



‘Just the way
we live
our life’



KAREN LEACH AND TAMMY HARRINGTON, BOTH OF MUNNSVILLE, N.Y., ARE IN LOVE AND RAISING A FAMILY. WHEN ASKED IF THEY HAVE HAD A COMMITMENT CEREMONY, THEY SAID NO, THEY DID NOT THINK IT WAS NECESSARY. THE COMMITMENT THEY HAVE TO EACH OTHER AND TO THEIR CHILDREN, IS, AS LEACH PUT IT, “JUST THE WAY WE LIVE OUR LIFE.”

Photographs and story by Angie Gaul



family portrait



Tammy Harrington spends quiet time with her infant daughter, Anna.

Like all parents, Tammy Harrington, 37, and Karen Leach, 43, of Munnsville, N.Y., want their children to grow up surrounded by decent people who love them. But Graham, 2, and Anna, 7 months old, are special. They have two moms.

The Harrington children are among an estimated “8 million to 12 million American children (who) are currently being reared by lesbian and gay households,” according to the Lavender Families Resource Network. Their daily life is fairly typical: Graham wakes up his “Momma,” Harrington, the biological mother of both children, and his “Mommy,” Leach, around 5:30 each morning. Sometimes, if his moms are lucky, he will sleep in until 7 a.m. on the weekends. Then, Leach helps Harrington get started with the day, helping to feed and dress both of the children before she goes to work at an administrative job at a nearby university. Harrington stays home with the kids and often visits her sister in Manlius who has three young children. “We have our own little daycare,” she said, smiling. “We spend a lot of time playing.”

When Leach comes home around 5:30 p.m., she takes Graham to do chores and tend the horses, sheep and chickens that they raise on their small farm with the help of two friends, Kathryn Same and Sarah Fitzpatrick. Graham loves to see the farm animals and pretends to drive the large, red tractor that they use to tend the 100 acres of land that surround the large, bright farmhouse where Harrington and Leach are raising their family. “We’re pretty much completely focused on the kids,” Harrington said. Leach describes their home environment as “stimulating” and “safe.” “There’s no yelling,” she said. “We try to foster their interests, whatever they may be. Graham likes trucks, so we have a truck calendar. We rent truck videos.” “He does ‘guy things’ with his cousins,” Harrington added, “which right now means jumping on the bed.”

As an infant, Anna spends most of her time playing in her walker and trying to put things in her mouth. She grins and laughs a deep belly laugh whenever Graham runs around her in circles, which seems to be one of their favorite games. “Graham is a charmer, a joker, a laugher,” Leach said. “He’s a good kid,” Harrington added. “He’s very gentle. Whenever one of his cousins hits or lashes out, he never strikes back. He just goes about his business.” As for Anna’s personality, at 7 months old, “it’s a little too soon to tell. I think she’s more serious, more opinionated,” Leach said. Like most children his age, Graham “has definitely entered the terrible two’s,” according to Harrington, who says she tries to stay optimistic during this difficult phase. “I breathe a lot,” she said, laughing. “We try to ignore the tantrums and

redirect him as much as possible. There’s always Play-Doh.” When Harrington and Leach first met at a Fourth of July party in 1993, neither expected she was meeting the woman who would become the mother of her children. “I always knew I liked kids a lot and wanted kids,” Harrington said. “Even being gay, I never really had a plan. I just didn’t think about it.” Leach first started thinking about having kids when she was in her mid-30s. “I had been pretty focused on my career for a while,” she said, mentioning that her own mother had really been encouraging her to consider raising children. “She didn’t care that I was gay. She just said, ‘You’ve gotta have this experience.’ It was a nice thing for her to say.”

