmed many in the L.G.B.T.Q. community, as has the legal-advocacy work of a Seattle-based organization founded by an N.P.E. called Right to Know. The group wants to mandate the inclusion of donor and surrogate names on birth certificates, which currently reflect legal, not genetic, parentage. Some in the L.G.B.T.Q. community fear that this will, by default, force them to report more information than opposite-sex couples are required to. In making its case, Right to Know can at times rely on nascent, controversial theories within the world of genomics, which many scientists caution overstate the impact of genes on our health and personalities.

In myth, if a hero wants to achieve greatness—to slay a multiheaded Hydra, to part the Red Sea, to bring balance to the Force—he is almost required to have a dramatic paternity reveal. But now millions of mere mortals are having to contend with the same epic dilemmas: What’s the appropriate amount of anger over an extramarital affair? Will our roots always tug at us, even if we don’t know they’re ours? Who or what, exactly, determines our destiny?

In 1999, the producers of “Maury” came to their host, Maury Povich, with an idea to boost ratings. “These soap operas—they take six months to reveal someone’s

secret father,” Povich remembered them saying. “We can do that in fifteen minutes, on air.” The show became known for its flamboyant paternity-test reveals, and for men, suddenly off the hook for child support, doing celebratory dances. Povich told me, “People come up to me all the time on the street. They like to grab their pregnant wife and get me to say, ‘You *are* the father.’ ” His show was controversial; scholars have accused it of reinforcing stereotypes about Black women’s promiscuity, but nonetheless it became a cultural touchstone. In a 2015 “Saturday Night Live” “Weekend Update” segment about Black History Month, Michael Che joked about Povich: “He set more Black men free than Abraham Lincoln.” Povich’s show was also an unlikely educational resource. In the nineties, DNA was the stuff of science fiction—I first heard about it in “Jurassic Park”—but here it was something real, with real-life consequences.

The scholar Nara B. Milanich, in her book “Paternity: The Elusive Quest for the Father,” observes that, in the past, “biological paternity was considered an ineffable enigma of nature, not just unknown but indeed unknowable.” For much of the twentieth century, the closest thing to a paternity test was the ABO blood-type test, invented in 1924 by a German doctor named Fritz Schiff. But that test could only exclude a possible father, not positively identify one. Then, in 1984, a British geneticist named Alec Jeffreys discovered DNA fingerprinting, which allowed scientists to take a sample of hair, skin, or saliva and single out a sequence of nucleotides specific to one person. But such testing was intended for professionals in a lab. That all changed when a retired business owner in Texas had some extra time on his hands.

People had always asked Bennett Greenspan whether he was related to the economist Alan Greenspan. “I had no answer,” he said. He had never met Alan Greenspan and had never heard that he was a distant relation. Most of us in his position would simply have replied no, but Greenspan, now seventy-three, had been fascinated by genealogy since he was a child. He once brought an empty chart to a shiva, where he mined his elderly Eastern European relatives for intel. He always felt that there were “paper-trail roadblocks” stopping him from getting a full picture of his family tree.

In 1997, Greenspan read an article in the *Times* about a group of geneticists who had tested the Y chromosomes of Jewish men who believed themselves to be part of an ancient priestly tradition called the *cohanim*. He called Michael Hammer, one of the researchers quoted in the story, who ran a lab at the University of Arizona, and asked

to buy a DNA test; Greenspan figured that, if science could try to trace Jewish men alive today to Aaron and Mt. Sinai, there might be hope for his family tree. Hammer told him that his DNA tests were for anthropological purposes only. Greenspan countered with a technique he had learned from sales, which was to let an awkward silence emerge. Hammer fell for it, interjecting, “Someone should start a company for this, because I get calls from crazy genealogists like you all the time.” Hammer and the University of Arizona agreed to let Greenspan run direct-to-consumer tests out of their lab for a fee, and, in 2000, FamilyTreeDNA, the first home DNA-testing kit, was born. Greenspan remembered getting calls from confused customers: “These brothers called and they go, ‘We think your test is wrong—we two match, but our little brother doesn’t.’ I said, ‘Come *on.*’ ”

