

Q & A with Laura

Elevator Speech...What is your book about?

My book is about Laura, a woman who lived her life with her secrets finds her greatest secret unearthed at age 67. The child she was forced to give up for adoption when she was 17 in an Unwed Mothers Home in New Orleans unexpectedly sends her an email. Meeting her 49 year-old son rocked her world and cracked her soul wide open. She found the acceptance and love she had always denied herself had been with her all along.

My book tells an incredibly sad story but ends with a story of grace, hope, and extraordinary joy.

Who do you hope will read your book?

Mostly my sons, who made me a mother and made this book possible. Family, friends, birth mothers who still carry the burden and guilt of surrendering their child to adoption, adoptees and readers who carry deep painful secrets and never accept that they can forgive themselves. Anyone interested in the oppressed society of the 60s, regarding unwed mothers may find the book enlightening about that period of time when women were institutionalized because they didn't have a ring on their finger when they became pregnant.

What are the one or two take-aways you hope readers get from your book?

My book is incredibly sad in parts and incredibly joyful at the end. I hope readers have a better understanding about how releasing your secrets will not only bring you to a better place emotionally, physically and spiritually but help everyone in your life including the secret makers and secret keepers. In writing this book, I have found a better understanding about who I was then and who I am now. I hope readers will find the story of the Unwed Mothers Home and society morals in the 60s interesting.

What kind of research did you do? How long did you spend researching?

For 49 years I avoided reading books about adoptions, maternity homes. Emotionally it was too close to home. I was in denial. I even bought books regarding those subjects and they stayed hidden in my bedroom bookshelves, never opened. Right before my son found me, I joined a community online of birth mothers who were alumni of the home I had been in. I had this hope I would find more information about finding my child. Then almost immediately after my son found me, I read everything I could get my hands on regarding the subject. I perused websites and googled information non-stop. I joined CUB and reconnected with a couple of women I had known during that traumatic time in the 60s. I have interviewed my old friends, to validate my memories and read everything I can get my hands on about the maternity home I was at, including finding old photos (which were not allowed at the time) online and also I have looked at my son's birth certificate and any information his adoptive mom received from the Home the first year of his life, before his second birth certificate was issued. I have traveled back to New Orleans and visited the building where the home was. The building is being renovated. It was changed to a children's shelter in 1972, when there was no longer the demand for maternity homes. At present the building is vacant.

What is it about the topic of this book that made you write it? Stick with it?

For fifty years I never dreamed I would tell anyone this story willingly. (Only my husband knew the story... and he only knew part of it) Now, here I am not only shouting it the world, but writing it down for anyone to read. I realized after my son found me, that this particular event in my life had held me back in so many ways. It had changed the whole direction of my life. Not necessarily in a completely negative way, but definitely it had colored who I was, and had changed me.

I was absolutely driven to write it down. I began cautiously telling the story and the more I wrote, the more honest I became. I literally allowed myself to bleed on the page. I lost any worries about who might disagree or not be pleased with my truth. Whenever I told my story, people asked me if it was book or movie I was talking about. Everyone I spoke to said 'this needs to be a book' or 'a movie'. I laugh..oh if it could be so easy...especially now the more I've learned about writing a book.

Always an avid reader, I had no idea how damn hard it is to write a book and do it right. Also it takes forever and hey, I am almost 70. Do I have the energy to see this through? Yes I do!

I feel like I have to write this book. For me and for my sons.

What attempts had you made to find Jamie over the years?

Two days after I gave birth to my son, I was shuttled downtown New Orleans to a scummy building and left alone with no adult present and told to sign the final adoption papers. I was told this was final. I had no rights to him (this was illegal, but of course I did not know that) and I was told I could never try to find him, that I should go on with my life, that I would forget about him (a total and cruel lie) and that he was in a better place.

Years went by and three sons later, I started reading about closed adoptions. I learned that in some states the records were sealed and Louisiana was one of them.

