



Heather Smith, right, and her birth mother, Kay Sutton Tolbert, pose for a photo.

Eddie Smith sits with his birth mother and his daughter, Shelly.

(Photos by Keith Barrett)

Finding their moms

Local adoptees find answers

By Amy O'Neal

Daily Times City Editor

Heather Smith keeps a mother book.

It has the original telephone message tape with the voice of Christine at Kinovising Investigations saying, "Heather, I've found your mom."

It has the scrap of paper with Heather's notes outlining what she would say to Kay Tolbert the first time they are called.

It has the first photo of Heather and Kay. It's only eyes and nose because the waitress at Benjamin's in Raleigh wasn't the best photographer.

Then come the cards. Kay seems to have cared enough to send the very best — again and again and again.

And then, there's the family photo with Kay, Heather, Lorie and Bob taken last Mother's Day.

Heather and her boyfriend, Wayne Johnson, were visiting Kay in Greensboro. They stayed at the home of Kay's boyfriend, so Heather was surprised when Kay called to ask how she'd like to meet her brother and sister.

"Heather," Kay said, "it's Mother's Day, and I want all my children to be together."

Heather, born March 26, 1967, is Kay's oldest. Kay put Heather up for adoption at the Children's Home Society in Greensboro. Looking back three decades, Kay

remembers being given the chance to hold Heather one last time before the adoptive parents arrived. Mother and daughter were reunited a few months shy of Heather's 26th birthday.

Heather is among a growing trend in adoptees searching for their natural parents. Her story had a happy beginning and a happy ending.

Imagine and Jimmy Smith never made any secret of the fact that Heather and her brother, Eddie, were adopted.

"As I looked after my mother during her illness and then started nursing school, I became curious about my medical history," Heather said. "That's what got me started on the search."

With her adoptive parents dead, the only document she could find related to the search was a birth certificate listing Wilson County as her place of birth and Imogene and Jimmy Smith as her parents. But she remembered her parents mentioning the Children's Home Society in Greensboro.

When she requested information from the society in early 1992, she received the only information to which she was legally entitled: Her birth mother was 5 feet, 6 inches, blue-eyed, blonde-completed, 18 years old or three she gave birth, had two or three siblings and a father who was addicted to alcohol.

Heather, born March 26, 1967, is Kay's oldest. Kay put Heather up for adoption at the Children's Home Society in Greensboro. Looking back three decades, Kay

could not act as an intermediary. She consulted a Greensboro attorney who offered to petition the court to open her records for medical reasons, but he cautioned that judges usually required the need for the information to be life-threatening.

"As I looked after my mother during her illness and then started nursing school, I became curious about my medical history," Heather said. "That's what got me started on the search."

A few years later, at a friend's urging, she contacted the Children's Home one more time. The home referred her to Kinovising. Within two weeks, she learned that her mother, Kay Sutton Tolbert, sold real estate for a company in Greensboro, had two other children and was divorced.

Heather put in a call to Kay after a good cry, a cold drink and a couple of hours practicing what she would say. Kay returned her call two days later, and they talked for two hours.

Kay said she was 18 years old and scared to death when she discovered the father of her unborn child was a married man. Her wife was father, widowed when Kay's mother died of breast cancer in her early 40s, encouraged Kay to put the child up for adoption.

Kay had questions, too. "She wanted to know about my parents," Heather said. "I told her I had the best parents I could have asked for."

The two are trying to make up for lost time. They talk every

week and get together at least once a month.

"Kay has become a really good friend. She's not like my mom, but I can tell she cares."

"You hear people say [finding their birth mother] is like having something settled. Now I know what they mean," Heather said. "I'm complete now."

Eddie's turn

Eddie Smith made up his mind on his birthday last year to find his birth mother.

He looked across the table at his sister, Heather. "I thought, here she is with her [birth] mother, and I'd love to find out about mine," he said.

"I'd always wondered about her, and I figured she had always wondered about me."

He figured right. From the time he reached 18, she had expected to hear from him. That's the age the people at the adoption agency had told her he could get her name.

