

She Didn't Want to Give Him Up, But She Didn't Have a Choice

How One Woman's Decades-Long Secret Pregnancy Became the Impetus to Her Fighting for Adoption Reform

By: Amanda Kari McHugh

Francine Gurtler melted on her hands and knees begging the social worker in the courthouse to not take her baby. She didn't have a judge. She didn't have any sort of legal counsel and to Francine, it seemed like the only goal in the social worker's mind was to get Francine to sign the relinquishment papers. This was in 1971, and being a 15 year-old unmarried young girl, Francine didn't feel as though she had a choice in the matter.

Francine is just one of many girls who were victims of the [Baby Scoop Era](#), which is the time period between WWII and Roe v. Wade where there was an estimated 1.5 million (according to Ann Fessler's book [The Girl's Who Went Away](#)) unwed mothers who were forced to have their babies in secret and place them for adoption. Decades after this traumatizing life event, her son found her through DNA. Now she's part of a growing movement of birth mothers who are fighting for adoption reform. For Francine, this starts with getting an official apology from the Episcopal Church for forced adoptions.

"I know the heartache that she still endures to this day. She bears a cross that she will bear until her dying day," said Carol Germann, Francine's older sister.

Germann said that Francine as a kid was tenacious, outgoing, outspoken - was even voted "class arguer" - and that people gravitated towards her. After she came home in March of 1971, having been away for two months, Francine had noticeably changed. Germann said she had become distant and kept to herself. She didn't know at the time that this was because her sister had been at [St. Faith's](#), an Episcopal home for unwed mothers.

"One evening. I sat down at the dinner table and my mother said your sister's gone away. She'll be back in a couple of months. And that was the only thing that my mother shared with me or anyone in our family that I am aware of," said Germann.

This was the only information she ever got from her mother about this, who she and Francine referred to as being very strict. Francine also said that because her mother was emotionally volatile and unpredictable, it often felt like in order to survive, you needed to stay under the radar. Between this and not even knowing that she could have gotten pregnant, she didn't realize she was until she was six months along.

When asked why Germann never asked Francine herself what had happened, she said it was because at this time, it was a mark against the family to have a family member who was unwed and pregnant. So she thought it was best to let her sister have her privacy with this. Although she also said that just because no one spoke about it, doesn't mean that there weren't whispers

about the changes that had gone on with Francine's body and how that might be why she had missed two months of her freshman year of high school.

"I didn't even know what sex was," said Francine, when asked about whether or not the act that led to her pregnancy was consensual. Because of the [lack of sex education in the 60s](#), she thought she had to be married in order to become pregnant. And what's more, considering that the father was older (Francine declined to say more about him), and being that she was 14 years old when it happened, she wasn't even at the age of consent in New York State in 1971, which [at the time was 16](#).

Francine became pregnant at the tail-end of the Baby Scoop Era in Westchester county of New York State. This era is said to have ended when Roe v. Wade passed because this gave more choices to pregnant people other than going to unwed mother's homes to have unwanted births. However, in New York state, abortion was already [legal](#) when Francine became pregnant, but the larger culture and education around it hadn't caught up yet. Considering her young age – and because of the lack of sex education, how long it took for her to realize she was pregnant – her options were limited to either going to an unwed mother's home to then have the baby placed for adoption, or be ostracized from society with [no social supports](#) in place to help her survive and therefore have the baby taken into foster care anyways.

With [19 states](#) still teaching abstinence-only sex education and only [16 states and DC](#) having abortion protection laws with [Roe v. Wade having been recently overturned](#), it appears that we are possibly headed towards a second Baby Scoop Era. Gregory Luce, an adoptee and adoptee rights lawyer, is concerned that should Roe get overturned, another aspect of this era will resurface as well: the concept of privacy for the birth mother.

"In legislative advocacy, adoptees are often the punching bag between the two sides of abortion; where on the one side the anti-choice or the pro-life movement believes that if we are not secretive about adoption – and relinquishing a child and keeping that relinquishment secret – it will lead to more women having abortions because they're not guaranteed that anonymity. On the other side are left-leaning progressives who see adoption as a reproductive choice in some way, which is bizarre. But they see it that way because they want to protect women from the choices they make to parent. And that's come back to roost, unfortunately."

The secrecy Luce is referring to is what made unwed mother's homes in the fifties and sixties necessary at the time in the first place. Having children in secret was meant to protect women from the [shame](#) they would face in society should anyone find out about their pregnancy out of wedlock. Within the unwed mother's homes, however, Francine says shame is one of the tools the social workers at St. Faith's used to break down the women that resided there.