In 2006, a new kind of DNA test came on the market. Co-founded by Anne Wojcicki, a biotech analyst, 23andMe used autosomal DNA, which could better trace recent relatives on both the patrilineal and the matrilineal lines. Wojcicki envisioned 23andMe as a health-care startup: your saliva could reveal your odds of getting early-onset dementia, or determine if your earwax was sticky because of a C variant in the ABCC11 gene. In 2008, 23andMe hosted a celebrity spit party at New York Fashion Week. Wojcicki told a reporter from the *Times* that Barry Diller was unable to roll his tongue whereas his fellow-guest Anderson Cooper could make a four-leaf clover with his.

Another DNA-testing company also decided to start leveraging the power of celebrity. Back in 2003, Rick Kittles, then a geneticist at Howard University, co-founded African Ancestry, a direct-to-consumer DNA test marketed to African Americans. He began contacting high-profile Black figures and offering to test them. The Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr., recalled hearing from Kittles. “I get a letter saying, ‘Dear Dr. Gates, have you seen “Roots”?’ ” Gates told me. “And I was thinking, What kind of idiot does this guy think I am? Everybody’s seen ‘Roots.’ ” Kittles thought that someone else had connected him to Gates, and doesn’t remember the letter, but, in any case, the men teamed up, and Gates hosted two seasons of a PBS show called “African American Lives,” DNA-testing famous Black people such as Oprah Winfrey, Quincy Jones, and Maya Angelou. In 2012, the premise was expanded to include all backgrounds, and the show became “Finding Your Roots.”

The first time Gates got an N.P.E. case, he told me, was ahead of an episode featuring LL Cool J. The genetic genealogist he works with on the show, CeCe Moore, called

Gates to tell him she had discovered that the rapper's mother was adopted. "I almost dropped the telephone, because this was not in my playbook," Gates remarked. "I was just trying to get Black people their Kunta Kinte moment." Then, just as the actress Kerry Washington was considering appearing on the show, her parents called Gates. According to Washington's memoir, "Thicker Than Water," her mother asked him, "If Kerry had been conceived in a way that was not biologically related to her father, would that kind of thing come up in a DNA test?" It turned out that they had used a sperm donor to conceive her.

The involvement of Gates, a prominent Black professor, quieted some concerns about the use of DNA to determine heritage. The field of genetics, after all, has an ugly history. The Nazis used paternity testing to look for "Jews hidden in Aryan genealogies," as Nara B. Milanich writes. But now it was not only socially acceptable to take a DNA test; it was sometimes pitched as a form of racial justice. Kittles told me that the actor Isaiah Washington had founded a hospital in Sierra Leone after his African Ancestry test revealed roots there. I myself was given a test as thanks for speaking to a group of minority students about graduate school. "We don't have an honorarium, but we have an Ancestry DNA test for you," the vice-provost joked, handing me a small box. I've never been drawn to the idea of doing one personally, but something Gates said made me understand the seductions of DNA, particularly for people who've been deprived of some part of their family story. "Our ancestors are dead in one sense, but they're very alive in the shaping of your very identity, your phenotype, the color of your hair, the color of your eyes, medical traits," Gates told me. "It's a kind of immortality that we didn't learn about in church."

Earlier this summer, I rang the bell of a brownstone on the Upper West Side; I was there to meet Michele Grethel, a psychotherapist, at her private office. Among the specialties listed on her website is "identity exploration (e.g., LGBTQIA, trans/gender-non binary, and unexpected DNA discoveries)." To try to understand that range, I asked Grethel what the subject of her dissertation had been. She told me that she had written about gender dysphoria in eighteen- to twenty-five-year-olds who were assigned female at birth and were in the process of transitioning. She wanted to help people, she said, "who were coming into a more authentic sense of themselves."

