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Growing up with gay parents

SPECIAL REPORT: WHERE RAPE IS A WOMAN'S FATE

"MY PARENTS ARE GAY"

As judges across the country decide whether a parent's sexual behavior has a harmful effect on the child, we talk to the first generation of adult children raised by gay parents—and to two couples who are fighting for custody of their kids.

By Sharon Krum

1 Kellen Kaiser, 16, lives in San Francisco with her mothers, Nina and Nora.

In elementary school I was taunted for having lesbian mothers, and as I grew older I became very sensitive to anti-gay remarks. If anyone in school even dropped anti-gay slurs, I would challenge them. When I was younger, I was sometimes embarrassed when my mothers were affectionate in public, and I'd ask them to cut it out. By the time I was a teenager, I was over that. I am incredibly proud of them and love them both madly.

My mother met Nora when I was 5, and they got married in a commitment ceremony when I was 5½. There was a lot of teasing, and people told me my parents couldn't be married, which was very traumatic because it completely invalidated who I was.

I think it is ridiculous that people think >

NINA (LEFT), HER PARTNER NORA, AND NINA'S DAUGHTER KELLEN AT THEIR HOME IN SAN FRANCISCO.



you need a mother and a father to raise a healthy child. Biology doesn't make a family—love does. They should meet my family. There are two moms, and so much love—more than in most nuclear families. They both discipline me and argue with me, and I don't feel I lost anything by not having a father. If anything, they've been role models for a loving relationship that involves respect and compassion.

My father and I have an on-and-off relationship. He learned of my existence when I was 3, and since then I have seen him a couple of times. I'm sure when

I was younger I wondered what it would be like to have a father in my life, but the support in my family is so strong. If your parents are good enough, it doesn't matter that they do not form a traditional family.

I have plenty of male role models. Both my mothers adore men, so I was raised in a house that was not anti-male. Society at large has given me male role models, and I always have male friends, teachers, and grandparents to turn to.

People assume living in a gay household will make you gay. That is ridiculous. I think these

"I FEEL BLESSED BECAUSE THERE IS SO MUCH LOVE IN OUR FAMILY," SAYS JOSH GRAHAM, SEEN HERE WITH SARA (CENTER) AND BONNIE.

assumptions come from ignorance and prejudice. I am straight, and it came to me naturally and early on. I think my mothers give me different things in equal measure. Nina and I are incredibly similar. We look alike; we share interests. She is my best friend and she sets the rules. Nora waivers; she is more of a softie. Nora is really wise, and she has taught me a lot about people.

The hard thing for kids is that before you start school, you are not exposed to homophobia, but once you're in school, you're bombarded with it. I think schools have to play a part in this. Just as you teach that racism is wrong, you should teach that homophobia is wrong.

2 Josh Graham, 30, lives in Portland, Oregon. He was raised by two mothers, Sara and Bonnie.

"I was aware of my own sexuality and never doubted it."

My father died when I was 5. I was 10 when my mom met Bonnie, and they moved in together. That was very difficult for me. I hid it from all my friends at school. Everybody else had had a mom and a dad, even if they were divorced. But I >

"People assume living in a gay

"The court thought my being gay would harm the girls."

Estimates suggest that anywhere from 6 to 10 million kids in the U.S. have one gay parent. And more and more often, these parents are fighting for custody of their children.

Julie Packard, 33, left her marriage of 11 years after falling in love with another woman. In court, Julie's ex-husband argued that he and his new wife could provide a "Brady Bunch" life for his two daughters. The judge agreed that Julie's lesbianism was a factor in the custody decision and that her husband provided "a more traditional family environment for the children." Julie has appealed and is awaiting a ruling.

"My daughters have said openly that they want to live with me. My oldest starts crying when I take her back from a visitation. They love my partner; they consider her a second mother.

We don't influence the girls either way. We are raising them to accept everyone and not to judge. My ex-husband and his wife tell the girls that I am a sinner, that I am going to hell.

