

She was left with disturbing questions that will never be answered. The Pandora's Box of DNA testing.

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Jeffrey Jean Baptiste of Union City with the siblings he discovered through DNA testing. From left to right are Danielle Gee, Baptiste, Deborah Slaughter, David DiPenti and Diana DiPenti. (Photo courtesy of Ana Tent)

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By [Ted Sherman | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com](#)

A cotton swab to the cheek; a quick spit into a tube, and the world can be forever dramatically transformed for some or comfortably affirmed for others, lured by the growing industry of DNA self-testing.

For Jeffrey Jean Baptiste of Union City who received a DNA test kit as a Father's Day gift, it led to a family he never knew existed. Michael Farragher, a writer from Spring Lake Heights, found new tales to tell after also sending in his DNA.

For Barbara Chance of Hammonton, it was a different story. She was left with disturbing questions that will never be answered, after genetic testing called into question more than her long-held Irish heritage.

TV commercials by companies such as [23andMe](#) and [Ancestry.com](#) suggest a world of discovery, (not to mention a nifty gift for those curious about their past). Where did you come from? Can you trace your path back to Europe or Asia or Africa? Who are you?

The stories of heartbreak and hope, however — ranging from the discovery of siblings, to doubts about paternity — offer both a promise and a warning for those eager to open the Pandora's Box. It's like a box of chocolates, as Forrest Gump famously said. You never know what you're going to get.

Rutgers University sociology professor Eviatar Zerubavel said even before the arrival of DNA testing, genealogical curiosity existed in many cultures.

“It helps individuals get a sense that they are connected; that we belong to certain groups,” said Zerubavel, author of [“Ancestors and Relatives: Genealogy, Identity, and Community.”](#)

What is interesting about today's DNA testing, he said, is that the science seems to offer an absolute proof of who and what you are, even though mistakes are made. And sometimes, he observed, there can be surprises.

Andelka Phillips, a research associate for the Centre for Health, Law and Emerging Technologies at Britain's University of Oxford who has studied the growth of direct-to-consumer genetic testing, said despite the growing interest in genealogy and identity, people should be wary.

“We have to be cautious about it,” she remarked. “It can be positive, but it have negative impacts.”

Genetic testing was once the exotic realm of health care providers and genetic counselors looking for the prospects of disease or the likelihood of birth defects in a child, as well as law enforcement and defense attorneys looking to prove the guilt or innocence of a criminal suspect.

It was expensive science, which sought to decipher the unique DNA code that makes everyone what and who they are, and is shared with their children. Part of what made it so costly is that the human genome is a really complicated puzzle. The four basic building blocks of DNA (Deoxyribonucleic Acid), known as nucleotides, combine in complimentary pairs to make a strand. How many pairs? There are about 3 billion in the human DNA code.

In recent years, however, new and cheaper ways to analyze that data have allowed commercial consumer testing companies to emerge, by using a much smaller snapshot or snippet of those pairs.



The four basic building blocks of DNA (Deoxyribonucleic Acid), known as nucleotides, combine in complimentary pairs to make a strand. How many pairs? There are about 3 billion in the human DNA code. (Pixabay)

23andMe, for example, uses computer algorithms that individually look at short pieces of DNA across an individual's genome. Company officials said they compare each piece to DNA to reference populations from around the world, and use that to make determinations as to the percentage of a person's ancestry, whether that be Italian or Irish or African, Asian, Native American or Ashkenazi Jew.

Basically, they solve the riddle within your DNA by comparing it with the DNA of other people.

It's an inexact science. Get tested by different companies, and you'll likely get different answers.

“Because many genetic tests are not standardized, it's common to have conflicting results,” said Phillips. She pointed to the case of a pair of identical twins who received different ancestry results from the same genetic testing firms. Identical twins have the same DNA.

And sometimes it's not science at all.

In Canada, law enforcement agencies are reportedly investigating the use of fake Indian status cards to obtain tax breaks after reporters discovered that DNA tests used to prove Indian heritage were conducted by a Toronto lab that returned positive Indigenous ancestry results on two DNA samples obtained from a dog.

At the same time, Phillips, author of "Buying Your Self on the Internet," noted that when someone has a genetic data sequence, it can serve as a unique identifier which exists in perpetuity. "Because our genes are shared with families, there is also potential for it to be used against other family members as well," she said. "If you consider having a DNA test one, you should think about asking your family, because it's their data too."

She was also especially critical of direct-to-consumer testing being marketed for health and illnesses concerns, suggesting that for most complex diseases, there are disputes over genetic variants even for working at genetics research, leading to conflicting conclusions.

Scott R. Diehl, Professor at Rutgers Biomedical Health Sciences, has concerns as well about unregulated companies misusing genetic science for-profit, which he said too often provides customers with no clinically useful information or misleading guidance about the person's risk of serious diseases.

