

Meeting your donor/ donor-conceived person

Interview with Roger and Riley

24 August, 2011

Roger:

I'm Roger and back in the 1980's I was a sperm donor. Before the laws in Victoria changed most donors were anonymous. Back then I made the decision to make myself available to any offspring if they wanted any information about me. And one of those chose to find out more about me after he turned 18. Riley applied to the Donor Register a few years ago. We subsequently met and today the Victorian Assisted Reproductive Treatment Authority - or VARTA - has asked Riley and I to talk about how all this began. You can check out the VARTA website at VARTA.org.au.

Riley when did you first learn about your beginnings?

Riley:

I first learned that I was conceived from a donor at a very young age... I don't actually remember when it was. I mean when you talk to your parents about these origins and stories, where did you come from and all that sort of stuff... It was always explained alongside them, I don't actually know. I can't remember when I first found out. It's a question I'm often asked and I can't actually give a definitive answer because I just don't know. I was probably two or three year old, as soon as your natural curiosity about your origins comes up. That was when I was first told. I've got no idea of the time....I've always been serious to find out more about the whole process and who my donor was, and all that sort of stuff. And again it was always this suspended wonder, oh well I'll find out eventually. But I used to wonder... you know, what he looked like. I had always imagined... I had always thought about, you know, seeing an older man on a railway station, or something like that. Did he look like me? I knew that on my 18th birthday I was going to get the information and I could do what I want. But I think my parents, my parents were determined for it to be my own experience, my own journey I guess. And they've never really expressed any... they've never put themselves in this for me. It's always been something for me to explore. It was always something that I was going to try. Oh, and there was always the risk that he was not going to meet. Then I thought, well, if we're anything alike, which is on the cards, he will probably have the same sort of curiosity as I do. So he probably will. And it was always very heartening when I got the... for my 18th birthday my parents gave me the information and all the documentation that they had. Which is very scant personal details and identifying details. But it had... there was stuff written about character traits... and it had. And at the end of it was heartening to read that "I'd really like to meet any eventual offspring from this." And I was like brilliant...excellent... that'll probably happen then. I was never too concerned. I don't know... It was out of my hands, you know I remember sort of thinking; this is a big deal. But then it didn't really have... it didn't blow me away. It was exciting, it was exciting. I remember it was the next step and I knew that I was soon to meet him and that was exciting. This is going to be really interesting to have some of these questioned answered. What does he look like? Does he have any shared interests that aren't explained through my upbringing, that sort of stuff. So that was sort of when I started thinking; what am I wanting to learn from this? What am I wanting to find out? Yeah, what are the things that I'm going to be able to take from this? It was very exciting. It was a very exciting time.

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And it was within a month that we, from that first email that we had that first meeting. So it all happened very quickly, it was good. It was a very positive experience.

Roger:

I can remember the lead up to our meeting and it consisted of counselling. Counselling, I don't think is a good word. I don't think we were being... counselling suggests that you might be being assessed or something.

Riley:

Or something wrong with us. Something needs to be sort of fixed or healed and it definitely wasn't anything like that.

Roger:

It was really more exploring the possibilities, your motives. One of the things that occurred to me was that I felt that there was a sort of a safety net being set up there by the counsellor.

Roger:

I can remember the day. We were sitting in a room there. The door was closed, I was inside the room and I was led to believe that you were outside the room. And I knew at some stage the door was going to open and there he'd be... this fellow I'd heard about who'd made application to meet me. And how was I going to feel and react? Do you remember how you...?

Riley:

Yeah... I sat outside there and could see you were in the room and that sort of thing and was told you were in there. And it was just the culmination of a lot of curiosity and a lot of excitement and anticipation. But I don't know, it wasn't one of those shatter points in your life where everything turns upside down. It was a moment that I very keenly enjoyed. And I remember going into the room and immediately - and we've discussed this before - how we immediately we could see the physical side of things. I was looking into my own eyes.

Roger:

I could see the resemblance straight away.

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Riley:

And you said you were told by her there was no physical resemblance.

Roger:

That's right, at some stage during the counselling she mentioned, almost off-hand, she said; "Oh, I don't think he looks like you, you need to know that". Well I went home and dug out a photograph from my family album when I think I was 18. And I think I sent it side by side with you.

