

Sisters reunited in Clinton after decades of searching

By Carole Kelly

Three sisters recently met at a Clinton restaurant, and it was not a routine gathering but a momentous first-time-ever meeting. The youngest sister, Lisa Huff McWilliams of Clinton, had been a 50-year mystery, the ninth child born into an Indiana family, adopted by a Pearl couple when she was a few months old. She was the missing piece in a puzzle for her siblings, who knew they had a baby sister somewhere. The other two sisters, from Evansville, Indiana, Helena Jenkins and Gail Braun, with her husband Clark, had driven to Clinton from vacationing in Myrtle Beach after receiving a call that at last their baby sister had been located.

The meeting, on Thursday, June 27, at 7:30 p.m. was a joyous occasion as the sisters met, smiled, laughed and hugged in the parking lot and then joined family members and friends waiting inside the restaurant. Lisa recalls that there had been tears during the first telephone conversations she had with her newly discovered family prior to the meeting.

"I was crying so much that I couldn't speak during our first talks," she said. Her sister Helena or Lena told her, "We have always loved you."

Another sister Mary, sixteen years older than Lisa, had been her babysitter, singing to her, caring for her, calling Betty Lee her 'angel baby.' Mary was the last one to hold her before the adoption. "Last Saturday, Mary sent me a very special photo, one of me when I was a baby," said Lisa. "She also kept my baby blanket."

At the restaurant meeting, Helena and Gail said they all knew there was a missing sister who had been adopted but did not know how to find her. Years had passed, as sealed adoption records kept closing doors as information was sought about the baby.

Lisa was 29 when she learned that she was adopted. Her husband, Kevin McWilliams, in preparing for a family trip abroad, recalls thinking there was a problem with her birth certificate information and that perhaps Lisa had been adopted.

Lisa chose to not ask her adoptive parents, Hazel and Jack Huff, about her birth, because she did not want to hurt them.

"My parents loved me, and also I had love from my aunt and uncle, 'Mamma Rene' and 'Daddy Charles,' who were like second parents," says Lisa. Jack Huff had worked in Indiana, which led to the opportunity to adopt the baby girl.

After her parents died, she began the search for her roots, with her best friend Kayla Phillips of Pearl lending a sympathetic ear and of-



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Lisa McWilliams of Clinton, center, welcomes the sisters she just met, Gail Braun, left, and Helena Jenkins of Indiana. The first meeting of these three, held at Froghead Grill, came after years of searching finally revealed that Lisa, who was adopted when she was a few months old, is the ninth child in the Indiana family. She will be meeting six other siblings in future months.

fering research advice. More time passed with no results.

In October 2018, Lisa submitted a request to obtain her unsealed original birth certificate. Eight months later, she received the papers that revealed her parents' names, Nonlee Irene McCahren and Wilbur Gerald McCahren. She had brothers and sisters, Helena, Anita, Gail, Doris, Mary, Rick, Bob and Kenneth.

The family puzzle was closer to being solved when Lisa found the obituary notice of her birth mother.

As brothers Bob and Rick searched in Indiana for the missing sister through genealogical sites, Lisa and Kayla were at work in Mississippi. Says Lisa, "Time passed. One day Kayla called me, saying she had news. I didn't get excited, didn't really expect anything big." But it turned out that a social media mes-

sage posted by Kayla allowed brother Rick in Indiana to discover that Lisa Nicole Huff McWilliams was his sister who, at birth, was named Betty Lee MaCahren. Rick immediately called his sisters, who were in Myrtle Beach, with the news that he had found their sister. Plans were made for their traveling to Clinton to meet Lisa.

Sister Gail recalls that she and her mother had completed a 1,000-piece angel puzzle. Gail says, "When she died, we had a beautiful picture of the angel etched on her teardrop headstone. Nine roses were also part of the design, one for each child, including one for our missing sister. We always felt that angels were with us."

The angel presence she attributes to the final pieces of the puzzle falling into place, as they had wondered

where the baby sister lived and how her life had been. Now, they are looking to the future to build memories together.

Lisa's family in Mississippi included an older brother, Wayne, who died in 1990. Also rejoicing in the successful completion of her search are children Timothy, daughter "Sam," and Chris. Lisa and Kevin's granddaughter, Skylar, will be joined by a second grandchild in January.

A Labor Day reunion is planned to take place in Indiana, where Lisa and her families will visit the cemetery to view the angel tombstone with nine roses.

"This will be an avenue of closure for me, the end of the search. Now we can all make new memories," says Lisa.