

# Donor Unknown

## Adventures in the Sperm Trade

A documentary by Jerry Rothwell  
78 mins | colour | UK 2010

### Screening and Discussion Guide



*'Warm-hearted, funny and human' Independent \*\*\*\**

*'An unexpected treasure' The Times \*\*\*\**

*'Surprising, moving and oddly melancholic: a genuine human drama' Time Out \*\*\*\**

*'Thought-provoking, laugh-out-loud funny and deeply moving' ViewLondon \*\*\*\**

Winner of Audience Awards at Silverdocs and Tribeca Festival Online, and Grierson Nominee 2011

[www.donorunknown.com](http://www.donorunknown.com)

## **Donor Unknown: Introduction**

Donor Unknown follows the story of JoEllen Marsh, 20, as she goes in search of the sperm donor father she only knows as Donor 150.

The story of Donor Unknown has never been more relevant as reproductive and genetic technologies advance. The shape of the family is changing and Jeffrey Harrison – Donor 150 - his children and their families are pioneers.

We didn't find Donor 150 - Jeffrey Harrison. He found us. In 2007, Producer Hilary Durman was woken very early one morning by a phone call. The caller was a man - Californian, middle-aged and a total stranger. Jeffrey had called because he'd heard that Redbird was producing a BBC drama about a teenage boy who had just learned his father was an anonymous sperm donor.

Some time before, in a cafe on Venice Beach, Jeffrey had read in a discarded copy of the New York Times about two teenage girls who had discovered they shared the same sperm donor – California Cryobank Donor number 150. Both girls were curious to know who Donor 150 might be. And Jeffrey had to decide whether to keep his anonymity - or step forward and identify himself. Jeffrey wanted to talk about his experience.....

We travelled to LA to meet Jeffrey, and gradually pieced together his story. At the same time, we started to make contact with the Donor 150 siblings and their families, the Donor Sibling Registry which brought them together, and the California Cryobank where the story of their connection began.

Donor Unknown took about 3 years to make, and was premiered at Sheffield DocFest in 2010, with a cinema release and TV broadcasts in 2011. The film is supported by a dedicated website: [www.donorunknown.com](http://www.donorunknown.com)

# **Donor Unknown: Background**

## **The Story of the Film**

JoEllen has always known her family 'wasn't like other families'. She grew up in Pennsylvania with two mothers, and a burning curiosity to know more about her anonymous donor father. When JoEllen discovers a unique online registry that connects donor-conceived children, she manages to track down a half-sister in New York. The New York Times picks up the story, and, over time, 12 more half-siblings emerge across the USA.

The New York Times article also falls into the hands of Jeffrey Harrison, living alone with four dogs and a pigeon in a broken-down RV in a Venice Beach car park. In the 1980s, Jeffrey supplemented his meagre income by becoming a sperm donor at California Cryobank. His number was Donor 150.

Donor Unknown follows JoEllen from her discovery of her siblings, to the moment Jeffrey steps forward to identify himself as Donor 150, to her decision to travel to California to meet him. Along the way, we meet Danielle in New York, who was not told by her parents that she was donor-conceived till the age of 14, and is uncertain of the kind of relationship she could ever sustain with Jeffrey; Rachelle in Memphis, who is not sure if she ever wants to meet him; Ryann and Roxanne, who live in California and have already established some kind of relationship with Jeffrey; and Fletcher, 19, who decides the time is right to follow JoEllen on her journey to meet their donor father.

At the centre of the film is Jeffrey, living with his dogs and his pigeon in a car park by the beach, and preparing his broken-down RV for the arrival of JoEllen and Fletcher. At 52, his sperm donor days are over but his story has cast him in the role of an unlikely pioneer. His decision to cast aside his donor anonymity to meet them is a step few donors have taken.

Donor Unknown is a film about a new kind of 'family'. Linked by their connection to a single sperm donor – 150 - parents and children are creating and navigating a new set of relationships. They are discovering first hand what a close biological connection to a stranger means for themselves and their identity. What happens next opens up some fascinating questions about nature and nurture, the responsibilities of parenthood, the moral integrity of the cryobanks, and the hazards of genetic inheritance. As the laws on donor anonymity change in some countries, there are fewer sperm donors and there's a growing trade in 'fertility tourism', for overseas sperm and egg donation.

Donor Unknown is a unique snapshot of a group of random people who are all pioneers. The parents - heterosexual, gay, single and in couples – were determined to have children against the odds, and happened to choose the same sperm donor. Now they're living with the unpredictable consequences of their choice. What impact will meeting this stranger – Donor 150 - have on their children? What kinds of relationship can the children build with their biological father? How will letting Donor 150 into their lives affect their relationships as a family? And how will meeting his biological children change Jeffrey's life?

