

## Proponent Testimony for H.B. 61

Susan Anthony

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Chairman Butler and members of the Judiciary Committee: My name is Susan Anthony, and I am a birthmother living in Cincinnati, OH. Happily, I reunited with my daughter 17 years ago.

I lost my daughter to adoption in 1967 when I was 21 and a junior in college. In those days, being single and pregnant was extremely shameful. Unless we planned to marry the fathers of our babies, girls like me were obliged to “go away;” give birth in secret; and relinquish our children to adoptive parents deemed fit to raise them.

When I was four months pregnant, I left home to live with strangers—a middle-aged couple and their five young children. They provided what was then called a “work home” for unwed mothers. In exchange for daily housekeeping and childcare services, they gave me room, board and \$10.00 per week. The husband was a family law attorney, and he arranged for a social worker from the county to meet with me to handle my baby’s adoption.

The social worker and I met twice at the work home. At no time did she counsel me about alternatives to adoption or even what to expect emotionally and psychologically as a result of losing my child. Her focus was to obtain my medical and social history and explain the adoption process. She assured me that my baby would have a good home. That was my main worry – the “not knowing” what would happen to my child.

At no time during these visits did the social worker promise or even suggest that sealed adoption records meant confidentiality for me. What she did tell me is that I would never be able to know the names of the adoptive parents, and they and my child would never know mine. At the time, I remember comprehending the concept of sealed records, but I had no emotional understanding of what it really meant. When I thought about what was going to happen, I simply numbed out.

I gave birth to a baby girl on July 4th, 1967. It was a surreal, almost schizophrenic, experience. Intellectually, I understood that I was *not allowed* to keep my baby. I wasn’t married. I knew I would have to leave her behind. Yet, none of it made sense emotionally. In the first minutes and hours after giving birth, I experienced the same joy, the same rapture, the same miracle of birth that women have experienced from time immemorial. I felt no different from any mother here.

Because I was going to terminate my rights, my baby was kept in a separate nursery with closed curtains. I asked to see my baby, but the hospital staff refused. I had to beg and finally threaten the hospital administrator. I had not yet signed any papers. They had no right to keep my baby from me. I had to see for myself and know in my heart that my baby was okay before I could let her go.

I went to court to terminate my rights a few weeks later. Before the hearing, I met for the third and final time with the social worker. It was in this meeting that I apparently signed permanent relinquishment papers. I have no memory of signing anything, and I was not given any copies. What I do have is a transcript of the court hearing. During the hearing, the judge asked me several questions that are relevant to my testimony today. He admonished me:

Q: Have you talked to your social worker?

A: Yes.

Q: And has she explained to you what these proceedings are about?

A: Yes, she has.

Q: Now, you understand, Susan, that if the Court approves of your petition you won't be able to know where this child is or with whom she is placed?

A: I understand.

Q: And you understand that the decision you are making today is final and you can never change your mind about it in the future?

A: Yes, I know.

At no time that day, did the judge or the social worker state or even imply that I had any right to privacy. It was the other way around. By signing the relinquishment papers, I was stripped of all rights to know anything about my child. It felt like a huge punishment. The notion that I had a "right" to privacy and confidentiality never entered my mind. No one ever mentioned it. In my grief-stricken state, if they had, it would have been laughable! I would have renounced it! Not knowing the fate of my baby girl was agony for 29 years.

I and so many other young women of my generation were made to feel ashamed and unworthy to raise or even know our own children. After losing our babies to adoption, we were expected to go back to our families, keep our children a secret, and act as if nothing had happened. We weren't even allowed to grieve. It was horrific. That is why I am here today—to tell you how it really was. Single mothers of my generation "drank the Kool-Aid" society served up, and it nearly killed us.

I support H.B. 61 because it rights a serious wrong for adopted adults. I may have relinquished my legal rights to my child, but I never relinquished my love or my responsibility. Adoptees' access to their own identities is a human and a civil right. It is also a matter of social justice. Now is the time for ALL of us to step up, speak out and pass this legislation.

Thank you for hearing my testimony. I will be glad to answer any questions.