

Quest Comes to End / Abducted 20 years ago, son finally meets father

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Abstract (Abstract): 1) Photo by Roberto Rosales - An unidentified woman at the Albuquerque, N.M., home of [Judith Smiley] and [Barry Smiley]. 2) [Matthew Propp], shown above in a 1997 Albuquerque High School senior yearbook photograph, is the biological son of 3) Newsday Photo, 1981/David L. Pokress - [Anthony Russini] and [Debbie Gardner], pictured at left in 1981. Propp, 22, has been living in New Mexico with Barry and Judith Smiley for more than 20 years. 4) Newsday Photo/John Paraskevas - Anthony Russini, above, with his sister, Pat Hanon, leaves the courtroom after yesterdays arraignment of Barry Smiley, right, in the abduction of Russinis son. 5) Newsday Photo/John Paraskevase - 6) Anthony Russini, biological father of 7) Matthew Propp, inset, outside Queens court yesterday.; Search Is Over. After 20 years, Westbury Man Is REunited With Son He Says Was Stolen From Him. Newsday Cover Photo/John Paraskevas - 1) Anthony Russini, biological father of 2) Matthew Propp, inset, outside Queens court yesterday.

Full text: For more than 20 years, Anthony Russini looked for his first-born son. He spent more than \$100,000 on lawyers, investigators and bounty hunters. The baby's picture was plastered on milk cartons. And every March 8-his son's birthday-Russini would go off by himself.

Until yesterday.

On March 8 this year, Russini, of Westbury, saw the man who had disappeared with the boy on June 6, 1980. Barry Smiley, 56, a former high-ranking official with the city's personnel department, surrendered in State Supreme Court in Queens yesterday on kidnapping charges.

Smiley, his wife, Judith, 54, and the boy have been living in New Mexico for years under aliases.

The boy-now a man who goes by the name Matthew Propp-flew to New York last week to meet his father and a family he never knew he had.

"It's just kind of overwhelming," Propp said in an interview from his home in New Mexico yesterday.

"They're great people," he said of the Smileys, who allegedly abducted him when an adoption was nullified.

"They have never treated me bad a second in my life."

Yesterday, Smiley pleaded not guilty at his arraignment and was ordered held on \$25,000 bail.

Judith Smiley, a former employee in the city's Department of Labor Relations, was still in New Mexico after having knee replacement surgery, according to Barry Smiley's attorney, Eugene Sarchiapone.

She is expected to surrender to New York authorities soon, prosecutors said.

"I think of my son-what he must be going through," said Russini, expressing mixed emotions. "But then again, when you do something you have to answer for what you do."

At the bittersweet meeting between father and son last week, Russini said: "I just kept asking the questions, 'What did I miss [all these years]?...I looked for him every day."

The decades-long saga began when Russini's girlfriend, Debbie Gardner, became pregnant. Both were 19 at the time, and her family kept the two away from each other, Russini said. When the baby was born, he was taken from Syosset Hospital and turned over to Smiley and his wife for adoption.

"After he was born she called me and said, 'They made me put him up for adoption,'" Russini recalled yesterday.

Russini's attorney, Frederick MaGovern, said yesterday that his client filed a petition for custody about a month after the baby was born.

"It was never a lawful adoption," MaGovern said. "Debbie was coerced into signing the baby over. That

surrender consent was vacated."

And Russini never gave his consent, MaGovern said.

Russini and Gardner married later that year, and on Nov. 2, 1979, a Family Court judge in Queens ruled that the baby be returned to the couple. The Smileys, who lived in Jamaica Estates at the time, appealed the decision to the Appellate Division and the Court of Appeals but lost.

On June 6, 1980, the day the baby was supposed to be turned over to the Russinis, the Smileys and the baby disappeared.

Anthony Joseph-or A.J., as the Russinis called the baby-was 15 months old at the time.

The Russinis went on to have two more children together. And though the couple split in the mid-1980s, the family never gave up looking for A.J. Russini's ex-wife has remarried and lives in Florida.

His grandfather, Richard Russini, even tried to get to President Ronald Reagan in 1981 during a visit to Washington, D.C.-only to witness the assassination attempt against Reagan that day.

And every once in a while, there would be a call he might be found.

"Always wound up being nothing," Anthony Russini said.

Until recently when Matthew Propp sought his birth certificate in order to get a job in law enforcement in New Mexico. When he was unable to do so, an investigation discovered that the Smileys weren't his parents.

A civil lawyer for the Smileys then contacted the Queens district attorney's office.

"I asked for them to provide me with their identity and have the boy come here to meet his family," Assistant District Attorney Lucinda Suarez said yesterday.

They agreed and Suarez arranged the meeting.

"I was stunned," Russini said.

But this time it was for real. Propp flew into New York and met his biological family Tuesday.

"We spent the day and the next day together," said Russini. "It's difficult for him. The time we spent together...he saw what he missed. He said he always wanted a sister and a brother.

"He's built like me. My height and my size," Russini said, adding that Matthew also looks like his younger brother Chris.

He also said their interests are strikingly similar.

"I played Little League. I was a catcher. He was a catcher...He's a volunteer fireman in Albuquerque. My other son is a volunteer fireman in Westbury," Russini said.

But while he and his son have come to terms with their new relationship, the man who raised Matthew is due in Family Court today and back in State Supreme Court on Monday.

Sarchiapone said yesterday that the Smileys "were motivated purely out of concern for this child."

Yesterday was a special day for Russini. Whereas he usually left his family and went off by himself on March 8, this year he called his son.

"Happy birthday," I said."

Newsday stringer Guillermo Contreras contributed to this story.

Illustration

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