

Magazine
 All NYT

The New York Times

Gay Donor or Gay Dad?

Next Article in Magazine (1 of 17) »



Drawing by Christopher Silas Neal

By JOHN BOWE
Published: November 19, 2006

R. described himself as “a man in his 40s, voluntarily employed in the arts,” a situation made possible, he explained, by a private family income. His six-foot frame is fit and slim; his eyes, blue and bright. He dresses in a cultured but casual way, an aesthetic captured in his speech, in which phatic blips like “kind of” or “sort of” are interspersed with terms like “Richter-esque.” As in Gerhard, the German painter.

- E-MAIL
- PRINT
- SAVE

ARTICLE TOOLS
SPONSORED BY
DENCH BLANCHETT
NOTES & SCANDAL

Readers' Opinions Forum: Gay Rights



Steve Stenzel for The New York Times

P.J., left, and her partner Vicki with David, right, and his partner Bobbie. Vicki is holding Wyatt, age 2 1/2, and Eli, 6, is standing.

In an effort to become a parent of a sort, R., who is gay, agreed, 11 years ago, to donate sperm to a lesbian couple aspiring to pregnancy. A few years before, R. became friendly with a woman — white and upper class like himself — through the gay activist world. They weren’t good friends, he said, “just friendly.” The woman had a partner, a middle-class black woman, whom R. knew less well but who seemed solid.

The couple decided that the black partner would become impregnated with a white man’s sperm so that the baby would be biracial, reflecting the appearance of both mothers. They approached R. about being the donor. (Like all the subjects I spoke to for this article, R. asked that I not use his full name — R. is his middle initial.) It seemed like a good fit, R. said. “My life and my family background and my socioeconomic position kind of matched the profile of the nonbiological partner.” R. and the white woman even looked somewhat alike.

R. had always loved being around kids, particularly his niece and nephew, whom he saw often. But like many gay men, R. never thought of himself as a likely candidate for fatherhood. He always felt that parents opting to raise a child alone were choosing a rocky road, and at the time, R. himself had no long-term partner. He did,

however, have an ex-boyfriend who had started a donor relationship with two lesbians; it seemed to be going well. He quickly became taken with the idea. Having a child of his own, he thought, would mean creating a relationship more intense and involved than what he had with his siblings’ children. “I guess I felt that maybe I wanted to have some kind of more lasting relationships in my life,” he said. “I said I was interested.”

And thus began a series of conversations. R. made it very clear that he had no ambition to be a primary parent and that he was happy to renounce his parental rights. (The latter is crucial to many lesbian couples, allowing the nonbiological mother to adopt and protecting her bond with the child in the event of the death of, or separation from, the biological mother.) Nevertheless, R. saw himself playing a significant role in the child’s life. “I saw myself holding a baby,” he said. “I wanted a child to be part of my life. I wanted to have a relationship with somebody that was in some sense unconditional, that

“A GENUINE MASTERPIECE. THE BEST FILM OF 2006.”
REH REED | NEW YORK OBSERVER
 “BABEL DESERVES AN ACADEMY AWARD NOMINATION FOR BEST PICTURE!”
RICHARD ROPER | CHICAGO SUN-TIMES
 “AN UNQUALIFIED TRIUMPH FROM ALEJANDRO GONZALEZ INARRITU.”
PETE HAMMOND | MAXIM
 “STYLISTIC ELEGANCE... EXPLOSIVE ACTION.”
JOE MORGANSTERN | THE WALL ST. JOURNAL

BABEL

MOST POPULAR

E-MAILED BLOGGED SEARCHED

1. No Grunting, They Said, and He Was at the Gym
2. Red Wine Ingredient Increases Endurance, Study Shows
3. Iowa Finds Itself Deep in Heart of Wine Country
4. City Approves 'Carbon Tax' in Effort to Reduce Gas Emissions
5. F.D.A. Will Allow Breast Implants Made of Silicone
6. Maureen Dowd: Squeaker of the House

Not Always Full Speed Ahead

wasn't subject to the fading whims of friendships. And I don't think it's because I was not finding commitment somewhere else. I wanted to develop a relationship where I was nurturing somebody in a consistent way. I wanted to show up and be part of a child's life in a significant way."

R. said he felt that it would be fussy and unrealistic to insist upon specific visitation hours, but on the other hand, he said, "I didn't want to be someone who's wheeled out on holidays." His expectation was to see the child a few times per month. "No one said, 'That's a problem.' Everyone seemed to be on the same page." And so, according to R., "we went ahead and started to try to get pregnant."

Virtually every lesbian couple electing to use a known donor's sperm pursues one of two methods of artificial insemination. One is for the man to go to a clinic, have his sperm harvested and then passed to the mother, usually by doctor-assisted injection. The other, homier and cheaper course is commonly known as the "turkey baster" or "natural" method. As R. described it, after confirming that he was H.I.V.-negative, he simply went over to the mothers' house and masturbated into a sterilized container. The women injected it into the would-be mother's vagina with a needleless plastic syringe, and voilà. It could not have been easier, R. said with a shrug. Happened on the first or second time. Like, not a problem.

