

# Spence-Chapin's New Modern Family Center Offers Support for Adult Adoptees

Today we are introducing what will be the first in a series of Q&As that highlight organizations making a difference in the lives of adoptees. First up is Spence-Chapin's new support resource, the Modern Family Center, which opened at the end of 2013. I had an opportunity to connect with Misha Conaway, Outreach Manager, who is an adoptee herself, and Dana Stallard, the center's Adoptee Services Coordinator. Dana recently gave a moving testimony in support of New York open access legislation that eloquently captured the issues at hand for adult adoptees (video included below). Here Misha and Dana fill us in on their new center's services:

**Secret Sons & Daughters: What prompted Spence-Chapin to create the Modern Family Center and when did it open?**

**Misha:** We understand the changing landscape of adoption. There is no typical make up of a modern family but there are common threads that run through all of the unique families we support. Spence-Chapin has provided services to families for over 100 years. Within the last year, the Modern Family Center was created to provide more comprehensive services to all types of families, including families formed through adoption.

**Secret Sons & Daughters: What type of services does the new center offer adoptees?**

**Misha:** We tailor many of our services to meet the needs of adoptees, including providing personal adoption histories, search and reunion guidance and counseling, mentorship programs for tween and teen adoptees, discussion panels, groups, and more.

**Secret Sons & Daughters: What geographic areas does the [Modern Family Center @ Spence Chapin](#) serve and where are your offices located?**

**Misha:** We provide services to individuals and families who live in the five boroughs of New York City, Long Island, Westchester County, southern Connecticut, and northern New Jersey. We are currently in the process of expanding our services to reach those living in southern New Jersey as well. We have two offices, one located in the upper east side of Manhattan and one in Park Slope in Brooklyn. We also offer consultations over the phone or via Skype when in-person meetings are not possible.

**Secret Sons & Daughters: What have adult adoptees typically contacted Spence-Chapin for initially?**

**Dana:** Many are hoping to be connected to an adoption community and to meet

others that share their experiences or identities. Others are hoping to reconnect with their birth families and are hoping to learn more information about their birth histories and where they come from. All adoptees want to be supported throughout their adoption journey and we are able to provide guidance, empathy, and understanding to this community.

**Secret Sons & Daughters: What type of details does a personal adoption history include?**

**Dana:** A [Personal Adoption History](#) provides adult adoptees, birth parents, and the appropriate relatives with non-identifying information provided in the adoption record at the time of finalization. New York State law prevents Spence-Chapin from providing original birth certificates, the adoptee's original name, identifying information for the birth parents or adoptive family members, including first or last names, birth years, or specific locations. Spence-Chapin is able to provide personal adoption history information for adoptions facilitated by Spence-Chapin, Louise Wise (non-foster care), and Talbot Perkins prior to 1959.

For an adopted person: a written narrative called the Biological Background Narrative is prepared. This contains non-identifying information about birth parents at the time that they were making an adoption plan. This may include medical or health information about the biological family, ethnicity, nationality, religion, education, hobbies and interests and why the decision for adoption was made.

For a birth parent: a written narrative called the Adoptive Family Profile is prepared. This contains information about the child's birth and early development as well as non-identifying information about the adoptive parents until the time the adoption was finalized.

At this time, there is a bill in the New York State legislature that would allow adult adoptees to have access to their original birth certificates. I recently spoke on behalf of Spence Chapin at City Hall and advocated for this bill because we believe that it is a fundamental right of adoptees to know their original identities as well as the identities of their birth parents.

DANA'S TESTIMONY HERE:

**Secret Sons & Daughters: Can you tell us more about the type of support you offer adult adoptees?**

**Dana:** One of our social workers provides individualized support to each client seeking personal adoption history, from the initial clinical intake to sharing the information prepared, either by phone or in-person consultation. Additional counseling services are also available to further discuss related adoption issues, search and reunion, as well as to process the information received. We also offer therapeutic support groups for adult adoptees where they can share their experiences and work through any issues they may be struggling with.

**Secret Sons & Daughters: Those sound like excellent resources, I wish more states had them. What types of training have your counselors received?**

**Misha:** One of the most frequent complaints we hear from adoptees that come to us is that many mental health professionals simply do not understand the experience of growing up adopted, resulting in either minimizing their experiences or pathologizing them. Our clinicians are all trained and licensed social workers or are in a related mental health field, with an expertise in adoption and family systems. MFC's Training Department provides regular professional group and individual education throughout the year, and we frequently attend relevant conferences, trainings, and presentations.

**Secret Sons & Daughters: What has the initial response from adult adoptees been thus far?**

**Dana:** Adoptees find great comfort in connecting with others through mentorship, peer [support groups](#), or workshops. They are able to strengthen their own identities through meeting others and forming an adoption community.

Adoptees often do not know that they're able to receive a personal adoption history. It can be very helpful to find out more about birth parents and family of origin. Many adoptees are pleasantly surprised that they are able to talk to someone who provides individualized, caring support and they feel they are able to move forward in a different way after receiving that information.

One adult adoptee who received personal adoption history had this to say about the experience: ". . .it was a very illuminating day for me. What you were able to convey to me has answered so many questions about who I am. I want to thank you for your time. This is a normal practice for you, but it was a very special day for me."

In general, the initial response has been wonderful and we are encouraged to try new things and develop new programs for the adoptee community. If any of your readers have ideas for us, [we would love to hear from them!](#)

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