

PEOPLE

# Separated by adoption, sisters finally reunited

By BRENDA MONTY

It could have been a scene from a popular television talk show where the host wields his or her influence to reunite long-lost relatives. However, there were no TV cameras or handsome TV personality anywhere. No, there was no cheering crowd at Chicago Midway Airport when this writer stepped off the plane and into the arms of her anxiously awaiting sisters.

The joyful reunion was that of three children separated by adoption in 1959 at the ages of 2, 3 and 4. Born Brenda Jean Carpenter in 1954, I am the oldest child of a family that eventually included five children born to Carrie Winona Bailey Carpenter and Charles Plato Carpenter Jr. of Kings Mountain, N.C.

At age 4, I was the first to go, leaving behind two sisters—Linda Kay and Charlene Ann. Within the decade that followed, we three girls and both boys born later were scattered across the United States. We grew up virtually strangers to each other, hundreds of miles apart in three different families.

As the oldest, I am the only one who has memories at all of those first few years when we sisters were together. Our father was in the Army and stationed at Fort Dix in New Jersey when I was born. About a year and half later, Linda was born at Fort Bragg, N.C. Eighteen months later, Charlene was also born at Fort Bragg.

Nearly all that's left to tell the story are age-worn letters written by our parents and other relatives to my adoptive parents that date back to 1959, the year I was taken with them to live in my new home in Virginia Beach, Va.

The correspondence documents six years of alcoholism and its devastating effects on the family—domestic violence, incarceration, neglect and poverty. The early letters commend those who rescued me from a dismal fate and lament the plight of the two little girls left behind. Our father was in Korea when we went to live with a relative, our dad's brother, Hunter Everett Carpenter, and his wife Martha (the former Martha Hopkins of Plymouth) in Virginia Beach, Va. They were in their 40s and had no children. About four years later, Linda joined me. It took nearly seven years of wrangling, but we were both legally adopted in 1965.

Meanwhile, our father's military career took him to Lawton, Okla. to Ft. Sill, where our first brother Charles Eugene Carpenter, nicknamed "Chuckie," was born.

Three months later, a middle-aged couple, also childless, who lived in Quanah, Texas, adopted Charlene and Chuck through a private adoption. Even though she was still quite young, Charlene recalls the day her new parents, Harry and Billie Hopkins, gave her and our brother new names. They were raised as Melissa Jan and Philip Jay Hopkins.

A fifth child, another boy, was born in Kings Mountain in April of 1964 and given the name Larry Wayne Carpenter.

Within the year, our parents relocated to Chicago, where before Larry was 2 years old, he followed the same journey into adoption as all of his four siblings before him.

In 1984, "Jan" began an earnest search for her birth parents with the help of an organization, Adoption Information Exchange, that helps reunite adoptees and biological parents. With little to go on, Jan's original birth certificate was located. The agent then found the names of our parents in a book of genealogy of the Carpenter family. While doing research for the book, the author had obtained from our Carpenter relatives still living in Kings Mountain the family's history. Listed with our parents were all five of us chil-



Brenda, Linda and Jan

dren. It was only then that Jan became aware she had sisters and another brother.

Jan made a person-to-person call from "Charlene Ann Carpenter" to her birth mother in Chicago on, ironically, Mother's Day of 1984. (Our father had died years earlier.) Contacts were quickly made to numerous relatives and answers to Jan's lifetime of questions began to be answered.

That same summer, Jan flew to Kings Mountain in time for the annual Carpenter reunion, where she was greeted by our birth mother and other relatives, including me, my sons and my adoptive mom. Needless to say, Jan's successful search was the highlight of that year's family reunion, where an autographed copy of the book that was instrumental in reuniting her with her birth family, *Carpenters A Plenty*, was presented to her by its proud author, Robert Carpenter.

Some time later, our brother "Jay" visited our birth mother in Chicago, and also Linda, who still lives in a Chicago suburb.

Jan and I kept in touch over the years and I visited her and her family in Kansas about seven years ago. During that visit, I got to meet my brother Jay for the first time.

Recently, while organizing a trip to Boston in July for her daughter to attend a youth conference, Jan proposed a grand reuniting of we three sisters in Cicero, the Chicago suburb where Linda now resides.

Jan and her daughter Charity, 17, drove up from Bristow, Okla., arriving five days ahead of me. When Jan and Linda met, they fell into each other's arms. With tears flowing from their eyes, they held each other in a gripping embrace.

