

Children Of Gays

By Nikki Meredith

By some estimates there are as many as 10 million children of homosexual parents in this country. Yet despite their numbers, they are one of the most isolated and hidden minorities in our midst. Although they represent the first generation to have lived with openly gay parents, most of them do not know a single other person in their situation. "We have not yet come out of the closet," says the daughter of a gay man. The stigma that once forced many of their parents to lead secret lives has been passed down to them and it is their turn to hide.

The notion of homosexual parenthood treads on such sacred social and psychological territory that even in the Bay Area, presumably one of the most liberal communities in the country, no young or adolescent children of gay parents — and only two adult children — were willing to have their real names used in this article. And most of the parents, even those who have been public about their homosexuality for years, asked for anonymity in order to protect their children.

While most children of homosexual parents are the result of heterosexual couplings that preceded the "coming out" of a parent, there is currently a baby boomlet going on among gays who are becoming "intentional parents" — a term used to describe admitted homosexuals who are having children.

ALTHOUGH MOST OF THE problems described by children of gays are created by pressures from the outside world, some of their distress is caused by measures their parents take in pursuit of their own sexual liberation. This discomfort is usually more acutely felt by those children whose parents come out of the closet after long marriages. Watching this transformation, they say, can be painfully jarring.

"I was raised in a household where sex was never mentioned," says Susan, now 32, whose father came out when she was in college. "My father went from being asexual to being totally fixated on sex. There was so much that was out of character for him . . . His humor changed, his behavior changed, his attitudes about so many things changed."

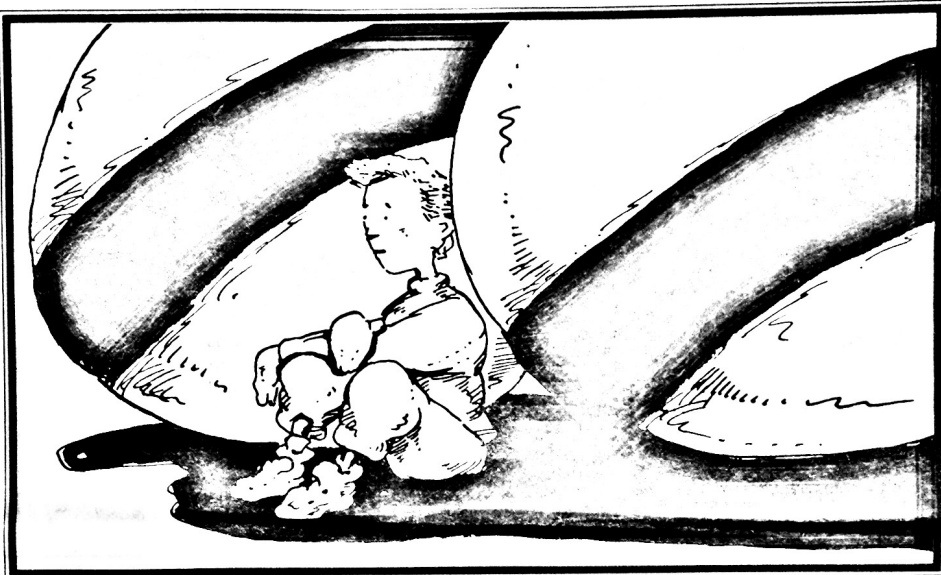
Susan says she knows it was a struggle for her father to take the step he did, but she thinks he was insensitive to its effects on her. "I tried to think that it was neat that he was so open in front of me, but sometimes, like when he would kiss his lovers in front of me, I would think, he ought already."

She believes that some of her father's behavior is a reflection of his difficulty in accepting his sexual identity. "I think he's taken me into weird situations, exposed me to weird stuff, to test me. He wants to see how accepting I'll be because of his own ambivalence. If I accept it, then it's okay."

Initially his new-found sexuality seemed to include new-found ambivalence about her. "Although that's changed — he now says he's glad he had kids — for a while I think he was sorry that he had a family," says Susan.

