



The Oregonian

Story of lost sister helps others pry living secrets from labyrinth of privacy laws

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Every family has secrets. Sometimes those secrets are people, hidden away long ago.

A sister who disappeared one day, whose name you were never allowed to speak again.

An uncle you heard someone whisper about, who lived somewhere in a "hospital."

Growing up in Astoria, Jeff Daly had a secret sister. He loved his younger sister Molly; he was patient with her. He protected her.

One day in 1957 when Jeff was 6, just before Molly's third birthday, Molly disappeared. Jeff was told never to ask where she'd gone.

Like many parents in the 1950s, the Dalys had been advised to put Molly in an institution. It would be better for her, they were told, and better for the family.

So Molly spent the rest of her childhood, and some of her adulthood, at the Fairview Hospital and Training Center in Salem with other children who had serious disabilities. Jeff never again heard his parents mention Molly's name aloud.

After his parents died, Jeff found his sister, in a foster care home in Hillsboro, in early 2004. A longtime television cameraman and editor, Jeff made a film about his family's story, his search and his reunion with Molly.

The film, "Where's Molly?," premiered in 2007 at the Portland Film Festival and was praised by critics.

Something of a media frenzy ensued. CNN did a story. People magazine gave Jeff and Molly a six-page spread, describing their reunion and the passage of "Molly's Law" in Oregon, designed to help relatives of people who were warehoused in state institutions find their brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, children.

Jeff and Molly's story has been published in Reader's Digest and reported on NPR.

It has changed a lot of families' lives. Millions of people have visited the Web site set up by Jeff and his wife, Cindy, to promote the film and assist people looking for institutionalized relatives (wheresmolly.net). Others have joined the Find Family Registry (theaclink.org/findfamily)

And now stories of reunions are pouring in.

The first was from Jeff's own brother-in-law, Layne DeLoff.

Layne and his wife, Claudia, live near Astoria. Claudia is Cindy Daly's sister. Incredibly, both sisters married men whose younger sisters had been sent away to Fairview at a young age. The sisters had even been roommates at Fairview for a time.

After Jeff found Molly, Claudia said to Layne, "Do you want to find Sherry?"

But Layne's search was very difficult. Unlike Jeff, Layne had no phone number in a family file, no medical records. "We had her name and we knew she was in Fairview," Layne says. "That's where we started."

It's almost where the search ended. Oregon state employees were not allowed to share information with Layne. "I guess one person thought she was God," Layne says. "She wouldn't tell me if Sherry was alive or dead."

Finally, another employee took pity on Layne and provided information "under the table." Sherry was living in a group home in La Grande.

"When we found her it was 2004," Layne says. He called the home and learned "Sherry was in ICU, and she wasn't doing well." Sherry had a heart condition.

Layne and Claudia dropped everything and drove across the state. "I wasn't going to pass up the opportunity to see my sister when she was still alive," Layne said. "It turned out to be a really, really good visit."

Sherry could not speak, but her caretakers told Layne things Sherry liked and didn't like -- she loved backrubs, she needed personal space, she loved camping and balls and key chains. "And she never did like men, but she took to me," Layne says.

Because he'd found Sherry, Layne made contact with his estranged older sister. When Sherry died last year, Layne and his older sister -- who've repaired their relationship -- were holding Sherry in their arms.

Her last three years of life were filled with visits and presents and phone calls from her siblings. "We had fun," Layne says. "We gave her the family, the true family, she never had."

Jeff and Cindy Daly think their whole lives led them to this time and this project.

Jeff was a videographer; he made a documentary. Cindy spent years as a lobbyist and a supervisor of lobbyists. She's leading the fight to have laws passed or rules changed in every state, so relatives can find their "secret" family members.

"We get inquiries from other states, usually from legislators or staffs, wanting to know what we did in Oregon," Cindy says.

"The problems all stem around privacy laws. They were never intended to keep family members apart, except in cases of incest or other horrible things. In this case, everyone knows people are looking for their (relatives) for all the right reasons. You don't want privacy laws so tight that families can't be reunited."

Searchers from all over the nation write Jeff and Cindy for advice and to share stories.

"We find, over and over, there was great dysfunction in their families as a result of a child being sent away," Cindy says. She says the reunions bring healing.

"Jeff is a different person because he found Molly, much more compassionate, more patient," she says. As a news cameraman, "Jeff saw so many horrible things, he got a little hard. But as he got to know Molly, a different Jeff emerged. He's more at peace."

Jeff's brother-in-law Layne has advice for anyone who has a suspicion there's a family member who was once sent away. "Find them. Don't even think about it. You'll regret it if you don't."

Do it for yourself, do it for your missing family member, he says. "It's not their fault they ended up this way. They have a right to know their family. And if you wait, you could be missing your last chance. These people often don't live very long." Sherry was 46 when she died.

"We gained everything from knowing her. We got a whole different perspective on these people, on what a family is and on who we are."

Now that Jeff and Cindy are retired, they're going to move to Seaside this year. They'll spend their time promoting the film, pushing for state and federal law changes, "and working with families," Jeff says. "It's

our chance to give back."

The guest book on their Web site has stories of many families they've already helped. "Every time we reunite another family, it's bringing peace to another family," Cindy says. "Just as it did to us."

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