In the 70s I sent a letter to a company asking for help... Soundex, was the name of the company that I found out about in a Dear Abby column in our newspaper. Supposedly they could connect loved ones.

With Soundex, I got nowhere. I registered my name with them in again in the 80s and in the early 90s online. Still unsure of what happened if by chance I should find Jamie. All along Jamie was not looking for me, so my name went unnoticed.

During those years I was raising my 3 sons, along with 2 step children and working in a demanding sales position. I looked for Jamie randomly and not with much hope of finding him. The worry and hurt of not knowing he was living a healthy and happy life never left me.

For some unexplained reason, I had always had a fantasy of him finding me from the time I left him at the unwed mothers home. I had not changed my name on my records hoping he would find the birth certificate with my name on it someday. Many girls had used falsified names. We were encouraged to so nobody could ever track us down. It was as if we had committed a crime. I had refused to change mine.

I left bread crumbs, hoping someday he would want to find me.

In 2016, my husband and I sent in our DNA samples and after we got the results from Ancestry.com I started finding matches, I hoped my son would do his DNA and I would find him that way. But I wouldn't let myself get my hopes up. After all, not everyone has their DNA tested. I joined a few more birth parent/adoptee groups and was stunned at how many b-parents and adoptees were searching for each other. It opened up a whole new world to me.

In Oct of that year, my son did find me thru Ancestry.com DNA. My fantasy that he would find me one day had come true, but not in any way I could have envisioned in 1967.

What made Richard decide to come looking for you?

Richard's wife Lauren, who is close to her family and realizes the importance of family in one's life encouraged him to look for me. His adoptive mother died 20 years ago and Lauren never had the opportunity to meet her. She always wondered about his birth mother and he always insisted that he did not need to find his birth mother or father. He felt that he had had great parents and that he did not want to disrupt anyone's life. He was unsure of what the outcome would be, the same way that I had been so unsure about the outcome of finding each other. Lauren persisted and convinced him that if they did his DNA and found out who his parents were, at least they could find out the health history of his family and that was important for him and for their children.

It worked! He sent in his DNA sample about 9 months after I did and Ancestry.com connected us immediately (within minutes) as a parent/child match. It was truly phenomenal when we connected. All of the years of saying he did not need to find me melted away and all of the years of me being afraid he would hate me were wiped away in minutes.

What are the types of responses you got from your children and grandchildren when they learned of Jamie's existence?

Responses were all over the board. Thankfully my husband, Gene, knew about Jamie and had never told anyone honoring my privacy. He totally supported me in this whole experience. My other sons, all three grown with completely different personalities, had completely different reactions that were overall positive. This was a huge surprise to know there was a fourth son and their Mom was head over heels in ecstasy that he had come into their lives. I am so proud of all of my sons for the way they have handled learning about Richard. They all expressed joy that this reunion had filled up the hole in my heart and happiness that their new half brother would finally get to know his Mom.

I describe their funny and amazing responses in my book.

My step children were equally surprised, but welcoming as well.

Our family grew over night to six children all with spouses or significant others.

Then from six grandchildren to nine grandchildren overnight!

Our grandchildren seem to be taking it all in stride with very little disruption. There are now 3 new grandchildren and those three welcomed a new Grammy and PaPa immediately in their lives with open arms.

I feel like the luckiest Mom and Grammy in the world.

What are some of the similarities between you and Richard that cannot be explained away by the nurture argument?

It is uncanny. He looks like he sprang from me alone. He looks so much like me. He does not resemble his father at all. (Maybe his voice? Somethings about his statue?) but his face looks like mine. His nose, his mouth, his jaw. I see a likeness to him in all of my other sons in different ways.

He and I love the same things...including History, Literature, tastes in food, movies, musicals. We laugh at the same things and find it funny that we are so comfortable with each other. There has never been an awkward moment. It was an immediate 'Fit'. It is as if he is a son but also a friend that I have not seen in years and the minute we are together, or talk or text we connect like it has only been yesterday.

It's an extraordinary thing, this DNA. Nature shouts out loud and clear in our case.