### **Donor Unknown- Director's Statement**

Donor Unknown is a story for what has been called the 'biological century'. From the human genome project to IVF, advances in life sciences since the millennium seem set to transform our relationship to the natural world and to each other, changing how we are conceived, born, grow up, cope with illness, and die.

Perhaps these developments also require new ideas about what it means to be human and how our social connections - families, relationships, friendships – are defined. If that's the case, then Jeffrey Harrison ('Donor 150'), his children and their parents are pioneers on one stretch of this new frontier.

Sperm donation has been used as a method of conception for far longer than the first recorded incidence in medical journals in the US in the late nineteenth century. What is new is the ability of the donor-conceived child to discover the identity of his or her donor and to initiate contact. This raises some challenging questions: what does a connection based solely on genetics mean? Can it become the basis of a lasting 'family' relationship? Is it emotionally necessary for the child? Underlying the story of Jeffrey and his children is the industry which is developing around the technology of human reproduction – which is very different in the US from the UK. Donor Unknown is also a film about America, made from a European perspective - which I hope provokes us to think about the extent to which we want reproduction subject to powerful and lightly regulated commercial forces.

I was drawn to this story because it seemed to me that through an extraordinary set of coincidences, Jeffrey and his children were dealing with age-old human dilemmas – where do I come from?, what is my connection with the past? where are the boundaries of my family? – in a uniquely modern context. Their openness and courage take us deeper than the obvious laughs to be had in a film about sperm donation. In making the film I wanted to approach the story through two kinds of journey – that of the children looking for their genetic inheritance, and that of Jeffrey discovering his new family of strangers. It's a film that lends itself to cross-cutting –

between places (Jeffrey's sperm reached all corners of the United States) and siblings, having connected and common experiences thousands of miles apart as they discover each other.

But for me, what really makes this story unique is the fact that Jeffrey is at its centre. Intelligent, eccentric and good-hearted, I admire him for the way he has lived out his beliefs – a true 'fringe monkey' as he says in the film. His comment that I'm not really a nine-to-fiver' is something of an understatement. When Jeffrey started donating sperm, he'd moved to LA as an aspiring actor. But instead of landing a role in Hollywood, he ended up earning a living playing bit parts in tourism videos, posing for Playgirl and waiting tables. Sperm donation at \$25 and later \$80 a go was something he took up to survive. And thanks to his attractive donor profile, his sperm was popular. Now in his 50s, his life is very different from that of the hopeful youngster who moved to Hollywood. He lives in an RV on the beach, his closest relationships are with his dogs, and recently an adopted pigeon with a broken wing. Now in his 50s, the children coming forward offer him a new set of connections and perhaps a new purpose.

*Jerry Rothwell*

# **Donor Unknown On Screen**

## **Screenings**

Donor Unknown is being screened at film festivals in the UK, across Europe and in the USA; in UK cinemas (Picturehouse, Apollo, Everyman and other independents); and on broadcast television in the UK, Israel, Belgium, Sweden, Norway, Italy, Canada and many other countries. In the USA, Donor Unknown was screened by Independent Lens on PBS. The film has also been shown at Science Festivals in Bradford, Glasgow and New York.

Donor Unknown won Audience Awards at the Tribeca Festival Online in New York, and at Silverdocs in Washington. It was nominated for a Grierson Award in the International Category, Best Documentary on a Contemporary Theme.

## **Audiences**

We've found Donor Unknown draws a really varied audience. The UK certificate is 12A but we've screened it in schools and colleges through Film Club UK and it's proved particularly popular with students of Film/Media Studies, Sociology, Psychology, Philosophy, especially 16-18 year olds.

In cinemas, as well as the general public (all ages), Donor Unknown has its own niche audiences. For example, LGBT groups and organisations; health practitioners, clinicians and researchers in hospitals, fertility clinics, GPs surgeries; counsellors and psychotherapists; university staff and students, particularly in the fields of Medicine, Medical Ethics, Philosophy, Film, Psychology, Sociology; adoption and fostering services; film clubs; all those people concerned with and affected by assisted reproduction; and of course a wide general audience.

# **Donor Unknown – Setting up a Screening**

## **The DVD**

As well as the film itself, the DVD has a number of extras:

- Extended Scenes: 7 scenes which add depth and context to the film.
- Talking Points: A range of opinions from participants in the film and others on issues including confidentiality, open/anonymous donation, openness and disclosure, donor motivation, making contact, definitions of family.
- All About Me – A UK Experience: A short film by Rosa Rogers about a young woman in the UK – Louise – who discovered as a teenager she was donor-conceived.
- Q+A: A Question +Answer session led by director Jerry Rothwell and Producer Hilary Durman with film/media students (16-18) for Film Club UK.
- Trailer: The original trailer which was used to promote and raise finance for the film.

