

LIVING

My ancestry test revealed a genetic bombshell

By Eric Spitznagel

August 11, 2018 | 8:26am | Updated



Linda Ketchum discovered that her father wasn't her real dad -- and she was Hispanic.

John Chapple

When Linda Ketchum of Glendale, Calif., asked her husband for an AncestryDNA kit for Christmas, it was just a lark. She had no family secrets she was trying to uncover, no genealogy mysteries that needed answers. She was just curious.

"My dad was German, and my mother was Scottish-English," she says. "I thought it'd be fun to learn a little about my genetic ethnicity, to trace how all the pieces came together." But she ended up getting far more than she bargained for.

When she went on the AncestryDNA site to view her DNA matches, there were no connections between her and her father. Even more unsettling, at least two-thirds of Ketchum's matches had Hispanic surnames. "At first I didn't believe it," she says. "But then I kept re-checking it, and I realized, oh my God, does this mean I'm . . . I'm Hispanic! All these years I thought I was German on my dad's side, but all of a sudden it was dawning on me that my dad wasn't my real dad and I had an entirely different ethnicity."

At 51, half a century into her life, Ketchum's familial and cultural identity had changed in an instant. "I looked in the mirror, and I didn't know who I was anymore," she says. "Every Hispanic person I saw on the street, I thought, 'Are you my cousin?'"

As an only child whose parents were both deceased, she had nobody to turn to for answers. So she kept searching on AncestryDNA. She finally discovered the identity of her biological father, Bill Chavez of New Mexico, who had died when Ketchum was just 17.

"It kind of consumed me," says the mother of eight. "I still wonder sometimes, would my life have been different if I'd known this earlier? My real father, my actual grandparents, they all spoke fluent Spanish. I can't even speak a word of it!"

She joined a secret Facebook community called DNA NPE Friends—NPE is short for “Not Parent Expected”— and found not just the support she needed but a reminder that she’s far from alone.



NY Post/Mike Guillen

“I never realized that there are so many others,” Ketchum says. “All over the country, DNA is blowing up family secrets.”

Business has never been better for what’s often called “recreational genetics.” The number of people who’ve had their DNA analyzed — which involves mailing your saliva or cheek swab to a genetic testing company like 23andMe, AncestryDNA, Family Tree DNA, or My Heritage — doubled in 2017, with more than 12 million

customers, or roughly 1 in 25 American adults paying to have their genes decoded.

What these companies are offering can sound tantalizing to anybody with even the mildest interest in genealogy. For just \$100 — the average cost of a direct-to-consumer genetic genealogy test — you can “Learn a more complete story of you,” as AncestryDNA’s website declares, or “Find new relatives you never knew existed,” promises 23andMe.

It’s only when you get to the fine print that the possibility of a genetic bombshell becomes more apparent: “You may discover things about yourself that trouble you and that you may not have the ability to control or change,” warns 23andMe’s terms-of-service statement.

This burgeoning genealogy-on-demand marketplace — which some projections claim could be worth an estimated \$60 billion in sales by 2020 — has spawned its own unique syndrome. Call it PTDD: post-traumatic DNA-test-results disorder.

The NPE Facebook community, launched by Catherine St Clair last summer, is already up to 2,364 members (at press time) despite a rigorous screening process. (You can’t join the group unless you’ve actually gotten the DNA rug pulled out from under you. Lurkers need not apply.)

“People don’t get that it really is a significant trauma,” says St Clair, a 56-year-old Texan who discovered through Ancestry.com that her biological father wasn’t the same person who raised her. “You feel completely alone and isolated. It’s like having an infection that’s deep under your skin that keeps festering and it’s painful and it’s getting worse and worse. Only after it’s exposed to air can it start to heal.”

Because the home genetics industry is still relatively new — the first tests didn’t become commercially available until 2007 — there isn’t research in the long-term psychological effects of getting bad DNA news, says science writer Carl Zimmer, author of the newly released book “She Has Her Mother’s Laugh: The Powers, Perversions, and Potential of Heredity.” But, he adds, “There’s evidence that some people may end up grappling with test results for a long time, especially if they didn’t prepare themselves for the possibility of a surprise.”

The fallout from discovering that your genetic identity isn’t what you expected isn’t just an internal struggle. Friends and family can be less than supportive. Cleon Brown, a police sergeant in Hastings, Mich., filed a legal complaint against his department last year, claiming that after learning of his African heritage on Ancestry.com, his colleagues targeted him with racial harassment. (Just last month he won \$65,000 in damages.)

Most revelations don’t result in lawsuits, but not every family is delighted to find out they have a new relative. “More than half of NPE members have had the door slammed in their face,” says St Clair. “People want them to go away, and they say things like, ‘Why are you doing this? Why you airing dirty laundry? This is a secret you shouldn’t be sharing!’ It hurts, because nobody wants to feel like a dirty secret. We’re not trying to stir up trouble. We’re not trying to wreck a family. We just want to know who we are.”

Natalie Frobel, 32, from Las Vegas, had an uphill battle after getting her DNA test results. “I found out I was conceived using an anonymous sperm donor,” she says. When she shared the discovery with her parents, they were initially argumentative and dismissive but eventually admitted the truth. “I don’t remember which parent said what, but one of them said to the other ‘We should just finally tell her,’” Frobel says.

