# A search to define her mother — and herself

By Catherine Laughlin
FOR THE INQUIRER

ESSAY

As a young girl, I never knew where my mother came from. I'd ask her where her mother was, and she'd tell me she died. When I'd ask her where her father was, she'd tell me he got sick and died, too. If I prodded too much, her engaging disposition and wide, crooked smile would vanish. "Why do you want to know so much?" she'd snap. "What does it matter?"

My father, a quiet man, whose green eyes hardly missed a thing, never knew either and never really cared or questioned her. But others could be more critical. When my parents were newly engaged, his cousin asked, "Why are you marrying someone who doesn't know who she is?"

Mom was by her own definition "made by God," a statement I initially adopted as fact given my Catholic upbringing. But as I got older, the urge to know her family was always with me, like a constant tickle in my throat that needed relief. I wanted to know someone who possessed my mother's slender wrists, shared her peculiar love for horse racing, or danced in her snapping-fingers-sort-of-boogie, a cross between a hip-hop hustle and the Mummers Strut. I wanted to know her legacy, her roots — something more to not only define her, but to define me.

Born on April 15, 1932, Carmela Sarnese became a ward of Catholic Social Services at seven months. Until she was 16, she lived in orphanages run by the Sisters of St. Joseph, who knew her background. She recalled one nun calling her a "dirty" Italian. "When people tell you something, you start to believe them," she once told me.

**Catherine Laughlin** as a toddler with her mother, Carmela. She started searching her mother's history after having her own child.

My knowledge of my mother's youth consisted mainly of stories I'd hear when she and her Irish "sisters," (women who'd been in one of the orphanages with her), sat around our kitchen table drinking beer and eating pepperoni. The sisters had become my mother's family — linked not by blood, but by heart.

Twenty-four years ago when I became a new mother myself, I started searching my mother's history behind her back. Today, numerous websites enable users to mushroom family trees with blistering speed. Last July, AncestryDNA reported that they'd genetically tested one million people, connecting 99 million fourth cousins or closer.

But the pre-internet world of genealogy was laborious and lacking transparency. After two years of writing letters to bureaucratic agencies and calling people with my mother's surname, I finally found details of my mother's past. And it was miserable: poverty, disease, incest, a mental institution, criminal charges.

She was angry at first, but after I told her I'd found her brother, she softened. He was a tall man, with my mom's slim wrists, and who, to my amazement, also loved horses, having worked a long time as a trainer. Another time, we met his only child, a daughter, who was my age. In their living room, her physician husband wondered aloud to my husband if my mother was looking for money. After that, I stopped looking, even though questions persisted about my mother's family.

A year ago, my mother died of follicular lymphoma, one of the blood cancers. Up until a few months earlier, she'd had few symptoms, even though her doctor said the size of the mass behind her stomach showed her body had been sick a long time. Bad blood had slowly killed her — a metaphor describing her life.

When she was sick, my mom told me things she hadn't told anyone, secrets she'd buried like sludge. She confessed how she always yearned for her family, especially her mother. Several days before she died, she turned yellow from her failing liver, and experienced confusion. She began calling me "mom."

Since my mom died, I've picked up the genealogy search again, partly for research for a book I'm writing about her, but more so, (and foolishly), to feel closer to her.

The first time I met my cousin Lexie was one night after an awards ceremony in the cafeteria of the high school she attends with my 17-year-old son. In an ironic twist, I'd discovered that we are distantly related, after having my saliva genetically tested by AncestryDNA.

For $99, AncestryDNA detailed a chart that showed I'm 63 percent Italian and to lesser degrees, Hungarian, Czech-Republican, English, Irish, and Ashkenazi Jew. It also provided a database of potential relatives who'd also been tested.

Sipping water and eating cookies under the cold fluorescent lights, I studied Lexie's long, auburn hair and noticed how different it was from the raven color of my mother's youth.

Through Ancestry, I found Terri, my mother's second cousin, who lives in Nashville. She's a fun-loving woman, who was delighted to meet me when she came north. Just like my mom, she has the habit of touching my arm during a conversation to hammer home a point.

Yet, confirming what I already knew, shared genes don't make us a family, or even foster relationships.

Initially, when I eagerly explained to the daughter of my mother's only aunt who I was and asked if she had any information that would shed light on why no family members raised my mom, she told me I'd have to call back in a month. She was too busy working on a church bazaar.

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