Riley:

Yeah and you emailed me, and you can see it.

Roger:

It was quite striking.

Roger:

I was really pleased, when Riley strode through that door, the purposefulness that he had. One of the first things he said was "thank you", thank you for what you did those 18 or 19 years ago. That was one thing I didn't expect but it was a very nice thing.

Riley:

The first things I wanted to know about Roger were... well there were a few things, first of all physically, obviously because the physical resemblance between us I was very, very curious. And there are there definitely are, certainly are some very striking points of similarity. Got the same eyes, same hair colour. There's stuff about the face that you can see. There are some other traits between us that I was very, very curious about in relation to interests or educational ability, that sort of thing. Because I'm hopeless at maths and always have been. And Roger is too. It was like a puzzle piece... fitting in nicely and going oh, of course, that's that there, that's another part of my life and that's definitely something I like. And there's definitely a connection between Roger and is based on a shared biological commonality and that's great.

Roger:

People have asked us about the sort of relationship that we now have. I think you said there are no words in the English language... we haven't got words for this yet.

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Riley:

No there's nothing you can say to someone to impart the level of understanding into them. When I have to explain who Roger is I have to say stuff like he's my donor or biological father. But as soon as you say "father" it has all these connotations of paternalism and all that sort of stuff. And Roger's is not really like that, he's a mate. He's a mate with a lot more life experience. It's useful getting that sort of advice that you might get from a father figure occasionally. But it's not in an authoritarian or paternalistic way where I feel like I owe him something. My Dad's my Dad and that's the way it's always been and the way it always will be. In my family it's always been so normal for this to be the way it is. It's never an issue, you know. It's never going to be the end of our family, you know.

Roger:

It's a very interesting journey, this. Recently when your parents invited me to a family function I thought, here we are again breaking some new ground. I'm now faced with the situation of meeting with your family. I'd never done that before. Here comes all the old apprehensions, what could possibly go wrong here.

Riley:

You do think about that.

Roger:

You do. And I remember walking into the room and there they were and I was welcomed so warmly. I actually felt like one of the family. I felt flattered by the warmth of the relationship that was opening up here. We also had sensitivities that we had to deal with. I remember that. I remember asking myself how will I deal with the issue of saying to my friends: I've met a person who I am biologically related to who really isn't my son. We've become good friends but what sort of friendship is this?

Riley:

It is very difficult to explain this to other people.

Roger:

And one of the things that Riley taught me was the openness of this. I think this really came from his parents. About being open about this from a very early age. And I thought, now I've got to be as open about this with my friends which I have been and I remember talking about this with my brothers and sister. And it was no big deal really. They were very curious about Riley.

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It's always been an open subject in my family. In fact it was my wife who suggested that I get involved in the donor program all those years ago. My children have always known and it's never been an issue with us.

Riley:

People were interested. People are always interested.

Roger:

They are.

Riley:

If someone's got this far with a child, they've got a child that wants to meet their donor. Just be supportive. Be helpful and all that sort of thing. I think my parents they exercised very good judgement in allowing me to have my own experience with this. Because it wasn't something that my Mum and Dad held my hand with. It wasn't something they experienced alongside me. It's always been my own experience. Advice I would give to parents is to... do what my parents did. Because they've shown a lot of wisdom in the way that they've handled this situation. And just be very honest and up front about it because it is the sort of thing that could be an enormous source of negativity and stress for someone if they find out when they're teens or in their early twenties or even later.

Roger:

It's something that has always been very positive. People always come back and say: I think this is fantastic, I think it's wonderful that you've both been able to do this. And so the positive thing has always been the overriding thing about it.

Riley:

I'm very happy for the role that Roger plays in my life. It's a very positive... a universally positive one, there's nothing bad about it.

Riley:

Our family is never going to be threatened by anything that's come as a result of our biological origins. And so if you're a person who's considering this as a means of procreation, just be honest about it, just be honest

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about it with them and don't treat it like it's a big deal. It doesn't have to be. It doesn't have to be something that will have a negative effect on a family.

Roger:

And a last word. This podcast has been presented by VARTA. The Victorian Assisted Reproductive Treatment Authority @ varta.org.au.