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family portrait

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Harrington and Leach dated for two years before they moved in together in the fall of 1995. They began trying to have kids shortly after that, and Graham was born approximately one year later. “The first thing anyone wants to know is how we (got pregnant),” Leach said, laughing. Although they considered biological options such as artificial insemination, the procedure can be costly. Although the financial costs were a consideration for Harrington and Leach, it was also important to them to know who the father of their children is, which is not always an option when one opts for artificial insemination through a sperm bank. “We wanted to know the donor so that our kids could know,” Leach said. “We really wanted (Graham and Anna) to have the same father. We wanted them to have that in common,” Harrington added. They found the man who would eventually father their children through a homemade method of artificial insemination after they were discussing their desire to have kids with a group of women friends. “A friend suggested her husband,” Harrington said. “He’s a really nice person.” After Harrington and Leach contacted this man, “a friend from Syracuse,” they had to figure out a course of action surrounding their attempts to conceive a child. “There are a lot of logistics involved: driving, getting (the sperm) and keeping it warm so that you have the best chance of (pregnancy) happening. It takes lots of planning!” Leach said, chuckling. One time, Leach met the children’s biological father to pick up the sperm at Clark’s service station



Graham, 2, and Anna, 7 months old, play while their cat, Fred, looks on.

between Syracuse and Munnsville. “That was the joke for a while, that Graham would be named ‘Clark,’” she said, and the two women laughed. Leach tried to get pregnant first; however, a physical condition with which she was diagnosed many

years ago, endometriosis, makes it more difficult to conceive and carry a pregnancy to term. “But I thought, ‘What the heck?’ I’ll try for six months,” she said. After six months of unsuccessful attempts, Harrington was inseminated and conceived their son Graham in the first month. “He gave us a tremendous gift,” Leach said. “I was very excited. I felt like I was making a huge decision,” said Harrington. Graham was born in late January of 1997, and Harrington gave birth to Anna approximately a year and a half later in August of 1998. ◆◆◆ After the birth of each of their children, Harrington and Leach had to initiate the lengthy process of arranging a second-parent adoption. Same-sex couples have been legally able to co-adopt children in New York state since the Court of Appeals passed a decision on a legal case, “In the Matter of Dana,” in 1995. From a legal perspective, in order for Leach, the children’s non-biological mother, to have the right to authorize medical treatment, cover the children on her insurance plan and make decisions about schooling, they needed to complete the adoption. According to Bonnie Strunk, a Syracuse attorney who specializes in same-sex, two-parent adoptions, the court has found that it is in the child’s best interest to be raised by two people forming a relationship with that child. “It forms a stronger family unit,” Strunk said. For Leach, however, completing the adoptions is even more important on an emotional level. “We wanted to be vulnerable to as few things as possi-

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Karen Leach cuddles her adopted son Graham, 2, in their home in Munnsville.

/egal struggle



Graham pretends to drive the tractor that the family uses to tend their 100-acres of land that they share with friends.



Harrington holds her daughter Anna.



Graham helps pick out seeds at the local hardware store.

Same-sex couples have been able to jointly adopt children since the 1995 decision of New York state’s highest judicial body in Court of Appeals in the adoption case, In the Matter of Dana. Approximately 12 adoptions have been granted in Onondaga County, according to Syracuse attorney Bonnie Strunk.

“There is a much larger gay and lesbian community in Syracuse,” said Strunk, comparing it to the northern areas of New York state such as Jefferson and Lewis counties. Quite a few adoptions have been completed in Monroe County, which includes Rochester, and Tompkins County, which includes Ithaca. Because many same-sex adoption cases are not recorded in the interest of privacy, it’s difficult to cite the exact num-

ber of adoptions that have been granted, according to Jeffrey Drimer, a Syracuse attorney who has worked on four same-sex couple adoptions. On a national level, “8 million to 12 million American children are currently being reared by lesbian and gay households. The Lavender Families Resource Network reports that “approximately six percent of the U.S. population is made up

of lesbian and gay families with children.” In adoption cases involving lesbian couples, one partner in the relationship often petitions to adopt her partner’s biological child conceived in a previous marriage or through artificial insemination. The Family Pride Coalition Web site estimates that “50 to 75 percent of all lesbians who have been married have one or more biological children;” however, “increased numbers of lesbians are choos-

