

The Father Shore

Boom" Is Changing Gay Culture

By Rick Loftus, M.D.

KGO anchor Pete Wilson's idiotic remark calling the birth of Supervisor Bevan Dufty and his friend Rebecca Goldfader's baby Sidney a "travesty" resulted in a firestorm which brought the reality of gay parenting into sharp public focus. Once, parenthood might have seemed to gay men like an exotic tourist destination across the ocean—fun to visit for a brief time, like my recent "Dad for a Day" with my 5-year-old niece Emma Rose, but not home. More and more, however, gay men are snapping up real estate and putting down roots on the "Father Shore." According to the Urban Institute, between 1990 and 2000, the percent of gay male households including at least one child had quadrupled, from 5% to 20%. At a lecture this past spring for the UCSF LGBT health elective, I noted that my biggest surprise as a gay men's health specialist has been witnessing this quiet revolution in our culture. Being a gay "daddy" often no longer refers to role-playing. Increasingly, it's a literal role.

Fittingly, gay men today attain gay fatherhood in many ways. In my own practice, I have patients co-parenting as a couple with lesbian couples; pairing off with one lesbian partner; raising siblings' children; fostering; adopting; fathering via surrogacy; and becoming known donors to women through the Rainbow Flag gay sperm bank. Gay men are constructing their fatherhood roles with the same creativity they've applied to their sexual lives.

In some cases, men are fathers in little more than the biological

sense, such as being a sperm donor. On the other end of the spectrum, they are serving as both father and mother in the usual all-encompassing, 24-7 manner—to children with whom they share bonds of genetics, or simply love. One of my patients told me his foster son explained to him that since Dad did most of the cooking, he would be honored on Mother's Day, while Papa—his other dad—would be honored on Father's Day. Clearly the children of these gay families use as much creativity in building their queer families as their parents do.

What's striking to me is how invisible these men often remain in our community. Until I started doctoring them, I had no idea how many gay men in San Francisco were parenting. Some would say the absence of gay parents from gay culture isn't an accident—that "gay parent" is an oxymoron, that the two worlds collide. And Pete Wilson is hardly the only person to suggest gay life and parenthood are incompatible. An April 2006 story in the Los Angeles Times, for example, illustrated the tensions resulting from the increased presence of families with children in the Castro. Concerned over how the street's racy storefront displays might affect their kids, parents—straight and gay—complained to the city. Traditional gay activists countered that there's only one neighborhood in all the world with as unabashed an embrace of gay sex as the Castro, and if parents—straight or gay—don't like it, well, they can live elsewhere.

Such stories fail to grasp the phe-

nominal trailblazing gay parents undertake, on a daily basis. Be a gay man at 18th and Castro; ho hum. Be a gay man at the Bayshore Elementary PTA meeting—that's ballsy. Back in 1969, the rioters at Stonewall were similarly at the margins of the gay community—mostly drag queens of color. And yet, they were our bravest pioneers. That story came to my mind when Leland Traidman, head of Rainbow Flag Health Services (gayspermbank.org) and a gay dad, told me how he and his partner, Dr. Stewart Blandon, confronted their local school district officials when they were told that a "family cultures" night would not allow a table on "LGBT families." Chinese, Mexican, Polish families, sure, but not LGBT families. Leland and Stewart, who have a long history of queer activism, stared the homophobes down. A place for the gay families was made. Score one for the queer folk.

What does all this mean for the cultures of gay men in San Francisco and the world-at-large? To my mind, it's a welcome annex to the ever-expanding Winchester Mystery House of queer life-paths. I also see it challenging assumptions about gay culture, both by enemies external to our communities, but also by those within LGBT cultures. Recent efforts on behalf of gay marriage, for example, have uncovered rifts in our ranks, as radicals worry advocacy for presumably monogamous LGBT marriages may neglect, even undermine, queers with less "conventional" lifestyles. (See "beyondmarriage.org" for details.) Some may see queers who choose parenting and family paths as

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“sell-outs” betraying “true” LGBT culture.

Of course that’s ridiculous, and provincial. When you consider that the Castro twenty years ago had taken on the icy pall of a ghost town due to AIDS, its present-day rejuvenation—including the patter of a few tiny feet—is a sign of resilience. What could be a better symbol of hope in the face of so much death, than the smattering of baby carriages and snugglies now spotted amongst the next generation of gay men walking its streets? It’s one sign of healing whose importance many gay men, especially those under the age of 30, probably don’t notice, or at least underestimate.

While writing this essay, I was reminded of a great line from Ron Howard’s movie *Parenthood*. Keanu Reeves, who plays Tod, the son of an abusive, neglectful father, confides in his soon-to-be mother-in-law, Dianne Wiest: “You know, Mrs. Buckman, you need a license to buy a dog, to drive a car—hell, you even need a license to catch a fish. But they’ll let any butt-reaming asshole be a father.”

Ah, Tod, if only it were true! As we butt-reamers can tell you, as of 2006, there’s six states in America that currently have made it illegal for us to become fathers, at least by adoption, and another sixteen are drafting such laws. Meanwhile, the US FDA just last year advised even sperm banks to refuse donations from gay men, supposedly due to our higher rate of HIV infection. (Never mind this policy makes no sense, in light of the hefty screening for HIV and other

infections sperm donors must undergo. Since when has anything in the current administration been logical?)

In truth, given how difficult society makes it for out gay men to choose the path of fatherhood, the upshot is that gay men do not usually father children by accident, as so many heterosexual men seem to do. And that offers to me the delightful prospect that, on a per capita basis, gay men almost certainly make better fathers than straights do. After all, most gay men will wind up dads by choice, not accident. That doesn’t guarantee success, but it bolsters the chances. I’m intrigued that we might “beat” the straight boys on some of their own prime real estate, so to speak.

The “Father Shore” becomes the newest gay neighborhood; details at eleven. Take that, Pete Wilson!

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