Now Grethel leads a team of researchers who have surveyed hundreds of N.P.E.s about their experiences. As she sees it, they, too, are stepping into their true identity.

She has observed that the N.P.E.s who tend to take the news hardest are the ones who had a difficult parental relationship. That was true of the “Prozac Nation” author Elizabeth Wurtzel, who, at the age of fifty, learned that her biological father was the photographer Bob Adelman, not her mother’s husband, Donald Wurtzel, with whom she had a complicated dynamic. “I have been working out that relationship all of my life, in writing and therapy and conversation, with cocaine and heroin,” she wrote in an essay for *The Cut*. “I have perfected a two-handed backhand to clobber the lob that is coming at me that is: the wrong problem. I have aced the wrong problem.”

Sigmund Freud, in “Family Romances,” writes that all of us, once we realize as children the uncertainty of paternity, begin fantasizing about alternative fathers. (In my fantasy, my father owned a gumball-machine empire, and I was an heiress with bad teeth.) But Grethel pointed out that the desire for a perfect do-over with a new parent can lead to profound disappointment. In 2012, the Canadian actress and director Sarah Polley learned that her biological father was the film producer Harry Gulkin, a discovery she documented in the film “Stories We Tell.” “There was this honeymoon period,” Polley told me, of the year after she reconnected with Gulkin. “It was exciting—like, Wow, what a twist—but then it became quite tumultuous.”

Michael Slepian, a psychologist at Columbia University, researches the toll of keeping secrets. For his book, “The Secret Life of Secrets: How Our Inner Worlds Shape Well-Being, Relationships, and Who We Are,” Slepian asked research participants—half of whom were told to imagine themselves as having a “small” secret, the other half a big one—to estimate the height of a grassy hill. The latter group thought that the incline was sharper than the former did. Slepian deduced that people who say they feel “weighed down” by a secret do, in fact, feel burdened in other parts of their lives as well. The night after Slepian first presented his findings at Columbia, he got a frantic call from his father. He and his mother had realized that they, like his subjects, had been suffering under the weight of a secret. Slepian had been conceived through a sperm donor, his father confessed over the phone. “Many people assume it was the other way around,” Slepian told me, “that I research secrets because my family had been keeping one. But no—my research helped them unburden themselves.”

Slepian also studies the moral calculus of divulging a secret, like, for example, when and whether to reveal to a partner that you were unfaithful. He thinks that, in the context of N.P.E.s, technology has altered the question of disclosure: “I know folks who wished they’d learned this from their parents rather than a website.”

The treatment of N.P.E.s is a growth market within the therapy sector, giving rise to N.P.E.-trauma-recovery coaches and identity-reinvention facilitators. Some interventions can seem more improvised than others. Lily Wood mentioned that she had been using eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (E.M.D.R.) to help her reckon with her discovery. This method typically involves having patients focus on a specific traumatic event; I asked Wood whether hers was the day she got the results. No, she said. Her therapist had her doing “point of conception” E.M.D.R.: “She’s, like, ‘I don’t do this very often, but we’re going to go back to the moment you were in utero. . . . Babies feel everything, even as a fetus.’ ” Wood was a little dubious herself. “I’m only on the third trimester, so I don’t know if it’s working yet,” she said.

Alexis Hourselt grew up in Tucson, Arizona, as the daughter of a Mexican American father and a white mother. Hourselt never felt a connection with her Mexican heritage, though. “I wanted to, being in the Southwest,” she told me. Rather, she was drawn to Issa Rae’s “Insecure” and the later, more politically inflected music of Beyoncé. “I loved ‘Formation,’ but I always thought, This isn’t *for* me.”

At some point, Hourselt added an Ancestry test to her Amazon wish list, which her family members all follow. She hoped that the test would uncover more about her Indigenous roots, and help her feel more connected to her father’s side. “Nobody ever bought it for me—which now makes sense,” she reflected. She purchased one for herself when it went on sale for Prime Day.

