Written by Michelle K. Johnson, M. A.
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Open records legislation is a national movement by members of the adoption community to grant access to original birth certificates and agency records to adoptees. Currently, when adoptions are finalized, the original birth records are sealed, including the birth certificate naming birth parents.

A second birth certificate is issued for the adoptee, with the names of the adoptive parents. Images usually conjured up in this debate are that of private agency placements of infants relinquished at birth. In Minnesota, Catholic Charities, Children's Home Society and Lutheran Social Services are the big three agencies most of the attention is focused upon.

The Adoption, Foster and Kinship (AFK) Dance Troupe is attempting to shift the focus to where it belongs; on the majority of adoptees affected, who are placed through county agencies and are overwhelmingly children of color. AFK began in 2003 as a joint effort between the North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC) based in St. Paul and Collins Productions to promote adoption awareness through music and dance. I, as, MN Adoption and Foster Care Recruitment Project Manager and Mary Collins, Parent Liaison, who both spent time in foster care spearheaded AFK events. Their first performance was at the African American Adoption Agency's annual fundraiser featuring actor/comedian Tommy Davidson and then Vikings quarterback Daunte Culpepper, who are both adopted. For two years AFK performed around the state until the grant funding ended.

AFK was resurrected this April by Mary and me. AFK's first event was May 4 at Forgotten Children's Rally Day at the Capitol. This month is National Foster Care Month and CASA MN (Court Appointed Special Advocates for children, also known as the Guardians ad Litem (GAL) program, NACAC and other agencies raised awareness of issues affecting children involved in child protection, including open records. I now work as the Volunteer Coordinator for Hennepin's GAL program.

The group chose Darryl "DMC" McDaniel's newly released single "I'm Legit" with British pop star Zara Phillips. Both are adoptees lobbying for open records in DMC's state of New Jersey. Inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame last month, McDaniels found out he was adopted at age 35. He shared his story through Vh1's Rock Doc(umentary) "My Adoption Journey" in 2007 which won an Emmy. The crux of the song is "I'm legit, not illegitimate and I will not quit, to strive by my state until I get my ORIGINAL birth certificate!" The song highlights every adoptee's search for a complete identity, which includes needing answers to all the questions that come when ties to birth family are severed.

While there are added complexities for adoptees whose families were investigated for abuse

and neglect, adoptees overwhelmingly want to know their origins and the sometimes sad truths that come with such revelations. Original birth certificates are the key to health histories and sometimes the beginning of searches for long lost relatives. I lost my sister to foster care. While I was adopted before her second birthday, my elder sibling by two years aged out at age 18. As our birthmother had me at 15, I assume I also have other siblings and an extended birth family. My adoptive parents support my search for answers. I was born Evette Gail, last name unknown at Sauk Centre's St. Joseph's Hospital in 1969. On March 11, I celebrated my 40th birthday. This annual celebration is always bittersweet for me and most adoptees as we have questions about our first family, with answers currently denied from us by state law.

Communities of color are over-represented in foster care and adoption numbers nationally and in Minnesota, which currently ranks second in the disproportionate number of African American children under court jurisdiction. While Blacks make up only 14% of the population, they represent 45% of Hennepin County's child protection cases. Almost half of these children end up with kin through adoption or transfer of legal custody, the other half do not; sometimes leaving the community altogether, never to return or cultivate relationships in their birth culture. While people have divided opinions about cross cultural placements, the fact remains they are occurring. The AFK Dance Troupe is trying to shed light on all of these issues and engage all communities, especially those of color, in dialogue about solutions for our children, and adults living with the consequences of decisions made on their behalf.

What folks can do:

* Become informed about open records legislation by visiting the Minnesota Coalition on Adoption Reform (MCAR)'s website at www.adoptionreform.org They have been endorsed by MN Association of Black Social Workers and the African American Adoption Agency,

* Write, e-mail or call your local legislators and Gov. Pawlenty and tell them you support open records,

* Consider a donation to AFK or MCAR,

* Contemplate becoming a volunteer court advocate for children, or a foster or adoptive parent,

* Come out and support AFK Dancers at the Juneteenth Parade June 14th,

* Go to www.youbloom.com/web/zaradmc and download a free copy of "I'm Legit" and call your local radio stations and ask them to add it to their play lists, and

* Plan on attending November Adoption Month happenings, including an event with DMC, TBA.

For any assistance with these items, contact me at meeshahjaye@yahoo.com or (651) 341-9636.

Knowledge is power, and our community needs to become more informed and take a more proactive role in advocating for our children. Hopefully then, children like Evette Gail won't end up in the child protection system, and if they unfortunately do, they will go home with family and their original birth certificates. Our village needs to live up to its potential and ensure safe and bright futures for all of our children, especially vulnerable youth in foster care!