"Regulation by both the FDA and the FTC has been grossly inadequate" complained Diehl. "This has allowed for-profit companies to make insufficiently-supported, and possibly false advertising claims for predicting traits such as personalized diets for adults or children's athletic, mathematical or musical potential."

He said genetic tests for many traits — such as diabetes or autism — caused by very small effects added up across hundreds of genes and by factors in the environment, are especially inappropriate for sale to the public

"It's like testing the pressure in only one of your car's tires and thinking if this is good then you're ready to make a cross country trip when your brakes or hundreds of other essential parts may be just about to give out," Diehl said.

The Centers for Disease Control said with improved technology and plummeting prices in the coming decade, it sees an expansion of direct consumer DNA testing for personal genomic information. In fact, the National Human Genome

Research Institute said the global consumer genomic testing market has been valued in excess of \$117 million, which indicates millions are purchasing the tests.

What has been driving those sales is not only the falling costs of the tests, but the deep interest many have in genealogy research. They want to know where they came from, and DNA testing can offer an easier way to look back in time than searching through historical records, old Census data, and passenger manifests from the turn of the last century.

When the algorithms make a match with someone else in a database who has already been tested, it's even less of a guessing game. It offers kinship connections.

For some, those newfound connections have allowed them to discover extended family.

For others, though, the technology has unearthed deeply buried and hurtful family secrets that in years' past would never have come to light.

A TRUTH SHE NEVER SAW COMING

Barbara Chance, 72, of Hammonton thought she knew her heritage.

"I always believed I was half Irish, Swedish and German," she said.

Her father, she said, was Irish. Both of his parents had been born in County Clare. Her mother had a Swedish and German heritage. But looking to confirm her Irish roots, she bought a 23andMe testing kit and waited for the results. It came back with a surprise, showing that she was 23 percent Italian. Not Irish.

"I said, 'This has to be wrong,'" she recalled. "Then I did [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com)."

That came up with 30 percent Italian, and because she had also asked for DNA matches with others, it was accompanied by a disconcerting finding she never would have expected. The test results indicated she had two first cousins she knew nothing about. Both of them, said Chance, were Italian.

That's where her nightmare began.

Chance, the youngest of four, grew up in New Jersey. Her father had worked for a time as a bus driver, and then as a projectionist. Her mother did not work, and did not drive.

"My three siblings said I didn't look like them," she said. Still, there was no suspicion over why that might so. "I never got vibes that something was wrong."

The DNA tests suggested a possibility she had never considered. As she began to dig deeper, she began to slowly suspect that there was no mistake in the test results. For the first time, she started to wonder if her father might not be her biological father.

"I had no clue. It was a total shock. I was pretty unhappy and sad and angry," she said, remembering sleepless nights

as she came to the conclusion that her biological father was likely a stranger. Yet there was no one to answer the many questions she had. Both of her parents were gone, as were their siblings.

“I had nobody to talk to about it except my new-found cousins,” remarked Chance.

With no other avenues open to her, she took to exchanging emails with one, in an effort to figure out the connection and confirm her suspicions. The cousins had a number of uncles, opening the possibilities of a direct genetic tie to her — if the DNA link to the cousin was to be believed. But all them denied any knowledge of Hammond’s mother, and there were no other obvious community ties or friendships. Still, one was about the right age. He had been in the Army in 1945 and was 21 at the time. Her mother was 31.

Chance grew increasingly convinced that he could be her biological father and despite earlier steadfast denials, he finally allowed that it might indeed be possible.

They met for the first time in December. She said it was pleasant get-together, but felt very odd. She would not name him, but said he was now 94, had brought his two grown children along with him, and admitted that he was nervous.

“He wouldn’t tell me how he knew my mother,” she said. “He said he didn’t want to color my opinion of her.”

He wondered about her childhood. They hugged and talked, but she could learn no more. She wrote him a letter after they met, but he never responded.

Her oldest son looks a little like his son, she said.

“I know he’s my father. I know that,” she said. “But there are still all these questions.”

Yet looking back, she has no regrets about taking the DNA test.

“Am I sorry? Not really,” she said. “It’s upsetting. But it’s part of your life.”

RECONNECTING AN EXTENDED FAMILY

Michael Farragher of Spring Lake Heights also took a 23andMe test, but was convinced he knew what it would tell him about his past. He was only partially right.

He already knew he was Irish. Farragher, who recently released a book called [“9 Rooms in Ballyglunin.”](#) set in a village

in County Galway, where he has visited and spent time with relatives who never left Ireland. When Farragher's wife gave him a DNA test kit for Christmas in 2017, he said he really was not interested in the heredity trail. He said he took the test to see if there were health issues he needed to be concerned about.