Since the 1970s, when gay men and lesbians began gaining wider acceptance, there has been a substantial increase in the number of children being reared by gay parents. According to the 2000 U.S. census, 34 percent of lesbian couples and 22 percent of gay male couples are raising at least one child under 18 in their home. Even allowing for a higher percentage of families willing to identify themselves as gay, these numbers still represent a large increase from the 1990 census. "It is more than just a product of better reporting," says Gary J. Gates, a senior research fellow at the Williams Institute, a center dedicated to sexual-orientation law and public policy at the U.C.L.A. School of Law. "The percentage of same-sex couples raising children more than doubled for men and increased by about 50 percent for women. Couple that with a fairly large body of anecdotal evidence about child-rearing among gay people, and I think that this is strong evidence of a 'gayby' boom."

Though precise breakdowns are hard to come by — demographers have yet to track all the different types of gay families — for many gay parents, the family structure is more or less based on a heterosexual model: two parents, one household. Heather may have two mommies, but her parents are still a couple. Then there are families like R.'s and his partner's that from the outset seek to create a sort of extended nuclear family, with two mothers and a father who serves, in the words of one gay dad, as "more than an uncle and less than a father." How does it work when Heather has two mommies, half a daddy, two daddies or one and a half daddies?

"People are in many cases redesigning 'family,'" says Judith Stacey, a sociology professor at New York University. Stacey has written about gay fathers, gay mothers, gay men who form family units with single lesbians and lesbian couples who form households with one gay male father. As radical as families like R.'s may seem, she says, in her experience the people engineering them aren't motivated by ideology but by a deep, and frankly conventional, desire to have children. "They want to have a relationship to children," she says. "And they want to be able to create whatever kinds of security and stability they can. They're drawing from all kinds of traditional forms, but at the same time, they're inventing new ones."

Primary among the reasons mothers to be choose to become impregnated by a known donor who remains part of the family is a reluctance to raise children in the shadow of anonymous heritage. As one donor dad, an East Coast lawyer named Guy, told me, his lesbian co-parents "felt like it was important for their kids to know as much as they could about their story. When there's an anonymous donor, it's not always an ideal situation for the child." As for why lesbians often choose donor fathers who are gay, Judith Stacey and others told me that many prefer gay men for reasons of "solidarity." "They think that gay men will be more sympathetic, more amenable to agreements they might create and stick by," Stacey says. And finally they — along with the straight women who choose to use gay donors — say they feel that gay men simply come with less baggage. Heterosexual sperm donors are more liable to marry and father children of their own, which has the potential of causing jealousy and competition among the children and their mothers.

While the role of the mother in gay co-parenting arrangements can, on a day-to-day basis, be quite traditional, the father's is often part-time and ancillary from the first. Why would any man, gay or straight, choose a kind of fatherhood that would seem to curtail both its joys and responsibilities? In part, the answer has to do with the fact that a gay man's options are already somewhat limited. Though gay men can and increasingly do become parents through adoption or by using surrogates, pursuing those avenues can be difficult. Many (though not all) states allow "single people" to adopt, but in practice some make it tough for gay men to do so. Surrogacy can be wildly expensive, easily costing \$100,000 or more for multiple egg harvests, in vitro fertilization and the surrogate mother's expenses. Most of the men I spoke to didn't want to be single parents; they cherished the idea of fathering children with partners they knew and liked.

Frequently, gay men and women entering into co-parenting arrangements draft some kind of document

NOT ALWAYS Full Speed Ahead

8. [A Troubled River Mirrors China's Path to Modernity](#)
9. [Chili to Chili in Mole-Sauce City](#)
10. [Reporters' Notebook: Unlike Clinton, Bush Sees Hanoi in Bit of a Hurry](#)

[Go to Complete List »](#)



The New York Times STORE



Statue of Liberty, New York Harbor,
1905
[Buy Now](#)

that specifies participants' roles and responsibilities — the father's visitation schedule, how many kids everyone plans to have together, what happens if one of the partners moves, dies or becomes involved with a new partner. These homemade, sometimes expensively drafted documents can run as long as 30 pages. Many agreements stipulate that the donor will waive his parental rights, allowing the nonbiological mother to become a legal parent. (Three states have statutes permitting second-parent adoptions; nearly two dozen others have granted such rights through the courts.) But generally, unless the co-parents choose to use a clinic, a donor may relinquish his parental rights only after the child is born. What if the father sees the child and decides he can't bear to part with her? What if the new mothers decide he is wanted less than originally agreed? It is not unusual, in such cases, for custody battles to ensue.

Agreeing to be a father while stepping out of the way means navigating a thicket of emotional and legal issues. "I talk to a lot of guys who have this offer from women," Guy, the East Coast lawyer, said. "And I always say: 'You've got to completely trust these people. Because this relationship is going to be so tested in so many ways. If you can't talk through every single, possible issue, this is not going to work. You've got to be able to bring your fears to them and vice versa.'"

Drawing up an agreement can have what Guy called "immense stop-look-and-listen value." That is, it makes "you think for a minute about what you're doing." But as he readily admitted, such documents — even when drawn up by a lawyer — often carry little legal weight. According to Arthur Leonard, a New York Law School professor and an expert on sexuality and the law, families can draft as many documents as they want, but "in the eyes of the law a parent is either the biological parent or an adoptive parent or, in some jurisdictions, a de facto parent." At best, co-parenting agreements serve as a way to establish intent, which state courts can choose to factor into their decisions — or not. Charged, above all, with looking out for the best interest of the child, judges are free to ignore even the most well-drawn documents.

