

Finding Family – February 2018

When a DNA Test Has Surprising Results

By Sharon Bookmyer Maragoni

Before you take a DNA test, realize that the result you get might not be the one you were expecting.

In November 2015 I was answering an email from a cousin, who said that he had unexpected DNA results and because of this, he dropped his genealogy for a while. His mother had had an affair and, after much prodding, she set up a meeting with him and his birth father. The meeting went well, and he has new half brothers and sisters.

I started to answer that email, saying that I felt that my DNA results were as I expected, but a nagging voice in the back of my head said to look at them again. When I did, I found that I had been matched with a father called K.K.! It was weird, because my father had died 20 years previously. I was dumbfounded! I wanted to gather more information about him before I broached the subject with my mother.

Ancestry DNA matches show living persons with initials, so I knew K.K. was still living. It did not take a lot of genealogical digging to uncover his name, Ken, where he lived, and what he had done for a living. I contacted someone who had information on Vallejo school students, and he was able to get me photos of Ken and put pictures of me at the same ages side by side. There is no denying we are related.

Unfortunately, my mother was diagnosed with cancer a couple months after I made my discovery, so I was not able to really discuss the situation with her. I felt that if she had known that I had a different father, she had a reason for not telling me that information. For me, that was not a big deal. My family I had growing up was my family: Dad was my father, and I was OK with that.

After Mom died, I was able to meet with Ken. We stared at each other for a few minutes and then talked for almost four hours. I now speak to him via Skype once a week. I am glad I could meet my biological father. Not everyone gets that chance.

I now have a larger family, thanks to DNA. I was hoping to have more brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews. Nope! Ken and his wife Joann decided to not have children, as she was a little older when they married, and she already had two boys from a previous marriage. (As a side note, one of those boys was married to a woman with whom I worked briefly in Napa. Small world!)

One of the things I discovered through DNA is that I am descended from a Virginia slave. My third great-grandfather, George Braxton Dunn, was born into slavery in 1800. He was purchased at 6 years of age by a Baptist minister, who took him to Frankfort, Kentucky. In 1836 he bought his freedom and went to Ohio. By 1851 he was living in Ontario, Canada, with his wife and seven children. He died in Canada in 1885.

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DNA tests can reveal hidden information. Remember, if you decide to take one, you could get information for which you were not prepared. Even though it has been a good experience for me, it somehow made me a little sad that the father I grew up with is not my father, and the sister I have known all my life is a half-sister. I missed out on a lot of family growing up by not knowing they existed. I believe things happen in the way they do for a reason, and I am grateful to have met my biological father through DNA.

Post Script: My father turned 80 on Jan. 15, and he passed away on the 16th. I was able to be with him in his last hours, and he knew I was there, nodding to acknowledge my presence. It has been an honor and a privilege to meet and get to know the man who fathered me. I shall miss our visits and our Skype sessions, each of us drinking our morning beverage while catching up. Rest in peace, Bonus Dad.

On this topic, I recommend a book to everyone, “The Stranger in My Genes” by Bill Griffeth.