

In The Name of the Children

Cambridge therapist Joyce Maguire Pavao is relentless in protecting the rights of adopted people. It's something she takes personally.

By Joseph P. Kahn
Globe Staff

Cambridge - Joyce Maguire Pavao, a family therapist whose speciality is adoption related issues, received a phone call recently from a former client. The woman, a 22-year-old graduate student had been out of touch with Pavao for a couple of years. She was audibly distraught.

Without warning, explains Pavao, "she was on the Internet and got an e-mail over her computer from her [adopted] brother's birth mother asking how she could locate him. The birth mother had no idea where he was. She didn't know whether to tell her brother or her parents about the letter. She was really freaked about the situation."

Pavao calmly talked her through her options. She advised the client to download the letter, send a copy to her brother and alert their parents right away. This was a family issue that required everyone's understanding and support, Pavao counseled, whatever the outcome.

Whether to respond to the query would be the brother's decision, Pavao notes. However, such scenarios have become routine in an information age where someone's unaccessed past may be only keystrokes away when the complex equation of adoption grows that much more complex as technology transforms the landscape of possibility.

"This is different from a knock on your door or a phone call out of the blue," Pavao says. "This is turning on your computer screen and finding this person there who may hold the keys to your very identity."

It is this human dimension to adoption that most concerns Pavao and her staff at the Center for Family Connections in Cambridge, a non-profit organization offering pre- and post-adoption education and counseling to adoptees and their families. In turn, Pavao's has become an important voice in the spirited public debate over what "the best interests of the child" means in an imperfect, bureaucratically untidy world.

"A lot of people in the field use the phrase, Joyce believes it in the bottom of her soul," says Lynn Jacobs of the Joint Council on International Services for Children, a California based organization with 100 agency members. "She plants ideas that make difficult

issues sound normal and easy. Not painless, but normal."

The issues today are indeed challenging ones, from transracial adoption and open adoption to foster care abuse and attachment disorder. Single women and single men hoping to adopt, same-sex couples seeking avenues to parenthood - all are issues driving news headlines and sparking debate over federal and state adoption policy, while inspiring such popular fare as Michael Leigh's film "Secrets and Lies," a contender for this year's Oscar nominations.

Pavao chaired a Harvard Medical School conference on adoption last weekend - the school's first - and is a frequent flier on the training and speaking circuit, appearing before caseworkers, agency officials, lawyers and judges. Convening the Harvard medical community was especially noteworthy, she says, because its members "see these families walk into their offices all the time now, bringing the full range of issues with them."

An adoptee who sought out her own birth mother more than two decades ago, Pavao, 50, is not shy about using personal history, either, to illustrate - and advance - what she insists is her bottom-line concern. The best interests of the child.

Period.
"Adoption is not about finding children for families, it's about finding families for children," says Pavao in her offices on Massachusetts Avenue in North Cambridge, where the ambience is decidedly more familial than clinical. She repeats the thought a few minutes later with a conviction bordering on the religious.

"It's a cliché, I know," she says emphatically. "But I work very hard, and train people very hard, to do just that. Too often the child gets lost in the legitimate pain and difficulty the adults are going through."

Another example Pavao offers is an adoptive mother who had come in for counseling a few days before. The woman's daughter had recently turned 8. She had been told she was adopted; the girl even had a picture of her birth mother in her bedroom. Additional information contained in a letter from the birth mother had been withheld from the child, however. The consensus had been that she was too young to handle it. That decision was under

review as the child began to ask more pointed questions.

Says Pavao, "The parents wondered how to do that now. If this is the right time. How they could integrate what they have *not* told her with what they have up to now.

"The point is, these are things you don't ask your sister-in-law over Thanksgiving dessert. There are different levels of openness. Some people think you should never give a child that information. And even though adoption gives people the opportunity to have an amazing extended family, not everybody needs to act on that."

When it comes to issues like disclosure, Pavao continues, there are no rules. Or should not be. Her organization involves itself in many sorts of arrangements: contested adoptions, semi-open adoptions, adoptions where the birth mother refuses to surrender her rights.. Department of Social Services cases of the most dysfunctional kind (The center has a \$120,000-a-year contract with the state DSS to consult on cases and educate caseworkers.)

Says Pavao, "We model a lot for people who don't know how to talk to children about hard things, because they don't want to hurt them. Our mandate may be to protect these kids from harm and danger. It is not to protect them from the truth. That's their life story. It's who they are."

'My mothers died of secrecy'

Her own life story provides a persuasive prologue to Pavao's crusade for a more enlightened approach to adoption.

"Both my mothers died of secrecy." Pavao says about the two women most responsible for her perspective on adoption. Both passed away 12 years ago, just six weeks apart.

"In some ways," Pavao says, "their lives and the secrets they were forced to keep by society contributed to their deaths." Her adoptive mother, Pavao explains, suffered from Alzheimer's disease, her birth mother contracted a neuromuscular disease that left her unable to talk. Symbolically, both were imprisoned by silence as their lives came to an end.

The two women, who never met, reflected society's prevailing attitudes on adoption, Pavao avers. She herself was born in 1946, adopted when she was two days old. She was happily raised in a

loving, middle-class family in Lexington. Her parents had adopted another daughter who was six years older than Joyce. Because of an infertility problem, the couple could not have children of their own.

