

Adoptee Seeks Reassurance Through DNA Answers Study

By Sam Kennedy

BETHLEHEM - Melissa Shafer was nervous as she went on the DNA Answers website to gain some insight into her long-sought genetic medical history from the new St. Luke's Community Health research program.

The 43-year-old Assistant Vice President of Government Relations and Community Affairs at St. Luke's was adopted during her first year of life, and she was excited to realize that by participating in the DNA Answers study, she would be receiving medically relevant genetic information that would not only better inform her but could also impact her two children.

"I've often asked myself, 'What am I passing on to my kids?'" said the Upper Saucon Township resident.

See video: <https://vimeo.com/1006343980?share=copy>.

Being adopted presented challenges to knowing her family medical history. And to further complicate things, Shafer's biological mother, too, was adopted. This made Shafer's medical detective work much more challenging.

The DNA Answers is a no-cost community health research program, that St. Luke's is offering with their population genomics partner, Helix. The organizations launched the DNA Answers research study as part of an ongoing commitment to the Lehigh Valley to offer the latest medical technologies that support a "precision medicine" approach in healthcare.

"We have arrived at a historic turning point in the history of medicine – the ability to use information stored in patients' DNA to improve the accuracy of certain treatments for the individual patient," reports Aldo Carmona, MD, St. Luke's Senior Vice President of Clinical Integration.

Born in Florida, Shafer was adopted as a baby by a Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, couple. Shafer's biological mother was born in Newfoundland, Canada, where she too was adopted as a baby, by a US military family stationed there at the time.

As an adult after she started her own family, Shafer felt a growing urgency to know more about her own medical background. "I'd been active on Ancestry.com, which helped me learn about my heritage but not my medical genetics, especially on the paternal side of my biological family," she said.

During a trip in 2023 to St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada, Shafer was able to meet her great-uncle, the last living sibling of her biological grandmother. This allowed her some further insight, as he relayed that her grandmother's medical history included heart disease. Additionally, Schafer knew that her biological mother had died after a long battle with bladder cancer.

Then in January 2024, St. Luke's launched its community health research program, DNA Answers, which involves 'medical grade' analysis of participants' DNA through Helix's Whole Exome(+) Sequencing (WES), technology designed specifically for healthcare purposes. Shafer acted quickly and enrolled in the study and following a simple blood draw at a St. Luke's laboratory, she waited for the results with a mix of excitement, curiosity and anxiety. Among her concerns, Shafer stated, "I wanted to rule out if I was a carrier of the BRCA gene, which would put me at a high risk for cancer."

Christopher N. Chapman, MD, principal investigator for DNA Answers explained, "Our study initially aims to enroll 100,000 participants over four years. Participating individuals, like Ms. Shafer, are provided genetic screening at no cost, informing them of important health information about inherited risks for serious conditions, such as a certain type of cardiovascular disease and certain types of cancer. This knowledge allows the participant to make proactive decisions in conjunction with their healthcare provider to potentially delay, reduce, or even prevent these conditions from occurring later in life."

Additionally, for research participants who have provided their informed consent, Helix will apply its end-to-end genomics platform and unique Sequence Once, Query Often™ model, which allows future clinical genomic tests to be run with a provider's order and patient consent without the need to collect an additional sample. This could help participants' providers tailor care options and prescribe medications even more accurately and effectively – hence the term "precision medicine."

Thankfully, as Shafer's testing results returned, she breathed a sigh of relief as, "Everything came back negative" meaning that the screening did not identify any genetic variants currently known to be associated with an increased risk for the conditions covered by DNA Answers.

"This was good news!" she said. "If not for DNA Answers, I wouldn't have learned this critical medical information. It was quick, easy and free-of-charge, and my family and I are grateful for it."

To learn more about St. Luke's community research study, DNA Answers, visit www.DNAanswers.org.



SONIC Fills Local Schools' Classroom Libraries in East Stroudsburg

By Sonic

ATLANTA (October 24, 2024) - SONIC® Drive-In donates a portion of proceeds from every drink purchase to support local public schools through the brand's Limeades for Learning® initiative. This fall, SONIC is going all-in on reading for National Book Month, making it easier for students to access books in the classroom.

This October, the SONIC Foundation provided \$1.25 million to match donations to classroom projects requesting books through DonorsChoose, a website that allows people to donate directly to classroom requests submitted by teachers across the U.S.

The following exceptional teacher received support through the funding: * In East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, Mrs. Melendez at East Stroudsburg Elementary School received a donation of \$1,292 for the project Comfy and Inviting Areas to Learn and Play.

"Education has always been at the core of our Limeades for Learning program, and we've seen the impact it's had over the past 15 years with more than \$28 million going to support public school teachers and students across the markets SONIC serves," said Stuart Brown, Executive Director of the SONIC Foundation. "Making books more readily available is key to fostering lifelong learning, and partnering with DonorsChoose helped turn our passion for literacy into meaningful action this National Book Month, engaging and empowering the next generation through books."

In total, the SONIC Foundation has helped to fund nearly 5,000 classroom book requests this month, impacting an estimated 134,730 students nationwide. However, there are still thousands of classroom book requests in need of funding, and those interested in helping students in their community get books can visit DonorsChoose.org/FillEveryShelf.

Guests can also join the SONIC brand's mission simply by ordering their favorite drink at the drive-in. Every time guests purchase a Drink, Slush, Blast or Shake, SONIC donates a portion of proceeds to the SONIC Foundation, which supports public education through Limeades for Learning.* Powered by the SONIC® Foundation, SONIC has donated more than \$28 million since 2009 to fund local classrooms, becoming one of the largest programs to support public education in the U.S.

To learn more about Limeades for Learning and how the SONIC Foundation is creating brighter futures for America's youth, visit LimeadesforLearning.com.

*SONIC donates a portion of every Drink, Slush, Blast and Shake purchase to the SONIC Foundation, which is used to support local schools across the communities SONIC serves through partners like DonorsChoose. The SONIC Foundation is a division of the Inspire Brands Foundation. For more information about the SONIC Foundation, visit foundation.sonicdrivein.com.