Her mother drove her an hour to the home in Tarrytown in silence. Immediately upon arriving, Francine said a process of disassociating herself from her identity began. She was given an ID number and an alias (they chose her middle name Annette) one she would use at the home in place of her real name - and that she was never to tell anyone else her true identity. This

instilled in her that she couldn't trust the other girls there, which she believes was so that they wouldn't form any real bonds, thereby keeping them all in a state of isolation.

"That was the very first thing they did: they started the gaslighting. Separating me as a human from my baby," Francine says.

While living at this home, she says they all had simple chores such as making dinner and doing laundry: nothing she felt was unreasonable. She read a lot, there was a TV room, an arts and crafts area and they were all required to attend private chapel service once a week after dinner. A nurse also came by once a week to check on everyone's vitals. She says that looking back, compared to other unwed mother's homes at the time, it wasn't that bad. Still, she recalls the environment being a bit like the Cold War. In addition to the isolating environment caused by not knowing anyone's identity, they were also not allowed to leave the building. Francine remembers once that she asked to go outside, and that simple request became a "whole production." She went to the corner store against their wishes, and while out she realized that it was because someone could see her very visibly pregnant and her secret would get out.

There also wasn't much education as to what would happen during the actual birth, despite the lack of sex education she had in the first place. She recalls only having one session with a nurse who told her how the delivery would take place, but no helpful details. And throughout all of this, she was never given a choice as to whether or not this child could be placed for adoption. There was only the constant reminder that this was not her baby as she was unfit to parent it. Because of this, she says it took a while for her to realize that she had a growing baby inside of her.

"They were gaslighting you to let you know that you were not deserving of this baby. That they were going to get a nice, married couple to take this baby. ... The baby's gonna be better off at this home. You can't provide for this baby. And if you said you wanted to parent this baby, you were stupid and you're selfish you were immature, you were unrealistic ... It was like literally like, no support whatsoever. There was never a choice," Francine said.

On the day of her son's birth, she recalls being driven to the hospital, being walked inside to check in, and then being left completely alone on her own for the birth itself. She describes it as having been a nightmare she received zero support for even in the hospital. She says she was mocked by doctors and nurses for her age and situation. She had a son. Beyond this, her memory goes dark.

At St. Faith's during this time period, the women had ten days in the nursery of the home to spend with their babies and were allowed to name them before being placed with new parents. This surprised Francine, considering how often she had been told that her baby wasn't hers. She remembers what she named her son, but declined to share the name. As the court date to relinquish her parental rights arrived nearer and nearer, it started to dawn on her that this wasn't what she wanted. She remembers seeing a fire escape and wondering whether or not she could leave with her son, but then wondering where they would both go.

The day of the court hearing was a traumatic event for Francine, so she can't remember everything in sequence. But she does remember that she was there without a legal guardian, and without legal counsel or representation, being pressed by her social worker to sign both her alias name and legal name onto relinquishment papers she didn't entirely understand. She sobbed on her hands and knees, grabbing onto the ankles of the social worker, begging her not to make her give up her baby. Her social worker's response was less than empathetic, she recalls, as she was annoyed with her for being emotional because that would prevent them from going in front of a judge. Somehow, the relinquishment still took place, even without a judge.

After this, Francine blocked out this experience for decades, as if it never happened. She says that even after becoming pregnant with her daughter, she told her doctor that she had had no previous pregnancies.

Then five years ago she received an email from a woman who claimed to be married to her son. The woman had bought her husband an Ancestry kit for his birthday and began sleuthing to find his birth mother, considering he was adopted. Through 2nd and 3rd cousins who had registered their DNA, and an online obituary, she found Francine.

The reunion started with emails first, then texts and phone calls. Eventually they met when Francine flew out to San Diego, where he lives. Although much of her son's family has met Francine and her family, his adoptive parents are still unaware of this reunion, so Francine has asked us to refer to him by the alias, Rob.

The reunion was very emotional. She was reconciling the time she had lost; that the baby she had relinquished had now come back as a grown man. It was emotional for everyone, she says. She wanted him to know that she loves him and always wanted him, which he rejected at first, but has since come to accept.

Carol Germann, Francine's older sister, remembers when she first learned about Rob. She was visiting their other older sister in Florida and Francine had them go on speakerphone so she could tell everyone at once. Germann says that they all offered their love and support and just this past winter were able to meet in-person for the first time. Germann says that Francine teases him that he needs to call her everyday, and that this contact helped to rid her of some of the guilt she had been carrying around.

Francine also began therapy to process all that had happened to her. She recalls one of her first therapists on this journey tried to diminish her feelings, telling her that Rob was not her son. Eventually she found [Joe Soll](#), who specializes in reunion therapy. Soll has said to [WE ARE ADOPTED](#), a non-profit dedicated to serving the needs of adopted people, that the first step in reunion therapy is to fully feel the grief from the inherent loss that adoption causes. Francine says that the first two years after her reunion with Rob was just this.

