

# Erin McKenzie-Christensen

I was adopted at birth because my adopted mother was unable to have children due to a disease called anti-phospho lipids syndrome which led to lots of miscarriages. My adopted parents really wanted children and due to this they decided to adopt me. I was born in 1981 in Adelaide. My Mum was a Primary School teacher usually teaching years 3-7. She had a permanent position with the education department but when she fell ill from the miscarriages and ended up adopting me she decided that she would resign from her work (or she had to from being so sick I am not sure which) and then she spent the next 5 years looking after me while Dad was working. She did do some tutoring over these years. When she went back to work as a primary school teacher after I started school myself she had to take a contract from then on cause the education department had changed the rules about having contract teachers instead of permanent ones. This meant that every year even every term sometimes we never knew whether she would get a contract or not. So she was off and on Centrelink payments (or the then social security).

Unfortunately when I was 5 years old my adopted parents were separated and divorced and my father remarried someone else who already had 3 children so from then on I was living with my Mum. I saw my Dad (and his family) one day every fortnight til one day when I was 14 he decided he didn't want to speak to me again. This was to get back at my Mum who needed extra child maintenance money which he eventually agreed to (although less than he should have been paying it was better than nothing.) She was becoming sicker from renal failure and could no longer work to support me which is why she asked for more money which had been the same amount for the previous 10 years.

So for about a year my Dad didn't speak to me and then at Christmas I decided to try sending him a Christmas card which he sent me one back and a few months later I happened to be at a school debating team meeting and I remember coming back from it and Mum said you will never guess who rang you and it was Dad wanting to meet me. So from then until uni I saw him about 4 times a year in the school holidays. I appreciated this although it was far from what I needed or wanted. I called him often at his work. I never saw his other family again. Once I went to uni I also saw him in the city more often than at school and since Mum died I started seeing him more regularly because I was able to get to the city more often. More recently however this has become a lot more difficult because he retired at the beginning of the year and so cause he lives about 50km from me he decided that that is too far to travel and so I have to meet him somewhere I can get to. Often it's near my physiotherapists rooms. Since I don't see her all that often I don't see my dad much and this really bugs me. He has met my birth family particularly my birth mother and grandmother a number of times. We always found it amazing that my adopted father was meeting me in my birth grandmothers unit for lunch. Bit different! But at least it brought us together. He is supportive that I have found my birth mother and I think he hopes I will find my birth father also.

Mum was another person altogether and was very close to me. She was the love of my life and me hers. She became sicker and sicker as I grew up and when I was 19 (2001) sadly she passed away due to kidney failure, a complication due to the anti-phospho lipids syndrome. I miss her terribly. Her ashes are currently in a rose pot in the back garden so that I still feel close to her. She will never be forgotten.

I managed before she died to locate my birth mother. Once I turned 18 I started looking. I wanted to find her since the day I was told. When I was 3 maybe 4 years old still living with Mum and Dad the neighbour at the time had a baby. We were friends with them and when I went to school her kids went to the same school as I did. Anyway apparently I started asking questions about where babies come from etc as most kids do. Not sure of exact age could have been younger than 3. Anyway my parents always explained it that there was one Mum who had me in her tummy and the other looked after me while I was growing up cause she wasn't able to. And later I found out that Mum had had many miscarriages and that she wasn't able to have children hence my parents had to adopt me instead. I always just thought of myself as being special.

Anyway I went to birth deaths and marriages and got my original birth certificate and contacted an agency called Jigsaw about them trying to help me find my birth mother. I also did electoral role searches myself going to the State library to find them on microfiche. And I went through pages and pages did every state in Australia for the name on the birth certificate. I found it strange cause there was one woman (of the name I was searching for) and someone else in the same house who disappeared after awhile on the electoral roles. I never realized until later that this was my birth mother and grandmother. I sent letters all over the country there were many of this name and mostly got them returned or sorry not the right person back (this was in 1999-2000). The story is that my adopted Mum was not well (around October 2000) and she had a stroke and went into hospital. The next day unbeknown to me my birth mother contacts Jigsaw to update her details. She had changed her name and hence that's why she disappeared off the electoral roles. Anyway 2 days later, Mum still sick in hospital I decided to contact Jigsaw again to see where they were at. I had contact with them off and on over the previous year and they said they would write contact letters to all the people I had found on the electoral roles. Well a day later I was contacted by Jigsaw to say that they had found my birth mother. I almost died! Honestly fancy the next day being told we've found her. So I rang her up and we had a big long chat. I discovered she was living interstate. Our first contact was apart from this phone call done by mail and she wrote me a very long first letter explaining how things had happened for her. Basically she had been young and at uni when I was born and had had a "one night stand" and I had been born. Apparently my father whom I still have not met knew of me and wanted to have me one week and my birth mother the other week. She disagreed with this saying it was no way for a child to grow up (and her family was strict catholic) and so she had had me adopted. Told me it was the hardest thing she had ever done! She said she had known 3 things about me 1. I would live in Adelaide, 2 I would want to meet her and 3 I would be musical. Funnily all three came true. She grew up with 5 siblings in Mt Gambier on a big property. She had lived in other states as well as Adelaide.

