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Getting to Know a Sperm-Donor Dad

By [AMY HARMON](#)

In November 2005, I wrote an article about two teenage girls, raised in different families, who discovered [they are the genetic children of the same sperm donor](#). The girls, JoEllen Marsh and Danielle Pagano, met through the [Donor Sibling Registry](#), a Web site that has connected thousands of half-siblings conceived through donor insemination.

At the time, it seemed unlikely that the girls would ever meet their biological father — known to them only as “Donor 150 of the California Cryobank.”

But as it turned out, Donor 150 just happened to be reading a discarded copy of The New York Times that Sunday. He choked on his coffee when he recognized the name of the sperm bank and his donor number on the front page of the paper. Fifteen months later, he contacted JoEllen and Danielle.

It was a moment that they had fantasized about for a long time. That week, [I wrote about their first phone call](#) with the man who had supplied half of their DNA, now known to them by his actual name, Jeffrey Harrison.

At that point, I stopped following the story, in part because I had other projects to attend to. But it was also because it had become — well, complicated. Mr. Harrison, whose donor profile described him as a six-foot-tall actor who liked yoga and animals, lived in an R.V. in Venice, Calif. He had posed for Playgirl during his sperm-donor days, was an unabashed believer in a host of conspiracy theories and supported himself and his small menagerie with odd jobs.

I had written about [the growing number of donor-conceived children](#) who, grappling with questions of identity and health risks, are seeking out their donors and lobbying to prohibit anonymity in sperm and egg donation. Yet the case of Donor 150 and his offspring made me question the value of transparency. I felt protective of Danielle and JoEllen, who used to look at men who fit their donor’s description in train stations, restaurants — indeed, anywhere — and wonder if that was their biological father. I felt protective of Mr. Harrison, a gentle and kindhearted man who might be hurt by his unusual decision to reach out.

But the producers of [“Donor Unknown,” a documentary](#) being shown on “Independent Lens” on PBS, did not shrink from the situation’s complexity. The film, which had its premiere at the Tribeca Film Festival this year, follows JoEllen, Danielle and three other offspring of Donor 150 as they get to know Mr. Harrison. If it does not provide a pat ending, it does show a range of ways to forge family with a biological parent who is not what you expected.

When she finally visits him in Venice, JoEllen is touched by the small presents Mr. Harrison offers. “Him coming forward and wanting to meet all of us and share his life with us means he’s more than just a donor,” she says.

Danielle, who visited separately, sees her own sense of adventure as coming from her biological father,

but also a cautionary tale of what might happen to her if she doesn't choose a clear life path.

Even Fletcher, one of the donor children who seems most adamant about holding Mr. Harrison at arm's length ("I don't think I'm going to carry on any sort of dad-son relationship with him," he says) takes solace from the replacement of fantasy with fact about the other half of his genetic identity: "It's not these crazy ideas that I created in my head anymore," he says.

And Mr. Harrison, who rises to the occasion as his solitary life is suddenly filled during the visits, sprucing up the R.V. and giving beach tours, seems pleased to think of himself as a "fun uncle."

Wendy Kramer, the founder of the Web registry that made all this possible, says that Mr. Harrison is not typical of the sperm donors who have come forward on her site. Most, recruited on college campuses, end up in professional jobs, and many have families. But how to navigate such relationships, no matter what a donor's life circumstances, is still very much new ground.

Perhaps most striking to me in the film was that, as the siblings sought to know a biological parent — the bond that seems most primal — it was their bonds with one another that emerged as unequivocally the strongest. One of the siblings, Roxanne, confesses that she "stalked" the others on Facebook while deciding whether to reveal herself to them.

"It's not stalking if you're just trying to see what your siblings look like," another assures her.

Though they enjoy noticing the physical and personality traits they have in common — wide foreheads, easygoing natures, love of animals — there is a hint that it may not necessarily be the shared genes that tie them so closely.

"You're the first sibs of mine that are donor-conceived that I've ever met," one tells the others after a group meeting with Mr. Harrison. "But you're also the first people that are donor-conceived that I've ever met. So it's sort of interesting, just that shared experience."

Six years after their first, seven-hour phone conversation, Danielle and JoEllen still talk daily. Danielle, 22, has just graduated from college and is moving to Cairo on Monday to look for a job helping refugees. JoEllen, 21, who is still in school, is also studying Arabic. They are planning another of what they call a "donor one-five-oh reunion" with the other siblings in the coming year.

I was happy for the chance the film's release gave me to get back in touch with them this week. I needn't have worried. They're doing great.

"Donor Unknown" will be shown nationally tonight at 10 p.m. (check local listings) and in New York on Sunday at 11 p.m. on WNET-TV..