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SATURDAY SPECIAL: 27 years ago as a baby, Janet Keall was left alone in front of a Vancouver hospital. 'I could have been left in a trash can,' she says. Ms. Keall and others know first hand the hardship and uncertainty in store for little Rachael Grace, the baby abandoned last week in Toronto. **Story, A15**



LYLE STAFFORD/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Abandoned as an infant 27 years ago, Janet Keall is searching for her biological parents. She is shown here in her Vancouver home with her seven-year-old son, Taylor.

Children with no beginnings

Adults who were abandoned as babies say they spend their lives hoping to find their birth parents and search strangers' faces for familiar features, reports OLIVER MOORE

By OLIVER MOORE

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SATURDAY SPECIAL: 27 years ago as a baby, Janet Keall was left alone in front of a Vancouver hospital. 'I could have been left in a trash can' she says. Ms. Keall and others know first hand the hardship and uncertainty in sore for little Rachael Grace, the bay abandoned last week in Toronto.

For a taste of the hardship and uncertainty in store for little Rachael Grace, abandoned in a Toronto church parking lot last weekend, consider the story of Janet Keall.

"Every birthday I cannot celebrate because to me it's not a celebration," said Ms. Keall, who was left at the

entrance of a hospital in Prince Rupert, B.C., a few hours after her delivery 27 years ago.

Ms. Keall, who lives in Vancouver, is one of several women abandoned at birth who warned in interviews that Rachael Grace may need enormous inner strength to ward off resentment.

She will need to develop the ability to cope with the uncertainty of her past. This strength must come from within, they say, but add that help is increasing: support groups, therapists and fledgling on-line resources for people struggling with their abandonment.

The newest of these resources -- <http://www.keallfoundation.com/> -- is being built by Ms. Keall as a gathering place for people who were abandoned as infants, a place for them to come together for support and information.

The lack of information is particularly hard, said Sheryl Reed, who was found as a newborn in 1967, after she was left in a parked car at a hospital in Waukegan, Ill. She said the blankness of their past makes the abandoned different from regular adoptees.

"It's harder for us because we have no paper trail. We have no beginning," the woman who resides in the United States said in an e-mail exchange. "People who aren't adopted have answers. They know where they originated. They know their nationality. They know their medical history, they know who they look like. Every day I look into the faces of the people I meet looking for a clue, a resemblance."

In Toronto, police say the hunt for Rachael Grace's parents is partly aimed at ensuring the girl will know her medical and family history.

"You don't know if you're a walking time bomb for some hereditary disease," said Kathy Titus, a South Carolina social worker who has conducted research into baby abandonment.

Ms. Keall went so far as commissioning a DNA test to try to find out her origins. The results suggest her background is overwhelmingly European for at least five generations. Beyond that, her past remains a mystery.

That did not stop her from having children of her own. She and her husband Christopher Chong have two boys, seven-year-old Taylor and two-year-old Harrison.

"I'm so tapped into family now and I really believe that family is so important," she said. "[My past] has made me so much more understanding of human nature. It has made me a kinder person, it's made me a more sensitive mother."

Of course, Toronto Police are also looking for Rachael Grace's parents because it is a criminal offence in Ontario for caregivers to neglect their charges. The criminal charges would have become much more serious if she had died as a result of being left unwatched.

Melanie Persaud, spokeswoman for the Toronto Children's Aid Society, said that her experience has been that police tend to lay charges only when the baby was abused or endangered.

Many U.S. jurisdictions have implemented laws that allow for unwanted babies to be left at safe spots. Most states have passed such laws, but Ms. Keall argues angrily that they are misguided, not addressing the reasons women abandon their babies.

Ms. Keall said that her own explorations have turned up research showing that mothers who abandon babies tend to suffer from extreme emotional or financial pressures. Interestingly, the age group most likely to abandon is between 20 and 30, with mothers in the 30 to 40 range coming in second. In third place are 16- to 20-year-old mothers.

Debbe Magnusen, founder of California-based Project Cuddle, a continent-wide volunteer helpline for pregnant women, says that fear is the driving motivator for the mothers she has helped.

"It's the fear of someone finding out their secret. Maybe an abusive husband or boyfriend. Maybe it's very religious parents," she said.

"Fifty per cent of our women already have one child," she explained. "Parents might say 'how dare you, if that happens again you're out the door.' And so, for the love of the first one they hide the second one."

She said many of them don't see their babies as human. "They look at it as a tumour, an object. I call it preg-norexia [because] everyone knows about anorexic denial. This is like that."

Ms. Magnusen's organization is financed by private donations and has been operating for nine years. They have saved 527 children from being abandoned, she said, but the work never ends.

"Whenever I see a box at the side of the road I wonder, is there a baby in there?"

Hard numbers for abandonments in Canada are elusive because no one appears to keep track. A representative for Social Development Canada said his department does not keep numbers. Neither do the many provincial ministries contacted by The Globe and Mail.

Ms. Keall said she has contacted government officials and cannot find anyone who knows how often these abandonments occur. "Here in Canada I suspect it's not such a major issue, but do we even know?"

Ms. Persaud of the Toronto CAS said "foundlings" happen so rarely in the city that she had to dig around to

tally up the half-dozen cases in the last two decades. But she acknowledged that those are only the ones she's aware of.

Ms. Titus, the South Carolina social worker, believes the absence of safe-haven laws in Canada inevitably causes the problem to be underreported.

"If you don't find the body you don't know a baby's been abandoned," she said. "I don't think anyone really has a handle on how many babies are abandoned."

In the United States, safe-haven laws typically prevent prosecution if a new parent leaves their child in a spot where they will be found safely and quickly. No such laws existed when Ms. Keall and Ms. Reed were abandoned, but their parents nonetheless chose to leave them close to local hospitals.

For Ms. Keall, that decision speaks volumes about the mindset of the person who abandoned her.

"I could have been left in a trash can," she said. "They sure didn't do the right thing but they didn't do the worst-case scenario."

That decision may have saved her life. By contrast, Rachael Grace was left in a church parking lot and had to be taken to hospital for medical examination. She has since been released from Scarborough Grace -- the hospital accounting for her second name -- and is in the care of the CAS.

Others who were abandoned say that if Rachael Grace is adopted it is inevitable she will eventually start to search for her biological roots.

Ms. Reed devotes hours every week to the hunt for her parents, saying that she wants information from her mother more than she wants a relationship.

"Not knowing 'who' leaves an empty hole in my identity," she said.

Ms. Keall also spends a great deal of time trying to track down her biological parents. She has been looking for nearly a decade and maintains an e-mail address at lookingformyparents@hotmail.com. It is a search that began when she accessed her original documentation from the ministry and found the word "unknown" glaring at her, again and again.

"That's what makes it so tough when you're abandoned, it's not like an adoption when you at least have that last name," she said. "I'm not angry . . . but it is kind of nice to think that someone cares."

The search by Ms. Keall -- who is quick to praise her adoptive parents for treating her exactly the same way they treated their other children -- took her to Prince Rupert last weekend. There she met the man who had found her, coming face-to-face with him at the very spot where she had been found.

It was an emotional moment, a triumph of sorts, and a long way from the naiveté of her early search.

As an 18-year-old she thought it would be as easy as putting her story out in an article and waiting for her parents to magically appear. Now she continues her search with the hard-won experience of a decade following leads that don't pan out.

She still hopes she will one day meet her biological mother but struggles when asked what she would say to her.

"I would just be very honest with her and tell her how painful it has been," she said, her voice shaking. "I would tell her how much of my life she's missed out on and how much of hers I've missed out on."

"I was created inside this human being and, at the end of the day, they left me."