

Man's quest finds that family circle was closer than he knew



JIM
STINGLE

Kevin Rutkowski lost a dad, gained a dad, lost a dad, gained a dad, and in the process discovered that his longtime best friend is actually his cousin. Call it a coincidence if you want, this pinball collision of Kevin, the birth father he hadn't seen in 39 years, and the pal who stood up at Kevin's wedding and who now turns out to share his blood.

But Kevin sees it as pieces of a mystical puzzle interlocking and forming the next chapter of his life, of all their lives. In the excitement over Father's Day, I almost forgot to mention that Kevin also has been reunited with the mother who carried him in her womb but could not find a way around giving him up for adoption.

Let's start at the beginning. Kevin was born in Milwaukee on Thanksgiving Day of 1961. His mother, Lois Carhart, was working at Marquette University, and his father, Ramon Talamantes, was attending night school there. They met at the school and started dating, and Lois got pregnant.

Kevin was placed in a foster home as Lois and Ramon talked about whether they would get married. They were young. Lois wanted to get married in church; Ramon didn't. Lois wanted to raise her son in a traditional family. But Ramon was hobbled, emotionally and physically, from his experience in the Korean War, and he feared he could not support a family. So their brown-eyed baby boy was adopted at about age 2 by a Milwaukee couple, Gloria and Robert Rutkowski. Kevin grew up happy and well-loved in Bay View, where he still lives today. He learned to make music, and he and his wife, Lora Nigro, are in a band called Sometimes Y. He also sells jewelry designed by his wife and he works as an educational assistant in the physical therapy program at Milwaukee Area Technical College.

Robert Rutkowski, Kevin's adoptive father, died in a boating accident in 1981. Over the years, Kevin was mildly curious about his birth parents, but never enough to search for them. But one night around last Christmas, he awoke and felt, in his words, wired and electrified. The next morning, he called Catholic Charities, the agency that had assisted in his adoption, and said he wanted to find his biological parents.

There was a small box on the paperwork where he was supposed to write succinctly why a reunion with his parents was a good idea. He wrote: "I wonder what it would be like to have a child born on Thanksgiving day and not know what became of him."

The agency tracked down his mother, Lois, in the La Crosse area and she called Ramon in Milwaukee. The two had stayed in touch all these years. Lois had married, raised five children and divorced, but Ramon never married. He is retired from federal government work, first with the Veterans Administration and later in the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

They had the right not to be found by Kevin, to say they wanted to be left alone. But they were thrilled that the man they last saw as a baby in diapers now wanted to know them. Lois cried with joy. A meeting was set up for the Thursday before Easter at the Catholic Charities office at 60th and Lloyd streets.

Kevin, the baby who now stood 6 feet 3 inches tall, walked into the room and immediately hugged Lois and Ramon. They stared into each other's eyes and faces. Ramon quickly began to explain why they had given up their baby. He said he was worried Kevin would be bitter. Kevin assured him he was not.

Kevin showed them the photo album from his wedding in 1996. Ramon looked at the pictures but in the intensity of the moment did not notice that Gene Brittain, his nephew, was a groomsman.

Kevin and Gene met about 20 years ago, and for seven years they were roommates at a party house on the east side where they lived.

Gene would sometimes tease Kevin about how long he was extending his bachelorhood. "You're going to be just like my Uncle Ramon," he had said prophetically.

Once, about 10 years ago at the Bastille Days festival downtown, Gene introduced Kevin to his uncle. Ramon and Kevin shook hands, not knowing they were father and son.

On the day that Ramon finally met his son at Catholic Charities, he wanted to introduce him to his two sisters, the aunts Kevin never knew. So they went to Rey Sol, a restaurant at 23rd and Forest Home.

Kevin walked in and immediately saw Mercedes Brittain, whom he knew well as Gene's mother. He then learned she was one of Ramon's sisters.

"She said, 'Oh, my God.' I said, 'You gotta be kidding me.' That's all we said for like five, 10 minutes," Kevin said.

Then they devised a plan to get Gene, 37, of Waukesha, to come to the restaurant. Mercedes called him, said she had car trouble and asked him to pick her up. They all sat down at a table, set a beer at the empty place for Gene and waited.

He came into the restaurant and saw his mom, his aunt, his uncle and, oddly, Kevin and his wife. He had failed to put together two pieces of information he received in separate conversations in the preceding weeks - that Kevin was planning to meet his birth father, and that Uncle Ramon had given up a son for adoption decades ago but was now planning to be reunited with him.

"Kevin said, 'You're not going to believe this.' That's when it clicked. I said, 'No way, it can't be.' What are the odds?" Gene said.

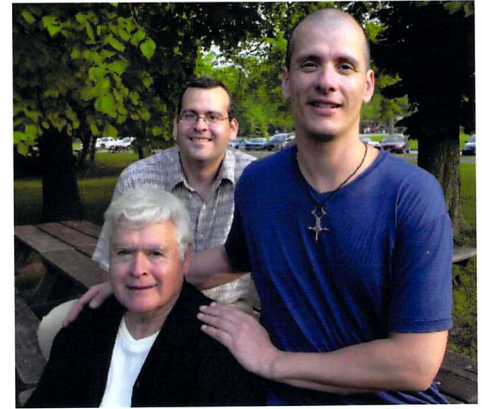
"It was a shock for the whole family. I feel God had something to do with bringing us all together after so many years," said Ramon, who is artistic like his son and sells his paintings and jewelry.

After so many years, Ramon is realistic about his new role and thankful for the mom and dad who raised Kevin.

"Let's face it, they nourished him. I'll never be able to replace his father and mother. I'd just be happy if Kevin and I would become close friends," Ramon said.

And what does Gloria Rutkowski, the mom who raised Kevin, think about all this?

"His mother had one statement she wanted to make," Kevin's wife, Lora, said. "She has the greatest son in the world and she's happy to share him."



Michael Sears, staff photographer

Kevin Rutkowski (right) sits with his birth father, Ramon Talamantes (left), and longtime friend Gene Brittain in Milwaukee last week. Rutkowski's search led him to Talamantes and revealed that Brittain was his cousin.

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