What were the corrosive and hidden effects to you (and others) of holding onto this secret for so long?

I feel like a stone that weighed down my heart has been removed. I feel like I can finally exhale and breathe completely when I began to tell my story.

For 49 years I lived in fear that 'people' would judge me if they knew I had given up my child. Raising my sons and being a good mother was the most important accomplishment I felt I had ever achieved. No, other success in my life matched that, yet I always felt like maybe I wasn't that good mother I tried to be, that I was a fraud....what kind of mother leaves their child? Intellectually I knew that was not the case. I did not abandon Jamie. I was given no choice in the matter. Hard to comprehend now.

With the birth of each of my other sons, I worried constantly that there would be something wrong with my baby. It would be 'payback' for what I had done to my first son by leaving. I thought I would be punished, I guess.

Losing my son colored my life with a (sometimes unbearable) feeling of loss. I could not openly talk about him or grieve for a son no one knew about. It was extremely lonely. I also had this fear that he would hate me if I ever did find him and that feeling of 'rejection' scared the hell out of me.

I know this affected me emotionally and physically. Something was missing no matter how happy or successful I was. The stress of carrying this weight of guilt and fear that someone might find out and think less of me was enormous.

None of my friends or family would have guessed I had this going on inside. I am a great actress.

I often thought, if I could just find out that my son was loved and well and happy... I would know it was the right thing. I had not in my wildest dreams thought he had turned out as well as he had or that he would accept and care for me the way he does.

It was the icing on a cake that I never knew we would bake together.

Did you feel you “knew” Richard when you met him? On some cellular level? What about him? Did he feel he knew you?

Oh yes, and this was one of the most amazing surprises of my life. Richard emailed me on the night of Oct 9. We emailed all day back and forth and agreed to talk to each other that night. That first phone call lasted 4 hours.

I “knew” his voice immediately. He told me, he “knew” my voice. It was as if I had spoken to him forever. He and I both are talkers ...he is a psychologist and an attorney and I am a retired sales rep...that first night was fantastic.

I could not stop crying tears of joy for months. I was smitten. I was in love. I felt like I had just given birth to a new baby. I was obsessed by him. I wanted to know everything.. wanted to count his toes. And he seemed equally happy. It was thrilling.

He said I must have imprinted my voice on him, that there was this physical reaction when we talked of happiness and he loved talking to me. I was head over heels. (The only way I can describe it.)

He flew out from Baton Rouge three days later to meet me in person. When we hugged the first time, I felt like I was hugging my son, not a complete stranger. This feeling was definitely on a cellular level.

For a remarkable 3 days he stayed at our home and it was totally comfortable. I finally had the gift of my oldest son, who I had not seen since he was a newborn infant. It was indescribable joy.

Two and a half years later, and many visits back and forth from California to Louisiana and him to see us, we still are learning about it other. We continue to marvel at how alike we are and how comfortable we are with each other.

One of Richard's daughters looks like a mini-me. Mattie is 11 now, 8 when I met her. She is so much like I was as a little girl it is surreal.

This adventure has been like none I had ever expected. I am blessed.

What it about the South in the 60s that made it harder than other parts of the country to be a pregnant, unwed mother?

Not sure. I have done extensive research and it was treated as a scandal everywhere in the country in the 60's to be an unwed mother, not just in the South. I do know that the South has always been more antiquated in many ways and less progressive than the rest of the country. I also know it is in the Bible Belt. I can't say it was worse for me because of being in the South because I have nothing to compare it to. I do know that when I moved to California at the age of 19 it was much less judgmental than Mississippi, where I had grown up.

The way of life was different there in the deep South than here, and still is.

It may have been harder because it was more backward and obviously I was too. I totally believed that I was damaged goods, unworthy and that I did not deserve happiness after the huge disappointment I had been.

There is a beauty in the laid back simplicity and order of the South, but there is a disturbing element about it as well. Rigid, unyielding....the thinking that “their way is the only way.”