The first few hours were spent getting acquainted, including taking a mental inventory of familial resemblances and mannerisms. Over the next few days, photos and scrapbooks were shared. Once strangers to each other, the sisters tried to fit together missing pieces of their past lives and brought one another up to date on 45 years of personal history, which included their current families.

Back in Plymouth, I was filled with eager expectation of the day I'd dreamed about all my life—the three of us together again. I also brought a great number of photographs of my family—husband, Alan, and sons, Jonathan, 22, and Brian, 32, and granddaughter, Victoria, age 9. Among the snapshots were what few pictures of our birth family that I'd been given over the years.

Jan had photos of her family—husband, Brent Hays, and their children, Chance, 19, Charity, 17, Cherish, 12, and Choyce, 7, and pictures of our brother Jay growing up.

Linda's family, all still in the Chicago area, includes children, Amy, 32, and Jeremiah, 27, and three grandchildren, Brian, 14, Alicia, 12,

and Albert, 9.

Among the treasured family mementos I'd brought along were those previously mentioned letters—for all intents and purposes, our history, sad but true. The three of us read over them together, jotting down significant bits of information, including the circumstances that led to each of our adoptions. This once-scattered puzzle is getting ever closer to being put back together. We are looking forward to the time when the three of us girls can be joined by our brother Jay and his wife Beatrice, who make their home in Perryton, Texas.

All our adoptive parents are gone now, and all we have are each other. As you would imagine, my sisters and I have been greatly impacted by our recent reunion, and it has renewed our determination to search for our baby brother, who is now 40.

In hopes of sharing our story and perhaps getting some help in our search for our brother, we plan to write to TV talk show hosts Oprah Winfrey and Montel Williams.

A scrap of paper has been found that contains the name and address of what we believe to be Larry's maternal grandmother. We think that Eva Edison of 5221 Winthrop Ave., Apt. 101, Chicago, Ill. may have been a neighbor or maybe our parents' landlady at the time he was adopted.

Since Linda, Jan, Jay and I have gotten to know one another, we have discovered that each of us, whether physically or emotionally, has had to cope with the consequences of the alcohol addiction of both our mother and father. But even so, for better or worse, it is our family of origin and we all, including Larry, have the right to know where we came from.

As much as I'd like to find him for our sakes, I think most of all I want to find him so that he will know that he has three sisters and a brother who love him, even if only from a few yellowed pages of a letter.

(Brenda Monty is a staff writer for The Roanoke Beacon in Plymouth, NC)

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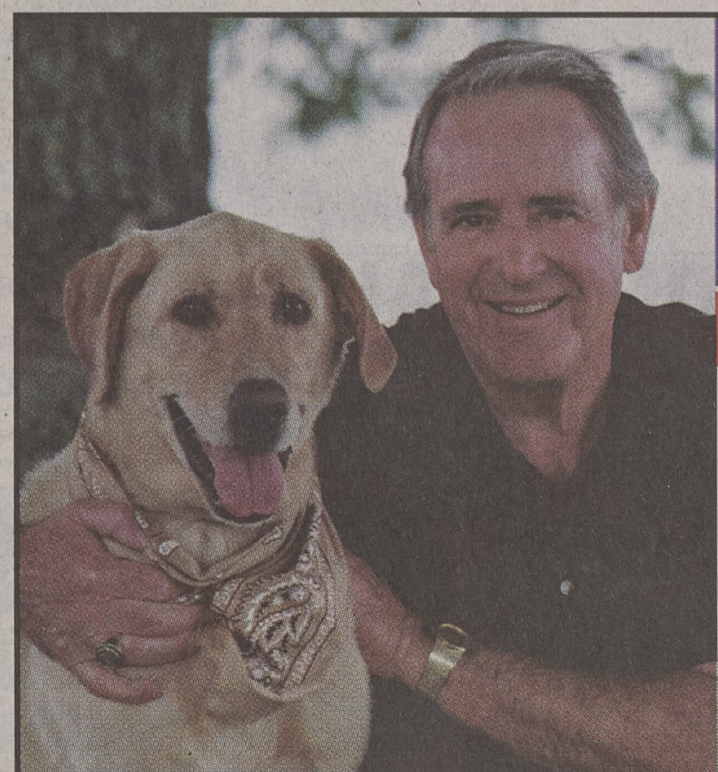
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