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KC native writes, performs in one-man show about adoption experiences

By ERIC ADLER
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Even as a young boy, Kansas City native Brian Stanton questioned the mystery of his existence. Adopted as an infant, he wondered who his birth parents were and where he really came from.

Near the start of his one-man show, "Blank" — which opened Thursday night in Kansas City — Stanton, now 36 and an actor and playwright in Los Angeles, muses on the nature of identity.

"Why do we have to know?" he asks. "Isn't it OK to just not know sometimes? ... Do you ever ask yourself who you are? I don't know. I ask myself all the time, and I may never know ..."

But in real life, as the play reveals, Stanton did find out.

What he discovered in 1999 from a letter from his birth mother, who was a Catholic, teenage schoolgirl when she gave birth to her unnamed son in February 1975, ended up being more dramatic than he ever imagined.

"Brian, I always hoped this moment would come," the letter said. "I'm filled with joy just to hear the smallest bit about you and anxiety over the emotional rollercoaster this may put you through. I want to first answer a question I'm sure you have for me and one I put to myself 24 years ago. How could I give away my own son? There isn't a good way to put this, so I'm going to be as honest as possible. Brian, I was 16, (and had) been gang raped ..."

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Nationwide, the desire among adoptees to gain access to their original birth certificates upon request — to search for identity, history, or medical knowledge from birth parents — has been a personal, legal and public policy issue for years.

A few states, including Kansas, Alaska, Alabama, Delaware, Oregon and Tennessee, grant complete access to original birth certificates. In most states, including Missouri, either a court order or proof of a compelling reason is required. Some states allow no access.

"The number one reason given for secrecy is often said to be to protect the identity of birth mothers," said Fred Greenberg, legal adviser to the American Adoption Congress, now pushing for more open records. "The people who really want records kept close tend to be insecure adoptive parents. A lot of them would like not to have to deal with birth families."

Creating a policy that respects adoptees, adoptive parents and biological parents is the trick.

"We want to see access for the majority who want it," said Chuck Johnson, president and chief executive officer of the National Council for Adoption, "but at the same time we have to protect the people who don't want the information released."

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In Stanton's show — which takes its title from the blank space where his name should have been on his original birth certificate — he plays every role.

Using humor and pathos, the 1993 Rockhurst High School graduate takes on the voices of his younger self, his melodramatic acting coach, his strong mother, deaf grandfather, blasé friends and others as he probes the nature of identity. How much of who he is comes from his unknown genetic makeup?

Is his search for his biological roots a betrayal of the parents who raised him? In what light does he view himself knowing that his biological father was a rapist?

He says in the show: “One half of me is a victim, the other ... a monster.”

Where Stanton does not venture, because the play ends just before he meets his birth mother, is into how complex, in both difficult and rewarding ways, creating a relationship with his birth mother became — not only for him, but all around him.

Brian Stanton’s history:

Born Feb. 4, 1975, he is the adoptive son of Tim and Marsha Stanton, now ages 64 and 63. They raised their kids in Overland Park and now live near Branson.

The Stantons had tried to have children, but couldn’t. After adopting Brian, though, Marsha Stanton became pregnant with daughter Jennifer, now 35, and son Patrick, 32.

Life was good. Brian Stanton was happy, popular, a swimmer in high school with many friends.

Always, he knew he was adopted. The adoption had been closed, so the Stantons had scant knowledge of their son’s biological mother.

“I had always been very content with that,” Marsha Stanton said this week.

They received some parent information from their adoption organization. They were told the biological parents were young and given general descriptions of hair and eyes, height and weight.

As a teen, Brian Stanton grew curious.

“He would just ask questions: ‘Where did she live?’ ‘How old was she?’ ‘Why did she give me up?’ ” Marsha Stanton recalled.

She did not dissuade his interest. When a friend with access to Missouri adoption records offered to get Brian’s original birth certificate, Marsha Stanton said yes, in case Brian might one day need to reach his mother for medical information.

“It was strictly a genetic thing,” she said. “I did not do it because I wanted to throw him into her lap.”

The certificate bore the biological mother’s name. Marsha Stanton figured Brian’s biological mother was now married, found her name and address and, for more than a decade, squirreled it away.

In his early 20s, Brian came home on Christmas break from graduate school in California. He once again asked about his biological parents. Marsha Stanton took out the slip of paper.

Warnings ensued: Be careful. Maybe she won’t want to see you. Maybe her husband and family don’t know about you.

“You don’t just call her up and say, ‘Hey ...,’” she remembers telling him.

Brian thought about it. The next day he asked his mother to call.

“You want me to do it!?” Marsha Stanton said. “I was trying to act as brave as I could. I called her number.”

Brian’s biological mother, now 52 — who spoke this week from her Kansas City home but requested anonymity because of the circumstances of his conception — said the call “kind of hit me like a ton of bricks.”

They reached an arrangement: If the birth mother wanted contact with Brian, she would write him a letter.

“Not a day went by without me thinking about him,” she said, “wondering where he was, how he was, did I make the right decision in giving him up?”

Brian received his biological mother’s letter at graduate school. The rape revelation “was a punch in the face,” he said.

As an adopted child, he’d held fantasies: son of a prince, child of a great actress.

“Never in a million years did I think I was the product of rape,” he said.

His biological mother explained: She was at a party. There was drinking. Three boys from her high school class assaulted her. She never reported it.

The day she gave birth, she did not get to hold her unnamed son. She saw him briefly on the other side of a glass, and a nurse took him away. Her boyfriend at that time would become her husband. Together they would have two children, a son and daughter.

She said this week that the rape did not prompt her to give Brian up. "I just did not think I was old enough, or that I could handle having a baby."

Over 12 years, Brian and his biological mom have grown close. They visit and talk regularly. While Stanton was at the Fishtank Performance Studio, 1715 Wyandotte St., earlier this week, his biological mother played with his two children, Malea, 9, and Ellowyn, 7, near Crown Center.

The relationship is enriching.

"Believe it or not, I feel a little more whole," Brian Stanton said. "Before, I was surrounded by mystery."

As his play reveals, the rape does not define him. Marsha Stanton said she is happy for Brian because she loves him deeply and wants him to be happy.

It's come at a cost.

Soon after Brian united with his biological mother, he invited her to his wedding in California. It would be the first time Marsha Stanton would meet her. She wanted to focus on her son's wedding, not on another mother. It turned out fine. They met and spoke briefly.

At first, Marsha Stanton conceded, "It hurt. It hurt."

So it was initially with the play, hearing that her son felt himself to be "blank" in any way.

"I hated it," she said. "I'm very proud of his writing talent and acting talent. I'm glad he has had success with it. But, no, I hated it. ... My daughter convinced me that I was not hearing all of it, so I went again. It was better that time."

She plans to attend the show.

So does Brian's biological mother. Although the new relationship with her son has broadened her life, she also said that it was not all easy. Brian's presence forced her to tell her own children, then in high school, about his existence and the rape.

One was angry; the other seemed little bothered. Their relationship with Brian is friendly, but distant.

"The play is about truth," Brian Stanton said. "I do think truth is important in building an authentic self."

But everyone has their own truth.

Marsha Stanton said she probably never would have given him the slip of paper had she known about the rape.

Her advice to those looking to reconnect: "They should take it very, very slowly."

Said Brian's biological mother: "It's complicated. It affects you and everybody around you."

The details

"Blank" is to be performed through July 10 in the 50-seat Fishtank Performance Studio at 1715 Wyandotte. For the schedule and ticket information, go to <http://fishtanktheater.blogspot.com>.

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