ing to have children through alternative fertilization techniques.” Gay men may opt to contract a surrogate to carry a baby using their donated sperm, according to the Organization of Parents Through Surrogacy Web site. All same-sex couples, including gay men, also have the option to adopt children through an agency, within a private arrangement, or from a foreign country such as China, said Strunk. Cases in which gay men wish to adopt a child are often more complicated because neither man is the child’s biological father. “Usually one man will adopt the child, and then the other partner will do a second adoption a little later,” Drimer said. This is usually the case when either gay or lesbian couples adopt a child from a foreign country due to the restrictions and fees imposed by the government of that country, said the Family Pride Coalition Web site. Even though one partner in a same-sex couple is the child’s biological or legal adoptive parent, the 1995 Court of Appeals decision explains the importance of the non-biological parent to co-adopt him or her as well. “The advantages which would result from (a two-parent) adoption include Social Security and life insurance benefits in the event of a parent’s death or disability, the right to sue for the wrongful death of a parent, the right to inherit... and eligibility for coverage under both parents’ health insurance policies,” said Chief Judge Judith S. Kaye of the New York Court of Appeals in the court decision.

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biological options

Artificial insemination provides one option for lesbian women who wish to have children.

Approximately 20 lesbian women choose to be artificially inseminated each year at the CNY Fertility Center in Community General Hospital, according to reproductive endocrinologist Dr. Robert J. Kiltz.

"Increased numbers of lesbians are choosing to have children through alternative fertilization techniques," according to a report from the Family Pride Coalition, an advocacy group for gay and lesbian parents.

While this trend may continue as alternative families become more mainstream, "societal acceptance is not the most important thing," Kiltz said.

"Reproductive freedom is a very important issue in our society." Decisions about fertility issues are "extremely personal and private," he said.

"My philosophy is, 'We have no biases,'" Kiltz said. "We provide a service. Being nondiscriminatory is very important."

Artificial insemination is a relatively "simple process," according to Kiltz. He recommended that any woman considering the procedure first talk to a physician in order to assess her overall health. Then, she should select a donor from a sperm bank or a "directed donor" of her choice, such as a close friend.

If a woman opts for "cryopreserved," or frozen, sperm, the sample is shipped to the medical practice. If she chooses a directed donor, the person must first be screened for diseases such as HIV, AIDS and Hepatitis B.

In either case, the patient would call her doctor on the first day of her menstrual period in a cycle when she wants to become pregnant. She would then be inseminated when she ovulates approximately 14 days later.

Patients determine when they ovulate with the assistance of a hormone indicator

test or by taking their temperature first thing in the morning. A slight drop in temperature indicates that an egg has been released, Kiltz said.

The patient would then undergo one of three kinds of artificial insemination: intravaginal, intracervical or intrauterine.



Leach and Harrington hold hands in a quiet, tender moment.

Intravaginal insemination is most successful with fresh sperm, but intrauterine insemination tends to be the most successful procedure overall, according to Kiltz.

"The success of any fertility procedure is based on age," Kiltz said. The younger a patient is, the more likely it is that the insemination will work, he said.

A fertile woman in her mid-20s to early 30s has a 15 to 20 percent chance of becoming pregnant when frozen sperm is used. By comparison, a fertile woman in the same age range has a 20 to 25 percent chance of becoming pregnant from unprotected intercourse, he said.

Therefore, it can take up to 10 to 15 attempts for a woman to become pregnant from artificial insemination. Each attempt costs approximately \$500 to \$600, which includes the cost the sperm, shipping, preparation of the sample and the procedure, Kiltz said.

Although some insurance companies cover the cost of fertility procedures, some do not.

"It's very important that a patient find out about their policy before they receive treatment," Kiltz said. "Very often the limiting factor of fertility treatment is money."

Some women who cannot afford the cost of treatment may elect "homemade" alternatives to artificial insemination, using a friend's sperm and an injection device such as turkey baster.

"I do not recommend this method," Kiltz said. There is a slight risk of contracting a sexually transmitted disease, and women who do not obtain donor sperm through a sperm bank or medical center lose the benefit of their screening processes and tests, he said.

legal struggle



Leach and Harrington play with their children in their Madison County home.

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Strunk gave an example of these benefits in a case in which a biological mother lost her job. Fortunately, the woman's partner had a great job. The child was entitled to health coverage under the non-biological mother's health plan, "which wouldn't apply without the adoption," Strunk said.

Judge Kaye also listed the emotional and psychological benefits of two-parent, same-sex adoption in the 1995 Court of Appeals decision. "Even more important, however, is the emotional security of knowing that in the event of the biological parent's death, the other parent will have presumptive custody," Kaye said in the decision.

