

INSIDE

This week in Carlton County's only independent, locally owned newspaper.



Fall sports have arrived
Page 12



Teen offers mask relief
Page 20



Schools make plans known
Page 9

INDEX

Weather	2
News	3
Opinion	6-7
Obituaries	8
Education	9-10
Sports	12-14
Community	15
Puzzles	15
Classifieds	17



MAKING A GENETIC CONNECTION



Cloquet High School graduate Leah Boedigheimer, left, and Ruby Hunter are sisters who until a year ago did not know the other existed. Both were adopted as babies in China, dropped with no information except for their birth dates. Ruby is 14 months older than Leah. *Contributed photos*

Women discover each other 25 years after China adoptions

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Two 20-something women have matching tattoos using the Latin words attributed to Julius Caesar: “Veni, vidi, vici,” which translates to “I came, I saw, I conquered.”

It seems a fitting phrase for these driven women who came from humble beginnings and are or have marched their way through advanced college degrees in highly analytical fields.

But they live 1,400 miles apart and, until this past July, had never met. They hadn’t even known of the other’s existence until luck — and genetic technology — intervened last winter.

The tattoo discovery is just one of many similarities Leah Boedigheimer and Ruby Hunter have found in the past year. They are, after all, newfound sisters.

Both had no expectation of ever knowing their biological history. They were two of the thousands of girls abandoned in China in the 1990s, put into an orphanage and eventually adopted by foreigners.

Both babies had been dumped with no information about parents, just their birth dates pinned to their clothes.

“I came to terms a long time ago about not searching,” Ruby said from her home in West Hartford, Connecticut.

Leah felt the same, comfortable in a life growing up in Cloquet — and now with work and graduate



Leah, seen here as a baby with her father Kevin, and Ruby were both abandoned in China and later adopted. Ruby is 14 months older and grew up on the East Coast. Leah was adopted by Ruth and Kevin Boedigheimer of Cloquet. Genetic testing led to the two women finding each other 25 years after leaving China.

school in the Brainerd area — and admiring her parents, Ruth and Kevin Boedigheimer. “I didn’t care,” she said of the obvious mysteries around her birth. “My parents are my parents.”

Now, with Ruby in the mix, things have shifted. “Once I found Ruby, I can’t imagine life without her.”

Ruth Boedigheimer calls the discovery the “most exciting thing in our life.”

“It just makes our family bigger,” Kevin said from the couple’s home north of Cloquet.

Whims

Ruby laughs when asked about why she decided to get a 23and-Me genetic test kit a year ago. She

had been joking with friends and brought up the idea of getting a “Made in China” tattoo. The next morning, with her Chinese roots still nagging at her, she decided to get a kit. There were practical reasons aside from curiosity. She had planned to get married this year and finding some blood relatives could divine some medical history when thinking about parenting.

Leah had received a kit the year before, also under the notion that knowing some medical background might be useful. She went through the process, learning that she had “something like 30 possible cousins” out in the world.

School hit with claims of abuse

Cloquet teachers named in social media posts

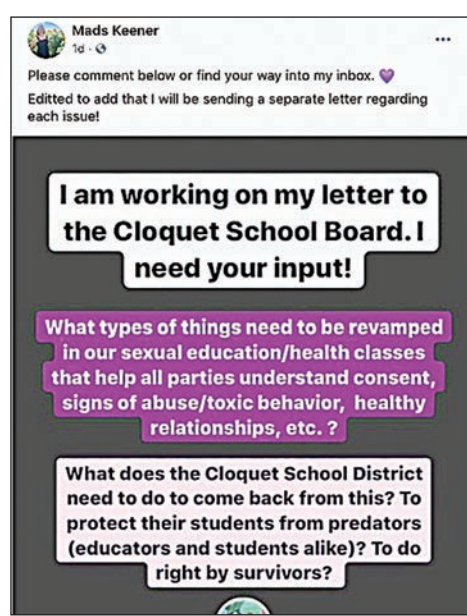
Jana Peterson
news@pineknotnews.com

Social media sites started lighting up in Cloquet circles last weekend after a former Cloquet student unleashed a laundry list of allegations against current and former Cloquet school district teachers and staff. The posts came from myriad sources and included claims regarding both past and present employees, with stories of teachers and staff who asked female students to hug them or sit on their laps, to others who allegedly bullied students, played favorites or gave a person “the creeps.”

Madeline Kiehn, a 2012 Cloquet grad, made the initial post Friday on Facebook asking people to share their stories, and promising to post them anonymously. Her second post that day — which came with clips of predatory or toxic behaviors by teachers and staff — garnered 301 comments by Wednesday afternoon, many of them with their own stories, others defending those who were being named in this very public forum. She has moved much of her activity to Instagram now, where she said more than 1,000 people have watched her videos and each post gets up to about 800 views.

An educator and a self-described “keyboard vigilante” Keihn said it all started after she found the courage to name her own assailants. It created a domino effect, she said.