## **Extended Scenes**

### **A Lot of Women (2' 09")**

A Lot of Women explores the influences on JoEllen's life of several important women, including her birth mother Lucinda, and her 'other mothers,' Neen and Tina.

**Questions: What makes a family? How important is nature/nurture? What is the relative importance of the male/female influence?**

### **Pizza (2' 24")**

Pizza shows JoEllen with a group of friends, and explores her decision to tell her friends about being donor-conceived.

**Questions: How important is openness/disclosure with friends and wider family? What are the relative merits of open/anonymous donation? Why become a donor?**

### **How Life Began (1' 36")**

Rachelle reflects on growing up with 2 mothers.

**Questions: Same-sex relationships and having a child; how to tell a child he/she is donor-conceived.**

## **Ryann and Jeffrey (2')**

Ryann was the first of the siblings to meet Jeffrey and she has a continuing relationship with him. Her family invited him to her graduation.

**Questions: What kind of relationship is possible between donor and child? What is the nature of the connection?**

## **California Cryobank (3'26")**

Dr Cappy Rothman takes us into the storage room of the Cryobank, describes the processes of freezing and storage, and reflects on the uniqueness of sperm and his motivation for his chosen career.

**Notes: Dr Rothman points out the distance a sperm travels is like running from LA to Seattle. ....the California Cryobank sends out 30,000 ampoules of sperm each year and has so far been responsible for about 60,000 children.**

## **In A UK Sperm Bank (2' 21")**

Allan Pacey from the Department of Reproductive and Developmental Medicine at the University of Sheffield introduces the processes operating in a UK sperm bank.

## **The Os Penis (42")**

Dr Rothman introduces an item from his collection of Os Penises – a walrus penis!

## **Talking Points**

### **Introduction to Donor Conception:**

- Dr Cappy Rothman on the first recorded donor conception, who uses the cryobank, changes in the profile of people choosing sperm donation, and screening for genetic abnormalities.
- Joy Longest on why she used a sperm bank.
- Roxanne Shaffer on her mother's reasons for taking the sperm donor route.
- Dr Allan Pacey on the need for donors, and characteristics of the successful donor.

### **Donating Eggs and Sperm**

- Dr Cappy Rothman on the selection of donors, and their

motivations.

- Dr Allan Pacey on support for donors in the UK through counseling; egg donation; and the issue of paying donors.
- Wendy Kramer from the Donor Sibling Registry on why donors donate, their motivations, and the question of anonymity.
- JoEllen on paying donors – did Jeffrey do it for the money and does it matter?
- Jeffrey on being contacted.

### **Ethical Issues**

- Dr Allan Pacey on the screening of embryos in the UK, and the ethical issues raised by using donated sperm and eggs.
- Dr Cappy Rothman on limiting the number of children from each donor.
- Joy Longest on the implications of storing and using sperm over long periods – “She could be 90 and have a baby sister.”
- Wendy Kramer on the difficulties of limiting numbers.
- Sue Norris and Cathy Fletcher on the problems of limiting numbers, the lack of male influence and its significance.
- Rachelle Longest on the male influence: “Better no dad than a bad one.....”

### **Choosing the Donor**

- Cappy Rothman on donor choice and family disclosure.
- Cathy Fletcher and Sue Norris on choosing someone who seems ‘familiar’.
- Joy Longest on the absence of information.
- Lucinda Marsh on anonymity versus known donors.
- JoEllen Marsh, Ryann McQuilton and Danielle Pagano on the need of the child to know.

### **What Do We Tell the Children?**

- Dr Allan Pacey – the UK legal position, and the difficulties of openness.
- Wendy Kramer on what’s in the child’s interest, toxic secrets, and is a donor a father?
- Sue Norris on the implications of honesty, JoEllen Marsh and Rachelle Longest on the importance of openness, and Fletcher

Norris on the fact it's not a big issue.

- Lucinda Marsh distinguishes between a donor and a dad.

### **Making Contact**

- Wendy Kramer on why people want contact, and dealing with expectations.
- JoEllen, Danielle, Fletcher and Ryann on the importance of finding their donor, their expectations, and the kind of relationship possible with a donor.
- Joy Longest on what a donor might want from contact.

### **The Donor Family**

- Wendy and Ryan Kramer on building relationships, the nature of the bond between child, donor and extended family, reactions in the extended family, donor families and bereavement.
- Roxanne, Ryann and Joy on the special nature of the relationship, and taking time to let it develop.
- JoEllen on what makes a family, and on closure.