"The law," Leonard went on to say, "has lagged far behind in taking account of nontraditional family forms." Partly, he said, this can be attributed to the "natural inertia in the legislative process." Legislatures on all matters are "slow in reacting to changes in society," but in this case they are also reluctant to offend socially conservative voters. (In the midterm elections this month, seven states voted to ban same-sex marriage.) Finally, Leonard said, despite the current outcry about "activist judges," many courts are skittish about reshaping social issues from outside legislative bodies.

A result is that gay donor dads must not only trust that their co-parents will abide by whatever agreements they have designed but also hope that as dads they have managed to adequately predict their own reaction to being a parent. As Guy, who has two children of his own with a lesbian couple, said: "A lot of guys can't do that. They think they can do it, but when the baby's born, they really can't." In other words, a father-donor working with a lesbian couple must make peace with the fact that he just isn't going to be a TV dad, a heterosexual dad or a full-time gay dad. "Ideally," as Guy put it, you need to be "willing to accept that the baby has two parents, who are the two moms — and then there's you."

Each of the 10 gay donor dads I met with in recent months maintained a different level of involvement with his lesbian partners and their children. Some co-parents buy houses near one another and interact nearly every day. Others, like Guy and his co-parents, live a thousand miles apart and arrange visits or vacations together every few weeks or months. (When I asked Guy if there was any downside to fathering in this way, he answered yes, missing the kids. "They give me incredible joy," he said. But then he added, "It's the kind of thing where it's, you know, when you miss someone, although that hurts, it's a good reason to feel bad.") One donor dad told me that he never had any plans to be a father. The day he realized he was gay, he said, he felt he had been given a pass. No child-rearing. No Little League talk or barbecues. He looked at donating his sperm as "helping my friends make a family." But like a lot of gay donor dads I spoke to, he didn't fully anticipate just how attached he would become. He is now thrilled to visit with his 21/2-year-old daughter every Wednesday from 4p.m. to 6 p.m. When I asked him what she called him, he said: "That'll be her choice. I think 'Dad' is a word. That's a word I hope to use."

Others always knew they wanted to be fathers. Before embarking upon the creation of his family, Mark, who works at a local museum, spent years discussing the idea of being a co-parent with two lesbian friends, Jean and Candi. At first, he said, the tone was "You know, wouldn't it be fun if we all had kids? And then it kind of got more serious as time went on."

Mark and the mothers to be took the time to discuss every conceivable angle. What would happen if one or another combination of parents didn't agree with the others? What would happen if someone died? They talked about their family backgrounds, how they had been raised, what they liked and didn't like about their upbringing. They wrote a document in which Mark was absolved of any financial role in the child's life. (Many co-parents put this stipulation in their agreements; the father's sustained financial support of the child could be used to help establish his claim to custody should relations become contentious.) He also agreed to put the child up for adoption by the nonbiological mother once it was born. Moreover, it was spelled out that the child would be brought up knowing Mark was the father and that Mark could visit as agreed upon.

At first Mark's role was circumscribed. But, he said, from the moment of birth, "things just got a lot nicer than that." Candi had a natural delivery, and as Mark described it to me, watching the process of birth had a transformative effect on him: "The excitement, the fear that maybe something could go wrong. And to watch the head crown — it was just exciting."

Mark, 48, Jean, 37, and Candi, 34, now have two children — Mark (named after his father) is Candi's biological son, and another boy, Joseph, now 7 months old, is Jean's biological son. For a long time Mark, who was working as a freelance information technologist and financial consultant in Minneapolis until he took the job at the museum, could arrange his schedule to suit the mothers' needs. He spends time with the kids once a week, sometimes alone, sometimes with his long-term partner, Jeffrey, who is 36 and went to college with Candi, and sometimes with one or both mothers. The relationship among the fathers and mothers has been a surprise benefit, he said, creating a brother-sister feeling. Despite the fact that the mothers are still financially responsible for the children, Mark has put them in his will. Each birthday and Christmas, he deposits a \$1,000 bond for their education. Like any good father, he said, "I want to see them do well."

When I asked him if he ever ran into resistance from school personnel or his own family about his less-than-conventional parenting arrangement, he told me a story. He had taken the girls, as he calls his lesbian co-parents, to Wisconsin to visit his mother and his sisters. "We went to a lake place over by Wausau." He laughed. "My nephew" — his sister's son — "had a lot of questions. He was asking my mom, 'Why does Mark have two moms?' My mom was like, 'I didn't know what to say.'"

Mark continued: "I guess in people's minds there's a kid's cartoon drawing of a family unit. Well, ours is the same thing. It's just that the characters have changed a bit. People make a lot out of it, but it's really quite simple: you've got four parents now instead of two. And they're all together." Considering how many heterosexual parents are overworked, divorced or otherwise unavailable, he said, in the end he advised his mother what to say to anyone asking about little Mark: "Tell 'em he's lucky."