This all happened in 2000 a few months before my adopted mum died and luckily even though she was still in hospital my birth mother and grandmother got to me her. They were very impressed at how she had looked after me! And my adopted mum respected my wishes to find my birth family. To be quite honest I think she was a little bit surprised because I had found my birth family right after she had had a stroke and I had to keep the whole thing a secret because she was unable to talk! I told the nurses at the hospital and they said to me that mum was not in a fit state to bear that news and that I would have to wait awhile for her to recover before I told her. Basically I kept giving the nurses the details and they kept it secret too. Each week I would say is she ready yet. I waited 4 weeks a whole month pretty much to the day. In that time mum had had two strokes and a seizure. She had lost pretty much all communication except via an alphabet board and because she had to have dialysis there were arguments about where her rehab would be held so she ended up staying in the hospital and not going to the rehab hospital. She regained a little bit of speech but she was still very ill. I asked the nurse again and she said oh I think your mums starting to recover and she at least has some speech now. I had received a long letter from my birth mother by this point and I was also at uni and I was always going to visit mum in between lectures so I brought the letter and told her about finding my birth family. She said why didn't you tell me!!? And I said well you couldn't talk, how on earth would we have been able to have this conversation. She sort of felt a little like birth mother was taking over, but this was not the

case. It was an incredibly difficult situation and I think if mum had not been sick then I would never had had to wait 4 weeks to tell her!!! She was very happy for me. And because my birth mother is interstate she actually visited a second time at Christmas (2000) and then when mum passed in Feb. 2001 she also stayed down here for a few days as well. Over the course of the next year I met all my other birth relatives from her family. There are lots of aunts, uncles, cousins, second cousins and grandma of course. I also met grandpa but he passed away a couple years ago. I am still in regular contact. Grandma has recently moved into a nursing home and it's been great to visit her occasionally.

When I first met my birth mother I was mostly able bodied but a couple of years ago I had an accident on a public transport bus leading to chronic pain leading to a reaction to two medications in July 2008. The short version of this rather long and difficult story is that now I cannot walk and there are questions about whether I have a genetic condition called mitochondrial disease. Even though its genetic no one else in your family necessarily has to be sick from it and the symptoms everything from pain, fatigue, weakness, lack of energy, lack of coordination, heart problems, lung problems, nerve problems like lack of feeling etc, are common and overlap in other neurological conditions such as MS, fibromyalgia, Chronic fatigue syndrome (the last two which I have been diagnosed with) and also commonly this condition is labeled as conversion disorder where it is assumed that emotional problems are being converted into the above symptoms, an actual psychiatric condition. I also have dystonia, a neurological movement disorder. So the search for my biological father is still very important to me to find out whether anyone in his family has this condition or any other neurological conditions. In 2006 I also lost my hearing from surgery that went wrong. Again it would be interesting to see if anyone in my birth father's family is deaf too.

In between my adopted mum passing and finding my birth mother I also met my husband. We have been married now for over 7 years. It was amazing because at our wedding we had my birth mother and adopted father in the wedding party! My husband's family also live interstate as well they have only met my families at the wedding.

So I think to answer the question of what family is to me well my ideal family would be one I could be open to and talk to them about anything, one who would be around me and support me because of my disabilities, one who would not complain about driving 50 km to see me but would rather love me for the person who I am no matter how far away I am. The one person who I do this with is my husband. I think that I can take my own values of what I think family is and hopefully one day soon when we have our own children we can have these family values with them! Realistically though a family can be anything. A couple like my husband and I, my adopted mum and me, a mum, dad and children or anything in between. Unfortunately my families are quite disjointed so many people who don't speak to each other and me trying to keep the peace in the middle cause I speak to everyone! However, like I said earlier I have always felt special being adopted and I just say to people when they ask I have many different families adopted, me and adopted dad, my dads family (who he stopped speaking to when he separated from my mum), my husbands family and my birth mothers family. There's also another family and that's the one at my church as well. A different kind perhaps but they at least support us. Hopefully one day I will list my birth father on that list as well. It certainly makes for an interesting family tree that's for sure!