

# A Lifelong Journey



**Opposite page**, clockwise from left: William B. (Brad) Norris and Lois Norris in 1964, with children Todd, Bob, and Betsie. Betsie, center, with her birthparents Edie and Bob Nelson in 1986. Grandparents Elizabeth (Betsie's stepmother) and Brad Norris, and Edie and Bob Nelson welcome Betsie's son Elliot in July 1997. PHOTOS COURTESY BETSIE NORRIS

*O&A*

Shaker resident Betsie Norris talks about the groundbreaking organization Adoption Network Cleveland, which she founded in 1988, and her own experiences as an adoptee in search of her beginnings.

**BY SUE STARRETT**

The story of Betsie Norris, daughter and middle child of Lois and William B. (Brad) Norris of Shaker Heights, is entwined with that of Adoption Network Cleveland, the organization she founded in 1988 and currently serves as Executive Director.

The 1978 Shaker Heights High School graduate attended Cleveland State University and the Huron Road Hospital School of Nursing. She worked at the Cleveland Clinic as a registered nurse in adolescent medicine and child psychiatry. For seven years she balanced two full-time jobs: her paid work at the Clinic and her volunteer position as founder and board president of the growing Adoption Network Cleveland. Hired as its Executive Director in 1995, she prepared for that responsibility by earning a certificate in nonprofit management from Case Western Reserve University while working weekends at the Clinic.

Today, Adoption Network Cleveland is a highly regarded, nationally recognized nonprofit that employs 25 staff members, operates with a budget of \$1.7 million, and preserves its grass-roots approach. Recent honors, attesting to the organization's esteemed reputation, include the 2009 Adoption Excellence Award from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and the 2006 Anisfield-Wolf Award from the Center for Community Solutions.

Adoption Network Cleveland is not a placement agency. Instead, it promotes progressive practices in adoption and foster care through public policy and advocacy. It also provides support to both individuals and agencies involved in the adoption and foster care process. Because



of its values of responsiveness and inclusion, Adoption Network Cleveland has initiated a number of new services. These include a partnership with Cuyahoga County's Department of Children and Family Services to help youth in the county's care find permanent families.

Adoption Network Cleveland also has created a mentoring program for young people in foster care, through which the mentor makes a long-term commitment to the relationship. Furthermore, Adoption Network Cleveland offers assistance in searches, not only for adult adoptees and birthparents, but also for siblings of adult adoptees. Support groups meet monthly throughout the area, and the organization has sponsored a Birthmother's Day Ceremony every Mother's Day weekend since 1993.

On behalf of Adoption Network Cleveland, Norris continues to speak extensively throughout the country on adoption practices, policy, and law, and she works tirelessly to reform Ohio's adoption laws.

She also has served on the board of the American Adoption Congress, co-authored with Jayne Schooler the book *Journeys After Adoption: Understanding the Lifelong Process*, and received many tributes, including the 2009 Bellefaire Honoree Award, 2009 Foster Care Hero Award from the Rona R. Carter Scholarship Fund, the Hearts of Hope award from Beech Brook, and the Angels in Adoption Award from the United States Congress.

Now entering its 22nd year, Adoption Network Cleveland remains true to its mission — *we connect and empower individuals, organizations, and communities impacted by adoption and foster care, and we provide a source of healing for those in need* — and to its founder's vision.

*For more information about Adoption Network Cleveland, visit [www.AdoptionNetwork.org](http://www.AdoptionNetwork.org) or call 216-325-1000.*

### ***How did your childhood prepare you for the important choices you made as a young adult?***

My two brothers and I are adopted. Our parents were open with us; I knew I was adopted from day one. I grew up on Southington Road, across from Boulevard School, and also attended Woodbury Junior High and Shaker Heights High School. My father, Brad Norris, taught me that it is important to give back to the community. He worked for the law firm Hahn Loeser and was the founding chairman of WCPN because of his desire to bring public radio to Cleveland. He also fought against the proposed Clark Freeway going through Shaker Heights. I learned so much from him.

### ***What brought you back to Shaker Heights?***

I never left the area, although I lived in Cleveland Heights and North Collinwood in Cleveland. My son Elliot was born in 1997, and I returned to Shaker because

of the schools. I didn't set out to move back, but the schools, community, and diversity were consistent with all the values I had formed while growing up in Shaker Heights.

I decided on the Lomond neighborhood and was able to use a Fund for the Future loan to buy our house. We arrived in July of 2002, and Elliot began Kindergarten the next month. I bumped into several high school classmates that summer. They also had moved back to raise their families. Shaker is a wonderful place, both for growing up and for returning. I didn't really appreciate it until I left.

### **Why did you establish Adoption Network Cleveland?**

When I was in my mid-20s and working as a nurse, I came across a book titled *The Adoption Triangle* [referring to the adoptee, birthparents, and adoptive parents]. I stayed up all night reading, because it

validated my need to search for my birthparents. In the mid-1980s, very little information existed on this topic. I joined a group in New York to help guide my search, and after a year had a very successful outcome. I realized that I could assist other people with their searches, that I could create an affordable, self-help, and empowering alternative to the few options available at the time.

### **How did you actually launch the organization?**

I did it backwards. I helped a local birthmother organize a regional conference for the American Adoption Congress in 1988. Over 200 people attended. The Plain Dealer had done a promotional article. My phone number was included, and I received 275 calls from adult adoptees and birthparents in a three-day period! I quickly discovered a tremendous need in the community. Because of my father's

example, I knew the importance of taking action if you want something new to happen. From the start, it was important to create an organization that would live beyond my tenure. I didn't want it to revolve around me.

