

# Invisible legacy

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## Children conceived via sperm donation seek to find their biological fathers and half-siblings

When the son Wendy Kramer conceived from a donated sperm wanted to know more about the donor, the teenager came up empty.

Ryan Kramer found this man elusive, a biological father with neither legal nor emotional attachments. When Ryan was born 15 years ago, sperm donors almost always remained anonymous, passing along their DNA but not their names.

Ryan is a boy genius who attends college at age 15. He can rattle off calculus formulas but knows nothing more about his biological father other than the man is sperm donor No. 1058.

"My son had always said he can see that parts of him come from me and my side of the family, but then there are parts of him that are invisible -- physical traits, personality interests, things that really were unknown," Wendy Kramer said in a phone conversation from Denver.

With nowhere else to go, Wendy and Ryan Kramer started a Web site where children of sperm donors could register with the hope of finding their donor, their half-siblings conceived by the same sperm, or both.

For two years the site, [www.donorsiblingregistry.com](http://www.donorsiblingregistry.com), remained virtually underground with only 37 members. Then the Kramers' story turned up in the local news.

Dozens of news reports later, more than 6,000 people are registered on the site. Of those, 1,230 are people who have been matched, either with half-siblings, a donor or offspring. About 286 are sperm donors willing to be found by children carrying their Y chromosome.

None of the matches are from Oklahoma or even the surrounding states, Wendy Kramer said, but surely that will change as more people register daily.

The site is bustling, but it has yet to provide Ryan Kramer with any knowledge of his genetic other half, a sperm sample Wendy Kramer chose because the donor's physical attributes matched those of her then-husband.

Sperm donation isn't the secret it once was. It used to be mostly married couples, in which the man was sterile, who used donated sperm to have a child. This was often kept secret from friends and family, even from the child conceived.

"I think people my son's age and older, 90 percent of them don't even know they're donor-conceived," said Wendy Kramer, who has kept her accounting job while managing the Web site and the interest it's stirring. "It's just in the last 10 years, maybe even in the last five years, that people are realizing truth is the best.

"In the adoption world it's known that truth is best, that openness is best and to tell children about their background. But in the donor world, we're just not there yet."

But we're getting closer. Using donated sperm is becoming more accepted by society, and

therefore, people are more willing to admit they've done it.

Also contributing to the "coming out" of donor-conceived children are the growing number of single women and lesbian couples using donated sperm to have children. In these situations, no man is personally involved, so the secret isn't as easy to keep.

At Cryobank California, one of the largest sperm banks in the country and one of two used by the Tulsa Fertility Clinic, 80 percent of the married couples who get sperm samples keep it a secret, said Dr. Cappy Rothman, the bank's medical director and founder.

But only half of the 2,300 to 2,500 sperm samples Cryobank receives a month go to married couples. The other half goes to single women.

"Single women can't keep it a secret. They have to tell their children," Rothman said in a phone conversation from Los Angeles.

Cryobank recently started an open-donor program in which donors agree to contact with any child over age 18 who was conceived with their sperm. Rothman said the bank is considering lowering that age to 12 because so many women and married couples who use sperm samples are anxious to contact the donor.

Most donors today have agreed to allow all families who conceived with their sperm to contact them, he said, and this change in practice reflects the country's growing acceptance of sperm donation, both on the part of donors and recipients.

"Historically, donor insemination has remained a secret," Rothman said. "The man was embarrassed; he needed (secrecy) because masculinity has been associated with being able to impregnate a woman . . . I think we're getting a little beyond this machismo of men. Things are changing. Things have changed."

There are 25 sperm banks in the United States. None are in Tulsa, according to **Spermcenter.com**, an organization that helps women nationwide find sperm donors.

The Tulsa Fertility Clinic, a facility that performs invitro fertilization and artificial insemination using donated sperm, gets its sperm samples from Cryobank and another sperm bank in Virginia, said Joni Nichols, the clinic's nursing supervisor.

The Tulsa clinic only provides donated sperm to married couples, at a price tag of about \$1,000 -- not including the insemination process. The local clinic does not provide sperm to single women or same-sex couples, she said.

Donors remain anonymous, Nichols said, and she's never heard of couples requesting information about the donor other than non-identifying characteristics, such as hair and eye color, height, level of intelligence and educational background.

"It's not just a woman wanting to have a baby," Nichols said. "This is a family. These are people who don't necessarily want anyone to know why they are using a donor. And the last thing on their mind is having a third party become involved in that."

But that's already changing on the east and west coasts. Sean, a man in Boston who wanted only his first name used, gives his sperm for free to any woman in the country he deems fit. Most of his business comes from his Web site **www.knowndonor.com**

Sean is open to being contacted by any child conceived by his sperm or the family of such a child. He has donated several times, and seven children have been born as a result, he said in



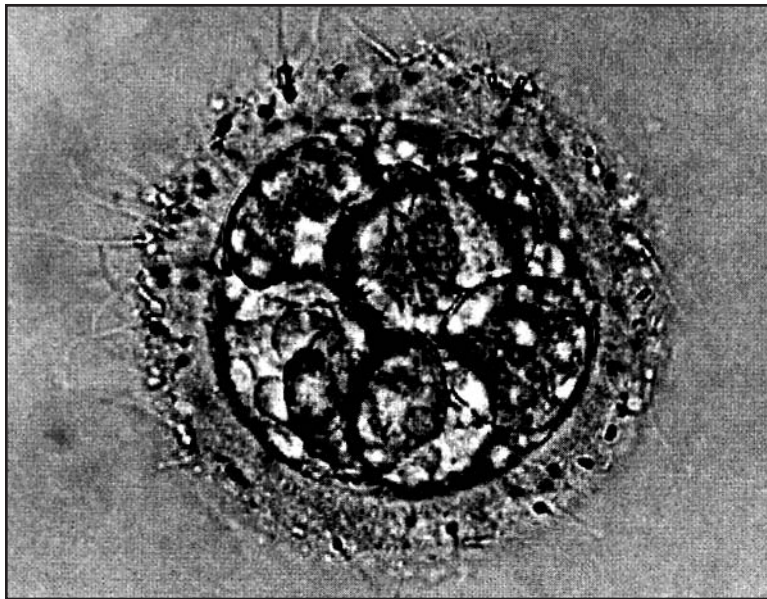
a phone conversation from his home.

Sean predicts open sperm donation will soon become the accepted practice.

"Donation has become very common in the United States and around the world," Sean said. "At first, anonymity was the safest position to start from, but it's clear that some children really do care about knowing their genetic history and being able to be in touch with biological relatives. Over time, it's becoming more accepted."

Ryan Kramer will find out who sperm donor No. 1058 is in three years when he turns 18. Until then, he and the many other children conceived by sperm donors will live without knowing half of their roots. Some will hunt forever.

"These people are not looking for money or a daddy," Wendy Kramer said. "I assure you that no one on our Web site is looking for either one. They just want to know where they come from. Seeing that invisible side of you in a sibling or a donor is a wonderful thing. It's shedding light on that invisible part of themselves."



*An embryo is surrounded by sperm in this microscopic photo.*



*Ryan and Wendy Kramer started a website where sperm donors can attempt to find their offspring.*