She also joined organizations such as [Concerned United Birthparents](#) and [Origins America](#), which showed her she wasn't alone in her situation, feelings or experiences. She says that this is what motivated her into wanting to do something to help prevent this from happening to more women who might end up in her position.

Germann says that this makes sense for Francine, as she has always taken on some sort of role in activism throughout her life. Germann recalls how at the end of Francine's freshman year of high school, after her son was born, she staged a walk-out to protest against the Vietnam War and later working with her biology teacher to clean up the Hudson River. As an adult, Francine has marched in the Million Mom March for gun control, every women's march in NYC, she was active with Title IX when her daughter played high school soccer, did door-to-door canvassing in Pennsylvania to help get Obama elected and even helped get her town to vote on making it a sanctuary city after Trump was elected.

"She believed in her causes and she wasn't afraid to speak out for them. ... I think it has to do with her feeling that she didn't have a say in what happened to her and her baby. So she looks for outlets to help people who had no control over their situation," said Germann.

Professionally, Francine ended up with a career that literally gave children voices: she became a [speech pathologist](#) for children with disabilities.

After reuniting with her son, and her denial over what had happened to her as a result lifting, Francine's activism became more targeted towards adoption reform, by joining the [Catholic Mother's for Truth and Transparency](#), which was formed to help adoptees gain access to their original birth certificates. As it stands, adoptees by default always have two birth certificates: one that is created when they are born, with their original parents' names and the name given to them at birth, and then when they are adopted that birth certificate is sealed and a new one is created, with the adoptive parents names and adoptive given name - with nothing stating that the child is adopted. This was created to protect the identities of the birth parents and also so that adoptive parents could pass off the adoptive children as their own, since there was an enormous amount of [shame](#) around infertility as well.

Although [studies](#) have shown that open adoptions are better for all parties involved, the belief that birth mothers want privacy is still perpetuated to this day - and because Catholic Charities [lobbied against unsealing birth certificates](#), many believe that religious birth mothers feel the same way. Francine and many other birth mothers, who went to religious unwed mother's homes, want the church to stop speaking for them. Although Francine went to an Episcopalian unwed mother's home, she chose to speak up for adoptee rights by participating in a [video call](#) that featured mothers who lost children to adoption, which was sent to the CT General Assembly, ahead of the vote to unseal birth certificates for adoptees. In this she said,

"It is healing to me and helpful to me when people acknowledge my loss and acknowledge my son's loss and help me grieve. That is helpful."

It was shortly after this, in September 2021, that Francine decided to start an Episcopalian coalition of birth mothers, since one didn't currently exist, to advocate for an official apology from the Episcopal church for forced adoptions. This comes on the heels of the Catholic Church apologizing for forced adoptions in the [UK](#) in 2016 and three Catholic entities in [Australia](#) apologizing for forced adoptions in 2012.

She said she just started by Googling the names of people who held power in the Episcopal Church, who might have a stake in wanting to help. It wasn't long after that she found Mark Diebel, an Episcopalian priest based out of Owensboro, Kentucky, who is also an adoptee born in 1955, during the Baby Scoop Era.

This is not the first time that Diebel has called for adoption reform within his own church. In 2009, Diebel [advocated](#) for adoptees adopted through the church, including those born of sperm or egg donors, should gain access to their medical histories and genetic heritage upon reaching legal age. While this passed through the lay house and clergy, Diebel said that ultimately the Bishops rejected it. One [argument](#) against this was that this would cause more people to choose abortion over adoption, because anonymity would not be maintained. Father Mark Diebel even went so far as to pursue a doctorate, which focused on [adoption and donor conception issues](#) in 2012. While he was in the diocese of Albany, he was on the committee that helped get a [bill passed in New York State](#) in 2020 for adoptees, and children born of donor conception, to have access to their original birth certificates.

Diebel asked Francine if she had ever talked to her local Parish about her goal in getting an official apology, considering that she never left the church. In fact, she even taught Sunday school. She said she hadn't, because someone in the Parish was an adoptive parent. Adoption reform advocates say that this is a common block for adoption reform. For example, one-third of the [Supreme Court](#) are themselves adoptive parents: Amy Coney Barrett, John Robert and Clarence Thomas. One reason is possibly because when birth parents enter the picture, adoptive parents [tend to feel more insecure](#) about their role as parents to their adoptive children.

So the first step that Father Diebel and Francine took was last October, where they wrote a letter to two members of the Social Justice and US Policy Committee of the General Convention of the Episcopal Church, advocating to workshop a resolution for forced adoptions during the Baby Scoop Era. As they continued to follow-up, they gathered 20 people ready to provide testimony, until they heard back from Bishop Edwin Johnson in January, who wanted to co-author a resolution with them, without the testimonies or additional information, to be brought to the General Convention this month, where a decision on the apology would be made.

