

After 65 years, woman can't wait to meet her sister

TARENTUM, Pa. (AP) — Rita Betush was sitting in her Tarentum home, working on a jigsaw puzzle, when she received a phone call that dropped a missing piece of her life into place.

It was a social worker, calling to say that Betush's long-lost sister was looking for her. "I couldn't believe it," Betush, 68, said in an interview Friday. "After all these years, I thought she was either dead, or maybe she didn't want to be found, or maybe she didn't know about it."

Her sister, though, did know that she was adopted, and for a decade she had been looking for her birth family. The two sisters finally connected this August, with the help of the Children's Home Society of Virginia, an adoption agency that also helps families reconnect.

They plan to meet for the first time in February, when

Betush travels with her husband to her sister's home in Arizona.

It will be a long trip, but it's been an even longer journey.

Rita Betush grew up in southwestern Virginia with her parents and an older brother, and also lived apart from two half-sisters and one half-brother. Betush always yearned for a sister, and at a young age, she learned that she had one.

Her parents, however, didn't know where to find the child they had named Helen.

Helen was born in 1938 to Clarence Hawks and Callie Rose Haga, a divorced woman with three children who worked as a housekeeper for Hawks' family.

Helen was adopted after the Hawks family made it clear to Haga — who was not married to the young Hawks at the time — that if she wanted to keep her job, she could not

keep the baby.

The next year, Haga and Hawks were married, and they had a son and a few years later, a daughter, Rita. They tried to track down Helen, twice hiring a private investigator, but had no luck finding her. Neither could her brother, who went searching for his sister in the 1970s.

As the years went by, Betush's parents died, and so did her brother, her half-brother and one of her half-sisters.

Betush married, moved to Pennsylvania and had two daughters and five grandchildren, all the while thinking frequently about her sister.

"I would always be looking at people, and if they looked like me a little bit, I would wonder if that was my sister," she said.

It never occurred to her that, somewhere, her sister was looking for her. She was.

And she finally found her

through the Children's Home Society of Virginia.

The agency, which conducts about 10 to 15 searches a year for adoptees and birth families, makes the initial contact between the two parties and then asks them to send letters, at first withholding their names or other identifying information, said Kristy Frick, a social worker at the agency.

"We've heard from birth families and adoptees that it's nice to get to know one another and almost break the ice a little bit, and it builds up confidence and courage to work toward the reunion," she said.

Once Betush knew that her sister had found her, she waited for her sister's letter to come through the agency.

"It was very hard waiting for that first letter," she said. "I got so anxious."

It came in September, ad-

dressed "Dearest sister."

Over about 20 emails and — after the adoption agency received permission from the state of Virginia to release identifying information — many phone calls, Betush has gotten to know a sister with whom she shares so much but has shared so little.

Her name is Judy Bottomley, and she is 74. She was adopted by an Indiana couple who later moved to Illinois, which is where she met her husband. They live in Mesa, Ariz., and have a son, an adopted daughter, a foster daughter, 12 grandchildren and 10 great-grandchildren.

She has been eager to learn about her birth family, and Betush has been happy to answer her questions, she said, emailing her photographs of her parents and brother. They've also exchanged photographs of

themselves and their families. Betush said they both have their father's nose.

Through their conversations, the two women have discovered what they have in common, such as love of cooking and camping and nature. Betush calls her sister every few days, just to see how she's doing.

"She is such a sweet-heart," Betush said. "I just love her to pieces."

This Christmas, they exchanged their first Christmas presents. Betush received a cookbook, and she sent her sister a statue of two sisters, two friends.

They will meet for the first time in February, when Betush and her husband, Bob, plan to fly to Arizona for a two-week visit.

"It's going to be a lot of hugging, a lot of talking. Probably some tears, some happy ones," Betush said.

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