Continued on Page 16



Madeline Kiehn started an online firestorm asking about abusive experiences at Cloquet High School.

Continued on Page 11

Sisters ...

Continued from Page 1

Leah shrugged. “Oh, whatever.” She moved on and was inactive on the website.

Ruby was very busy. For four weeks she kept hitting the “refresh” button, she said, and eventually a hit for a “sister” came up.

She immediately sent Leah a long message through 23andMe, beginning with “We’re sisters!”

Like dad

Leah is much like her father. Their shared motto could be “Trust, but verify.” She was skeptical, and laid the information on her parents.

“We look very much the same,” she said. They had done some video chatting. Same interests, mannerisms, Leah said. “Same orphanage and bio, the birth dates pinned to our clothes. You just can’t make that up.”

“Are you sure it’s legit?” Leah recalls her father, Kevin, asking. “It’s wonderful if real, but we need to research it.”

Leah laughs warmly about the comfort of the shared skepticism. “He looked it all up, said it seemed legit. Now he rolls with it.”

“Ruby and Leah look identical,” Kevin said.

Ruby’s mother, Mary Hunter, says her “mouth hit the floor” when she saw pictures of Leah, especially from her high school days in Cloquet. They reminded her of a secret wish she’s always had for Ruby. A single mom to an only child, Mary had a notion long ago that it would be nice if her daughter had a blood relative, even a twin, surface from somewhere. Then she “tucked that away” and life moved on. What’s happened in the past year has been “miraculous,” she said. “Finding out was one of the most joy-filled calls I’ve ever received.”

Journeys

Ruby is 14 months older than Leah, who grew up knowing only what being a big sister was about. Parents Kevin and Ruth adopted her brother, Isaac, from Korea after the experience with Leah.

The Boedigheimers tried for a long time to have biological children. It was a painful time that Ruth says gave them a parenting style their children appreciate.

“They focused on being parents and being present,” Leah said.

“When you struggle,” Ruth said, “you take it more seriously and are grateful for what you have.”

Ruth had seen news reports about the overcrowded conditions at orphanages in China, much of it having to do with the national policy that parents have just one child. Males became the preferred choice, and baby daughters were being abandoned in droves.

“He looked at me like I was out of this world,” Ruth said of telling Kevin she wanted to adopt in China. But he knew his wife, and he knew that when she put her mind to something, it would be a go.

It was a long process, but in November of 1996, they received word that it was time to go get 13-month-old Leah, a baby girl they had only seen pictures of. On Thanksgiving Day, they were on a plane with nine others bound for China.

“We were just scrambling,” Kevin said.

There was little thought of gathering possible information about Leah’s background, Ruth said. It was just too much of a whirlwind.

“It was the furthest thing from our minds,” she said.

When they were boarding a plane for home with baby Leah, they were greeted with a beautiful sunset. Kevin chokes up when recalling being one of the last to board and holding his new daughter and tak-



Ruby Hunter, left, her mother Mary Hunter and Leah Boedigheimer met up in Michigan in July. It was the first time Ruby and Leah had met in person since discovering they are sisters. *Contributed photos*

ing one last look around in the gloaming. “Some day I will bring you back to your home,” he told her.

The meet

The families had been video calling before Leah and Ruby decided they would officially meet in person in July, pandemic or not.

A new part of the Boedigheimer family lore was etched when Isaac came upon a video chat with Ruby. “Oh my God, there’s two of you,” he said.

The sisters met in Michigan — where Mary Hunter grew up — at a family cabin. The connection was immediate, Mary said. “They quickly bonded,” she said. “It really gets you thinking about nature versus nurture.”

They talked nonstop, Leah said, learning that they were both night owls. She said she can’t adequately relay the feeling of sitting across from someone who looks like you, has the same mannerisms and thoughts. “It’s like looking in a mirror,” she said.

“It feels like it was meant

to be,” Ruby said.

Mary said it is “fabulous” to see her daughter “relate to someone so closely, a blood relative. It’s a miracle kind of story.”

Ruby hopes to get Leah out to the East Coast to show her where she grew up. Mary is retired from teaching at Yale. And the Hunters can’t wait to see Minnesota and Cloquet.

They talk a lot, Leah said. Ruby’s wedding, planned for this fall, is on

hold while the Covid-19 pandemic lingers. They know they will see each other again, and often, in the coming years.

Both are inspired and want to fulfill that promise Kevin made to Leah, returning to China. “I’m totally on board,” Leah said.

Mary said going to China has always been a thought but “life got in the way.” Perhaps with a new-found sister in tow, and more time in retirement,

the families could make it work. Until then, she’s happy with whatever lies ahead. “I can’t wait to know Leah and her family better,” Mary said.

Ruth said this latest twist has only added to a cherished life with her children.

“We are some of the most fortunate people around,” she said.

“It’s crazy,” Leah said. “I feel so blessed. It’s like I found a missing piece that I didn’t know was missing.”



Kevin and Ruth Boedigheimer sit for a picture with children Leah and Isaac.

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