

MAKING THE CONNECTION

DNA testing helps Salem man find his biological father

Dianne Lugo
Salem Statesman Journal | USA TODAY NETWORK

Kevin Peña had reached a point in his life where he accepted that the odds of ever finding his biological dad were slim. • A connection on 23andMe, an at-home DNA testing service, in March changed everything. • Peña was born in Guadalajara, Jalisco. His parents were very young, just 18 and 19 when they met. By the time his mother found out she was pregnant, she had no way of contacting Peña's biological father. • He had no clues to help identify his father.

Peña actively searched for him for years, asking and doing anything to try and connect pieces that didn't exist. He interviewed his aunts to see if they remembered anything about the man his mother had met years ago like a school, a job, or if he had mentioned where he was going next. He searched through schoolbooks to see if there was anyone that resembled him.

"There was a point where I kind of thought, I'm probably not going to find him and that's OK," he said.

Journey back to the United States

He spent his childhood in the United States, raised in Albany and graduating from high school in Scio. But Peña was unable to do what the rest of his peers were doing after receiving their diplomas because he was undocumented.

Former President Barack Obama's Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, an immigration policy that protects undocumented immigrants who arrived in the United States as children from deportation, did not exist at the time. Without many options, Peña voluntarily left the country.

He first flew to Denmark where some family lived and was accepted to a local university. In order to receive a student visa, the country required proof that Peña would be able to sustain himself without needing to work. He needed at least \$25,000 in his bank account, he said.

It was an impossible sum. He flew back to Mexico, where he lived from 2009 to 2016.

Peña began working in casinos. The industry was booming at the time because Mexican officials had just begun granting live-game permits. Peña made a lucky connection with an owner from Las Vegas. He was quickly promoted to a rotating pit boss, managing pits in different casinos in Mexico.

Federal corruption put an end to the boom and live-game permits were pulled, but another lucky connection changed Peña's career path.

He was hired to help in a political campaign for Aristoteles Sandoval Diaz, a candidate for governor in Jalisco. Diaz won and Peña continued his career in politics, eventually being promoted to the second assistant to the Governor.

"I felt comfortable enough to ask him for a letter of recommendation to the U.S. consulate," Peña said.

His applications for a tourist visa had already been denied twice. With Diaz's recommendation, his third attempt was accepted.

In August of 2015, Peña surprised his mom, seeing her in person for the first time in six years. He greeted her at her job in Corvallis with six dozen roses in his arms, a dozen for each year he'd been absent.

"She just freaks out," he remembered.

Peña was still on a tourist visa and returned to Mexico. He once again asked Diaz for help in returning to the United States, this time permanently. With his assistance, thousands of dollars he had saved and an acceptance from Linn-Benton Community College, Peña returned to the United States.

It was at LBCC that he met Brittany, his future wife. The two married in 2017 and bought a house in Salem in 2019, where they've lived since with their son, Niko.

Final piece of the puzzle

Brittany was aware of Peña's dream to meet his father.

It was the last piece of the puzzle in his life. "We have a kid, I'm happy. We don't need anything in life, but if there's a miracle out there, this is it, it's finding my dad," he remembered telling her.

One birthday, his wife bought him an Ancestry.com DNA kit. In 2019, she bought him a 23andMe kit. Peña matched with many other people but no one had a direct connection.

Suddenly in March 2021, a woman named Marcela Gomez Espana matched and reached out. The 23andMe DNA relatives feature suggested she was likely his aunt.

Peña never messaged her back.

"For some reason, I thought she was from my mom's side of the family," Peña admitted. "I thought that my grandpa had had a fling and I had another aunt out there."

Marcela messaged him again in April and Peña, at the urging of his wife, messaged her back.

Peña didn't know it at the time but Marcela was visiting her brother, Javier Gomez Espana, in Napa, Calif., at the time. She began showing her brother's wife, Mary, pictures of Kevin.

"She told her, 'Look at this guy I connected with on 23andMe. Who do you think he looks like?'" Peña said. "They're like, 'Well...' and call Javier over and he's like, 'No way. No way.'"

Javier had not known Peña existed.

