

# “How did you find me? Did you call my neighbors? My church? What do you want from me?”

These were the hysterical replies of a birthmother first contacted by adoption detective Ava Friddle in 2001. And no matter how much Ava, in her sweet Southern drawl, tried to explain that she was a licensed private investigator working on behalf of the birthson, who merely wanted his family medical history because his wife was pregnant with their first child, the woman was convinced she was being blackmailed.

End of conversation.

Later that evening, the birthmother's husband called back: "You don't want to mess with me, girl! I'm a minister, but I can be tough. If I find out you've spread this around town, you are going to be in plenty of trouble."

This time Ava succeeded in getting across the true purpose of her call. The husband understood, but the birthmother couldn't be convinced. She had become pregnant while in high school in 1967, in a small town in Alabama, and it was such a source of shame for her, such a fearfully kept secret, that she couldn't comprehend it as being anything other than catastrophic – even 30 years later.

"When you first contact a birthmother, in their minds they go right back to the last time they saw the baby," says Kristen Hamilton, Ava Friddle's daughter, also a licensed private investigator. "The feelings come flooding back, and fully mature women will sound like terrified teenagers. That was when time stopped for them. When we make first contact, it's like the clock starts again."

Ava, Kristen and Judy Andrews, also Ava's daughter, collectively form the Scottsdale-based private investigation firm Research Etc., which has been performing adoption searches and corporate investigations since 1995. They work out of a home office decorated with numerous "thank you" notes and pictures from clients. One former client, named with her permission, is Lisa Joyner, co-host of the new ABC reality TV show *Find My Family*, which deals with adoption reunions, as well as other types of reunions. The home office arrangement serves them well when investigations sometimes stretch late into the night, although they are careful never to receive new clients there for security reasons. Many of their most intriguing adoption searches are chronicled in their book, *Back to the Beginning: Remarkable True Stories of Adoption Searches & Reunions* (Research Etc., 2008).

In the case mentioned above, the birthson, JD (not his real name), had his Non-Identifying Information (NIDI) that is often available through the courts or adoption agencies. Unfortunately, NIDI, which is supposed to give adoptees some background on their birth family without revealing identities, can be notoriously unreliable.

Until the adoption process became more open in the 1980s (more on why later), birth families often concealed their unflattering stories of unwanted pregnancy through distortions. Agencies also muddied the picture through carelessness, or in seeking to make the child more "appealing" for adoption, by suppressing details considered undesirable, such as their true racial and socio-economic backgrounds.

In JD's case, all people and place names related to his birth family had been literally cut out from the NIDI documents with a straight-edge blade. The only detail left behind about his birthmother was her home state: Alabama. This called for some intensive forensics on the part of the Research Etc. women, who soon found some important clues had been left behind in the documents: The tops and bottoms of letters that rose above or dipped below the standard typewritten line had been left on the page.

Small letters that rose above the line had to be one of the following: *b, d, f, h, k, l* or *t*. Similarly, small letters that ran below the line could only be *g, j, p, q* or *y*. Judging by the space on the page, they knew the mother's first name had eight letters and her last name had six letters; her hometown had 10 letters and her home county had 12 letters.

With that meager amount of information they pulled out a map of Alabama and started playing trial and error. Eventually they zeroed in on a county and a town that fit the criteria, and the town had only one high school. Kristen called the school, pretending to be organizing a class reunion, and a polite Southern gentleman read off the entire senior class of 1967. Twenty-five names into the list, Kristen knew she had a match (but she listened to the remaining 30 names to keep up appearances). The team corroborated the name with other sources, and bingo – they'd found their birthmother.

However, it was the birth grandmother who eventually interceded on behalf of the reunion. Other than the birthmother, Marjorie (not her real name), the grandmother was the only other living

Laura (left) reunites with her birthparents, Smoky and Mary Jane, in 1994. The women of Research Etc. say this case was the catalyst for their business.