One afternoon, while waiting for the results, Hourselt was folding laundry and suddenly had an intrusive thought. “I was, like, Wouldn’t that be crazy if your dad wasn’t your dad? And then I was quickly, like, Stop it. You’re so ridiculous.” But, when the e-mail came and she clicked on her DNA map, the thought returned. Her DNA did not cluster with that of anyone in Mexico. Lit up instead was the western coast of Africa—countries like Nigeria, Mali, and Cameroon—and the African American population of North Carolina. “I called my mom, and she acted surprised but in a way that very much let me know that she was not surprised,” Hourselt told me.

Hourselt, who, since 2022, has hosted the podcast “DNA Surprises,” invited me to Tucson for dinner with her family: her husband and kids; her sister Amanda; and her parents, meaning her mother, Carole, and Jaime, the father who raised her. A week before I was scheduled to come, Hourselt told me that Jaime had a conflict and wouldn’t be joining us. I didn’t probe. When I arrived, I was greeted by Hourselt, in a

colorful Ankara-print baby-doll dress, and the smell of sautéed onions; her husband, Josh, was preparing fajitas. Her mother sat on the living-room couch in a gray sweatshirt, holding a pink Stanley cup. She looked uncomfortable.

We sat down for dinner, and together they took me back to July 22, 2021, Hourselt's rebirth day. After the phone call, Carole and Jaime went over to their daughter's house. Carole couldn't stop crying, so Jaime did all the talking. "He said, 'I met you when you were two months old,'" Hourselt recalled. She was taken aback. "I thought, Maybe Mom had an affair or something. It didn't register to me as a possibility that he would be in on it." The couple had been stationed together in the military, in Spain. Carole, then a new mother, told Jaime that her baby's biological father was her Puerto Rican ex-boyfriend; the end of their relationship, she said, had been rocky. But that didn't make sense to Hourselt. Her Ancestry matches had uncovered that her biological father was very likely an African American man. Carole swore that she didn't remember the encounter, but the revelation then created problems in her marriage. "Jaime said, 'I didn't realize I'd married a floozy,'" she recalled. "And that's the nice term for what he said."

Hourselt barely spoke to her parents for a year. In that time, her biological father, Cliff, who is Black, reached out, asking to meet. Hourselt flew to Montgomery, Alabama, where he lives. On the flight there, she listened to Beyoncé's "Black Parade," a song now for her. "I was, like, This is me, 'I'm going back to the South / Where my roots ain't watered down.'" Cliff met her at the airport. They hugged for a long time. ("It was the best hug I ever had," Cliff told me.) He took her to see the Equal Justice Initiative's Legacy Museum and memorial to the victims of lynching.

Hourselt said that meeting her biological father caused certain things to click into place, like why she was the one in her family who always made the dinner reservations; Cliff also took a leading role in planning family functions, she observed. She accompanied him to one of them, a family reunion in North Carolina. There, however, biology began to reveal its limits. Hourselt, not having grown up in the Black church, felt lost. For the talent show, someone did a dramatic reading of Bible verses. "It was the 'he who throws the first stone' one," she told me, trying to recall the exact words. I could hear my aunt's voice in my head going, "Sister doesn't know her Scripture." It's Jesus speaking in the Gospel of John, refusing to condemn an adulteress.

In “Mamma Mia!,” a daughter’s quest to find the truth about her paternity becomes an opportunity to revisit the exciting sexual escapades that filled her mother’s youth. In one of my favorite films, “Stealing Beauty,” the nineteen-year-old Liv Tyler—who learned late in childhood that her father was Aerosmith’s Steven Tyler—plays a young woman who travels to Italy on a hunch that her mother had a secret lover there; it, too, is a paternity quest that doubles as a sensuous study of a mother’s glory days. In real life, the N.P.E. community tends to take a less forgiving view of mothers with complicated pasts.