Even if the biological parent appointed his or her partner as the child's legal guardian, the deceased parent's family could contest that decision if the second parent did not officially adopt the child, said Strunk.

It is in the child's best interest to be raised by two people forming a relationship with that child, said Strunk.

"It forms a stronger family unit," she said.

Karen Leach, 43, of Munnsville, N.Y., began to research the process of adopting her partner's biological son Graham, now 2, before he was born.

"It was very important to me because I was making a huge emotional investment," she said. "I never wanted to hesitate in front of Graham when someone asked if he is my son. It just makes it official."

The adoption process takes more than a year to complete and requires "a great deal of paperwork," according to Strunk.

The adoption procedure necessitates the renunciation of parental rights of any biological parent other than the petitioner's partner.

Although this requirement does not affect couples who conceived their child through a sperm donor, the process can be quite lengthy if the child is being adopted through a private arrangement with the biological parents. If this is the case, both the birth mother and father have to give up their legal claim to the child, said Drimer.

The prospective adoptive parent is then fingerprinted and undergoes an extensive background check, which includes a "detailed" and "intrusive" report involving a full financial and employment summary, a history of military service, a list of past residences and a disclosure of any family court proceedings related to abuse or neglect.

"You name it and the state wants to know it," Strunk said.

Next a social worker will then visit the family and submit a report to the court describing the home environment.

Lastly, the couple appears in court and signs the official papers, provided that the background checks and home visit reports are approved.

The cost of these court proceedings is usually around \$2,000, said Strunk.

The court proceedings are the least expensive when the child is conceived through a sperm donor because then no one has to sign away his parental rights, Strunk said. However, the medical fees for artificial insemination can cost approximately \$500 to \$600 for one attempt, and it can take up to 10 to 15 attempts for a woman to become pregnant from this procedure, according to reproductive endocrinologist Dr. Robert J. Kiltz.

The most expensive type of two-parent adoption occurs when the parents adopt children from China. This kind of adoption, which includes travel costs, fees to China and additional court appearances in the United States for the second-parent adoption, can cost approximately \$20,000, Strunk said.

The two-parent adoption law in New York state is fairly liberal in comparison to other states, the lawyer said. North

Carolina, Florida, Alabama, New Hampshire and Virginia all have laws that permit a parent's sexual orientation to be used as evidence that they are unfit parents, The Boston Globe reported.

Some states, such as Wisconsin, New Mexico and California, are as liberal as New York state regarding two-parent, same-sex adoptions, according to Strunk.

"One problem with New York that will become a serious problem if it's not rectified in the near future is that there's no visitation" for non-biological parents if the relationship is terminated, explained Strunk.

"It's sad that it has to come to this," she said. "You have the added pressure on a (homosexual) relationship of not being married. It's human nature that relationships end, and people would like to have relationships with their children."

Similarly, Drimer said, "We have to get ready for gay relationships to have the same problems as heterosexual couples regarding separation, support and visitation."

Although these changes may be coming for New York state, "I'm very proud of the New York state system at this point," said Drimer. "The law lives. The law adjusts to changing times."



Friends Paul Pinet and Marita Hyman visit Leach and Harrington's family for a Saturday afternoon lunch.

family portrait

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ble," she said. "I just wanted to assume that Graham is my son and not always have to explain it. It was very important to me because I was making a huge emotional investment. I never wanted to hesitate in front of my children when someone asks me if they're mine. It's important for Graham and Anna. It just makes it official."

In order to complete the second-parent adoption in New York state, the legal procedure necessitates that any biological parent other than the petitioner's partner renounce his parental rights.

According to Harrington and Leach, the judge "really grilled" their children's biological father about why he wanted to renounce his legal claim to the child.

"He just explained that this was our plan all along," Leach said.

Then, the prospective adoptive parent is fingerprinted and undergoes an extensive background check. Next, a social worker visits the family and submits a report to the court describing the home environment. Lastly, the couple appears in court and signs the official papers, provided that the background checks and home visit reports are approved.

"You go to court and have a magic moment," Leach said. "It was really happy. Some friends from work sent a big bunch of flowers."

Although the cost of these court proceedings is usually around \$2,000, a family friend, Paul Noise of Oneida, completed the adoption for the Harrington family "at a very reasonable cost," according to Harrington.