Things became more tense when Frobel announced that she wanted to track down the donor who helped conceive her, because she’s been diagnosed with the autoimmune disease lupus and wanted more information on her biological family’s medical history. During one especially heated discussion, her mother “tried to argue that it was nothing like adoption and the stranger’s DNA didn’t matter,” Frobel says. “I argued back that it very much did matter, and at some point in the conversation she yelled out, ‘I almost wish I didn’t have another man’s sperm in my vagina to conceive you!’

“I haven’t seen my family since,” Frobel says.

DNA results don't just reveal unexpected dads. Roberta Estes, a genetic genealogist who helps people translate their DNA results, says she's consulted dozens of people who've discovered so-called "secret siblings," proof of their father's (and sometimes mother's) infidelities. The choice of whether or not to reach out to these half-brothers and sisters is always a difficult one, she says, as the reactions are never predictable. "Some people are accepting," Estes says. "Some people are disbelieving, some people are angry, some people grieve the person they thought they knew and didn't. Some people are incredibly grateful to find a sibling."

That was true for a Brooklyn woman who was happy to discover she had a secret half-sister via a DNA test. But the revelation also angered her because it was a reminder of her father's constant infidelity. She hasn't yet told her mother the painful news and isn't sure if she ever can. "It's been about six months of living with this secret," said the 45-year-old, who asked not to be named. "It's all tentative and raw."

To further complicate matters for those grappling with unsettling DNA news, there's also the question of accuracy. DNA testing is far from a perfect science, says Sheldon Krinsky, a professor at Tufts University who studies the bioethics of genetic engineering. "There's really no oversight for ancestry testing," he says. "There's no independent testing that validates any of it with scientific certainty."

When these DNA-testing companies have been examined, they haven't exactly passed with flying colors. In a study published last March by researchers at Ambry Genetics, a medical laboratory in California, they analyzed the results of commercial DNA tests (without naming specific companies) and found that only 60 percent of the findings could be confirmed. The other 40 percent were false positives; meaning, the genetic variants were incorrectly identified.

The technology is a far cry from what we see on forensic crime shows on TV, "where they find the DNA and instantly identify the perpetrator," says Robert Green, a medical geneticist at Harvard. "Most of genetics is about probability. If you look at it through that lens, you see why it's both valid but also kind of disappointing. On average, DNA testing companies are telling you the truth. They're telling you that they've identified markers that indicate a high probability that you come from X region. But that's still just a probability and it's far from a certain."

Whether entirely accurate or not, modern DNA tests are changing lives. But is it for the better?

"It's All Relative" author A.J. Jacobs, who attempted to make contact with the 80,000 (alleged) distant relatives that he only learned about because of DNA databases, believes genetic sleuthing can bring us closer together. "The hope is that it'll show us that we're all a mix," he says. "We're all mutts. There's no such thing as 'racial purity.' I've seen many instances of it increasing tolerance. There was the Texas meteorologist who found his biological mother through DNA testing. He's gay and she's evangelical Christian. It could have gone terribly. But his mom overcame her bias and fully accepts him and his husband."

Since learning about her real father and ethnicity, Ketchum hasn't changed much about the way she interacts with the world. Although she never got to meet her biological dad, she's seen pictures — thanks to cousins who've accepted her as family only after taking their own DNA tests — and she sees his face when she looks in the mirror.

"I never looked like my dad, or the man I thought was my dad," she says. "But knowing what I know now, I see my dad in every reflection. The things I used to explain away, like that I was the only one in my family with black curly hair, make more sense. My grown-up sons, they're the spitting image of their grandfather."

Although no one can confirm what she assumes was an affair between her mother and Bill Chavez, she claims she's had "flashbacks" since learning about her real dad. "I remember my mom bringing me to Bill's house when I was really young," she says. "I can so clearly see myself in that kitchen, Bill is sitting at the table, and there's another woman there in a pink housecoat. She's friendly but not warm. I remember his wife's name was Rose. I don't know if the woman I met was his wife."

Because of her experience, Ketchum says she's started to look at her personal identity as a brick wall. "When we learn something that's devastating or life-changing, it knocks some bricks out of the wall," she says. "The wall weakens, but it doesn't tumble completely. You've just lost a few bricks, but the foundation is still there. And you find some new bricks to replace the old ones." She laughs at her own explanation. "It's a silly metaphor, but it makes sense to me," she says. "I'm still figuring out how to wedge those new bricks in there. But my wall isn't collapsing anytime soon."

— To reach NPE Friends Fellowship, go to NPEFellowship.org.

THE GENE FACTORY

- **330,000:** Total number of DNA test customers in 2013
- **12 million:** Total customers in 2018

- **1.5 million:** Number of AncestryDNA kits sold last year between Black Friday and Cyber Monday, triple what was sold in 2016.
- **2,000 gallons:** The amount of saliva needed to process all of those tests
- **\$79-\$99:** Average cost of DNA test from top providers
- **\$109 million:** Spent annually on ads by Ancestry.com
- **94%:** Americans that say they have a right to access their genetic information with at-home DNA testing
- **80%:** Have privacy concerns about DNA testing
- **17%:** Said privacy concerns were their main reason for not trying it
- **\$300 million:** Amount invested by pharmaceutical giant GlaxoSmithKline for access to 23andMe's genetic database
- **59%:** Americans who think the world would be more accepting of different races if more people got tested
- **26%:** Millennials are more likely than older counterparts to want to take a DNA test in the future

Sources: 23andMe Inc., Kantar Media, GlaxoSmithKline, AncestryDNA, and Credence Research

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