Catherine St Clair created her Facebook group after finding out from an Ancestry customer-service rep via a chat box that her brother was actually her half brother. N.P.E.s needed better support, St Clair felt. But, when she tried to create a separate group for the mothers of N.P.E.s, the backlash was ferocious. “There was a lot of animosity toward mothers,” she told me. “I said, ‘Wait a minute. They are victims of their circumstances and the social pressures that they went through.’ I’m not saying they made the right choices, but they did the best they could with what they had.”

There are undoubtedly cases of mothers and fathers not navigating these situations well, but it’s largely the mothers of N.P.E.s who have been pathologized. In an article for *Psychology Today*, a psychotherapist and N.P.E. named Jodi Klugman-Rabb argued, “Now that commercial DNA tests are revealing long-held family secrets, a new category of narcissism is emerging: motherly narcissism.”

Some of the language around mothers can make N.P.E. spaces sound eerily similar to those of fathers’-rights associations. These groups represent men as unsuspecting victims of women, and of feminism more generally, and regularly exaggerate the rate of misattributed paternity as thirty per cent. Some fathers’-rights groups have even called for mandatory paternity tests at birth. I asked Kara Rubinstein Deyerin, the founder of Right to Know, what she thought of that proposal: “What I say is, Kara believes every child should be paternity-tested when they’re born, but Right to Know would never advocate for that, because that’s a step too far, I think, for a lot of people.”

Rubinstein Deyerin has shoulder-length salt-and-pepper hair. When we spoke, over Zoom, she was wearing a necklace with a Star of David. She began identifying as Jewish only three years ago. She was raised in Seattle as the daughter of a white mother and an African American father. As she grew up, Rubinstein Deyerin, like

many Black Americans, became curious about her African origins, a history lost in the slave trade. “I said, ‘Dad, let’s take one of those tests.’ ” But, when she opened her DNA pie chart, her sample didn’t cluster with any part of the African continent. Instead, a large portion was labelled “Ashkenazi.” “I had never heard of it,” Rubinstein Deyerin told me. She called her mother: “She said, ‘But I don’t know anyone Jewish.’ I was, like, ‘Well, you knew at least one.’ ”

Her mother had been sitting at the bar of an upscale restaurant in Seattle when Sam Rubinstein, a wealthy philanthropist from the area, approached her, Rubinstein Deyerin alleges. Her mother was eighteen; he was in his fifties. She got pregnant, and they never saw each other again. The man who Rubinstein Deyerin had believed was her father was working class, and so the news left her ruminating on the life she might have had. She took Rubinstein’s name, and is determined to get the laws changed so that she can add it to her birth certificate.

Last summer, Rubinstein Deyerin travelled to the National Conference of State Legislatures, an annual gathering of state politicians, holding a mockup of what she calls an “expanded birth certificate.” She e-mailed me a copy of it. At the top, there were lines for genetic parents, then legal parents, and then, if applicable, the surrogate. When I asked about the latter, Rubinstein Deyerin began talking about epigenetics, a subfield of genetics that looks at how an individual’s environment shapes gene expression: “How does that surrogate impact that baby? We don’t know yet, but future generations should have access to that information.” A geneticist I corresponded with cautioned me that this science is likewise “in its infancy.”

Rubinstein Deyerin has a habit of dispersing scientifically disputed information, which emphasizes genetic determinism, to her followers. The Right to Know website offers a webinar with Robert Plomin, a behavioral geneticist known for making big claims about how much of our personalities and educational achievements are influenced by DNA. In his book “Blueprint: How DNA Makes Us Who We Are,” for example, he writes that “the major systematic factor affecting divorce is genetics.” Rubinstein Deyerin holds a biennial Untangling Our Roots conference in cities around the country, which always includes a panel on siblings discovering one another as adults and feeling “genetic sexual attraction,” a theory—coined in the nineteen-eighties by a psychologist named Barbara Gonyo, who claimed to have fallen in love with her son years after giving him up for adoption—that has been criticized as providing intellectual cover for incest.