At age 3, Pavao was told of her adoption. The conversation more or less ended there. Frustratingly so for her.

"My sister and I were entirely different people with different personalities," she recalls. "I was always very verbal, a fiery redhead who always showed my emotions. I always wanted to know more [about being adopted] too, but I couldn't ask my parents directly. Times were different then. You didn't talk about those kind of things, certainly not adoption. Still, I always wanted to know. My sister did not."

Years later as her father lay dying, Pavao resolved to search for her birth parents. Adolescence had been a difficult period for her, she concedes. Pavao once wrote about herself this way: "The red-haired girl was very smart and very social in high school. She wanted to be included, so she hung out with the wrong crowd and missed curfews. It was safer to keep her place with her teen-age friends and come in late and be punished by her parents (who loved her but seemed unreasonable) than to be punished by her friends and be excluded."

Having drifted through a rootless phase typical of the late 1960s, Pavao finally settled down to earn a wall full of degrees in the fields of education and family therapy. ("Too many," she says with a laugh, "but I guess I was trying to validate myself.") The birth of her daughter, now 24, was not far away. She was running a Boston pre-school.

It was time Pavao felt, to close the circle.

When told her intentions, her family reacted with suspicion. Her older sister was strongly opposed to the search. Her mother's reaction was more one of fear than anger.

"I was very close to her." Pavao reflects. "If I couldn't talk to her about the things that were most important to me, it would have been a barrier between us. But she was scared she was going to lose me."

The search, later described in a 1980 *Globe* article, led to a phone conversation with Pavao's birth mother (she knows little about and has never met her biological father). Though promised further contact, Pavao did not hear from her birth mother again for three years. Later Pavao learned the letter she had sent - the equivalent of an e-mail message from deep cyberspace -

had arrived the same day her birth mother had buried her mother. Joyce's grandmother. It was she, it also turned out, who had insisted baby Joyce be given up for adoption.

The double blow had hit Pavao's mother hard. Harder, certainly than Pavao realized at the time.

"My mother told me later that she had stood on the hospital steps, crying, when I was taken away. She didn't stop crying for a month. An aunt offered to take me later, but by then it was too late. Most adoptees grow up thinking they were not wanted. In most cases, that's not true."

The shame and guilt society places on birth mothers is of special concern to Pavao. "If a baby dies," she observes, "parents go through a grieving process. If you give a baby up for adoption, there is no such grief process. My own mother thought I'd be angry with her for what she did, but I wasn't. My life was probably better for her decision."

Pavao developed a warm relationship with her "new" extended family, to which she remains close. Time and clinical experience have given her search even more resonance professionally, she says. Best of all, the bond with her adoptive mother was strengthened, not weakened, by the discovery.

"I had been doing this work for along time before my mothers died," says Pavao, "but I feel it's in the name of my mothers, both my mothers, that I do this."

Eighteen years ago, Pavao co-founded the Family Center in Somerville, where she developed her team-approach. Her current staff carefully mirrors the population it serves: adoptees, adoptive parents and birth-parents; people with a wide range of ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds; a variety of counselors, lawyers, nurses and students.

The Center for Family Connections split off from the Somerville center more than a year ago. Pavao taking with her a dozen staff members and setting up small branch offices in New York and Berkeley, California.

How open should open be?

Those who part with Pavao on philosophical issues, like Harvard Law School professor Elizabeth Bartholet, wonder if this concept of "open" adoption has been pushed too far.

"Joyce and I differ in how important the link to blood relatives is," says Bartholet, the mother of two transracial adoptees. "I see her believing in a view of parenting that makes the blood relationship

paramount. I too am a proponent of openness, certainly when it comes to records. I am *not* sympathetic in the notion that birth parents have legal, enforceable rights in shared parenting."

Transracial adoption is another sensitive issue. An estimated 100,000 African American children await adoption, far more than the estimated 12,000 black families looking to adopt. Again, where do the "best interests" lie?

"Black kids sit and rot in foster care for years, and that is an outrage," charges Bartholet. "This controversy is coming to head and deserves to."

Pavao agrees with Bartholet on at least one point - that not all adoptees should search for birth parents.

"I would never pressure anyone to do that," says Pavao. "It's much more symbolic of an inner search, and you have to be real to do it. Open adoption is not for everyone either. If parents can't deal with it, it's not good for the child."

On same-race adoptions, Pavao steers a middle course between discounting race as a factor and making it the only factor.

"I am concerned about placing an African-American child with the first white family that comes along," says Pavao. "A family in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont might adopt a black kid, and that kid will never see another person like himself."

Pavao cites studies that 98 percent of children over age 3 who are up for adoption, international or domestic, have been sexually or physically abused or neglected. However, only three states, Massachusetts among them, require child welfare supervision.

"These are post-trauma issues, not just adoption issues," Pavao says. "Most families don't understand what that means. Most agencies are afraid to tell them, fearing the parents won't want to adopt. I don't believe that."

While the underlying issue may be race, childhood abuse, access to information through the Internet or some unplanned X factor, says Pavao, the overriding concern must be - must be - that child.

"When I speak about this issue from a personal perspective, it's hard for people to stay in total opposition to me," she says with a smile. "I have no ulterior motive. I'm over the struggles you go through. The anger, the pain. My empathy lies with everyone else going through these struggles, too."