

UPFRONT

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THEATRICAL SONG CYCLE

Dana Wylie's *Makings of a Voice* an exploration of matriarchal lineage. See page 57.

Three united: a tale of separated sisters

BY SCOTT HAYES
 Staff Writer

And then there were three. At long last, three sisters — previously separated by time, distance, and especially a tricky family history — were reunited for a long-awaited group hug over the summer.

In August in Ontario, St. Albert's Velvet Martin looked into the eyes and held the hands of Bonnie Williamson-Powell and Helen Murphy. It was the culmination of years of searching, decades of separation, and a lifetime of wondering.

"My heart is filled with joy," Martin said. "I feel incredibly blessed to find two extraordinary, caring, lovely sisters."

For most of her life, Martin thought she was an only child. There were hints, perhaps, or simple gut feelings along the way that suggested otherwise.

After her mother Marguerite Hennessey passed away in 2015, Martin began a genealogical search for any other relatives. She knew her mother had a complicated life, starting with being a foster child. Martin promised her mother she wouldn't do any looking around until after she was gone.

Such familial detectivity took her on a quest to various children's aid societies, assorted genealogical groups, and online research avenues. Sleuth had donned, she followed the invisible tracks of her mother's life from her birth in Nova Scotia to her childhood in Ontario.

Martin contacted her mother's orphanage and, for what it was worth, she tried out a DNA kit. That was in 2018. At one point, she learned her mother had had a sibling. From that, Martin made contact with her new first cousins, who were more than happy to help with further research.

Together, they compiled a list of possible surnames for her sibling, along with photos that went with each one. As the year was coming to a close, one picture beckoned. When Martin phoned, the person who answered turned out to

be the sibling of Martin's own new sister. A message was passed along, and Martin was connected to Williamson-Powell, some 20 years younger.

Those two new sisters were reunited in Edmonton in 2019, but the quest continued. Knowing that her mother had other children, Martin knew there was more searching to be done. She was able to put enough details together to come up with the name "Helen Murphy," but as she said at the time, a name as common as that was "a needle in a haystack."

A *Gazette* article at the time ended up being shared around the country more than 1,500 times. On Twitter one morning, someone from Toronto asked her to look at a picture.

The picture was of Hennessey, their mother. The message sender was Helen Murphy.

"I had no idea that our family was so large and complicated, but it's thrilling. All my life, I dreamed of having a family," Martin offered.

The connection was made only a few months before COVID-19 caused further interference. It took the three until this summer to safely travel and spend time together. Martin, along with her husband John, travelled to Ontario to visit Williamson-Powell (and her husband Fred) and their new sister Helen (and her husband John).

For all, it was more than worth the wait. According to Martin, Williamson-Powell described the union as a sense of closure: "a feeling of coming home."

Williamson-Powell called it "an emotional, joyous occasion."

"It was amazing ... absolutely," Murphy offered.

The reunion started two days after Murphy's 77th birthday. The three spent two weeks together, enough to remark on the similarities they bore with each other, and with their mother.

"Bonnie has mom's striking blue eyes. Staring into them when we first met was surreal. Then I met our sister Helen who



BONNIE WILLIAMSON-POWELL/Photo

Helen (left), Velvet, and Bonnie hold a photo of their mom when she was a teenager.

looks so much like our petite mother, Marguerite. At times, I found myself staring in awe as if seeing mom again," Martin said.

"When I held Helen's hand in my own, it was exactly how I remembered mom's felt. Genetics are incredible; even our fingers are identical. And our manner-

isms ... Bonnie and I both placed our hands on our hips at the same time," she laughed.

Even though the visit is over, the three still remain in communication, with weekly calls to catch up on a lifetime of overdue rap sessions.

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