



"We shall not cease from exploration. And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time." - T.S. Eliot

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THE PHILOMENA PROJECT

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February 27, 2019

The Honorable Velmanette Montgomery
New York State Senate
915 Legislative Office Building
Albany, NY 12248

The Honorable David I. Weprin
New York Assembly
526 Legislative Office Building
Albany, New York 12248

Dear Senator Montgomery and Assembly Member Weprin:

On behalf of the Philomena Project, I write in strong support of passage of A5494/S3419, the adoptee rights bill you each recently introduced.

In 1952, Irish-born Philomena Lee gave birth to her son Anthony at the State-funded Sean Ross Abbey mother-baby home in Roscrea, Co. Tipperary. Sean Ross was one of three mother-baby homes run by the Sacred Heart Sisters in Ireland, responsible for more than 25,000 adoptions in and from Ireland. Despite the state's funding of the home, for three years, Philomena nurtured and loved her son while working off 'her keep' in the home's laundry, until her son was cruelly taken from her and trafficked for adoption to the US. Anthony was one of more than 2,000 such 'Banished Babies' sent to the US, including **517 New York citizens** (c.f. *Banished Babies*, Mike Milotte, 1997), largely trafficked through the Brooklyn-based Angel Guardian Home, an arm of Catholic Charities. I am one of those as well, adopted from Ireland to Philadelphia in 1961. My own adoptive parents were always truthful with my younger adoptive brother and me about our circumstances, and always respected our right to know who we are. I am also the mother of a daughter born in Philadelphia in 1978 who I was forced to relinquish in a closed, coercive adoption orchestrated by Philadelphia Catholic Charities. I was not asked to sign a confidentiality agreement at the time, nor did I seek such confidentiality. I've always believed, as does Philomena, that we are accountable to our children.

Philomena and Anthony's incredible story has become the basis for the Oscar-nominated film *Philomena*, starring Dame Judi Dench and Steve Coogan. But more importantly, it spurred Philomena herself to become a passionate advocate (at 80 years of age) for the rights of all adopted people. In January 2014, Philomena and Jane partnered with our organisation, Adoption Rights Alliance, to start The Philomena Project. The ultimate goal of The Philomena Project is to change current Irish legislation to restore the right of adult adopted people in and from Ireland to their original birth certificate and documents, including those now US citizens, and the reunification of families that were separated by forced or illegal adoption. This very basic civil and human right is one that has been enjoyed by adopted citizens in the UK for nearly forty years, and in six US states. And to date, the sky has not fallen in as a result.

I had the honour of visiting Capitol Hill with Philomena and her daughter Jane Libberton, and meeting with key representatives including Sen. Roy Blunt (R-MO), Sen. Claire McCaskill (D-MO), Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-CT), and former Irish Ambassador Anne Anderson on the issue of adoption rights. The feedback and ongoing support we received from those senate offices and the Irish Embassy has been phenomenal. I also testified against New Jersey's recent restrictive Bill and its draconian contact veto.

On behalf of Philomena, Jane, myself and those 517 Irish-born New York citizens, we urge you and your colleagues to pass New York S3419/A5494. It is long past time to stop hiding behind the skirts of mothers like Philomena and me, using the myth of birthmother 'privacy' or 'confidentiality' (not one single document has ever been produced – in the US or Ireland – to prove this myth) to deny and discriminate against citizens who vote, pay taxes, serve their country in the military and are owed the same right to their identity as every other citizen, including convicted felons. This myth is a dog which simply won't hunt any longer. NY has ample laws covering issues such as unwarranted contact, harassment and other violations of personal conduct. To grant those of us who relinquished children a special right of protection/privacy that no other citizen enjoys suggests that adopted adults are 'damaged,' or somehow pathologically unable to manage their own personal relationships in a reasonable, rational fashion. To attach such conditions or redactions to their own original birth certificate is unthinkable. An adoptee's identity and right to it is a matter between the adoptee and the state: not a negotiating instrument between the adoptee and his birthparents or agency.

At the end of the day, adoptee rights isn't about search and reunion – it is about the restoration of rights that once belonged to adopted people, rights that were rescinded as a result of popular bad psychology of the time, along with a desire to protect the identity of all parties of the adoption from the public, not from each other. Take Philomena's lead and let's get rid of the shame and stigma that was once associated with adoption. That shame isn't ours anymore. But it will be your undying shame and legacy if you continue to abrogate the rights of citizens in your own state.

We believe you wish to leave a better legacy than that, and we believe you'll do the right thing.

Respectfully,

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The Philomena Project

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