If Mark's role as a father comes closer than some to a traditional dad's, that of his friend David falls squarely in the middle of the "more than an uncle but less than a father" continuum. At 43, David works for the University of Minnesota general counsel's office and is very serious about furthering his acting career. (He and Mark became friendly through a theater company Mark used to manage.) When David's friends, P. J. and Vicki, now 52 and 37 respectively, approached him about "helping them out with kids," he was receptive, although he had reservations. The first was that he wasn't interested in being a full-time dad. His acting career, he said, "pretty much supersedes anything else. Spending a lot of time with little ones, that's not where my focus is. I'm far too selfish a person." He still had plans to leave Minneapolis for New York or L.A. to further his career. But in the end, he agreed, with several conditions.

The major one was, as he put it, "if we do one, we're doing two." David agreed with P. J., who didn't want to create an only child. "Nothing against only children," he explained, "but I feel that it's important for kids to have a sibling. I remember when I was growing up, with my brother, you just kind of go, 'What's going on with Mom and Dad?'" How much more, he wondered, would a kid need an ally with strangers asking questions about his or her unconventional family?

The mothers insisted on one other condition: until or unless David actually left for the bright lights of Broadway, his interaction with the kids had to be consistent. As P. J., the children's nonbiological mother, said: "I told him you have to choose. You're either going to be in for five cents or you're in for a buck."

David, Bobbie (David's long-term partner), P. J. and Vicki were more laid back than were many co-parents I met. They made no legal or quasi-legal document. They never spelled out exactly how often David would see the children, just that it couldn't be once a week and then once a month. The attitude shared by David, P. J. and Vicki (Bobbie, as the nonbiological father, was the least involved in the discussions) was, as David summed it up: "If stuff happens, then it happens; it happens in married people's lives, it happens in straight people's lives and it happens in single mothers'. Stuff happens everywhere, to everybody."

When I asked David whether he and his partners had gone to a doctor or used the "turkey baster" method to become pregnant, his answer surprised me. He looked at me with a big, devilish grin. "We did it," he answered.

David had never been with a woman, but he and Vicki decided that they didn't want the process to be impeded by technology. Using syringes and cups seemed inorganic and inefficient. Sperm would lose potency during each transfer. "I wanted the numbers," David said. The first attempt resulted in an uneventful two hours of awkward huffing and puffing. As David remembers: "We were sort of like, O.K., then! Let's get breakfast!" But within a month, after another try, Vicki became pregnant. "Thank God for videos," David said.

David has now fathered two children with Vicki: Eli, who is 6, and Wyatt, who is 21/2. Being a parent

has not been without its challenges. One morning last October, Eli woke up with abdominal pains. P. J. took him to the emergency room. The doctors found a mass in his abdomen, which turned out to be a tumor. The diagnosis was neuroblastoma, a childhood cancer of the sympathetic nervous system.

“At the outset,” David said, “They said he was at Stage 4, high risk, which is just about as bad as you can get.” The tumor was the size of a fist and had wrapped itself around every major blood vessel in his abdomen and attached itself to his kidney and liver. It had also metastasized into Eli’s bone marrow and lymph nodes. At one point, the doctors gave him a 30 percent chance of survival.

During eight and a half hours on the operating table, the doctors removed the tumor, one of Eli’s kidneys and his appendix. Soon after, he began chemotherapy, had a stem-cell transplant and started radiation. Luckily, David told me, the treatment took.

When the crisis first hit, everyone came together and dealt with it as a team. Vicki quit her job to be the full-time caretaker, and as David told me, any notion of part-time fathering went out the window. All hands were called on deck, and everyone responded in kind. After the initial trauma, however, when the emergency decisions and arrangements had been made and treatment was under way, David wanted to return to his part-time role. As he admitted later, this caused “some resentment.” The mothers, or at least Vicki, expected that David would continue to be more involved.

“It was tough, because I was under the impression we were all going to stand together,” Vicki told me later. “As time went on, it was: ‘Well, I’m going to work. I’m going to a play. I have this; I have that.’ And so the bulk of everything sort of fell on my shoulders.” The treatment schedule was grueling and left P. J. on her own with Wyatt; cancer was not something the family had planned on. “You go in under the assumption that you’re going to have a healthy child,” Vicki said. “Some things worked and some things didn’t work. David, the way he describes himself, he’s the machine who figures things out and gets things done; I’m more emotional; and P. J. is really levelheaded; Bobbie’s not necessarily a man of action but feels things really deeply — we all sort of reverted to our roles and got through it.” As a mother, she felt it was her job to bear the brunt of Eli’s care. But, she said, “it would have been much nicer to have the responsibilities spread out a little more. I think David’s aware of my feelings.”

David, as he explained it to me, saw things a little differently: “I’m like, Well, at the beginning, I was needed in that role. Now that things are together and moving, I’m pulling myself back, because I’m not — I didn’t sign on for —.” He stalled. He still had his bills to pay, his house to pay off and all his other affairs. Most significant, he said, “this wasn’t a responsibility that I necessarily took on. You know? This was where the untraditional part of the family arrangement came into question or got defined or whatever. Because that’s not what my role is here.” It was, he said, at times, “a difficult wire to walk.”

