

It's 8:30 p.m. on March 20, 1965, in Chicago. The temperature hovers around 8 degrees as Cesar Johnson steps outside his Chicago doorstep, headed for his job as a night factory supervisor.

Glancing down, he encounters a basket containing a blanket resting on the apartment steps. Bewildered, he nudges the basket with his foot. The blanket moves. The thrashing beneath is from a newborn infant.

Johnson hurries the infant to his wife in the warmth of their apartment. Police arrive and question the Johnsons and their neighbors.

After a fruitless search for the mother, the 5-pound foundling is taken to St. Vincent's Catholic orphanage later and found to be in good health.

-----A birth certificate identifying him as a foundling infant without identifiable parents was submitted to the Bureau of Vital Statistics. The case went to family court where the investigation continued. His name became Joseph, just as the sisters at St. Vincent's had called him, apparently because indications were that he'd likely been born on St. Joseph's Day the day before he was found.

Three months later, Catholic Charities was awarded guardianship of Joseph and saw to his baptism at St. Vincent's. He was officially registered with the Holy Name Cathedral in Chicago.

In August 1965, five months after being discovered on the steps, Joseph fulfilled the hopes of Sylvester, a construction worker, and wife Loretta, a teacher, by being given to them as foster parents. The couple had been trying for four years without success to conceive a child. And after Joseph arrived in their home, Loretta would come to bear a daughter and two sons.

By 1973, social workers reported that Joseph had grown into an "outgoing, well-adjusted child who mixed well with his peers and was doing well in school." But in that year, Loretta and Sylvester divorced. Loretta fought successfully to adopt Joseph who, by the time the adoption was approved in 1975, had become as much a part of the family as Sylvester and Loretta's three natural children.

Joseph began asking about his own birth parents. Loretta told him they'd make that attempt to learn about them when he turned 18.

But Loretta also grew increasingly insecure that her beloved adopted son would leave, or perhaps believe she'd done an inadequate job of raising him should he find his natural parents, even though he continually assured her what a fine mother she was.

The young man from the basket on the steps realized he'd have to search on his own.

By 1992, he'd earned his bachelor's degree and married his wife, June. They had a daughter, Candace. It also was the year Loretta died. He began making inquiries to the Illinois Adoption Registry.

Another eight years passed. Joseph and June by now had three daughters with the addition of Loren J'la and Paris Jordan. The family also had relocated to Northwest Arkansas, where Joseph had accepted a high-level executive position with Wal-Mart. There he'd remain until 2008 when he left to start a business and pursue other interests.

Four years later, Joseph was still longing to discover how and why his birth mother had chosen to abandon him as she had. Since Illinois had opened up previously closed birth-certificate information from closed adoptions, he was able to connect with a man who also had been searching for his son resulting from a rendezvous with a woman in 1964.

The man felt certain Joseph had to have been his son. But DNA testing proved otherwise.

Meanwhile, Joseph awaited his original birth certificate, hoping it might list his natural mother. But those hopes were dashed when the document read simply: "Certificate of Birth-Foundling Child."

The final path to pursue was to try to locate the man who'd found him. But by then, Cesar Johnson would have been in his 80s. Because of the unusual spelling of his first name, in August 2012, Joseph compiled a list and began dialing.

On his first call, he reached the very Cesar who indeed "remembered every detail as if it were yesterday."

Over Thanksgiving, Joseph and his family traveled to Chicago to meet the Johnsons and revisit the Catholic Charities' St. Vincent's Orphanage. He thanked the sisters and the Johnsons for saving his life.

Joseph was led to the baptismal where he'd been christened. "It was surreal. I thought, this is the place where nearly 50 years ago I was in this same place and God has led me back. My kids could see their dad was literally overcome with joy. It was a spiritual experience. We've become close friends with the Johnsons.

"A minister once told me most people spend a lifetime searching for God to ultimately be saved. But my life has been just the opposite," he said. "God found and saved me in the beginning of life and continues to be with me through the journey."

This little boy who teachers called so well-adjusted remains a foundling who will never stop searching. He has gone from alone and abandoned on the steps of Cesar Johnson's apartment to the steps of the Arkansas Capitol as our state's first black deputy secretary of state, Joseph K. Wood.

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