But even in the midst of this upheaval, she and her father have managed to remain close. "Having a

Tom Murray



sense of humor about the whole thing hasn't hurt," she says. When she describes a dinner out with her dad, she says the eye contact between him and the waiters sometimes takes her aback. "At this stage in my life," says Susan, who is pretty and has a child-like sexiness, "I can't help but think the waiters should be flirting with me instead of my father."

"I remember when my parents were married how my mother always complained that my father never had enough men friends," she continues, laughing. "Well, he's got a lot of them now."

NOT ALL DAUGHTERS can see the humor in their situations. Joan, 35, a personnel manager in a large San Francisco financial institution, completely

She admits that the situation is complicated by her father's drinking problem, and that she can't always identify the cause of a change in his personality. She nevertheless has a decidedly negative view of his social circle, which she considers to be anti-female. "I hate the sexism, I hate the chauvinism, I hate the way they call each other 'bitches.'"

She also hates the overt sexuality — a complaint voiced by other adult daughters of gay men. "It's like having Hugh Hefner for a father," says Joan. "He has all of this phallic art scattered around his house. I've never told anyone this, not even my sisters, but I once found a picture of him in drag. It was so disgusting. It feels like the little girl in me is

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loses hers when she talks about her father. Once an elder in his church and a corporation executive, her 61-year-old father is now retired and living with his lover — a man she describes as a "hustler" and user of people. She says that during the past 15 years her father has changed profoundly, from his demeanor ("he's effeminate, he's affected, he's exaggerated") to his role as a father to her and her two sisters ("he has no interest in anything outside of himself").

"There have been so many times when I've needed him and he hasn't come through," says Joan. "When I grew up I had the benefit of his values, his beliefs, his wisdom. Now he's a human black hole."

frightened and unprotected, and it panics me."

Her younger sister Pat, who has a four-year-old daughter, also objects to some of his interior decor. She told him recently that if he wanted to continue having his grandchild come to his house, he was going to have to select different art to display. "I try to put it in perspective," says Pat. "I try to focus on the good things he gave me. The fact that he's crapped out as a father shouldn't change what he was, but it's all so mixed up to me. But I do feel cheated."

Problems combining the role of parent with the role of homosexual are not uncommon among men

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When a source is identified by first name only, the name is fictitious.

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who act on their homosexual desires after marriage, according to Frederick Bozett, a researcher at the University of Oklahoma. He says that fathers in this situation often suffer what he calls "identity incongruity." Writing in the July 1981 issue of the *Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, Bozett explains that generally the father's own negative stereotype of homosexuality combined with the fact that his entire socialization had been within a heterosexual context leaves him in a quandary. "For these fathers, being gay is initially unacceptable, but being a gay father is so preposterous as to be out of the question." He says that usually, as these men become more comfortable with their sexual identities they can reincorporate their roles as fathers into their lives.

Some late-in-life homosexuals do manage to escape these identity problems. Film producer Kevin White was 16 when his father came out after a 17-year marriage. He has never felt that his father's homosexuality interfered with their relationship. "In my family, the kids always came first. If my father sensed there was anything uncomfortable for us he would not do it, or he would want to talk about it with us."

White, who recently completed a documentary called *Not All Parents Are Straight*, concedes that some parents take the pursuit of their homosexual identification too far, but he believes that it is equally damaging for them to hide it. "I get upset with both extremes," he says.

When his father first came out, White says he wasn't exactly thrilled. "I felt, 'well, there goes my nuclear family,' but I was also relieved in a way. We knew something was amiss, but we didn't know what it was."

He says life as an adolescent boy with a gay father wasn't easy — "as a child of a homosexual, you are always a curiosity" — but believes that his parents' openness helped him get through it unscathed. In fact he now feels that many children of gay parents ultimately benefit from the experience. "Because of

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my father's courage, I was raised with a sense of conviction to be an individual."

JIM SPAHR, A STUDENT at U.C. Berkeley, was also in high school when his mother, Jane, a Presbyterian minister, declared her homosexuality. He says her honesty and the way she handled subsequent discrimination (she lost her job) added a valuable dimension to his upbringing. "Of course, everybody would like to have a mom and dad who are married and live in the same house," he says.

