

# Burlington County Times

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Entertainment & Life

## Who do you think you are?

By Catherine Laughlin Correspondent

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—For much of Dominic Gagliardi's life, there were whispers in his large Italian family that the man he'd known as his grandfather was not related to him.

"He was such a kind man," recalled Gagliardi, 43, of Mount Laurel.

His grandparents had three sons. Their youngest, who was Gagliardi's father, was rumored to be the child of the married Jewish owner of a uniform factory in Camden, where Gagliardi's grandmother had worked during World War II.

So, back in 2000, Gagliardi, a lawyer, decided to do some digging. With his permission, he swabbed the insides of his grandfather's cheeks and sent the sticks to a Texas laboratory used by courts for paternity cases.

The results confirmed Gagliardi's suspicions; his grandfather had no biological relationship to him. Further tests confirmed that Gagliardi is one-quarter Jewish.

These days, as a consortium of websites enable users to test their DNA, family secrets aren't so secret anymore.

At costs ranging from \$79 to \$250, customers have sent their saliva specimens to companies, such as Ancestry, FamilyTreeDNA, 23andMe and National Geographic Geno 2.0, which identify a person's heritage and offer the names of potential relatives within their databases. Some of the tests, which normally return results in six to 12 weeks, provide information on ethnicity, while others can provide health data, including health risks, carrier traits and wellness information.

Many who have used the tests, like Gagliardi, are searching for answers. Some people are genealogy hobbyists. Still, others say gaining knowledge of where their long-ago relatives lived helps bring more understanding to them of who they are.

Gagliardi's story could have ended with him, but it didn't.

Last year, his cousin, the son of his grandparents' middle son, had his DNA tested. In a stunner, he also learned that he's one-quarter Jewish, which highly concluded that their grandmother, who died in 1985, had not one, but two sons by the owner of the uniform factory. DNA test results from the children of his grandparents' oldest son revealed no Jewish heritage.

Gagliardi says the whole experience has given him profound perspectives. Though, Gagliardi never shared his knowledge with his grandfather, he says he's sure his grandfather knew. "He'd heard the rumors, but he chose to raise all the boys as his sons and with love. I have great respect for him," he said.

Susan Broden, 59, has red hair and freckles and always thought her mother was 100 percent Irish.

Her father told his children that he was German. The notion was so much a part of him that he spoke German and joined a Catholic parish in Philadelphia where there was a large German community.

Last spring, the Philadelphia woman received as a birthday gift a DNA kit from Ancestry, which boasts 5 million members in its database.

The results weren't what she expected.

About one-third of Broden's results indicated she was a mix of Irish and the British Isles, but only 8 percent Irish. But the remaining percentages only showed one-third from Western Europe (which would include Germany). Her other one-third was Eastern European.

Broden soon discovered that her father was actually Polish. He was raised by a German family after his biological father died when he was 4.

Currently, her brother is working on a family tree and, thus far, has sprouted 400 cousins. "It's so fascinating finding these relatives," she said.

More than 9 million people worldwide have had their DNA tested, said Terry Koch-Bostic, a genealogist and the vice president of the National Genealogical Society in Arlington, Virginia.

While databases are growing by “leaps and bounds,” she cautions that the ethnicity details are still broad-based, often pinpointing the region one comes from, but not the exact country.

Martha Black said discovering her roots finally connected some confusing dots. Growing up in Colombia, South America, she always wondered why her father and his brother spoke Italian, had a passion for opera, and love Italian food.

Last March, Black, who teaches Spanish in Philadelphia, submitted a saliva sample to AncestryDNA. The results concluded that 70 percent of her ancestry was Native American, Spanish and Portuguese. But it also revealed she is 12 percent Italian. “It has opened my eyes to who I am. I’d love to visit Italy now,” said Black, 40, of Mount Laurel.

In recent years, Lynnette Valentin, 39, of Cinnaminson, has been studying the history of Puerto Rico, where her parents were born.

When she received her DNA results from Ancestry, she was in awe: Her results showed she was Native American, African, British Southern European and Spanish. “It’s as if I’m historical proof of all the countries that invaded the island,” she said.

Victor Ramos’s mother was Italian, and his father was Puerto Rican. “They rarely talked about their cultures,” said the Mansfield contractor, who has become a bit of an expert regarding DNA test kits.

Seven years ago, he began his quest to know more about his lineage. He has spent more than \$2,000 on family history research. Besides being Italian and Spanish, reports showed that Ramos, 56, is also Dutch and German.

But the biggest surprises? The first was that he’s a descendant of the Druze culture that began in the Middle East 2,000 years ago. The other was that his father had a dalliance with a Native American woman in Alaska, who bore his son.

Ramos said he was sad to learn that his half-brother had died before he knew got to know him. “But I’ve been in touch with his sons and daughters.