

reporterherald.com

Sunday, August 31, 2008 - default Edition - Edition: (RH)- Page: 1-B

Reunited

50-year search for siblings ends with an 'I love you'

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In the mid-1950s, 3-year-old Susan Virgo was adopted from a children's home in Georgia.

The little girl gained a new family, new opportunities and even a new name, and her life before the adoption quickly became nothing more than a few vague memories.

It wasn't until after a death, some letters and a twist of fate that the Fort Collins woman uncovered the extent of her past.

Recently, after more than half a century of separation, Virgo was reunited with siblings she had only dreamed of.

"I cannot come down off this cloud, and I never will," she said. "I'm never going to let them go."

An Early Memory

Growing up an only child in Arizona, Virgo always knew she was adopted from somewhere in Georgia.

Her adoptive parents didn't share any information beyond that, and Virgo didn't pursue the past with any questions.

However, a few blurry memories always came back to her mind — memories from before her adoption.

Virgo remembered a little blond girl with curly hair who was always crying, who she would cradle and rock to sleep.

She remembered the name Melissa.

And she remembered that when she cried, an older boy was the only one who could calm her down.

"I never questioned anything," the 55-year-old said. "I just knew there was family out there."

It wasn't until she was married and began having children of her own that Virgo started asking her parents about her past. Her second child was sick, and Virgo wanted information about her birth-family's health.

However, her parents were very vague, she said, and her mother would only tell her two pieces of information.

To start, Susan Leslie wasn't her original name. Before she was adopted, her name was Melissa Elaine.

And she had at least two siblings.

An Unexpected Clue

Years went by and Virgo didn't know anything more about her past than what her mother revealed decades before. And up until their deaths, Virgo's parents never told her anything else.

Yet when her father died in May, the story began to unravel itself when the woman cleaning out his home gave Virgo an unexpected phone call.

"She said 'We found your adoption papers. Do you want them?'" she remembered.

Surprised but ecstatic, Virgo said yes.

Soon, the papers arrived in her mailbox. They didn't lend much more information except for the name of the place she was adopted from: Georgia's United Methodist Children's Home.

With the new clue in hand, Virgo had the option to try and uncover the truth about her past.

"I didn't know if I wanted to know — yet I did," she said.

One day on her lunch break, Virgo picked up the phone and called the children's home.

She said she used to live there and that she was trying to reconnect with her siblings.

The woman on the other end said she'd do what she could; there had been two fires in the home over the years, and some information was lost.

Yet a few weeks later, Virgo received all the information that was left in her file.

Included in the paperwork were two letters addressed to Melissa Elaine Bass — both from her siblings trying to find her.

And in these letters Virgo discovered there weren't just two siblings to find — there were nine.

That night, Virgo dialed the two phone numbers on the letters written to her decades ago. However, both lines were disconnected.

Desperate to find answers, she asked her daughter, who lives in Denver, to go on the Internet to see what she could find.

Just an hour and a half later, she got a reply from her daughter.

“She said ‘Mom, I found your sister in Texas,’” Virgo remembered. “‘And her pictures are just like you.’”

Making Contact

About 1,000 miles away in Gladewater, Texas, Ruchia Moran was routinely checking her e-mail when she received a strange message.

“It said ‘You don’t know me, but I think we might be related,’” she remembered it read. “‘My mom was born Melissa Elaine.’”

“My mouth just fell open,” Moran said. “I’m like ‘No way, there’s no way.’”

Melissa Elaine was the long-lost sister she’d been searching for.

Immediately, Moran replied to her rediscovered niece and got Virgo’s phone number.

She called her that night, but Virgo missed the call.

It took a few tries back and forth before the two were able to connect.

But both remember that first phone call.

“It was talking to a stranger who was not a stranger. She’s your flesh and blood,” Virgo said.

Moran agreed, adding that they talked for two hours straight.

“We caught up on A to Z and back to J and picked up at L,” she said. “We were all over the map — we had so much to say to each other.”

And it was during their first conversation that the sisters realized Moran was indeed the little blond-haired girl Virgo remembered from long ago.

Uncovering the Past

The two, along with their other siblings, were taken away from their alcoholic parents and placed in the Georgia home.

There were 10 Bass children all together: One died when he was young and another, they think, was given to live with other relatives.

Moran, Virgo and a brother, now George Garrison, were adopted. Two brothers stayed with their birth-parents and the rest of the siblings grew up in the home.

Moran had reconnected with many of the seven who are still alive more than a decade ago. The group never stopped looking for their last lost sister.

“We knew we had another sister out there,” Moran said. “We never stopped looking for Melissa Elaine.”

However, because her name was changed, they never were able to find her — until she found them.

The Reunion

In early August, only three months after first uncovering her adoption papers, Virgo was on a plane to Texas to meet a few of her newfound siblings in person.

When siblings Moran and Dale Vanderverter spotted their sister in the airport, the sister they hadn't seen for more than 50 years, neither of them could stop screaming.

“We ran into each other in a huddle,” Virgo said. “We wouldn't let go. We couldn't let go of each other.”

Later, Virgo was introduced to her brother, Larry Bass. Quickly they realized he was the one who had rocked her to sleep years before.

The four spent a week together — most of the time simply talking and staring at one another. They'd even poke each other, Virgo said, to make sure it was real.

And the family got along great, finishing each other's sentences and finding out they're all tenderhearted.

“We didn't have any problem going ‘I love you’ to a stranger, to someone I'd never laid eyes on for half a century,” Moran said with tears.

“I knew they belonged to me and I belonged to them and it's always going to be that way. ...

“We'd all been through so much, but it was OK. It was OK because we had each other.”

Today, the siblings stay in close contact and are planning an even larger family reunion in Georgia next March. They're also planning to write a book about their journey.

“It took us 50-some years to get back together,” Moran said. “From now on out, every minute is going to count.”

Virgo agreed.

“We all strongly believe there is a reason for everything,” she said. “As bad as this place is, there’s good — you just have to find it.”