

from the front page

A DAILY SUN SPECIAL REPORT

# DNA Kit Helps Villager Track Down Sister

By CIARA VARONE | Daily Sun Senior Writer

Helen Tucker reentered the bowling alley, bowling. Her surroundings seemed to fade as she told her husband, Dwight, the news. She had another relative. It later turned out to be another half-sister. Tucker, who was adopted as a child, had already found her birth mother and a half-sister. She'd also linked to her dad — and his seven children — in 2012 after years of searching, thanks to an at-home DNA testing kit.

The Village of Liberty Park resident had checked her email to find a new message from AncestryDNA: Her family tree had another branch.

Upon meeting, Tucker bonded with Mary Jane Salter, her second half-sister, as though they were never separated.

"We just became instant sisters and friends, confidants," said Salter, who moved from Miami to the Village of Sabal Chase shortly after the meeting.

Both women said they wouldn't change their childhoods or give up the adoptive parents who raised them. They're grateful, however, for the events that brought them together.

The road to unraveling their origins goes back to when Tucker found the daughter she put up for adoption at 19.

The happy reunion, witnessed by Tucker's adoptive parents, got Tucker thinking about her own birth parents.

She wondered if her adoptive parents would give her their blessing to search for them.

"They never did," Tucker said.

She remembered how it hurt them when she hid her pregnancy. They found out by

chance when a hospital bill was accidentally sent to their home three months after the birth.

Not wanting to hurt her adoptive parents again, Tucker chose not to ask, and to refrain from looking for her birth parents while they were still alive.

Several years after they died, Tucker began her search. She estimates she spent \$3,000 between a company and a private investigator for a few answers.

Then Tucker got an email from a search company in Cape Coral, seeking people searching for information in New York.

She was skeptical because it mentioned Troy "The Locator," and her last experience with a company using his name led nowhere.

But she saved the email and left a handwritten note on her computer with the phone number.

A year later, she called and shared the information she had collected.

Within three days, the company found a bittersweet answer.

"She said, 'I have found your mother. Unfortunately she passed a month and a half ago,'" Tucker recalled.

But her mother's husband, Jim Poliquin, and daughter, Lori Manuel, Tucker's half-sister, were still living.

Jim confirmed his wife had told him she had a child before they were married. Lori never knew.

After talking on the phone, Tucker visited them in West Virginia.

While there, she sought information on her mother. Jim said she hadn't said anything about Tucker, so he couldn't be of much help in Tucker's quest to find her father.

He did mention, however, that Lorraine used to get up and sing with a band in D.C., and had sung with country stars Roy Clark and Jimmy Dean.

When Tucker's adoptive parents told her she was adopted, they said her birth father was a musician.

So Tucker's mind began racing, wondering if her father was a celebrity.

At the urging of the search company, Tucker took DNA tests with AncestryDNA and 23andMe.

The websites showed DNA matches.

Tucker passed along the info to the search company, which found a family of seven brothers. She called the oldest son of one of those brothers, briefly explaining the situation to his wife, who answered.

Tucker told her the only thing she knew about her father was that he was a musician. Luckily, there was only one in the family: Albert Pometto.

Tucker was instantly accepted. Her new siblings gifted her with her father's mementos: videos, pictures, recipe books he wrote, his drumsticks.

"All of the children welcomed me like I always lived there," Tucker said. "We're like a big family now."

She kept checking the ancestry sites for new DNA matches, eventually finding Salter.

Unlike Tucker, she hadn't



Bill Mitchell | Daily Sun

Mary Jane Salter, right, of the Village of Sabal Chase, hugs her sister, Helen Tucker, of the Village of Liberty Park, as they share a laugh at SeaBreeze Recreation Center. Tucker was adopted as a child and found her siblings, including Salter, from a DNA testing website.

really been looking for her birth parents, even though she was curious her whole life.

Salter said she also had wonderful adoptive parents.

She remembers asking her mother at 4 or 5 years old why she didn't have any baby pictures.

Her mother burst into tears. "I thought to myself, 'I'll never ask her that question again. I'll never make her cry,'" she recalled.

Decades later, after both parents died, Salter was going through papers at the family's farm. She found her brother's and her cousin's adoption papers, but not hers.

She asked an aunt where they were.

"She said, 'They're in Richmond, and you'll never get them,'" Salter said.

Then she heard one of her cousins found his adoptive parents. He used an at-home DNA kit, and he and his wife urged Salter to try it.

She hesitated, waiting a month to spit in the tube and send it in.

"I just kept giving excuses, I was so afraid of it," Salter said. "I didn't want to open up a Pandora's box."

Several weeks later, the results came in with a match for close family.

They weren't sure at the time if Tucker and Salter were first cousins or half-sisters.

After speaking on the phone and digging through information, the women concluded they shared the same mother.

They planned to meet at Tucker's home in The Villages in April 2018.

"That was the most emotional meeting ever," Salter said. "(We were) standing there hugging each other — I don't even know how long. It could have been an hour."

After meeting Tucker, Salter took two other DNA tests, which confirmed the match. She also found out about her other sister, Lori.

Salter drove to West Virginia with a friend to visit her new sister and Poliquin, her biological mother's only husband.

"I walk in and he just starts crying," Salter said. "He said, 'You're not my stepdaughter, you're my daughter, you understand me?'"

"Yes, sir," she responded, breaking down in tears.

Tucker and Salter said though Lori looks like her father and they resemble their mother, the three sisters share the same heart.

They said they hope to visit Manuel and Poliquin together soon.

Though they never got to meet their mother, Salter and Tucker said they feel attached to her. They think she wanted to keep them because she waited a year to sign the adoption papers both times. But as an unmarried single woman in the 1950s, they believe she learned it was too difficult to support them.

"I understand what she did. I wanted to meet her and tell her, 'I love you for that.' I can't imagine the pain she went through all those years not being able to share," Salter said. "Somehow, her hand is in this."

Though she's received many answers, Salter isn't finished uncovering the truth behind her birth.

After being told she could access her records in Maryland, she said the offer was rescinded.

Salter, who has also figured out who her birth father was, sent confirmation both parents had died.

She does not understand why she can't access the records. Family history, and an unusual experience when she was mistaken for a woman she did not know, have her questioning if she could have a twin.

"Something's there that they can't tell me," Salter said.

She plans to fight for access to the records, and is thankful to have Tucker's support.

"I love you so much," Salter said, reaching for Tucker's hand. "I thought I had all of the love in the world. This is unconditional."



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