



"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

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Dear Seanad Member,

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. I am one of those as well, adopted from Ireland to Philadelphia in 1961. My loving 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's 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 five US states. And to date, the sky has not fallen in as a result.

I had the honour of visiting Capitol Hill in the US 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), as well as 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 had the privilege of personally testifying on a NJ Bill in February of this year, which was ultimately passed and restored the rights of NJ adopted adults (including 273 Irish-born 'Banished Babies') to their original birth certificates and identities.

On behalf of Philomena, Jane, and Adoption Rights Alliance, we now urge you to do the right thing and vote next Wednesday on the Bill published by Senator Averil Power and co-sponsored by Senators Jillian van Turnhout and Fidelma Healy Eames. The Bill represents an important answer to the decision rendered in the 1998 IOT v B case, in which the Court recognised the need for legislation. 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. Ireland 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. Would you suggest that your own children fit that description? Or that they should similarly be discriminated against?

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 this country.

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