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hear the
MOST
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complicated,
perfectly
imperfect
word
I know?
FAMILY.

”

Stories, pg. 88

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Brandie (left) with her blended family in their mutual driveway, 2017.

FOR THE RECORD

Unlock the secrets of your ancestors with keystrokes, DNA, and a dream.

Genealogist Crista Cowan has been fascinated by family history research since the mid-'80s, when she helped her dad enter info about their kin into the home computer. "That was all it took," she says. "I was hooked."

Whether you're hoping to untangle a mystery or get better acquainted with your foremothers, Cowan, who's the corporate genealogist at Ancestry.com, says your first stop should always be a mail-in DNA test. But for an extra info boost, check out these sites she uses to fill in the blanks:

Find a Grave: "A worldwide community that takes pictures of tombstones and cemeteries, then uploads those photos and transcribes what's on the tombstone. There are more than 170 million searchable memorials containing details about birth dates, death dates, and burial locations." (findagrave.com)

Fold3: "A repository of military records from around the world: You'll find everything from photos to enrollment cards." (fold3.com)

Newspapers.com: "Small-town papers were the Facebook of their day. Search where your ancestors lived and get details on births, marriages, and deaths—and information about charitable acts, political and religious affiliations, and more. Information I've found here has helped me break through many research 'brick walls.'" (newspapers.com)

RootsWeb: "One of the largest free genealogy resources on the internet. Check out the Family History Wiki, which contains guides to interpreting census and immigration records, and includes links to state archives, libraries, and other government repositories." (rootsweb.com)

BABY BOON

The nonprofit HelpUsAdopt.org gives hopeful families what they need, when they need it most.

Becky Fawcett found her purpose after finding out she was infertile. "My husband and I adopted both our children," she says. "I was actually in the delivery room when our son came into the world 13 years ago." But given the legal fees, travel expenses, and state-mandated evaluations, the financial toll of that first adoption—about \$40,000 in total—was massive. "It took every penny we had," she says. "I said to my husband, 'My God, we're so lucky to have been able to make that work.'"

Feeling compelled to give back, Fawcett, then a publicist, hunted for programs giving grants to aspiring parents, in the hope of doing some pro bono work. "But I felt totally defeated by the organizations I found," says Fawcett. They often wouldn't work with single or LGBT parents, or people in interracial relationships, and supported only one religious group. "I was pretty shocked at the lack of inclusivity. How can you tell someone they don't deserve help because of the god they worship? Or

their marital status? And what did that mean for the kids who'd be great family members if only the money was around?"

Fawcett dove into online research; wrote up a business plan; and, in June 2007, sent out about 1,300 letters announcing her new nonprofit, HelpUsAdopt.org, which offers grants to all types of families. The idea clearly resonated, as she discovered a week later when she started receiving envelopes in the mail with checks inside—one for \$15,000. The organization has since awarded almost \$2.6 million to nearly 300 families. Fawcett (who's also the proud mom of a 9-year-old daughter) stays in touch with many of the families who've received grants. "The most emotional moments are when people send me baby pictures," she says. "And last Mother's Day, I wrote a Facebook post saying how grateful I was to my children's birth mothers. One grant recipient commented, 'I'm so grateful to read your story, Becky—without yours, I wouldn't have mine.' I get goosebumps just thinking about it."