### **All About Me: A UK Experience (8')**

This short film offers an insight into what it's like to be told as a teenager that you are donor-conceived. Louise, now in her 20s, only discovered when her mother told her at the age of 14, during an argument. All About Me follows Louise trying to make sense of this experience and understand the motivations some parents have for secrecy rather than openness. In the UK since 2005, donor anonymity is no longer possible, and Louise meets a donor, another donor-conceived teenager who has always known her origins, and a couple with a young family who are committed to telling them everything about the circumstances of their birth .

### **Q+A (3' 33")**

Film Club UK organised a tour of schools/colleges with Donor Unknown. This post screening Q+A at Chesterfield College raised a number of questions about film-making choices as well as about the issues the film raised.

#### **Key questions included:**

- How did the idea for the film arise?
- What made us want to make the film?
- How do you tell the story without changing the story by

impinging on people's lives?

- What were the problems encountered?
- How much is real, how much is set?
- Why choose Jeffrey as the central character?
- What does Jeffrey think of the film?
- Were there other children who didn't want to take part?
- How long was the shoot? How long did it take to make the film?

### **Trailer (2' 25")**

The trailer could be quite a useful way to capture attention before screening the film, especially in an education setting, to raise expectations and focus attention on key issues which students could then track through the film.

## **Donor Unknown – Setting up a Discussion**

Donor Unknown is set in the USA but was produced by a UK team. At each screening, the difference between practice in the US, the UK and other countries has generated a lot of interest. Since 2005 in the UK, donors know that they have to be 'willing to be known' when any offspring reach 18. In the USA, donor anonymity remains.

Louise Brown, the first 'test tube baby,' was born in the UK over 30 years ago. In the decades since her birth, assisted reproduction has become more widely accessible and now infertile couples, same sex couples, and single adults who want children can do so through developments in reproductive technology.

In the USA, the boom has created a market for the raw materials of human conception, inducing many young people to sell their sperm (or, more rarely, eggs) to cryogenic banks for cash. The US fertility industry has grown into a \$4 billion business with very few regulations or restrictions governing it. The UK, Italy, Australia, New Zealand, Germany, Norway, and Sweden have all outlawed the private sale of sperm and eggs, limited donations from a single individual, and prohibited anonymity for donors.

At every screening of Donor Unknown, we've found similar questions have arisen. We seem to have arrived at a moment for a public conversation about unintended consequences, the definition of family, and the ethical questions surrounding a fertility-for-profit industry that is largely unregulated. To support that important conversation, we're providing a list of resources for the children of donors, as well as for the parents or prospective parents of donor-conceived children, both biological and otherwise.

### **Donor Unknown - Resources and Links**

There are quite a few organisations which might be helpful either in preparation for a screening, or as follow-up.

#### **Donor Sibling Registry**

[www.donorsiblingregistry.com](http://www.donorsiblingregistry.com)

The Donor Sibling Registry (DSR) was founded in 2000 to assist individuals conceived as a result of sperm, egg, or embryo donation who are seeking to make mutually desired contact with others with whom they share genetic ties. The DSR has helped to connect over 8000 people.

## **California Cryobank**

[www.cryobank.com](http://www.cryobank.com)

Founded by Dr Cappy Rothman, the California Cryobank featured in Donor 150 has the largest and most diverse selection of donors in the US. It has set up its own registry to help connect half-sibling offspring of donors who used their service.

## **Donor Offspring Health**

[www.donoroffspringhealth.com](http://www.donoroffspringhealth.com)

A nonprofit organization that offers a free donor gamete health registry to allow sperm and egg donors, donor conceived people, and donor parents to share and research health information related to donor offspring.

## **Donor Conception Network**

[www.donor-conception-network.org](http://www.donor-conception-network.org)

A UK based self-help network of families created with the help of donated eggs, sperm, or embryos; couples and individuals seeking to found a family this way; and adults conceived using a donor.

## **UK DonorLink**

[www.ukdonorlink.org.uk](http://www.ukdonorlink.org.uk)

A voluntary contact register set up to enable people who are donor-conceived, their donors and half-siblings to exchange information and contact each other. The register is specifically for anyone over the age of 18 who was conceived using donated sperm or eggs, or who donated, in the UK, before the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act came into force in August 1991.

## **HFEA (Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority)**

<http://www.hfea.gov.uk/>

The UK's independent regulator overseeing the use of gametes and embryos in fertility treatment and research. The HFEA holds record of people donor-conceived post 1991.

## **NGDT (National Gamete Donation Trust)**

[www.ngdt.co.uk](http://www.ngdt.co.uk)

The National Gamete Donation Trust offers information and support for sperm and egg donors, those considering becoming a donor, and for health professionals and those requiring treatment with donor eggs or sperm.

**The Progress Trust**

[www.progress.org.uk](http://www.progress.org.uk)

The Progress Trust aims to raise awareness and discussion of ethical issues surrounding genetics, assisted conception and embryo/stem cell research, and to create an environment in which ethically sound research and practice will thrive.