"But my situation was good for me in other ways. I saw my mother's strength. Because so many people didn't like what she was, she had to like herself."

Researcher Gail Lewis found similar reactions when she interviewed 21 children of lesbian mothers for a study published in the May 1980 issue of the journal *Social Work*. "Almost without exception, the children were proud of their mothers for challenging society's rules and for standing up for what she believed . . . " she writes. "Many of the children said the experience had given them permission to seek roles in life that were not conventional."

Oddly enough, the "conventions" these families are challenging are not just the ones imposed by straight society. Historically, the homosexual community has not been particularly hospitable to gay parents. "Having children is a status passage in the heterosexual world; in the homosexual world it is often a stigma," writes researcher Bozett. "Most gay men have given up or have never entertained the notion of having children . . . Many gay men are unwilling to couple, or even to consider coupling with a gay father."

A Marin mother of an 11-year-old boy says the lesbian lifestyle, oriented as it is to singles and couples, is not particularly accommodating to families. "I've had a lot of difficulty integrating my role as a mother with my social life," she says. "I have had to break up with lovers because my relationship with my son was too threatening to them. My son always comes first and that's not easy for some women to accept."

Steve, the Berkeley father of 12-year-old Simone, likens the difficulty gay families have finding a social

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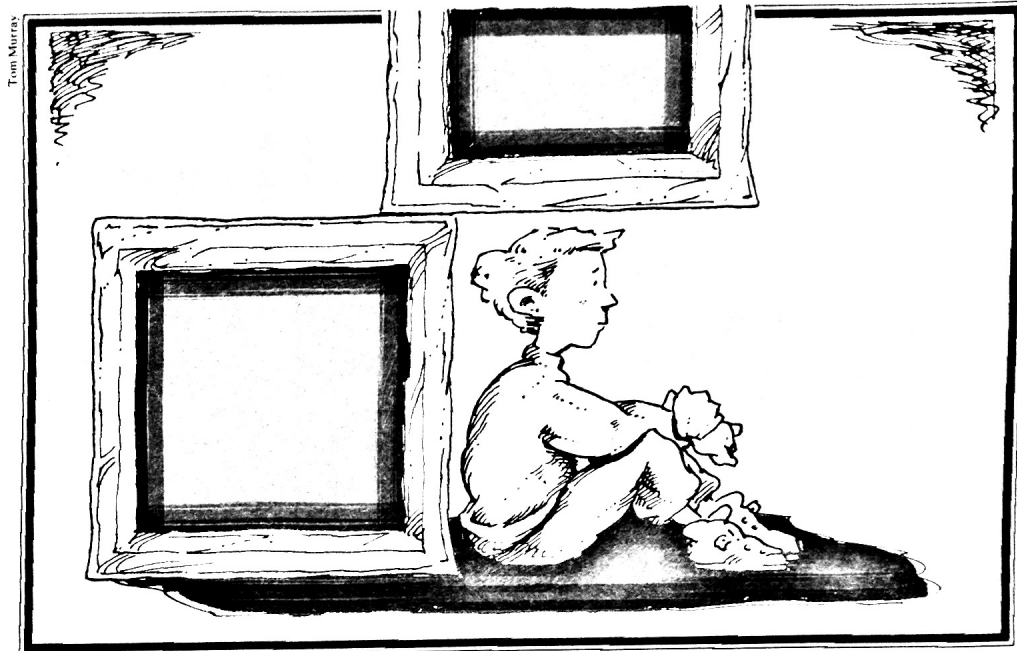
During most of this conversation, Jennifer is interested in the questions and eager to answer them. At one point, however, when her mother starts expressing her less-than-positive observations about men and heterosexual relationships, Jennifer starts to look bored. She gets up, playfully hugs her mother and then wanders around the room.

Meanwhile, when her mother is asked if she has any preference about her daughter's sexual orientation, she says it would be wrong to try to mold Jennifer in either direction. "If she can find a man, the kind of man I was never able to find, that's fine. But to me men are an incomprehensible species. They can't communicate on a deeper level and straight women have bought into the same conditioning."

