





An Angel Among Us

San Diegan Judy Sheinbein works tirelessly
to reunite families separated by adoption

BY TAMAR CASPI SHNALL

Throughout the Old Testament, “angels” are messengers of God. The most well-known are introduced as part of Daniel’s apocalyptic visions: Gabriel, who is an angel of revelation, interprets dreams, and Michael, who is a warrior and advocate for Israel. In Hebrew, an angel is a *malach* and means either a divine or a human messenger. So it wasn’t far-reaching when hundreds of people started calling Judy Sheinbein their angel. Sheinbein facilitates reunions between adoptees and their birth families and is so revered by them that they coined the term “Adoption Reunion Angel” to describe her.

Sheinbein and her family run the national Web site FindMyFamily.org, whose aim is to reunite adoptees with birth family members. The Sheinbein family calls it their mitzvah project and does the work free of charge.

Sheinbein’s road to “angel status” is deeply rooted in San Diego’s Jewish community. She is a second generation San Diegan who grew up within walking distance of the (former) College Area Jewish Community Center. She credits “fond memories of the after school activities at the JCC” for prompting the community involvement that began in her teens and set her “on the path to wanting to make a difference and help others.” Sheinbein is an alumna of Crawford High School and San Diego State University, where she earned degrees in speech therapy and psychology before becoming a teacher to the deaf.

When her son, Aaron, celebrated his bar mitzvah in 1996, the family began researching its family tree. Before long, she became an expert in the research tools available at the San Diego County Courthouse. She started offering to help friends with their own family research and soon began receiving requests for help. It was then that she decided to join the San Diego Jewish Genealogy Society as a volunteer researcher. When a woman approached her needing help finding her biological family, Sheinbein “took it on as an interesting challenge, and a few days later was able to find her entire birth family.” It was the first time anyone had called Sheinbein an angel. That sense of fulfillment was when she found her calling.

Sheinbein began receiving search requests through a personal Web site created by an adoptee named Beth Levee in 1996. Levee had documented her own journey to find her birth family and received pleas for help from other adoptees. She forwarded those requests on to Sheinbein,

who was known as the site’s search angel. After more than a decade of helping people through various such networks, Sheinbein’s son Aaron, a professional Web site developer, offered to help his mom create a Web site and database for the state of California.

In 2008, the mother-son team launched FindMyFamily.org for California-born adoptees, but, Judy Sheinbein says, because “one in 15 people [are] affected by adoption, and the tremendous response we received in our first year, we decided to create an adoption registry for each state.” When they went national in 2009, the site had a registration increase of 250 percent. Currently, it has 17,000 registered users.

Some users don’t need to go further than the site’s mutual match system, where users in search of a relative enter identifying information that’s searchable by other users. San Diegan Dan Ellers was one of these lucky people. Ellers, who hadn’t seen his daughters in 30 years, registered with FindMyFamily.org last spring. His daughter, Courtney Shirk, was performing one of her random, routine searches when she came across her father’s post.

Shirk wrote Sheinbein to inform her of the match, stunned that, as she wrote in her original e-mail to Sheinbein, “HE was looking for ME?!...The fact that he’s looking for me, after all these years...I’ve wondered if he even cared...I HAVE to get in touch with him as soon as possible. I am shaking — I can’t believe this is real!” Sheinbein immediately e-mailed Ellers and asked permission to exchange their contact information. Ellers instantly replied, “By all means! I have loved and missed my daughters since the day we were separated!”

In 1980, Ellers was living in Washington when he relinquished parental rights of Courtney, age 5, and Brooke, age 3, to his ex-wife, who was remarrying. In 1981 he and his second wife moved to San Diego, and he never saw or heard from his ex-wife or their daughters again. He had a third daughter, Ashley, in 1983 before divorcing and is now married a third time. He and his current wife became foster parents and adopted four of the children they cared for.

Earlier this year, Ellers was watching a reality TV show in which families are reunited, and he decided it was time to finally find his daughters. He thought there would be “a slim chance of finding them and of them wanting

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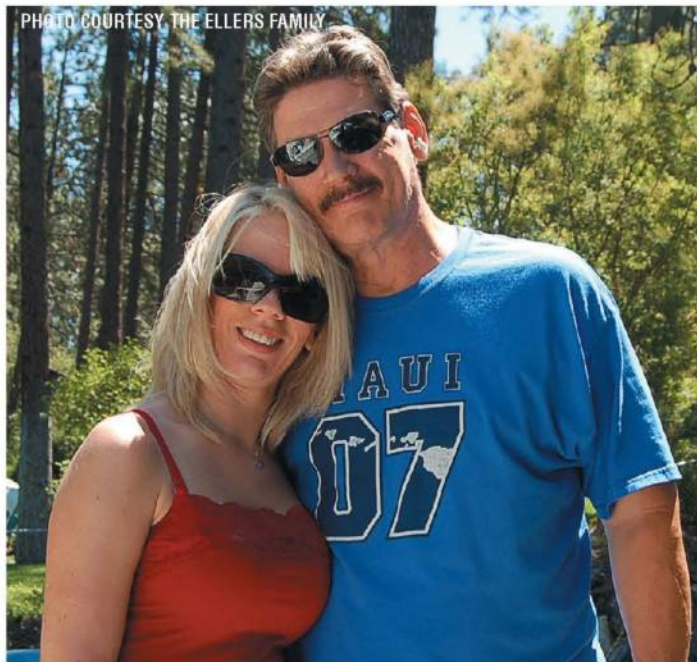


PHOTO COURTESY, THE ELLERS FAMILY
San Diegan Dan Ellers and his daughter Courtney Shirk performed online searches for one another and finally were reunited through FindMyFamily.org after 30 years.

a relationship" so he didn't get his hopes up. In April, he registered on FindMyFamily.org, and a few weeks later his oldest daughter visited the same Web site. The day of the initial connection, May 31, Ellers began corresponding with both of his daughters. They have talked on the phone or exchanged e-mails every single day since.

