

Oregon adoptee's DNA test leads to discovery of sister

By **Samantha Swindler**
The Oregonian/OregonLive

On the night of March 23, 1984, a little boy was found crying on the steps outside the Yongsan Theatre in Seoul, South Korea. He was scooped up by the manager, a Mr. Hong, and reported to the local police station.

The boy was estimated to be about 2 and a half years old, given the name Hong Ki Hong after his rescuer, and quickly prepared to be placed for adoption.

Less than 24 hours later and a mile or so away, a little girl was dropped off by her father at a marketplace, given 1,000 won, and told to buy herself a treat. He said he'd come back for her, but he never did. When a woman found the child alone, she discovered a note in the girl's pocket which read, "Please send this child to an orphanage through police station. At present, she has no parents."

The girl said she was 4 years old and was able to tell police her name, Jee Young Lee; her father's name, Kyung Kuk Lee, and that she lived with an older sister, Sang Yeon Lee. The girl said her mother ran away because her father drank too much and beat her. Records from the Social Welfare Society Inc. don't say whether police ever tried to find her family before placing her up for adoption as well.

Through different agencies, the children were each adopted by families in the United States. The boy was raised as Justin Kragt and grew up mostly in Salem. The girl became Renee Alanko and grew up in Northern California.

And until this year, they never knew they were brother and sister.

In 2014, searching for some distant blood relatives, Kragt did a DNA test through the company 23andMe.

"I was hoping to find a fifth cousin, as weird as that sounds," Kragt said. He did find some distant connections and was happy with the outcome.

Kragt was born with congenital heart failure, which required open heart surgery at age 4. He had assumed he had been abandoned because he had special needs.

"I was content with that," he said. "I heard other people that had horrible stories and I just thought I'll believe in my Harry Potter story."

But Alanko, who had known the name of her father and sister, had always wanted to know more about her birth family. She had traveled to South Korea for a birth family search in 2008. With the help of an adoption agency detective, she sent out more than 200 letters to people who might be the father whose name she had given police. She heard nothing back.

This summer, Alanko, now living in the San Francisco Bay Area, took her own DNA test because she was thinking about having children. After the search in 2008, she was looking for health indicators, not family.

So it was a shock when the results of her 23andMe kit predicted she had a sibling living just 600 miles away in Salem.

Alanko's adoption report makes no mention of a younger brother, only the older sister — and that woman, she knew, might actually be an aunt or caregiver. But her adoptive mother told her that when

she was very young and had first arrived in the U.S., she did speak of how her cute "baby brother" was.

When she reached out to Kragt and discovered they had been abandoned in neighboring districts and within a day of each other, the pieces came together. At some point, however briefly, they had been a family.

Why their father abandoned them separately is one of many questions that still linger.

They talked over the phone and shared photos but saw each other for the first time last week when Alanko flew into Portland International Airport for a tear-filled reunion. Kragt's adoptive family was there on what happened to be Kragt's 36th birthday.

"I could not have planned a better gift to give Justin than this," said his adoptive mother, Sue Maguire.

Life was not easy for Kragt as a child. He was abused by his adopted father, who is now estranged

from the rest of the family. But this moment, he said, was a joyful one.

"I always thought I was alone in the world, and I was content with that," he said before tearing up.

His sister, standing next to him, put her head on his shoulder and hugged him tight.

"Now you're stuck with me," she joked, and the pair laughed.

"I have a lot of holes that need to be filled in my heart," he said, "and this does, it patches it up."

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