Of course one member of this incomprehensible "species" is her former husband and Jennifer's father. Jennifer, who sees him on a regular basis, says she likes her father but adds that he's "not very bright" — the exact phrase her mother had used to describe him earlier.

After her mother completes her discourse on the male "species," Jennifer, in response to a question about boys, says she likes them and she's pretty sure she's straight. She also says she thinks she will probably get married someday.

CHANCES ARE THAT JENNIFER is right. Numerous studies have failed to demonstrate any relationship between the sexual orientation of parents and that of their children. In one such study — an analysis of 37 children raised by homosexual or transsexual parents — psychiatrist Richard Green concluded that parents' influence on their children's sexual identity is much more limited than was once believed. "Children do not live in a universe composed entirely of home environments," he writes in the



June 1978 issue of the *American Journal of Psychiatry*. "Children spend many hours watching television and reading and are exposed through mass media to conventional patterns of psychosexual development."

The fact is that despite volumes of psychoanalytic and social learning theory written by experts who claim to have the answers, we still haven't a clue as to what actually forms sexual preferences. In Kevin White's documentary, in a segment featuring two boys and their lesbian mother, one of the boys says to the interviewer proudly, "My mother never tried to

make us gay." Clearly surprised by this statement, his mother asked, "Even if I wanted to make you gay, how do you think I would go about doing it?" Her son pauses and then replies, laughing, "I guess by inviting a lot of boys over here."

Still, a belief in "inherited" homosexuality persists. Jennifer's mother, for one, says she knows of several second-generation homosexuals and she believes her own mother was a closet lesbian ("For heaven's sake, she was a drill instructor in the Army"). Also doubtful of the research findings is

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Peter, a 19-year-old student at U.C. Berkeley. His mother is a lesbian, his father once had a male lover, and Peter himself says he's a bisexual. "Right now I have a boyfriend and a girlfriend."

It does seem probable that children of homosexuals, should they feel homosexual stirrings, would feel freer to express them. Because of the social stigma, most gay parents say they would prefer their kids to be heterosexuals, but they also say they want their kids to have the freedom to make the choice. "In my family I didn't feel the pressure to be straight," says Kevin. "Although it turned out that I am, I think the freedom to explore is healthy."

FOUR YEARS AGO RON WRIGHT, the father of an adolescent girl, started a group for gays who are happy about their parenthood. He had previously been a member of a gay father group but felt that he had little in common with the other men. "Most of them were so bruised and wounded from confrontations with their former wives, it was hard for them to focus on issues having to do with kids," he says. "I was interested in getting people together who were 'intentionally' interested in being parents."

Over the years, the ranks of "intentional" parents has grown and the multitude of co-parenting arrangements arising out of this trend is redefining the meaning of family. The mother in one such unconventional family is Sally, a 36-year-old computer programmer. About three years ago Sally decided she wanted a child, but unlike most of the lesbians she knew, she also wanted a participating father for her child. "I wanted my baby to have grandparents from two sides, cousins, aunts. I wanted there to be another family besides mine. There is always a time when children ask who, where, why. I wanted to have a real person to talk about."

There were very few men in Sally's life to choose from but through mutual acquaintances she eventually met Ken, a gay man who wanted to be a father. She liked him immediately and they met regularly for about two years, discussing their values, their ideas about discipline and the kind of life they wanted for a

baby. Ten months ago, through artificial insemination, Sally and Ken became the parents of a baby girl.

"Initially I envisioned a father who would be only minimally involved," says Sally, "but as our relationship evolved, my feelings changed. I decided I wanted the relationship to be fifty-fifty. So far, it's working out very well."

Both of their families are thrilled. Says Sally, "She is very special to our parents because no one figured they'd ever get a grandchild from either one of us."

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most gay parents say they would prefer their children
to be heterosexuals.*

Although they share in the care of their daughter, Sally and Ken live apart and do not spend much time as a threesome. Sally thinks they will probably never live together as a family although she says lately she's been harboring fantasies that someday they might share a two-flat building.