Ellers says he's spent the past 15 years turning his life around because "if I ever had contact with my girls, I'd want them to be proud of their dad." Now that they're in contact, he says, "the pressure is on to be the father I've always wanted to be for them." His daughters have already come to call him "Dad," and they were finally reunited in July when Ellers and his wife flew to Washington to visit. Shirk is now planning a trip to California with her daughter, Ellers' first granddaughter, so they can all go to Disneyland together.

With so much of the population somehow touched by adoption, it wasn't a surprise to Sheinbein to find not only San Diegans she was helping, but Jewish San Diegans as well.

Phylis Lemberg was born Sept. 7, 1955, in Burbank, Calif., to an unwed mother who decided to give the baby a chance at a better life. Lemberg was adopted by a Jewish family from the San Fernando Valley, and she and her adopted brother grew up learning they "were special, because their parents got to pick them out." Lemberg hadn't thought of finding her birth mother until her adoptive mother said it would be good to know her origins. In 2001, Lemberg decided to sign up on a family locator Web site using the little information she had. Two days later, Sheinbein contacted her.

The search was not an easy one, as California didn't start digitizing its birth records until 1956, a year after Lemberg was born. Sheinbein helped Lemberg obtain a copy of her birth certificate, which had most of the pertinent information darkened over. But it took just a few tidbits to get Sheinbein rolling, and within a few short months she'd found an old utility bill, which led her to a married name, which led her to Lemberg's birth mother, JoAnn Goepfert. It was pure coincidence that Goepfert was living at the Leisure World Retirement Community in Orange County just



Mother-son team Aaron and Judy Sheinbein of San Diego launched FindMyFamily.org in 2008 to unite families separated by adoption.

around the corner from Lemberg's adoptive mom.

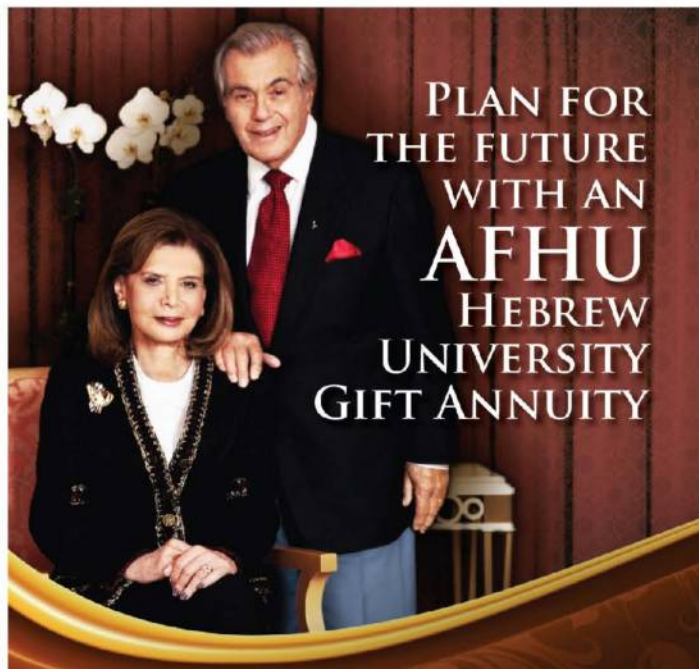
When mother and daughter met in 2002, Lemberg learned her birth mother had given her up because she and the birth father, whom she had met on vacation, were not married, and she didn't want to raise a child as an unwed mother. In Lemberg's first e-mail to Goepfert, she said "My intentions are well-meaning. I just want to say thank you, as my childhood was wonderful."

Goepfert also told Lemberg of a half-sister she had given up for adoption while living in Ohio. Goepfert had learned she was pregnant again after breaking off an engagement and decided to give up her second daughter for adoption for the same reason. Goepfert's second daughter, Shari Saks, was born in 1958, and Goepfert moved back to California after her birth. It took many years, but the two sisters found each other online in 2010 and have become fast friends. It turns out, Saks lives just miles from where Lemberg grew up and had also been adopted and raised by a Jewish family.

Lemberg and her partner of 17 years live in Bay Park, where she runs Lemberg Associates, a manufacturer representative firm. Her brother also lives in San Diego with his family and is considering looking for his birth family. Their adoptive father died in 1989, and their adoptive mother died last summer. Now, when Lemberg misses her mother, she can call Goepfert, whom she calls "JoMama." Goepfert did eventually marry and had a son in 1962. This past August, she celebrated her 75th birthday with all three of her children.

Sheinbein is FindMyFamily.org's only search angel, and she works tirelessly to bring families together. She is currently developing a search angel network, which would add volunteers to the research staff. In the meantime, she says, "It is very soul-satisfying to be able to make such a positive difference in people's lives."

FindMyFamily.org runs on donations only and is currently using the funds to become a 501(c)3 non-profit organization. To donate or to learn more, visit www.findmyfamily.org. ✨



We are strong believers in Israel and what the nation stands for," says Martin Zelman. "My family fled Germany in 1939, leaving everything behind. When we came to the United States, my parents, with five children, started from scratch. This country has been good to us, and Lois and I believe in the power of education. By creating an AFHU Hebrew University Gift Annuity, we are helping Israel's most capable and deserving students."

"I've spent my life as a leader active in Jewish philanthropy," says Lois. "It's the way I was raised. Marty and I want to make a statement for the future. An AFHU Hebrew University Gift Annuity offers a win-win type of philanthropy. We receive a high regular rate of return during our lives, after which our gift supports the well-being of Israel and The Hebrew University."

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