

Presidential love affair confirmed: Portland grandson of Warren G. Harding thankful for DNA results

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Jim Blaesing has known since he was a boy that he was the grandson of Warren G. Harding, the 29th president of the United States.

The Southeast Portland man was very close to his grandmother, who openly shared stories of her love for the man who took office in 1921. And it's always bothered him that so many people had dismissed her as "delusional" or labeled her as money-hungry, a fame seeker.

Nan Britton was disbelieved not only by members of Harding's family, who proclaimed the story of the 61/2 -year love affair a lie, but the history buffs who vigorously tried to discredit her over the decades.

"It just kept yanking at me and bugging me," said Blaesing, a 65-year-old construction contractor.

So he finally decided to do something: Get his DNA tested.

All of those doubters were silenced last week with news -- first reported on the [front page of The New York Times](#) -- that Blaesing is indeed the grandson of the late president. Ancestry.com confirmed his relationship to Harding with a more than 99 percent certainty, by comparing Blaesing's DNA with that of Harding's grandnephew and grandniece.

"For me, it means everything," Blaesing said. "I want everyone to know. I get angry sometimes when I think about what they did to my grandmother."

Britton spent the last years of her life in Sandy, where she died in 1991 at age 94. His mother, Elizabeth Ann Blaesing, of Sandy, died in 2005 at 86. He thinks they'd be overjoyed with the news of the genetic tests [ricocheting across the country](#) and even the globe, with NPR, national TV networks and other media calling for interviews.

The Harding-Britton-Blaesing family story is one of great love, tragedy, gumption and scorn. It rocked the nation at the time Britton wrote her 1927 memoir, "The President's Daughter." One memorable passage describes how she and Harding "made love" in a closet of the president's executive offices.

"She loved him until the day she died," Jim Blaesing said. "When she used to talk about him, she would get the biggest smile. She just couldn't get enough of him. They were truly in love."

Britton grew up in Ohio, just down the street from Harding, the owner of a local newspaper and 31 years her senior. She had a school-girl crush on him and stuck photos of him on her bedroom wall.

Their romance didn't take off until 1917, when Britton was 20 and the two secretly met in a New York hotel room. Although Harding had no children with his wife, and his family had long contended that Harding was infertile, Britton wrote that she was impregnated by Harding in the closet of Harding's U.S. Senate office.

In October 1919, their child, Elizabeth Ann Blaesing -- then known by the last name Christian to conceal her parents' identities -- was born. She later took on the name Blaesing after marrying.

Britton told her family that Harding quietly supported her and their daughter -- up until his sudden death in 1923, at age 57. As a single mom in a time when single mothers were shunned, Britton subsisted for a while on money channeled to her by a Secret Service agent or Harding's sister, Jim Blaesing said.

But after the money was cut off, Britton felt she had no choice but to write the book to support herself and her daughter, Jim Blaesing said.

When the government seized the printing plates for the book in an attempt to quash it, Britton successfully sued for the return of the plates, Jim Blaesing said. And when the publishers succumbed to government pressure not to print the book, Britton published it on her own, Jim Blaesing said.

"She was the strongest woman," he said. "She was really at the head start of women's rights. That's one of the things that probably attracted (Harding) to her."

After writing the book, Britton was branded a liar and her apartment was burglarized by a private investigator trying to prove that, Jim Blaesing said. Britton and her daughter were scrutinized so much so that photographers hounded them, and she eventually handed her daughter over to one of her sisters to raise in the hope she would have a more peaceful childhood, Jim Blaesing said.

"It was a terrible life for them," he said. "They were in the limelight."

Elizabeth Blaesing loathed the attention. She also avoided cameras. A 1931 photo of mother and daughter -- taken when Elizabeth was 12 -- shows mother beaming, but Elizabeth looking sullen and angry.

While Elizabeth Blaesing was tight-lipped about her mother's relationship with Harding, Britton openly spoke of it with relatives and strangers, who would sometimes recognize her, Jim Blaesing said.

"(My mother) used to tell us she hated to get on the bus with my grandmother because by the time they got off, half the bus would know," he said.

Jim Blaesing's parents raised him and his two brothers in Glendale, California.

Even then, in the 1950s and '60s, they'd occasionally be hounded by hateful skeptics. The unwanted attention seemed to intensify around each presidential election. Strangers called them up and made threats.

"My parents were always worried about people kidnapping me," he said.

When Jim Blaesing was 14, TV news reporters offered him money in exchange for a photograph of his mother, who was hiding out in the house.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, Jim Blaesing, his parents, his grandmother and other members of his extended family moved to Oregon.

After his grandmother and mother died, Jim Blaesing continued to research the Harding-Britton love affair. He wasn't the only one.

After deciding to get his DNA tested, he reached out to Harding's extended family in the hope one of them would provide DNA for comparison. At the same time, he was independently contacted by Peter Harding, the late president's grandnephew, who lives in Big Sur, California. Peter Harding and a grandniece, Abigail Harding, agreed to have their genetic information compared with Jim Blaesing's.

They sat on the results for more than six months, before finally going public this week.

"I wanted to show that she was telling the truth," Jim Blaesing said. "My grandmother is smiling so big. She's not a liar. Everything she said is right."

Now that Jim Blaesing has confirmation that he's Warren G. Harding's grandson, he also can say with certainty that his two brothers are Harding's grandsons, too. That means that Harding has a total of three grandchildren and six great grandchildren.

They all live in Oregon.

-- Aimee Green