As for his Irish roots, the 23andMe test verified that he was a son of Ireland. It came back confirming the Irish heritage went back to the farm in Ballyglunin where his grandfather, Martin, had lived out his life. No surprise.

But his grandfather had an extended family that had been lost to time. Martin Farragher was the youngest of 10, and there had been a 14-year difference between him and his next youngest sibling. He never knew any of them. They had all left for America and for London, where they had children and their children had children. Martin remained behind on the family farm that he would pass on to his sons.

When Michael Farragher took the genetic test, the results corroborated what he knew about himself, but also put him on the map for those far-flung Farraghers to find not only him, but discover their own personal roots to Ballyglunin. His book, interestingly, showed them where to find him. When they got their DNA tests and Googled "Farragher," he was the first result that came up. One of them showed up to a book-signing he had in March last year.

"A woman in the back room was sitting there sobbing. Just sobbing," Farragher said. "At the end of my talk, she throws her arms around me and says I'm your cousin. It was a neat moment."

Martin was long gone and Farragher's own father at first was less than enthralled with the idea of a new extended family. "They probably know you've got money and you're rich from the book," his 84-year-old dad warned.

However, when Farragher put his father on the phone with the distant relatives and they heard his thick Irish brogue, they began to cry anew, and even Farragher found himself a convert. What's happened since, he said, is that he has introduced some of the American cousins with their cousins in Ireland, and given them a dose of the heritage they never knew.

"I got to hang out with them. They're very nice people," he said.



Michael Farragher with his O'Toole cousins, Barbara on the left and Beverly to the right. His grandfather, Martin Farragher, never left Ireland. But his sister, Delia, emigrated to Boston and married an O'Toole. (Photo courtesy of Michael Farragher)

As for taking the DNA test, he has never regretted it.

"Fortunately, my Dad's my dad and my Mom's my mom, so there's not that drama. I knew where I came from," he said. "But I thought it was rewarding to connect other people with their past."

A FATHER NEVER KNOWN

Jeffrey Jean Baptiste of Union City arrived with his mother from Haiti when he was seven years old. An only child, he knew that his father had been an American who had worked for years in Haiti, that his name was David, and might have had an Italian background.

His mother, who did not marry David, was unclear about his last name. Dupenski, or something like that, she thought. Not exactly Italian, and not quite the roadmap to discovery.

Now married and 42 with a family of his own, Baptiste received a Father's Day gift from his wife, Ana Tent, that would answer some questions. She gave him a 23andMe test kit, mostly because he had been experiencing some health issues after the death of his mother and wanted a genetic screening.

“I was hesitant,” Tent said of the test, knowing there would be an accounting of his heredity as well. “What if everything his mother told him was a lie? Or it raises questions nobody can answer?”

She told him if he did not want to do it, that was fine. But he told her “no, no, no, I’m really excited about it.”

Baptiste sent in a sample of his saliva, and it did confirm he had some Italian background. Then when he checked for close relatives, a young man in Pennsylvania with the last name of DiPenti came up in the database with a DNA match that indicated he was a cousin to Baptiste.

“I said reach out to him,” Tent said.

They finally sent out an email. Justin DiPenti was a student at Penn State, and he got in touch with his grandmother, Diane DiPenti, who responded to Baptiste.

“I am hopefully your Aunt Diane,” she wrote.

Aunt Diane was married to Michael DiPenti, the older brother of the father Baptiste never met. That wasn’t all. While his father had died in 1996, David DiPenti had married multiple times and had left behind several families. Through his Aunt Diane, Baptiste found out he had four half-siblings, and all lived within minutes of his home in New Jersey. There was Diana and Deborah and Danielle and David.

They first met at MK Valencia, a trendy, contemporary restaurant on Main Street in Ridgefield Park for brunch.

“As soon as we saw them, we knew,” said Tent. “The resemblance was uncanny.”



A picture at the brunch meeting Baptiste had with his newly found family

... picture of the reunion meeting Baptiste had with his Henry, Leona family, minus his half-sister Diana, who Skyped in. (Photo courtesy of Ana Tent)

Stranger, still, she said, was how quickly they all began seeing Baptiste not as a stranger, but as a long-lost brother.

“The whole family said they did not know anything about Jeff,” she said. “Now they are so close, it’s funny to see them interact. I can’t be any happier for him.”

They have gone on trips together. They celebrate holidays. And Baptiste gained an extended family of nieces, nephews and cousins.

“This could have gone really differently, but it’s a great story,” Tent said.

There are unanswered questions. They do not know if Baptiste’s father even knew about his son. Or why he left Baptiste’s mother before he was born.

And Tent had one other lingering thought:

“What if there are more siblings out there?” she wondered.

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