As we talked, Bobbie, who is 45 and has been David’s partner for nine years, arrived, wearing a black polo shirt. He’s well over six feet tall, big like David. His expression seemed sour, but when he smiled, he revealed a broken bicuspid, which produced an oddly sweet effect. Unlike two of the other gay “stepdads” I met in my research, who had described themselves as playing a sort of “fun uncle” role, Bobbie admittedly played the family heavy. Maybe, he said, in some ways it was his Mormon upbringing. “I just set more limits and probably expect more out of the kids,” he said.

Recently, when the entire family took a weeklong trip to the East Coast and visited David’s mother, Bobbie recalled, Eli handed an orange peel to one of his aunts for her to throw away rather than walk 10 feet to a garbage can. Bobbie chastised him, and Vicki took exception to that. Bobbie was left feeling, as he put it, “disenfranchised from the family unit.”

He continued: “There’s definitely a pecking order. Vicki is on top, then David, then P. J., then me.” Coming last, he said, is an inherently difficult position to maintain. If he gets too involved, he gets yelled at for doing so in the wrong way. If he seeks distance, he gets called on the carpet for being aloof.

“There have been a couple of times when I’ve been made to feel that I’m the fourth wheel,” he said. Once, he was told, “Look, you’re only here because of him” — because of David. “I was told that to my face,” he said, looking pained. “That was probably the deepest knife in the back I’ve ever had in my life. That totally destroyed my entire self-image as part of the family.”

As in most families, members get hurt to a degree that seems unfathomable — they feel exiled, exact revenge, remain silent, do what they need to do, then pick themselves up and keep going. I later learned that David never changed diapers. When the children were with their fathers, the job fell to Bobbie. When I mentioned the disparity, both men smiled. That’s the way it is.

For David, the admittedly vain actor, one of the supreme joys of fatherhood is the idea that one day his sons might see him on television. He imagines them turning on the TV and pointing him out to their friends: “There’s my dad!” Bobbie has a nearly opposite take. “A lot of what Mormonism is about is what you’re passing on to the next generation, some type of legacy, whether emotionally or through teaching.” His fondest wish is to empower his kids, to help Eli find happiness, “after all the drama and heaviness of his illness,” to help Wyatt become, say, “a great mathematician who goes on to become famous and prove great new theories or something along those lines.”

Being a father has taught him, he said, to “look for the enjoyment in life rather than the humor. Watching a kid discovering an anthill and watching him spend a half-hour poking around, discovering the way ants move and walk. It makes you stop and look at nature all over again, because you’re rediscovering it through kids’ eyes.”

As David listened to Bobbie describe this, he smiled very warmly. When the kids call Bobbie Dad, he said, “I know that just fills his heart. You know? It fills his heart.” Bobbie positively beamed. “It does fill your heart when, you know, when they call you Dad. You feel like you’re a part of something.”

If David and Bobbie’s experience was tumultuous but ultimately rewarding, R.’s venture into fatherhood seemed cursed from the beginning. “I don’t think any of us expected that we would find the pregnancy happening before we actually sat down and did a contract,” he told me. “I mean, I think part of it was, we thought, Oh, this is going to take a while. And there was just this excitement about getting started.” So R. and his co-parents began trying to become pregnant before any papers had been drawn up. Lowering his voice and faltering a bit, R. continued, “So it was foolish of us to kind of do that.”

What happened next would have been remarkable for any family. R. took a monthlong vacation to Australia, where he contracted hepatitis. The illness progressed to a neurological disorder called Guillain-Barré syndrome, and after he returned to New York, he became fully paralyzed and lay ill in the hospital for several weeks. He recovered, but by the time he resumed discussions with his parent partners, more than five months had passed.

During his absence, R. said, his partners had suffered what he called “serious amnesia.” Instead of keeping to terms he had thought long-ago settled, they now said: “No, we never agreed to these. We just said we understand that’s what you expected.”

The discussions became heated and disagreeable. Someone suggested mediation. His partners chose the mediator, a woman, he said, who had written a parenting book in which she seemed to be saying that to give the father any rights at all was to open the door to disaster. In R.’s view, her position was: “If you give the guy any rights, he may want more and want to take the child away from you.”

Lawyers were hired, both prominently involved in New York’s gay community. The two lawyers had worked together on activist fronts, and because of this shared history, R. thought his partners’ lawyer would be sympathetic to a harmonious outcome. Wrong. As R. recalled, “The first thing she said to my lawyer was: ‘Your client’s not getting any rights. I just want you to know. Whatever he thinks he’s getting, he’s not getting it.’”

M., the woman who carried R.’s child, told me that, in fact, she and her partner were afraid to give R. any official access to their daughter. “The contract we wanted him to sign really didn’t give him any rights, didn’t really specify anything,” she said, “because that’s the advice we got from our lawyer — no spelling out of rights.” They didn’t want to lay the groundwork for him to demand custody later.

So much for brotherhood, sisterhood, gayhood — amity had curdled into enmity. R. said his “partners” blamed him for the discord. Every time he tried to approach them directly, he said, they refused.

