



"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

www.thephilomenaproject.org

THE PHILOMENA PROJECT

contact@thephilomenaproject.org

Dear Assemblyman Weprin,

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.

For many years, Philomena tried in vain to contact her son, or at least determine if he was happy and well and gave the Sisters her contact information. Each time, she was rebuffed by the Sisters in Roscrea. Likewise, her son Anthony (now named Michael), tried to find his mother, despite being told by his adoptive parents that his mother had 'abandoned' him. Michael had gone on to a brilliant career in Washington, serving as the chief counsel for the Republic National Committee under both Presidents Reagan and Bush. Twice, he visited the convent in Roscrea and was turned away. His last visit occurred in 1995, as he was dying of AIDS. He asked the Sisters if they would not help him find his mother, would they at least allow him to be buried there in the graveyard at Sean Ross? They finally relented, but only if he would consent to make a very sizeable donation, which he and his surviving partner did. He was laid to rest there in 1996. Even after Anthony's death, the nuns continued to refuse to divulge information to Philomena – in fact, they didn't even tell her he was buried on their property. It was not until 2003, when Philomena shared her story with her daughter Jane Libberton (and she in turn reached out to our organisation), that we discovered photos of Anthony's gravestone and the truth behind the lies.

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 last year of visiting Capitol Hill with Philomena and Jane, and meeting with key representatives including Sen. Roy Blunt (R-MO), Sen. Claire McCaskill (D-MO), Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-CT), and 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 similarly-restrictive Bill and its draconian contact veto. We vocally supported the original NY Bill A 2901A, through the NY Adoption Equality organisation, but in its original unamended state, which contained no egregious vetoes or language that would abrogate the rights of NY adopted citizens. However, with its last-minute amendments, we are mightily dismayed that the rights of those citizens will now be trumped by the myth of 'birthparent privacy,' along with what essentially amounts to a protection injunction against someone who has shown no cause or harm. It is unbelievable that an activist who purports to advocate for the rights of ALL adopted adults would so callously throw many of under the bus at the least minute, or that you would agree to support anything less than what Article 8 of the UN Human Rights Convention and the US Constitution guarantee us.

On behalf of Philomena, Jane, myself and those 517 Irish-born New York citizens, we now urge you to do the right thing and restore A2901A to its original, unamended status or pull this Bill altogether. 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, this Bill 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,

Mari Steed

maristeed@gmail.com

215.589.9329

US Coordinator, Adoption Rights Alliance

Committee Director, Co-founder, Justice for Magdalenes

The Philomena Project