Rubinstein Deyerin, who has a law degree from George Washington University, established Right to Know to push through legislation that would make access to one's genetic information a legal right. She told me that the group had lobbied a state senator in Iowa named Annette Sweeney to pass the state's first-ever fertility-fraud law. "Sweeney does animal husbandry, and she was, like, 'Oh, my gosh, if I got the wrong specimen for my animal, it would be horrific,'" Rubinstein Deyerin said. Among the organization's platforms are calls for a national retroactive ban on anonymous gamete donation. Similar laws have recently been passed in individual states: a 2022 law in Colorado outlawed anonymous gamete donation; Oregon passed comparable legislation earlier this year. Rubinstein Deyerin told me that Right to Know hadn't worked on the Oregon bill but had previously sent material to lawmakers there. "It's about education in these spaces," she said.

Many L.G.B.T.Q.- and reproductive-rights activists are concerned by Right to Know's lobbying efforts, which have also included trying to create a national registry of sperm donors and recipients. "This just sounds like a list of lesbians and single women," Douglas NeJaime, a professor of legal ethics and family law at Yale, told me. (Because of advances in sperm freezing and reproductive technology, heterosexual couples are often less reliant on donor sperm than they were two decades ago. According to one study, roughly seventy-five per cent of couples who now use donor sperm are same-sex couples and single women.) NeJaime isn't against banning donor anonymity, but he stressed that it has to be accompanied by protections for L.G.B.T.Q. families, particularly in cases where the partners are not married and thus do not benefit from the marital presumption of parentage. Polly Crozier, the director of family advocacy at GLAD Law, also voiced apprehension about "this drumbeat of regulating gametes and fertility fraud and changing birth certificates, because, to me, the through line there is that biology is preëminent, that it's the only thing that matters." Similarly, the demands in the N.P.E. community for complete access to one's family medical history seem to overemphasize genetics in shaping health outcomes, discounting socioeconomics and other factors beyond our control.

There's also the fear that some N.P.E. voices are inadvertently playing into larger forces. Project 2025, the controversial manifesto for American conservative leadership, spearheaded by the Heritage Foundation, makes a pointed reference to "biological" parentage. One passage reads, "In the context of current and emerging reproductive technologies, HHS policies should never place the desires of adults over the right of

children to be raised by the biological fathers and mothers who conceive them.” The language echoes that of Them Before Us, a right-wing lobbying group whose site includes inflammatory stats about the dangers of children living with people to whom they’re not biologically related and donor-conceived children’s “profound struggles with their origins and identities.”

NeJaime observed that the privileging of biological relatedness is arguably how donor-conceived N.P.E.s ended up in their position in the first place. “Why don’t men who used a sperm donor tell their children?” he asked. “Because there’s some expectation that real men are biological fathers of their children, and there’s some shame in not being the biological father.” Rubinstein Deyerin is aware of these critiques, but is firm in her conviction that there should be a legal remedy for what happened to her, and others like her.

In many European countries, direct-to-consumer DNA testing is effectively banned; in France, taking such a test is punishable by up to one year in prison. These tests are disruptive, it is argued. But many N.P.E.s insist it’s the secrets, not their unveiling, that throw families into chaos. Either way, I don’t think most of them signed up for all of this when they purchased their DNA kits online. The ones I spoke to couldn’t get the kind of recognition they wanted from the outside world. *Your father will always be your father*, people keep reassuring them. And so N.P.E.s have one another, a chosen family, as messy as any other kind.

Hourselt regularly attends the Right to Know conference and supports the organization’s proposed birth-certificate reforms. She has been trying to get Cliff’s name on her birth certificate, though she still considers Jaime to be her dad. Hourselt told me that, when Jaime saw her getting closer with her biological father, he said, “I just don’t want you crying on anyone else’s shoulder.” ♦

Published in the print edition of the August 25, 2025, issue, with the headline “Missed Connections.”