Meanwhile, the pregnancy had reached the third term. R. was despondent. Over the last nine months, his desire to be a parent had only become more ardent. Now he had apparently fathered a child he might never get to see. His lawyer, he said, told him: “I don’t know what to say. You’re in a terrible position.” R. could have insisted on his rights as a biological father. He could have used legal precedent in New York State to press for joint custody or, at the very least, visitation rights. But then, of course, it would have been an awfully contentious beginning for a family. R. chose to honor the original intent of his and his partners’ undertaking. In effect, he caved in.

After R. ceased making specific demands, tensions eased — somewhat. R. and the mothers had a rapprochement — enough of one to allow him to be at the hospital during his daughter’s birth. But later, when she began to speak, his daughter never called him Dad, Daddy, Father — anything of the kind. “For a long time,” he said, “I was just . . . my name.” He was seldom, if ever, allowed to be alone with his daughter. There were times, he admitted, when he grasped the amount of full-time devotion it took to raise a child and felt relief that the job was not his. But more often, he said, he would observe “the physical relationship my daughter had with her mothers and feel tremendous pain that I was never going to have that.”

In many respects, R.’s experience would seem to confirm the worst fears of those — inside and outside the gay community — who think attempts to re-engineer family dynamics in this way are doomed from the start. “I could never get a regular schedule for visiting,” R. said. “I was always kept at a distance. I was never brought in in a way where I felt like I was being acknowledged as really more than just a friend.” This went on for years, and he started to tear up as he described it. What pained him most, he said, was the feeling of irrevocability, the fact that each moment was a lost opportunity. “I was basically watching her grow up and having no control, just watching it go by. I would see her on the street, it was like, you know, you can imagine, I was looking at my child but not having access to her really.”

Like a lot of lesbian mothers at that time, M. said, she and her partner were, as she put it, “kind of paranoid. We didn’t want to promise a set amount of time or, say, summer vacation or any of that stuff.” She continued: “I think one of our big mistakes in our situation was we had no clue, all three of us going into it, and there weren’t that many people for us to talk to or things to read about it. He was just saying he wanted to be around and be known and have a relationship. And looking back, even that seemed scary to us.”

It was a deeply painful period for R. “I mean, if I were to say anything to people who were thinking about something like this,” he said, “it would be that with this kind of donor relationship, this web of affinity and genetics, it’s not like an article of clothing where someone gives it to you and then it’s yours and you can walk away. If you don’t want to have to be answerable to somebody, then go to an anonymous sperm bank. It’s like they wanted the privilege of being able to say to their children, ‘That’s your father,’ without having to really give up anything. And so, what’s that about?”

Luckily for R., things changed over time. When his daughter was 2, her nonbiological mother became impregnated with sperm donated by a gay black friend. She bore twins. A couple of years later, the mothers split up. A custody battle ensued, in which the white mother tried to gain sole custody of all three children. The judge ruled against her. The final agreement essentially assigned the three mixed-race children to the white mother roughly 60 percent of the time and to the black mother 40 percent of the time.

The current family tree is a crazy circuit board: The black woman has a new female partner. The white woman is now living with a man, and the two have had their own child. So, as R. said, between the one child that R. has with the black mother, the twins borne by the white mother with a black donor and the newest, fourth, child born to her with her new male partner, all of whom have some sort of sibling relation to one another, things can be a little confusing. “They’re quite a little petri dish of a family, as you can imagine,” R. told me. The children go from the white mother, who lives in a SoHo loft, to their black mother, who lives in a nice, middle-class row house in Crown Heights. On weekends, they often visit the white mother’s family’s country estate. “I’d say they’re like divorce kids,” he said. “They’ve got a family that split up; they go back and forth.” But the kids love both their mothers, and though the relationships may seem confusing to outsiders, there is certainly no lack of people in their lives who care about them — something many “straight” families can’t claim.

How he fits in as a father is less clear. Since the mothers broke up five years ago, R.’s relations with the birth mother — and his daughter — have warmed. When R.’s daughter turned 6, he was allowed to see her alone for the first time. And now? “It’s a work in progress,” he said. “We really enjoy each other. There are still issues about how much I get to see her.” But by now, R.’s birth mother wants him to have a relationship with his daughter. “My perspective has changed,” she said. “It’s good for her; it’s good for him; there’s no reason not to. She loves hanging out with him.” R.’s relationship with his daughter’s other mother remains strained. When I asked to speak with her through an intermediary, she declined to comment.

R. is not quite sure yet what his daughter thinks of him. He knows that she knows he’s her father. But he’s not sure what that means. A couple of years ago, he said, he took her to the Museum of Natural History. Outside, they bought a hot dog. “She couldn’t open the soda,” he said, “so she asked the vendor, ‘Can you open this?’ And he said, ‘Well, ask your father.’ So she started hearing that from strangers at a certain point. She probably didn’t know exactly who I was.”

He is still not positive to what degree any of the children in the various branches of the family have affixed their relation to all the parents. The white woman’s twins, the ones not biologically related to him, identify him as a “donor” — not their donor, not their father, but a title, donor, like uncle or godparent. As for his daughter, he said, “there are many men in her mothers’ lives. There are friends; there is the donor father of his daughter’s siblings; and there is the white mother’s new partner.” With all of these men in quasi-parental roles, he conceded, “I’m not sure if I’m — I can’t say honestly that I know that she’s accessing anything through me that she’s not getting anywhere else.”