"She kept wondering why I didn't call. She was worried that something might have happened to me," he said.

"It's a tough thing to do," meaning your birth mother for the first time, he said. "Do you walk up her front door and pretend you have the wrong address after she answers? Do you sit outside the house and watch her leave so you'll at least know what she looks like?"

Smith finally decided to call her at her Asheville home. "I told her I had something personal to talk to

Many adoptees look for birth parents

By Amy O'Neal
Daily Times City Editor

Eddie and Heather Smith consider themselves lucky to have located their birth mothers.

They are. In North Carolina, an adult adoptee is legally entitled to very little birth parent information, all of it "non-identifying."

An adoptee can learn the age, race, nationality, ethnic background, education, height, weight, and color of skin, eyes and hair of their birth mother and birth father.

The remaining block on a one-page adoption information form the state now requires provides for "other reasonably available non-identifying information."

What to put in that form is left up to the agency, according to Catherine Joyner, the adoption social worker for the Wilson County Department of Social Services.

In Ms. Smith's case, the Children's Home Society's willingness to say that her birth mother was a twin was what set her search in motion.

The pieces of Ms. Smith's life were fitted together by Kinovising Investigations of Newry. Like lawyers handling civil suits, Kinovising investigators earn money only if they win the case. Clients pay only if their parents are located; Kinovising turns over the name only after the client has paid the fee.

Kinovising also operates an Adoption Information Exchange and posts information of interest in a database that can be searched to be matched if the other party is also interested.

The exchange as a support

her about. I told her my date of birth and that I'd been adopted in Greensboro.

"She said, 'Oh my God! You're my son!'" She got real excited. She said, "I always wanted to talk to you."

She wanted to tell him that she was a teen-ager when she was 16 and she was pregnant. She said her parents pressed her to give him up for adoption. She said she even went back to the children's home 16 years ago had changed her mind, but they talked her out of it.

She wanted to tell her that she did the right thing.

"One of the things I wanted to tell her [how good the people were who raised us]," he said. "A 16-year-old couldn't have done half as good a job."

She was excited to learn that her only child works in the criminal division of the Wilson County Sheriff's Office, and he likes it.

Their conversations have just ended. He called her for the first time on Dec. 13, not long after the

group made up of adult adoptees, birth parents, adoptive parents and supportive professionals.

In the event adoption laws ever are relaxed in North Carolina, adoption workers at the Department of Social Services discuss with birth parents their feelings about being identified, note those feelings and ask to be notified should the birth parent's opinion change. Ms. Joyner said.

About 26 adult adoptees a year request information from the local department about their birth parents. Ms. Joyner said. "We've even had people ask about adoptions from the 1920s, she said.

"I would say finding out who your birth parent is without having anything but non-identifying information would be fairly difficult," Ms. Joyner said. "I have heard about very creative techniques people used to make the discovery. Some were illegal."

Although the stigma of having a child out of wedlock has faded over the last decades, Ms. Joyner said, "wanting to provide the best for your child is still of concern to most birth parents."

In the 50 years she has spent in adoptions, Ms. Joyner has found her birth mothers growing older. "Most are in the 40s and 50s and 60s, who may be able to better put their child's needs before their own," she said. "I've seen a child up for adoption when they know that adoptive parents may be unable to better meet those needs."

The telephone number for Kinovising is 1-800-527-8000. Call the Adoption Information Exchange at 1-704-537-5419.

same agency Heather used to find her birth mother discovered the name of his.

On Dec. 13, he and his wife, Lisa, and daughter, Shelly, Heather and her boyfriend drove to Greensboro and met his mother and her husband, Wayne Johnson, and her brother, Cracker Barrel. They had exchanged descriptions and photographs.

They met, the new family went to eat. They're still together.

He has been up to visit for a weekend. When he visits Asheville he stays at the park to meet his grandmother and his great-grandmother. He looks forward to getting a picture of five generations of his family.

He's willing to share his experience but not all of the details. He prefers not to give his birth mother's name. He chooses not to give his birth date.

He is willing to share a photograph with his mother. He has two of them, though. And he says he is very glad he found her.