"I know we can provide a loving environment, just like a heterosexual couple. I consider myself a good mother with good morals. I don't think the girls will lose anything coming back to me. They will still see their father, but they will also have us.

"I feel that our legal system is unfair and that most judges base their decisions on ignorance and incorrect assumptions about the gay lifestyle. They think we're weird. They don't have a true idea of who we are. I don't see us as that different. Yes, we're two women, but that's it."

Photos have been omitted to protect the children.



JENNIFER DIMARCO (RIGHT) WITH "MAMA" (CENTER), "MUMU" (LEFT), AND SISTER.

that somebody could disrespect my mother like that. That was the main reason our marriage broke up. I came to the conclusion that my mother's sexuality is nobody's business but her own. She is a wonderful, loving person. I respect her lifestyle.

My daughter is now 6 and lives with her

mother. My advice to her is that she isn't different from anyone else just because of her grandmother's sexual preference. She knows that her grandmother lives with a woman, but she loves her regardless.

had two mothers, and I didn't want to be different. For a long time, I told people Bonnie was my aunt. I had a hard time dealing with my mother being a lesbian. I didn't really talk about having lesbian moms until I was 21. If there were ever homophobic slurs in the schoolyard, I played along because I wanted to fit in. My moms were closeted in the early years, but even so, I was scared somebody would find out. I didn't want them to attend school activities together. They didn't. They understood.

I missed my father. I missed the discipline, having a man around the house. Basically, Bonnie was like a stepmother I didn't get along with. She tried to discipline me and reach out to me, and I rejected it all.

I know that when I was younger, having two mothers made me evaluate my own sexuality. I am straight, and I guess I felt I needed to prove it, which of course is insane. Gay parents don't make you gay. I was aware of my own sexuality and never doubted it.

I feel really bad now because I was really hard on Bonnie. I was angry at her. I guess I felt threatened by her. Before she came along, it was just me and my mother.

Then something happened that changed my whole attitude. I got married, my wife and I had a daughter, and my wife didn't want the grandmothers to visit us. She was very homophobic, and I was so hurt

3 Jennifer DiMarco, 24, lives in Radner, Ohio. She was raised by two mothers, "Mama" and "Mumu."

"I told them I was gay when I was 13. I never questioned my sexuality."

When I was 5, my father was killed. Soon after, my mother met her partner. I never thought what they were doing was wrong. So many kids had parents who were divorced. It wasn't like everyone around me was living in a traditional family.

I don't remember when I consciously realized my mothers were lesbians. But when I was 10 I wrote my first book, and it had lesbian characters in it. I knew my moms slept in the same bed and were lovers, but I didn't hear the word "lesbian" in the house until I was 12 or 13.

They were never openly affectionate in public, but they were open about who they were. I saw a lot of gay bashing when I was a child. As a consequence, I became very protective of them. My moms always went to PTA meetings and were very involved in my life. School-kids called them freaks and ▷

"My ex-wife doesn't want her kids raised by gay people."

Fred Smith, 38, lost custody of his two boys in June 1995. The reason was his homosexuality. Fred appealed the decision in 1996 and won. However, his sons still live with their mother in Kansas, as she has appealed to the North Carolina Supreme Court. A decision is due later this year.

"When we were married, my wife always had lesbian friends, and she tells me now she doesn't have anything against gay people. She just doesn't want her kids raised by them. We got divorced in 1991, and she consented to my having full custody. She got the boys for two months each summer, and that arrangement seemed to be fine with her. I lived with them and my grandmother (now deceased) until 1994. Then I met Tim.

"Tim loves my kids. He is a wonderful stepfather. I was really shocked when my wife served me with papers saying she wanted the children back."

[Fred's ex-wife won the initial custody battle. Judge Deborah Burgin found that Tim and Fred were openly affectionate, that they did not provide a "fit and proper" home, and that the couple's behavior exposed the children to unfit and improper influences.]