I used the mailing list from the conference to invite people to monthly discussion groups on the east and west sides of town. We also created a steering committee, and later, a board of trustees. But it all was based at my home, and in those days, I had to hand-address all the envelopes for our mailings. We eventually were housed at the Shore Cultural Center for ten years, and now we are located at East 46th and Prospect. Adoption Network Cleveland incorporated in 1990 and received 501(c)(3) status in 1992.

### **What prompted you to search for your birthparents?**

I didn't know my medical history, nation-

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ality, the circumstances of my adoption, or the time of my birth. It is the human condition to ask, "Where did I come from?" Knowing that I was adopted was never a negative, but the secrecy was a problem. Especially as a teen, I wondered what was so bad about my background that it was kept a secret. I experienced losses and gaps in my life – along with all that was good in our home. The medical aspects of not knowing my history were heightened when I was in nursing school. I witnessed births, and yet I hadn't heard my own birth story.

I eventually received a copy of my original birth certificate. It arrived on December 14, 1985. I had to piece together a lot of information, and it took me until May of 1986 to find my birthparents. I found out that they married each other 18 months after I was born, and subsequently raised three sons. They lived on Coleridge Road in Cleveland Heights, not

that far from me, though they later moved out of state. I also learned that shortly before Christmas of 1985 my birthparents started talking about whether they should look for me – that was uncannily close to the day I received my birth certificate. They also told me that they acknowledged my birthday every year, and they felt like there was a hole in their marriage due to their having relinquished me.

***When you contacted your birthmother, what was her response? And yours?***

After I explained the reason for my phone call, she said, "I have been praying for this call for 26 years." I had prepared myself for a negative reaction; I was speechless. My birthmother had kept a photo from my birth, and asked whether I have red hair. She was pleased that I do, and told me her mother also has red hair. We talked about 20 minutes and agreed to speak again that evening. Just to get connected

and to say the words I had rehearsed for so long was like an out-of-body experience.

My birthmother decided that she wanted to tell the news to my birthfather in person, so she left work early that day. She was so excited that she was ironing the curtains by the time he got home! My birthparents, brothers, and I saw each other fairly soon after that, and Elliot and I are now part of a large extended family. When my birth and adoptive mothers met, they expressed gratitude for the care each had given me. The good relationship between my parents really brought my life together. I am so fortunate and grateful, but this experience also triggered loss issues for me. As a mental health professional, I recognized that there is so much more to adoption than most people realize. My own experience turned me into an advocate. The shroud of secrecy is not necessary. Most birthparents want

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## A Lifelong Journey

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the contact with their children. I also saw how the mental health community wasn't dealing with adoption issues for adoptees, adoptive parents, and birthparents. All that suffering in silence wasn't healthy.

Indeed, Adoption Network Cleveland has helped therapists to understand issues unique to adoption, particularly the adoptee's sense of loss and compelling desire to forge an identity, despite incomplete information.

Cleveland is seen as a frontrunner in adoption services, and Adoption Network Cleveland is unique. We have carved a niche. We look for gaps and fill them, we look for what's needed and provide it.

### *What other major contributions can you cite?*

In 2004 we collaborated with Cuyahoga County to create the Adopt Cuyahoga's Kids Initiative. Since then, more than 400 young people have been placed in permanent homes. This is a child-centered approach that involves and respects the youths' opinions, and the program is being replicated in other urban communities. Our Adoption Navigators, who provide personal support throughout the process of adopting through the public child welfare system, have participated in the placement of another 300 children. We provide classes for prospective parents, as well as post-adoption services and programs. And, we have helped more than 1,700 people search successfully for members of their birthfamilies.

Under current law, the State of Ohio has a three-tiered system for adoptee's access to their original birth certificates. It is our aim to allow the adult adoptee, upon request, to access his or her original birth certificate confidentially, as currently permitted in adoptions finalized before 1964. We are working to change the legislation that closed adoption records from 1964 to 1996. Our advocacy began in 1989,

and it took until 1996 to open the records going forward. Our goal is to allow adult adoptees the same right to information about themselves that all Americans enjoy, and to equalize Ohio law regarding adult adoptees' access to birth records.

***Your father actually had a hand in sealing those records. Why?***

It's like a Greek tragedy. My older brother was born in 1957, and my father easily obtained his original birth certificate from the Bureau of Vital Statistics in Cleveland. He later helped write the bill to seal the records, but his intent was to ensure that the general public could not acquire the information. The unintended outcome prevented adult adoptees from accessing their birth certificates if they were born after 1964. My father eventually told me of his role in all this, and he became a huge advocate of changing the law. He even testified on our behalf.

***What's next for Adoption Network Cleveland?***

We need to be able to replicate our model in other Ohio counties and other states. We will continue to evolve to meet emerging needs of the community. Professionals, parents, and children are all in this together, and we share more in common than we have differences. We also will stay current with issues of international adoption. Adoption Network Cleveland will continue to be inclusive, collaborative, interconnected, and responsive. We have room for many perspectives on the adoption experience.

***When you say that adoption is an ongoing journey, what message are you sharing?***

It is not a one-time legal event. It involves loss and joy. Adoption is a complex, life-long, and intergenerational journey for all whose lives are touched by it. So much more unfolds over the years, and Adoption Network Cleveland provides a safe place for our community to come together.



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