Since then, Father Diebel and Francine created a 46-page document arguing their case for this resolution. In it, they included a previous resolution from a past triennial called "Women, Truth and Reconciliation," which pointed towards sexual abuse, disenfranchisement and harassment against women, but provided the backbone for the resolution they needed here. In this [resolution](#), it is concluded,

“We as a community of believers find ourselves in a cultural moment of reckoning for the sins of patriarchy as well as gender-based discrimination and violence. Now is the time to speak truth to the oppressive power of gender-based discrimination and violence and other abuses of power that demean children of God.”

They also included impact statements from Francine and other “Scoop Era” mothers as well as notable birth mother activists such as [Renee Gelin](#) and [Karen Wilson-Buterbaugh](#). In addition they identified some Episcopalian unwed mother’s homes and examples of official apologies given by the Catholic Church for forced adoptions as well. This was submitted for review in late-March and if it goes through, will be the first apology for forced adoptions of it’s kind in the United States.

Around the same time, Francine came to Kentucky on Diebel’s suggestion, to give a presentation to his local church, which is the first time she has ever spoken to anyone in the church about what had happened to her, other than her emails.. She shared her personal story and showed segments of Ann Fessler’s documentary “[A Girl Like Her](#).” Afterwards, he said that someone told her “on behalf of Trinity I just want to apologize to you,” which caused her to break down in tears.

“She’s willing to make that personal commitment to begin telling her own story. She sees that this has to happen and, you know, I think she sees this as just part of what needs to happen next. She can no longer just stand on the sidelines, but she needs to be able to tell us her story in a way that she feels safe,” Father Diebel said.

For Francine, and for many other birth mothers, coming forward about what has happened to them often means having to confront the coercion they underwent and lack of choice they really had, which can be incredibly painful. Because of this, Francine’s has a difficult time trusting anyone in a position of power.

“You could imagine my whole life has been a very big issue of trust. I have a very hard time trusting anyone,” Francine said.

Francine believes however, that once what has happened to them is legitimized by an apology from the church, more victims of these adoption practices will come forward.

As of now, a resolution has been written in conjunction with the Episcopal Church, has been published [online](#) and is set to be discussed once it goes to convention in mid-July. Desiree Stephens, an adoptee and Access Connecticut co-founder, who helped co-author the resolution, said in a [Facebook post](#), that the convention has been completely on-board with recognizing the damage and loss actions by the church have caused, and are seeking to rectify them. Should the resolution go through, a new committee composed of those within the adoption community itself will be created with the goal of making recommendations for how the church will recognize their role in

forced adoption.

Having Francine's voice expedited their goals, however, since just this past Tuesday, on June 21st, Francine had to testify in a second committee to advocate for the resolution. This led to the resolution not only being voted out of the second committee, but it was also decided to bypass the vote at General Assembly next month - now going straight to the Executive Council.

On this Stephens wrote, "Francine was so powerful, I can't even begin to tell you all. ... While we wait for the Executive Council to be seated, we'll be continuing to work our internal network so we have more champions in place to begin forming our committee which— as the resolution specifically calls for— will be made up of clergy, lay people, mothers, adoptees, women, persons of color and LGBTQ people. To sum up: we officially have the ear of the highest governing body possible at The Episcopal Church."

This comes not long after the archdiocese in [Canada](#) apologizing for its role in coerced adoptions just this past Mother's Day weekend. And with abortions now banned in [about half of the states](#), having the religious organizations that have had a huge impact on both adoptees and birth mothers atone for their past mistakes is imperative to preventing another Baby Scoop Era to surge now. It has been said by [various philosophers](#) that in order to prevent history from repeating, we have to learn about it. Which is one reason why Francine is so passionate about getting the truth out there about what happened to her 51 years ago.

"I want the error to be named, marked, identified and put in history books," Francine said.

Even in places where abortion is still legal, with a lack of options for pregnant people, problematic views on adoption are already starting to surface. The [NY Post](#) claimed that this could give a 9% increase to infants available for adoption, which would help supply the "demand" by infertile and LGBTQ couples looking to adopt. This was the same mindset taken on in the Baby Scoop Era, where babies were treated as a product to be sold to [wealthy, white families](#) who were seen as more deserving due to their race and economic status.

Francine had done the math herself, as well. She sees what happened to her as being a race and class issue: where she was specifically targeted because she was white - because this home was for white women, since there was "no market" during this time for children of color - and because she was working class, and therefore wouldn't have any financial support to raise the child on her own.

"If you're not given any options, there is no choice," Francine said of her relinquishment of her son into adoption.

Now, because of Roe v. Wade being overturned, these lack of options are what many women and girls in America are facing again. Hopefully with people like Francine speaking out, the culture around this can change and we can turn the clocks back in the right direction.