Struggling to be precise, he said: “She recognizes me. I feel like we have a relationship, that there’s some . . . that I mean something to her, that she recognizes an affinity that’s not just: I like this guy; he’s a nice guy; I have a fun time with him. I think she sees me as being part of some kind of heritage of hers. Now maybe that’s my wanting to make a relationship where I want there to be one, but I think that there is something there.” He mentioned that last summer his daughter and her twin brothers visited R.’s family on Cape Cod. At the end of the trip, he was able to spend an entire day alone with his daughter and his own family — his parents and siblings. After the day was over, M. told him that his daughter hoped maybe next year she would be able to spend two days there.

“So,” he laughed, “who knows? Maybe in the end, all of this will be a plus. Maybe we won’t end up having that typical Oedipal hand baggage that she’ll have with her primary parents. It’s been a long road. It’s been very up and down. But I got through it, and I wouldn’t ever say I wish I hadn’t done it. Because it’s great, actually, to have her in my life. I just” — he paused — “would certainly have done it very differently.”

It was late August on a wooden deck overlooking a quarter-acre lot in Coon Rapids, a suburb north of Minneapolis. The deck was next to a three-bedroom house. A big glass table was loaded with barbecue fixings of time eternal: bean salad, chips, nuts, corn on the cob and the staple of American child-rearing, juice boxes. The guests included two gay fathers, one gay boyfriend-cum-stepdad, three lesbian mothers (one couldn't attend) and four boys.

P. J., David and Bobbie's co-parent, is an X-ray technician with a bawdy and infectious sense of humor. Mark's co-parents, Candi and Jean, one of whom is a former prison guard, were more reserved. Eight conversations were juggled as children came and went, screaming, laughing, crying, demanding juice boxes, spilling juice boxes, getting sand on the frosting on their mouths and so on. Eli arrived — post-chemo, post-stem-cell-transplant. He looked fragile and skinny. His veins glowed slightly in the sunshine. His blond hair was coming back, silky and short. One of his front teeth was missing, and he gawked, open-mouthed, squinting in the sun.

P. J. told me that he seemed to have overcome most of his physical problems in a matter of months. The emotional trauma might take longer. She recalled his, and her, time at the hospital. "To watch your 5-year-old son staring through a glass-pane window at a room full of other 5-year-olds playing ball, and he can't do it. And the look of sadness on his face. Every day it was: 'Mom, why am I here? Why do I have to do this? Why, why, why?'"

Eli had run off to play in the yard. He looked fine. Just awkward.

Mark and Candi and Jean's child, also Mark, showed up, looking still three-quarters asleep.

"Is that the monkey shirt?" someone asked him.

No answer.

"What's Wyatt doing?"

"He's downstairs playing."

An electronic child monitor sat on the table, confirming that Wyatt was indeed downstairs playing.

A bee buzzed. One of the mothers swatted it. "No bugs! Bugs are not allowed."

"I need some water."

Little Mark followed Eli to the backyard. Big Mark followed little Mark. David followed big Mark. All of them marched past the Playskool house and a litter of toys to the T-ball setup. Eli began to swat at a Wiffle ball.

Wyatt emerged from downstairs.

A chorus of parents began to chirp. "Hey, big guy!" "Hi!" "Hey, big guy!" "You big guy!" "Come here, you!"

Wyatt ran to Bobbie and gave him a big kiss and a hug. Bobbie, whom I initially judged to be a bit dour, was clearly warmed to the quick. And it was only at that moment that I realized he was as much a part of the family as everyone, even if his role seemed more precarious. Wyatt made the rounds, hugging everyone. Little Mark returned and also went around kissing and hugging everyone. The adults cooed.

The conversation skittered and zigzagged as it does in any group of people addlebrained by the presence of four children. Topics covered school meetings, health benefits, the rate at which kids outgrow clothes. Circumcision (pro or con). Potty training. Toys. Birthdays. Sibling relations. Crying (when to ignore, when not to).

Suddenly, Eli's mother jerked up. Where's Eli? David shrugged, lazily. "He's off being a boy!"

Wyatt nestled into her lap. "I want grape!"

"You want grape? You want some mandarin oranges, too?"

He shook his head.

"You want some cantaloupe?"

He shook his head again. "Uh-uh."

"You want some nuts?"

"Yah."

"What do you say?"

“Thanks!”

Candi turned to me. So, she wanted to know, What’s this article about? I told her it’s about part-time fatherhood for gay men and how well it works out and how it works out, period. She seemed suspicious. But . . . what’s the agenda? she asked. I laughed. Hadn’t she heard? Journalists are objective.

