

Emily Saunders finds the missing piece of her puzzle

ALLIE SHAH, Star Tribune -12/30/07

For five minutes, Emily Saunders was alone. Then her twin sister was born. Their mother, a poor South Korean woman who was not expecting twins and gave birth out of wedlock, made a fateful decision. She would give one girl up. That was Emily, who was adopted when she was 4 months old by Jackie and Eric Saunders of Wyoming, Minn.

For 21 years, neither Emily nor her twin, Eunjin, had a clue the other one existed. Their families did not tell them until this year. On Thursday, Emily will fly to South Korea to meet her mirror image and try to stitch her past with her present. She hopes meeting her sister can fill a void that has contributed to turmoil in her life. The days leading up to the trip are a mixture of excitement and nervousness. She's packing a lifetime of photos to share with her sister. She also has a long list of questions for her birth mother, who has colon cancer and told Emily she wanted to meet her before she dies. At the top of Emily's list, not surprisingly, is "Why?"

When the Saunderses chose to adopt Emily, they knew she was a twin. But Jackie Saunders says the adoption agency told them the other sister "must have died" because as a matter of policy, they did not separate twins. Those words, "must have," gnawed at Jackie Saunders, who kept after the agency. Soon they learned the truth: Eunjin was alive and living with her mother. The Saunderses asked the agency to contact them immediately if the twins' birth mother ever released Eunjin so they could adopt her, too.

Years passed, and the Saunderses did not tell Emily that she had a twin sister. "Don't tell her. Not now, not ever," advised a woman who worked at the Korean orphanage where she had cared for Emily when she was a baby. The woman came to Minnesota for a visit. "Culturally, that's not how we do things," she said. Back in South Korea, Eunjin's mother kept quiet, too.

Jackie Saunders, principal of North Lakes Academy, a charter school in Forest Lake, says she and her husband wanted to tell Emily about her sister, but all of the adoption experts suggested that they wait until she got older. "She won't understand, and it could mess up the bonding process," Jackie Saunders remembers being advised. "The books and advisers all say that you should follow the child's lead. If the child asks questions about their birth information, of course, tell them. But don't push it on them." There were times when she wanted to blurt it out. Like when Emily discovered Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen and became obsessed. She'd watch all the shows, talk about them constantly, and want to play "Olsen Twins" with her friends. She even wrote to them. Some nights, Jackie Saunders and her husband would sit up in bed and ask each other: "Do you think it means something? Should we tell her?" Ultimately, they'd shrug it off and say, "It is what it is."

Meanwhile, Emily was growing up. Her teenage years were turbulent ones. Her best friend died of cancer, as did a grandmother. Emily developed an eating disorder and attempted suicide. She struggled in school, but eventually graduated from Chisago Lakes High School. She says her mother told her that during that dark period, her parents feared that she was too fragile to handle anything else. Jackie Saunders says they debated what the right thing to do was, but ultimately, stuck with the advice to let Emily's interest in learning more about her birth family guide them.

The missing piece

Last May, in a therapist's office, the truth finally came out. Emily, now 21, asked her mother to tell her everything. Jackie Saunders didn't hesitate. "You were born a twin and your birth mother kept your sister," she said, finally speaking the lines she had rehearsed for years. Emily crumbled.

Through her tears, she asked: "What was wrong with me? Why didn't she keep me?" Jackie Saunders replied: "The choices she made were about her, not you." Feeling rejected and numb, Emily went home to her apartment she shares with her two cats in St. Paul, accompanied by her mother. Two weeks later, she was starting to come to terms with the news. As a little girl, she loved to work on jigsaw puzzles with her father. "She said, 'Mom, it's like I'm doing a jigsaw and there's this one missing piece and I've been shoving all kinds of crud into that missing hole and it never fit. Now, my sister is like the missing piece that does fit,'" Jackie Saunders said.

They started searching for Eunjin and her mother. In South Korea, Eunjin was getting the same stunning news -- that she had a twin sister somewhere. Her mother had become seriously ill and, based on what Jackie Saunders has learned so far, that prompted her to reveal the secret. Eunjin and her mother contacted the adoption agency in September and gave the workers their contact information in the hope of finding Emily. Soon, Emily had two phone numbers in hand -- one for Eunjin's college dorm, the other for her birth mother's home. Emily sat on the edge of her bed inside her apartment, banging the phone on her knee a few times before dialing the long string of numbers for Eunjin. "It rang about three times," Emily recalled. Then a voice, deeper than her own, answered. "She said, 'yobo sayo,'" which Koreans greet each other with on the phone. "Then, I said something like: 'Hi, I'm your twin sister. I wanted to meet you, talk to you, see what you sounded like. I can't believe it's you.' Then I just started to bawl!" Eunjin, who speaks only a few English words, gasped loudly. "Are you OK? Are you OK?" she asked Emily over and over again. "I'm fine, I'm fine," Emily told her. They hung up and she called her birth mom. The conversation was equally brief because they couldn't understand one another. But later, they found a translator to help. "She told me she's never stopped thinking of me for 22 years," Emily said, noting that in South Korean custom, newborns are considered 1 year old. The twins' birth mom also told Emily: "Sarang hamnida." It means, "I love you."

Exchanging photos

Since Emily and Eunjin found each other, they've been e-mailing each other and calling. They've also exchanged photos, current and baby ones. A look at the pictures reveals strikingly different personalities. Emily says they don't know, without doing a blood test, whether they're fraternal or identical twins. "The first thing I wanted to do when I saw her picture was give her contacts and put makeup on her," she said. And when Emily, who swears a lot, told Eunjin she was learning Korean swear words, her sister gasped and told her those weren't nice words.

While Eunjin is in college studying to be a dental hygienist, Emily said she was laid off from a job and is considering applying to Metropolitan State University or St. Paul College to study law enforcement. Despite their differences, the language barrier and thousands of miles, they share a bond. "No person can get closer to a person than someone they were in the womb with for nine months," Emily explained. In her wallet, she carries a copy of the only page of her birth papers that mentions Eunjin.

On Thursday, she and her mother will fly to South Korea. They haven't planned everything they will do, but the main thing both sisters want is to be together again. Jackie Saunders says she is excited, too, but also cautious about building up expectations. "I've tried to develop a future version of 'it is what it is,'" she said. "I get up in the morning and I almost chant it: 'It will be what it will be.'" Both mother and daughter are hoping that the missing piece will help Emily put her past struggles behind her. "It won't fix her life but it will lay a foundation to close out the hardest chapters," Jackie Saunders said. Added Emily: "I believe it will fill some of the emptiness that I've felt. Always like something was missing. We didn't get the chance to grow up together. There were 21 years we missed out on. I am looking forward to having contact with her. She said maybe someday she might want to live here."