

Learning the truth about my dad taught me love isn't about DNA | Opinion

The rich and impactful life of my father was a bigger success story than we knew, thanks to a compassionate American adoption network and a married couple who happened to be Irish.

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My big Irish Catholic family was gobsmacked by a report from [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com).

Prior to receiving the report, my five brothers and two sisters and I had taken our [Irish heritage](#) for granted, wearing green carnations and derby hats on St. Patrick's Day and vaunting our Emerald Isle identities as musicians, storytellers and merrymakers for the past half century.

Right up until, that is, the fateful day in 2022 when my sister decided to have her DNA tested, and it showed not a single trace of Irish blood coursing through her veins. Our ancestors hailed from every nook and cranny in Europe – except Ireland.

Following the news, we endured four of the five stages of grief, including denial, anger, bargaining and depression. But there's something in our lineage stubbornly opposed to the fifth stage of acceptance. Accordingly, in March I sent \$99 and my own saliva

sample to Ancestry in hopes that my report would come back blooming with shamrocks.

Instead, it revealed my origins as predominantly Polish and Greek. No connection to Ireland: zero [centimorgans](#) (genetic unit of measurement) of Irish DNA.

How could that be? McGrath is an [Irish surname](#), after all. A closer look, however, suggests the reason.

On the side of my late mother, [Gertrude Cichoszewski](#), labeled Parent No. 1 by Ancestry, is a long list of names of those who match my DNA, which includes dozens of the Polish relatives I grew up with, such as the Pletzkes and Szymikowskis and others whose birthdays and weddings and christenings we celebrated together.

On the side of my late father, Charles McGrath, Parent No. 2, is another list of matches. But the McGraths, Goines and other Irish relatives I knew – the sisters, brothers, nephews and nieces of Ray and May McGrath, my father's parents – with whom we spent many a Christmas and St. Patrick's Day, and who also registered with Ancestry, fail to appear.

Instead, all the matches on my father's side are strangers, most with Greek surnames.

According to Kira Bricknell of [SearchAngels.org](https://searchangels.org), a nonprofit organization of genealogy experts, a DNA analysis with such unknown or unexplained matches is “a classic indicator of an [undisclosed adoption](#).”

The science shows I have no familial connection to the relatives of my father’s parents. Alternatively, I match up with a different group of people overwhelmingly Greek: a different family tree that my father apparently springs from, meaning that he is not biologically related to his parents. In other words, my father was almost certainly adopted.

Suddenly, other things fall into place, such as an "Affidavit of Birth" substituting for Dad's birth certificate. Or the fact that he was an only child. Or that his and our medical histories are dissimilar to those of Ray or May.

And who exactly are those strangers who do share my DNA, bearing surnames like Steriotis, Bokos and Carras? One, still possibly alive somewhere and sharing a copious amount of that genetic material, might be Charles’ sister, who without his knowing it, lived just blocks from where Dad grew up. (I know this because of my niece Lisa Anderson, whose crucial technical expertise allowed us to trace the McGrath family DNA.)



My father may well have been among the thousands of Greek children adopted here in the 20th century. It would explain why his handsome face, dark hair, stocky physique and personal magnetism did not closely favor Ray McGrath.

Yet, all our lives, there was not a single whisper or rumor of adoption. He was devoted to Ray and May till their dying days, and neither he nor my mother nor any of our aunts and cousins ever even hinted at a secret.

Odds are Dad never knew, but I can't be totally sure; so, it remains a detective story, and an emotional one, at that. Because knowing that he may have been an orphan, that his real mother may not have

wanted him or that his parents may not have loved him the same way he loved us, made me sad.

And it kept me awake at night, scenes from our past reeling in my brain with memories that slowly but surely led me to appreciate how wonderful a gift adoption actually is.

My dad's life was a bigger success story than we realized

On a Saturday in spring in the early 1960s, we went with Dad for the weekend of his grade school reunion at St. Anne's Parish in Chicago. We visited his school and church, and afterwards he bought us root beer floats with homemade ice cream at the same drug store where he enjoyed them as a kid.

From St. Anne's, he went on to become an exceptional student at Mount Carmel High School, according to several "Rewards of Merit for Excellence in Scholarship" certificates we still possess.

He proved exceptional again in the Army, where he was sent to officer training school and swiftly rose to rank of captain during World War II.

After the war, he was employed in sales at [Spiegel](#), then Consolidated Tile & Carpet, and then the Calgon corporation.

He was a funny, charismatic, cherished member of the community. The life of the party on Saturday night, Charlie McGrath would push an entire row of us on the swings at [Sherman Park](#) on Sunday

afternoon. President of our neighborhood association, he later won election as village trustee of Evergreen Park.

Married to Gertrude for over 50 years, his progeny were eight children and 15 grandchildren – he and Mom contributing to America's pool of lawyers, public sector workers, teachers, medical professionals, electrical and machine technicians, writers, soldiers and artists.

The rich and impactful life of my father was a bigger success story than we knew, thanks to a compassionate American adoption network and a married couple who happened to be Irish. They raised and nurtured the man who became a father who launched generations of American dreams.

My dad – I am so proud of him. And of his dad and all the others out there who are fathers in the very best sense of the word.

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