A bee came around the table. Eli panicked. He kept whining until it began to seem a bit attention-seeking. David asked him to quiet down a few times and finally told him to leave the table. Candi’s attention returned to me: “Why is this worth a story? It’s not even worth discussing. We’re just as American as our next-door neighbors. You see all these families with stepdads and stepmoms and half brothers and half sisters. What do you say about marriages that 50 percent of the time end in divorce? Why are we so threatening?” Most heterosexual parents, she said, marry, have sex “and then suddenly: ‘Whoops! We’re pregnant!’ Our families are designed. They’re conscious. They don’t just happen by happenstance. We had to sit down and say: O.K., what’s your relationship to the kid going to look like? What’s our relationship to each other going to look like? What’s this family going to look like?” She didn’t understand what the big deal was. “We want the same things that every other family wants! You know? We shop at Costco; we shop at Wal-Mart; we buy diapers. We’re just average. We’re downright boring!”

Two or three Saturdays after the barbecue, back in New York, R. knocked on the door of an East Village apartment. His daughter had been at a sleepover, and he was picking her up for an afternoon visit. A mellow, biracial couple answered and greeted him warmly. His daughter gathered her things, and we were on our way.

Now 10, R.’s daughter, H., has long, frizzy brown hair and hazelnut skin. She seemed very composed for her age. R. stopped her in the hallway. “Well, do I get a hug?” he asked awkwardly. He stooped, and they hugged. He rolled his eyes. “God, I wonder when I’ll have to stop asking.” It was mildly humiliating, but the moment passed almost instantly, and in 10 seconds we were outside in some of the last true summer warmth.

R. asked what she had gotten such and such a friend for her birthday. H. shrugged: “A monkey. Well, not a real monkey. But a notebook with monkeys on it. She loves monkeys.”

H. is tall for her age. As she walked and talked, she had an adorable way of punctuating the air with her fist every few syllables. Usually she jabbed with her right hand, and sometimes she jabbed with her left. It wasn’t a rap-video imitation; it just seemed like her own way of being.

R. asked her, “So . . . do you have any notion of what you want to do today?” It seemed slightly studied. Notion. Child. Planning. Do today.

We stopped by a boutiquey snack place to get H. some gourmet hot chocolate. She had Glacéau Vitaminwater instead. Passing some tables outside, she was spotted by her hockey coach. He shouted several times to get her attention. “How’re you doing?” he asked. She nodded, but ever so slightly. Very cool.

He asked her again, not noticing the nod. “Hey! How’re you doing?” Finally, obligingly, H. said, “O.K.” Pause. She ambled off with R.

The coach laughed. “Hey, anyone ever tell you you’re a great conversationalist?” R. said goodbye for her.

As we walked, R. repeated, “So, do you have any notion of what you want to do today?” She said she needed to buy a present for a second friend, whose birthday was also coming up. What did she want to get? R. asked.

Oh, maybe something by Paul Frank, she answered.

I asked who or what Paul Frank was. H. looked at me as if maybe I wasn’t so bright, but tried to explain. R. offered his two cents. “Paul Frank makes stuff and puts his brand or whatever all over it, and then because of that, it sells for more.”

H. argued that Paul Frank’s stuff was cute. R. disagreed. It was not cute.

H. disagreed. It was cute.

“I mean, come on,” she insisted. “At least he’s better than Hello Kitty.”

“Why?” R. asked. “Why is he better than Hello Kitty?” She looked at him with tolerant pity. “Because Hello Kitty is . . . dumb.”

John Bowe has contributed to The New Yorker, The American Prospect, GQ and “This American Life” on NPR. His book, “Nobodies,” about contemporary slavery in America, is to be published next fall by Random House.

[Next Article in Magazine \(1 of 17\) »](#)

TimesPoints - free enrollment

Ads by Google

[what's this?](#)

[Online Egg Donor Database](#)

Choose from over 1,000 Egg Donors and thousands of photos.
www.eggdonor.com

[Sperm bank](#)

Safe, effective sperm worldwide Rigorous testing. Beautiful babies.
www.ScandinavianCryobank.com

[Egg Donor](#)

Complete your Donor Wish List and find your Optimal Egg Donor
CenterForHumanReprod.com

Related Articles

- [Child Born to Lesbian Couple Will Have 2 Mothers Listed \(November 16, 2006\)](#)
- [When the Beard Is Too Painful to Remove \(August 3, 2006\)](#)
- [Lesbian Judge Fights Chilean Court for Taking Her Children \(July 20, 2006\)](#)
- [White House Letter; The Egg Roll \(Again!\) Becomes a Stage for Controversy \(April 10, 2006\)](#)

Related Searches

- [Families and Family Life](#)
- [Homosexuality](#)
- [Child Custody and Support](#)
- [Medicine and Health](#)

INSIDE NYTIMES.COM



TimesSelect

FASHION & STYLE »

ARTS »

TimesSelect

WEEK IN REVIEW »

THE CITY »



Rhoden: A Death Bridges a Rivalry



Weddings & Celebrations



Why Is Jay-Z So Anxious?

Morgensen: Carl Icahn's Tall Order at ImClone



Unbuilding Housing for the Poor of New Orleans



Lights Out for New York's Video Stores

[Home](#) | [World](#) | [U.S.](#) | [N.Y./Region](#) | [Business](#) | [Technology](#) | [Science](#) | [Health](#) | [Sports](#) | [Opinion](#) | [Arts](#) | [Style](#) | [Travel](#) | [Job Market](#) | [Real Estate](#)
[Automobiles](#) | [Back to Top](#)

Copyright 2006 The New York Times Company | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)