



"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 PA Legislators,

In 1952, Irish-born Philomena Lee, subject of the Oscar-nominated film, *Philomena*, 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 more than 100 Pennsylvania citizens** (c.f. Banished Babies, Mike Milotte, 1997). 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.

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. In 2000, I testified before the PA legislature on a clean adoptee rights Bill authored by Senator Stewart Greenleaf. Mr. Greenleaf, along with other adoptee rights advocates, have fought passionately for years to overturn Pennsylvania's 1984 draconian sealing of birth certificates and records.

I also 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. And I testified against New Jersey's recent similarly-restrictive Bill and its punitive contact veto, which unfortunately ultimately passed, leaving thousands of NJ citizens behind.

With **HB162's** 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 to me that fifteen years since I first testified in Harrisburg, we are still mired in myths, the hidden agendas of the adoption industry and those who are supported by it. My jaw dropped open at the testimony from a paid intermediary/searcher, who characterized myself, my mother and thousands of other "Philomenas" as 12-year old 'drug addicts' and worse, and whose 'evidence' on whether or not mothers wished contact consisted of a recommendation to 'Google birthmother doesn't want reunion'. I also believe it's time to

remove the influence of the PA Catholic Coalition and others who have historically opposed adoptee rights legislation to protect their own best interests and past misdeeds.

On behalf of Philomena, Jane, myself and those 100-plus Irish-born Pennsylvania citizens, we now urge you to do the right thing and restore HB162 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. PA 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 shouldn't be about lining the pockets of paid searchers, nor about protecting the past misdeeds of agencies or religious players. It is about the restoration of rights that once belonged to adopted people prior to 1984, 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

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