On Javier's behalf, Mary sent a message to Peña on Instagram on April 28.

"Hi Kevin, my name is Mary Gomez Espana. My sister-in-law Marcela shared her 23andMe DNA results with her brother Javier, who is my husband,



Kevin Peña made a connection through 23andMe that lead him to his biological father. ABIGAIL DOLLINS / STATESMAN JOURNAL



Kevin Peña, right, talks with his biological father, Javier Gomez Espana, on FaceTime at Bush's Pasture Park on Tuesday. Peña had never known who his dad was until a connection was made last year through 23andMe. PHOTOS BY ABIGAIL DOLLINS/STATESMAN JOURNAL

and me yesterday. It is without a doubt that you are closely related to both of them. Javier asked me to reach out to you because he is unsure how to approach this and I must admit I too am a bit unsure as I do not want to overstep or share anything with you that you're not looking for or do not want to know. But we are quite sure we have figured out how you all are related. Please let me know if you would like me to share what we think or why and also take a look at my Instagram page and feel free to follow me if you would like and also Javier's. He's made his account public today just in case you wanted to go look at it without the obligation of following him but also feel free to follow him and he will follow you back. He's also on Facebook, you can reply to me here or you can call or text me anytime, or email."

Peña immediately called her. "Well, we think Javier, my husband, is your dad. Have you had a chance to look at his Instagram?" he remembers her saying.

Looking at their photos, it is undeniable the two are related.

Javier and Peña spoke for over two hours that night.

Peña's wife posted a video of their first time meeting on Instagram. The video received more than 150,000 likes on Instagram. It was a surprise organized between Javier and Brittany.

The plan was originally to meet in California in June on Javier's 50th birthday. The date was six weeks away. It was too much time for Javier.

"I have a son. I've gotta see him," he told Brittany.

Peña rewatches the video frequently. He's amazed by the comments and messages he has received from people who have also found their family through DNA testing or who are trying to.

Peña and his dad speak on the phone daily. Peña is now one of five children, gaining two new siblings from his dad's side. Peña made Javier a grandfather for the first time. He goes by 'Peepaw.'

It's "crazy" how natural everything feels, Peña said.

He spent Thanksgiving with his dad's family and is grateful for how easily his new brother and sister accepted him into their lives.

His new sister, Eva, decided to attend the Univer-

sity of Oregon and Peña tries to visit frequently.

"Already, we've made so many memories and we connected in such a beautiful way and it's just that missing piece," he said. "You know, you finally find it and I think it makes you whole in a way."

He said he grew up looking in the mirror, always looking for his roots and where he came from.

"There's a lot of self-reflection that happens when you look in the mirror," he said.

But half of himself was a mystery.

"And when you find your dad or find the person that was missing ... you start understanding who you are and why you are the way you are. And then for him to look as much as he does to me or vice versa is just super freaky because I feel like, it's weird to say, but I feel like I see myself in a different way in the mirror now that I know my dad and now that I know all that was missing," he said.

Dianne Lugo is a reporter at the Statesman Journal covering equity and social justice. You can reach her at dlugo@statesmanjournal.com, 503-936-4811 or on Twitter @DianneLugo.

Public Notices

PUBLIC NOTICES

Public Notices are published by the Statesman Journal and available online at www.StatesmanJournal.com. The Statesman Journal lobby is open Monday - Friday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. You can reach them by phone at 503-399-6789. In order to receive a quote for a public notice you must e-mail your copy to SJLegals@StatesmanJournal.com, and our Legal Clerk will return a proposal with cost, publication date(s), and a preview of the ad.

LEGAL/PUBLIC NOTICE DEADLINES

All Legals Deadline @ 1:00 p.m. on all days listed below:
***All Deadlines are subject to change when there is a Holiday.

The Silverton Appeal Tribune is a one day a week (Wednesday) only publication

- Wednesday publication deadlines the Wednesday prior

LEGAL/PUBLIC NOTICE RATES

Silverton Appeal Tribune:
• Wednesdays only - \$12.15/per inch/per time
• Online Fee - \$21.00 per time

- Affidavit Fee - \$10.00 per Affidavit requested