Having a child and being involved with Ken has caused Sally to reexamine some of her attitudes about men. "Lesbians tend to make disparaging remarks about men and I know it's been part of my thinking. Sometimes when I'm talking to Ken I'll catch myself saying something negative against men. Because he is my daughter's father, I am beginning to question some of my old assumptions."

AMONG THESE NEW FAMILIES, Carol and Linda and "their" daughter Lisa represent still another variation on unconventionality. Linda, who gave birth to Lisa eight years ago, conceived her daughter through artificial insemination. Although Carol and Linda have never been lovers, they have lived together for 13 years. When Lisa asks questions about her father, she is told that there are two kinds of fathers: biological fathers and fathers who are parents. Hers is a biological father.

Carol says she is not a "father" to Lisa but a se-

cond mother — Lisa sometimes calls them both by their first names and sometimes calls them both Mommy. Although the child has a stronger bond with her biological mother, Carol says her relationship with Lisa is also special. "Since my role doesn't have a label it's hard for other people to understand it, but that hasn't affected our closeness."

Because Linda has a well-paying job as an executive with a communications firm and Carol is studying for the bar, Linda contributes more to Lisa's sup-

port. Otherwise they share parental responsibilities. Carol says it was always their intention that their daughter have a male role model but as it's turned out, "there haven't been very many in our lives." Nonetheless, she doesn't think Lisa is suffering from this lack of male presence.

Indeed it appears that most lesbians raising children are doing so without a male presence. Although the issue of fatherless homes has received considerable attention in recent years, most studies are inconclusive. Some recent research has pointed to the detrimental effect of a father's absence on children's cognitive development, but most of the studies have been conducted on families that have other problems besides a missing father. Other research has demonstrated that when the family circumstances are good, the absence of a father has relatively little detrimental effect on children's mental development.

In terms of emotional development, it has long been theorized that the father enables the child to compete the process of separation from the mother. In order to examine this, San Francisco psychologist Ailsa Steckel compared the "separation-individuation" process of children of lesbian couples to that of

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children of heterosexual couples. Based on various psychological tests and on interviews, she concluded that the children in both groups fell within the normal range. Steckel speculates that it may be the mere presence of a second parent rather than the gender of the second parent that helps with the task of separation.

Most of the studies on the absence of fathers, however, are done with children who have fathers but don't live with them. Babies born from artificial insemination and raised by lesbians not only lack a father in their lives, they lack one in their psyches. (At the Northern California sperm bank, male donors have the option of deciding whether or not their identity can be released to the child when he becomes 18. According to their last report, 44 percent have agreed, 56 percent have declined.)

Lesbian artificial insemination is too recent a phenomenon to yield much data about its ultimate repercussions. But if the experience of adoptive kids offers any clue, this issue is certain to be problematic. Until recently, the party line on this issue is that if mothers are honest with their kids and present their

birth in a positive way, the children will not be driven to find out who their biological fathers are. Some lesbian mothers, however, are having second thoughts.

"For a long time we said that as long as your child has two moms who love you, you don't have to know who your dad is," says one mother who has had to answer persistent questions from her son. "Now I'm beginning to think that the belief comes from our desire to believe it's true. I don't think you can know how your child is going to feel about this."

The magnitude of the prejudice experienced by children of gay parents reflects how formidable the taboo is against homosexual "reproduction" in our society. The existence of gay parents challenges our values and our way of life in a way we will probably never fully understand. And in fact the successful lives of their children may ultimately prove that some of our long-held beliefs about the essentials of healthy child development are based more on theoretical constructs and tradition than on reality.

Successful lives notwithstanding, anyone who has good feelings about men and fathers will find it painful to think about a child searching for a father he can never find. But is it any less poignant to watch a child waiting for a father he once had but who is never coming back? Children who have had to deal with both divorce and the "coming out" of a parent say that the disruption of the divorce was much

harder to accept than the changed sexual orientation of the parent.

From a look at the lives of children of homosexuals, it is clear that their needs are sometimes swept aside as their parents pursue their own dreams. What is not clear, however, is whether it happens more to them than it does to the children of heterosexuals.

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