

Native Awakenings

An Indiana Adoptee Finds Her Alaskan tribe—

I have lived my whole life with skin that doesn't burn in the sun, dark eyes and jet black hair. I've dreamt vivid, lucid, colorful dreams shaded with images of animals and earth's elements. My night quests were often filled with salmon and streams, and I was carried away in a current. The water above and below me flowed in one direction, but my body was pulled along an opposite middle path.

For as long as I can remember, I felt as if I'd been severed from something. The forbidden questions I dared to ask about my adoption as a child were met with unsympathetic responses and nervous tapping fingers. The answers given: "We were told your birth father was one-quarter Aleutian Indian. You don't want to open doors you cannot close. Your adoption records are sealed and that is the law."

I was never introduced to Native American culture. My adoptee journey started in 1965, when I was born and adopted in the state of Indiana, one of more than thirty states that still have sealed adoption records. Non-identifying information is available in Indiana, but identifying information is only available if the first mother registers and signs a waiver of consent.

Those avenues were closed to me. Thankfully, today's internet offered an alternate path to zip past prehistoric laws and unravel my ethnic mystery.

In the fall of 2013, I searched for DNA tests that determine ethnicity and found three companies: 23andMe, FTDNA and AncestryDNA. I had waited 47 years too long, dreamt too many dreams of being tugged away from something. I wanted real answers—to know if I was just a tan looking white-chick, or if I really had Native American ancestry.

While there were DNA tests that look solely for ancestral heritage, I began my search with 23andMe because at the time they provided genetic health information, such as whether I carried certain DNA mutations that lead to specific cancers or other diseases.

For an adoptee who has never had access to accurate family medical history, this was crucial information. (Unfortunately, the FDA has since stopped the company from offering this service.) I submitted my saliva sample and waited six weeks for the results.

When they arrived, I was shocked to find out I was in fact half Native American, my father full blooded. I mourned all the years I was denied my Native culture and never given the opportunity to know or celebrate my ethnicity with pride. My dreams, the strong spiritual connection I'd always felt to animals and the earth, the disinterest in the material world, all finally made sense to me in a way that made me feel rooted.

Thankfully, my medical history came out clean. Next thing I knew, I was accepting waivers stating that I'd read all they had to say about finding close relatives. I clicked away until I landed on a page that said there was a man with whom I shared 25% DNA. 23andMe suggested he was a nephew, but I knew in my heart he was my half brother.

We share the same birth date, one year apart. I messaged him right away and he responded promptly. He (Kevin) is 99.9% European. Since Kevin is nearly all European and I am half, it was clear we have the same mother. Kevin was born in Illinois, where adoption laws allowed him to access to our mother's name. He agreed to share it. After that, I searched for her for months on end.

The excitement of finding him prompted me to submit samples to two more DNA testing companies. My ethnicity results returned the same. All three connected me to Native American distant cousins located along Alaska's Yukon River.

I messaged everyone. Some replied, including Gail, a cousin who took me under her wing and offered to help me search for my Native birthfather.

In the meantime, I searched the internet daily for my mother. I drew family trees working them backward to forward. I searched every woman with the same name until "ruling out" was the only task left. Finally, in February 2014, I found her. She was on a public family tree. Also on that tree was a cousin from my European side, a photo of my mother, and her married last name.

I went on to find her on Facebook too and sent two messages that explained who I was (a nurse and mother) and what I longed to know, simple things like where I was born and the name of my father. I also told her that I was doing well and didn't need to know the whys.

After those messages were met with silence, I sent a message to one of her siblings and received a note saying my birthmother would be willing to look at a letter again. The letter ended by wishing me peace and God's love.

In my third letter to her, I confessed that I was petrified of hurting her and being rejected without answers. I promised to honor her private life, shared that Kevin and I were getting to know one another, and explained my DNA test result conundrum. And I asked again for my birth father's name. I closed the letter by saying "I hope that you know you are loved."

She responded a day later, asked for my address, and promised a letter. Six weeks later, it arrived. She confirmed that Kevin was my half brother, and gave me my father's name.

Days earlier, my cousin Gail had posted my photo on her Facebook page, along with a brief note about my search for my father. I added his name in the comments and it flew like wildfire in the wind on a hot day. Within 90 minutes I had a gazillion relatives.

I was accepted without question, honored with phone calls, and welcomed with tears of joy. These new cousins shared stories about my father, how he'd been

offered training with Chicago's Job Corps in 1965 and spent 12 years in the lower 48 picking cotton in Georgia and oranges in Florida before returning home. They say I am much like him: tall, dark, and thin with a gentle and goofy nature. I wish I could have met him.



Artist (and Mary's cousin) Rose Albert's "Vision" reflects Alaska's various cultures

My father, a full-blood Athabascan, walked on in 1992. My family assures me he would have loved me and done anything for me, had he known about my birth. I gaze at his photos and I see me, see white light reflected within dark brown eyes. I know his thoughts through these eyes. A history of memories carried through genetic markers that can never be washed away. My longing for connection to that history is so strong.

As for my mother's family, Kevin and I are still secrets. However, I appreciate that she honored my request and signed the waiver to release my original birth certificate—the certificate that confirmed my father's name, my Native American ethnicity, and had a checkbox marking me as "illegitimate." My half brother and I grow closer as time progresses. We talk on the phone and email photos. I hope to meet him soon.



Mary and her cousin LaVem

I recently met my first cousin LaVem. Our fathers are brothers. She flew to Las Vegas from Fairbanks, Alaska to celebrate her 50th birthday and I met her there. LaVern is the first biological relative I have ever met.

Meeting her was a special love at first sight. We laughed and joked and got along like we've known each other forever. We shared photos of ourselves on Facebook for our friends and Alaskan family to see.

Next summer my tribe will hold a memorial potlatch in Alaska. "Potlatch" is a native term for a tribal gathering that is celebrated with gift giving, traditional song and dance, and ceremonial practices for blessing. I hope to attend.

I'm immensely thankful to settle in to my heritage and share it with my children. And I'm thankful for programs now open to us that include healthcare benefits and college scholarship opportunities. If I had never known of my lineage, my children and I would have no access to these opportunities or our familial heritage.

It's extremely healing for me as an Alaskan Native American to know where I came from. Knowing one's history not only has the power to root someone in their past, it also opens doorways to the future, and our children's future, too.

Image credit: "Iditarod" and "Vision" by artist [Rose Albert](#).

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