

LOVE



lost & found: *parents reunite after 50 years, then find daughter*

BY TERRI LENZ WASHBURN

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At a back table in Schweich's Restaurant in Kenyon, four people gathered to relay a story of love found and lost, and then miraculously found again. The story of Northfield couple Karen Lehmann, 71, and Dennis Vinar, 73, is a winding road. They spent decades apart, lived new lives, after Vinar twice proposed and was denied by Lehmann. But, their paths reunited near 50 years later, they dared to try again, and together they found the third piece to their story.

A love lost

Karen and Denny were hometown sweethearts growing up in Brownton, Minn. She was 13 and he 15 when they started dating in 1959. Two years later, he proposed, but she turned him down; their

parents took a dim view of matrimony at such a young age.

Denny's family moved away during his senior year of high school, but he couldn't forget Karen. He returned again at the age of 24, fresh from U.S. Army service in Germany and proposed once more. She was pursuing a degree in interior design at the University of Minnesota. Karen's answer was once again a reluctant "no."

Decades passed. They each moved on, met for coffee a few times, and eventually married other people and lived full lives. But neither ever forgot their first love.

That fact became poignantly clear to Denny in October 2014. Someone asked him the question, "If your doctor gave you 60 days to live, who would be the one person you'd like to meet?"

While other people mentioned film stars and politicians, Denny said that one name rose clearly in his mind, without any doubt: Karen Lehmann.

He was 71 and had been divorced for 15 years; Denny had no idea where Karen was or if she was married. The next day he typed her name into LinkedIn, and there she was on the screen. There wasn't much personal information available, but he discovered she worked in Everett, Wash., so Denny waited until Monday morning and left a message for Karen at her workplace.

They talked later that day over the phone. He asked her marital



“Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

- First Corinthians 13:4-7

status - widowed in 2010. They realized they were both free, opening up a world of possibilities after 50 years.

It was a digital courtship, Karen said with a shy smile. Although 1,700 miles apart - he was living in Eden Prairie, Minn. - they texted and talked on the phone for hours each night.

A lost love found

Sitting in the chairs at Schweich's, they told more of the story. She has deep red hair and a petite, trim frame. Her earrings spelled out LOVE in perfectly balanced letters. At her side, Denny, a long-time businessman, exuded a natural confidence. His eyes turned to her often.

They talked about having the same values, about each knowing who the other person is, deep down.

“I told her, this would be the last Christmas we will be apart,” said Denny, emotion shaking his voice.

From Washington State, she had asked him if he would consider getting married again, and this time he said “no.” He had already asked her twice and he remembered how that turned out.

“In baseball, it's three strikes and you're out,” Denny recounted.

“Yes, but the third time is also the charm,” she reasoned.

The couple downloaded a marriage license and each filled out their parts separately. They would have 60 days to decide.

He flew out to see her for the first time on January 20, 2015; they were married two days later.

A daughter

The couple was living in Minnesota. They talked of many things, but one topic rose time and again in their thoughts in the year that



followed. There was another reason why the 17-year-old Denny had proposed to Karen when she was only 15; she was pregnant.

In high school, Karen bore their baby girl and they gave her up for adoption through Lutheran Social Services (LSS). All they had of that child was a baby picture taken in the hospital.

Denny told Karen, “It took me all those years to find you. Now it would make my life complete to find our daughter.”

It wasn't a sure thing. The LSS representative told them their daughter may or may not want to see them. They paid the \$800 fee to start an inquiry and wrote a letter for LSS, telling their story and

CONTINUES ON PAGE 8 ►►►

why they wanted to find their daughter.

Their tale was so moving, LSS waived the fee.

The Vinars wrote a long, heartfelt letter that they hoped would be given to their daughter, now 54. Then, they waited.

A letter

Andrew Voxland said it was mid-April when the first letter arrived. He and his wife, Jean, live northeast of Kenyon. They have three grown daughters plus grandchildren.

“The envelope and writing on it looked fishy,” Andrew said. “The letter was handwritten and very plain, no letterhead. It just said they had news about Jean’s family.”

Andrew had heard about scammers and wasn’t going to upset Jean with the letter until he had checked it out. He called the phone number several times and left messages. A second letter arrived.

LSS explained later that the contact letter had to be vague because some people don’t know they are adopted. They would speak only with Jean. Andrew decided it was legitimate and told his wife about the letter.

Jean couldn’t wait and decided to call LSS from work. They read the Vinars’ letter to her over the phone and she couldn’t stop crying. She had never dared to imagine her parents would be together. Jean and Andrew read the letter together at home and looked at the photos. She immediately saw her resemblance in the photo of her father.

Jean sent five handwritten pages to Denny and Karen with photos. She wanted more than anything to meet them. On May 21 that year, Jean and Andrew told their girls what had happened. The next steps could impact their lives, too.

Jean’s adoptive mother had died, and she has a solid relationship with her adoptive father. Jean said that on a subconscious level, she always felt unsure of herself, a trait she said is common among adopted children.

They read the letter and all three daughters gave their blessing to meet the Vinars, so they took the leap. On June 2, Denny and Karen

met the extended family at their great-granddaughter Gretta’s birthday party.

“One of the first things Jean did was thank us for choosing adoption over abortion,” Karen said.

Karen said she had lost touch with her faith in God and the church, but now she believes in miracles. She credits Denny with bringing her back to faith, and believes God brought them together and reunited them with Jean.

“Everything was in alignment. The timing is amazing. It couldn’t have happened at any other time, even five or 10 years ago,” Andrew said.

Jean wanted her parents nearby; since Denny had relatives close by, they chose Northfield. Since that first meeting, they have treasured getting to know each other’s likes and dislikes, comparing nature and nurture.

There have been some laughs in the process. The Vinars were choosing fabrics to reupholster several chairs and asked Jean what she thought. Of all the fabric samples, she chose the same two swatches from hundreds of options.

Jean said she never had the same taste as anyone else in her life until then, and now she feels like she really belongs. People kept telling Denny and Karen that they should write a book about their love story. When they found Jean, they began to take that idea seriously.

Recently, they collaborated on “How Did You Find Me After All These Years? A Family Memoir.” It contains memories of each of them growing up and then together again. The book was released on November 21, 2017, and they have been overwhelmed by the response from people at local book signings. Books can be ordered through bookstores worldwide as well as from online e-tailors such as Amazon.com, Barnes & Noble, Powell’s Books, Content Bookstore in Northfield and many others.

It’s “a God thing” Jean said, looking at her parents with a new confidence and belief in the unbelievable. It took 54 years to find this fulfillment, but over the course of a lifetime, a constant truth remains: love never fails.

Terri Lenz Washburn is Editor at The Kenyon Leader.

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