

## **‘Strengthening Families and Bringing Peace’**

Since 1930, Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Dubuque placed over 3,300 children in adoptive homes. While direct placement ended in 2010, the commitment to these families has not. Many individuals involved in the process are now attempting to learn more about—or even reconnect with—their relatives, and Catholic Charities Post-Adoption Search services allows this to happen through confidential intermediary services.

“Even though these folks were separated by adoption twenty, thirty, forty plus years ago, we’re still strengthening families, providing them with closure [...], and helping bring some sort of completion to that circle,” said Melissa Brimeyer.

Melissa Brimeyer has volunteered with Catholic Charities’ Post Adoption Search ministry since August 2012. However, she is not new to the field. For the past decade, she has volunteered with private agencies in the Quad Cities, helping to provide an opportunity for healing for countless families.

After graduating from St. Ambrose University with a degree in Sociology and Psychology, Melissa worked at Family Resources’ Wittenmyer Youth Center, a residential treatment program for children in foster care. Later, she worked for Lutheran Services in Iowa’s foster care program and provided in-home counseling to families whose children were at risk for being put into the foster care system. In this role, she also worked with the Dave Thomas Foundation to promote special needs adoption. After the birth of her second child, Melissa chose to stay home to raise her family. She now lives in Le Claire Iowa with her husband and three children.

However, due to her experiences with this vulnerable population, it wasn’t long before Melissa found an outlet for her passion and skillset. While she always kept in touch with LSI, it wasn’t until she received a call from a local lawyer asking for assistance that her full-time volunteering began. He had received requests by both adoptees and biological parents who had put their children up for adoption to reconnect and needed help. Melissa eagerly agreed and noted the coincidence in the timing because shortly before this, she had assisted her neighbor with a similar request and successfully helped him connect with three biological siblings for the first time.

The ask by this lawyer led to volunteering in this role with Family Resources for the past 11 years. Since Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Davenport’s adoption files were moved to Family Resources a number of years ago, it was inevitable that Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Dubuque’s Post Adoption Search program and Melissa would cross paths.

“Sometimes people would call and they weren’t sure which Catholic Charities office they were adopted from,” said Melissa. “So I had a case where someone called in and we didn’t have their file here, so I called your office and spoke with Angie [Link] to see if you had it there. As we spoke, she was saying how she didn’t have much time to devote to searching and I immediately said ‘I’ll help you!’ So now I do the search and gather the info and then Angie proceeds with helping those families connect if everyone is receptive.”

Angella (Angie) Link is a mental health counselor and adoption search coordinator with Catholic Charities. While the majority of her time is spent providing counseling services, one day a week is devoted to providing this ministry

“Melissa is in an incredible asset to the program and provides a tremendous amount of knowledge and support,” said Angie. “She is always available and provides endless hours of research. She's always positive, cheerful, and an amazing example of service. She spends countless hours searching for individuals and is generous beyond measure.”

Melissa explained that a search doesn't always have to end in a reunion in order to be successful.

“When these folks are calling in, it's because they've had a hole in their hearts or a hole in their life or a gap in their life and they just want to feel complete,” said Melissa. “And how that's completed is different for everyone.”

For some searchers, completion is learning family medical or social history or receiving confirmation that the other party is doing well. For others, it is connecting with family members you didn't know you had.

Melissa shared one story of a 72-year-old who had been put up for adoption searching for information about his biological family.

“We assume we're looking for a deceased birth mother at this point, but we found her and she was alive,” said Melissa. “She passed away not long after, but I imagine the peace that she received at 90 years of age learning that the child she had put up for adoption so many years earlier was ok.”

In this ministry, for every heartwarming story, there are also the heartbreaks. Melissa shared one search requested by a biological mother that uncovered the child she had 40 years previously had died at the age of two due to illness. But, even with this news, she was able to help this biological mother receive closure and process the news.

“It's hard, but it's rewarding,” said Melissa. “The bottom line of the mission, regardless of what connection is made between these different parties, is still strengthening families and bringing peace to people and filling in those gaps. That's what drives me to do it.”

“Melissa is one of the kindest, compassionate and generous women I have ever met,” said Angie. “It is truly an honor and a privilege to work alongside her.”

If you would like to be connected with Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Dubuque's Post Adoption Search Services, please contact Angie Link at 563-588-0558. For Catholic Charities, Diocese of Davenport, please contact Melissa Brimeyer at 563-508-7177.