"The court decision was devastating. We are not openly affectionate: I would never embarrass the boys in any way, and the fact that homosexuality is not publicly accepted means that I stay very private. Being gay has nothing to do with the kind of parent I am. I provide a stable home and strong values.

"I do fear now that my ex-wife and her new husband are filling the kids' minds with ideas about living with gay fathers. The judge said the boys need a traditional family. But if they come back to me, they won't suffer by not having a full-time mother. She will still play her part. But I love those boys, and I want to raise them."

Photos have been omitted to protect the children.

FACT The data does not suggest **HIGHER RATES** of homosexuality among children of gay parents.

taunted me, and I got into a lot of fights over it. I am a Christian, and it was hard as a child to go to church and hear the message that your mothers are sinners. For a while, I left the church because of it.

It's funny, because if you met us you would see we really are the traditional American family. As a parent, my biological mom has been more of a free spirit, always praising me, while my "heart" mom has been more authoritarian and intellectual. I call my biological mom "Mama" and my heart mom "Mumu." I just see having two mothers as double the love and caring and compassion. I've also had a wonderful male role model in my grandfather. He never had a problem with my mother being gay, and my grandparents have always accepted "Mumu" completely. Sometimes I miss my father terribly, especially around his birthday, but my grandfather fills the place my father would have.

A lot of children of gay parents keep it all a big secret, but I never did. My younger sister, however, had problems with it. She didn't bring friends home because she was worried about their reactions.

I told my mothers I was gay when I was 13, and they were horrified. They cried, asking me if I was sure. They didn't want me to suffer the way they did, but I never questioned my sexuality; I always knew. One good thing about coming out was that I didn't have to worry about getting kicked out of the family.

The comment I most often hear is that my moms "made" me gay. It's not true. My sexuality was defined, and I knew it. I am now in a committed relationship. I am really proud of my moms for being honest with us and with themselves. There was

so much love in our house that my friends actually used to say they envied me.

4 Greg Eighmey, 26, lives in Portland, Oregon. He was raised by two fathers, George and Peter.

"I choose to love my wife, and my father chooses to love Peter."

I was 10 when my father told me he was gay and explained that Peter would become part of his life. They moved in together, and at 13 I came to live with them. I think that when I was that young, I didn't really have a concept of what being gay was. But when friends came by, if there were gay magazines lying around I'd turn them on their covers.

Open affection wasn't a problem for me because Dad and Peter are not like that. When I was about 15, I took a stand and told people my parents were gay. I was very sensitive to homophobic comments, and I thought nothing of getting in a guy's face and saying, "I know gay people and you are wrong," or "My father is gay." Usually they had no response.

As I see it, the only difference is in who my dad chooses to love. I choose to love my wife, and my dad chooses to love Peter.

I am not very close to Peter. I think I blamed him for the upheaval after my parents got divorced and my dad came out. I certainly love and respect him; we just don't have a lot in common. But I am very close to my dad, and I see him and Peter regularly.

People think a gay father is not a good role model for a straight son. But we did plenty together—

sports and things. Now we shoot pool and have a beer, and I can talk to him about anything.

Even though my father got custody, I still have a relationship with my mother, and I certainly don't feel that growing up in a gay household deprived me of heterosexual role models. I was kissing girls at age 8 in school! I knew I was straight, and I could always talk to my dad about girls. I was never curious about homosexual love, ever.

Having two fathers has made me very sensitive to other people's feelings, because I saw how Dad suffered due to homophobia. I've also learned what love and commitment mean. Dad and Peter have been together for 16 years. They've been through some rocky patches, but they've stuck it out. It makes no difference that they are two men. Gay and straight parents really do want the same thing, which is to love and raise their families. □

GREG EIGHMEY (RIGHT) AND HIS FATHER GEORGE HAVE A VERY CLOSE RELATIONSHIP. "I CAN TALK TO HIM ABOUT ANYTHING," SAYS GREG.



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