"Paul treated us like a family," Leach said. "He gave us a great gift."

Even though the children's biological father renounced his parental rights, both moms said they would be open to their children forming a relationship with him if that's what Graham and Anna want.

Although they haven't decided on a specific age that they will tell their children about their biological father, they agree that it will happen "sooner rather than later."

"We need to coordinate that," Leach said. "Their biological dad has kids who don't know. Everyone will know at the same time."

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Although Graham and Anna's biological father is not directly involved in their upbringing, there are many adults in the children's lives that their mothers feel will grow to be wonderful role models.

They mentioned in particular their friends Kathryn Same and Sarah Fitzpatrick, with whom they share their land.

"We have a long history with (Kathryn and Sarah)," Leach said. "Our children love them like aunts."

"We want our children to know a multitude of nice people, men and women. About half our friends are gay, half are straight. We don't need to make the effort" to seek out specific role models, Harrington added.

In addition to the family's friends, the children's extended family, especially on their non-biological side, play

"It does hurt; we just deal with it. It isn't pleasant, but that's the way it works," Harrington said.

"I just want to know, 'What do they think we DO?'" Leach interjected.

"It's mostly okay now," Harrington said. "We just don't talk about it. I wasn't raised in an open thinking way," she said as she spooned strained squash

chance to survive in married, mother-and-father-based families."

However, a study published in Child Psychology and Psychiatry found that "children of gay and lesbian parents have no more frequent psychiatric or gender problems than do children of heterosexual parents."

Despite these findings, Harrington and Leach do worry somewhat about what will happen when their children are old enough to go to school and realize that their family is different from their classmates.

Leach was quick to point out, however, that "kids are mean to each other no matter what."

If this situation does come up someday, she plans to give her kids a simple explanation: "That's the way it is. You're really loved. You're really lucky."

"I don't need to apologize for the fact that Tammy and I really love each other," she said.

Harrington and Leach have received a lot of advice about how to handle this kind of discrimination from other parents with whom they are acquainted through a gay and lesbian/child support group that they help facilitate. The group, which was only formed about six months ago, has approximately 17 families on its mailing list.

"The main reason for the gay parents' group is to hear the advice of the people who've been there and to have confidence and pride in your family," Leach said.

Harrington also feels that it is important for Graham and Anna "to see other types of families" and to know other children being raised in non-traditional families. "When I was growing up, being a lesbian in a rural community, I thought I was the only one on the planet," she said.

If the mothers in the Harrington family have any advice for other gay and lesbian parents or same-sex couples who wish to become parents it would be, "Don't always feel like you have to explain yourself."

"People will rise to the occasion if you come at it from a position of strength," Leach said.

Harrington, who describes herself as a "more private person in general" says that she can understand the curiosity that people have "because it's not seen as normal."

On the other hand, Leach said, "I don't believe in being unique. These kids are a real miracle. I feel very fortunate to have these kids. It's a tremendous gift to have a family with this much love. I appreciate that every day, I never forget that. I feel so fortunate to be loved by (Tammy). That's not commonplace."

"We've been given all these gifts," Harrington said, reaching for her partner's hand. "I'm incredibly happy. Our kids are happy. They get lots of attention. How could anyone think that's a bad thing?"



Leach holds Graham and Harrington holds Anna as the family of four cuddles on the couch.

an important role in their family life. Graham and Anna are especially close to their non-biological grandparents who live in Albany.

According to Harrington, whenever Graham pretends to drive somewhere, "he's always going to his Papa's."

"In addition to Leach's father, 'Papa,' the children are also close to their non-biological uncles.

"My brothers have been great," she said. One unique way that one can see the uncles' influence in the kids' lives occurs whenever they read the children's classic book, "Pat the Bunny."

The book emphasizes the sense of touch and incorporates different textures for children to feel. As written, the book has a line that says, "Feel Daddy's scratchy beard."

Because Anna and Graham do not have a "Daddy," but they do have a bearded Uncle Duncan, Harrington and Leach read the line as, "Feel Uncle Duncan's scratchy beard" whenever they get to that part.

Their extended family has not been entirely supportive, however.

Harrington's family, whom she describes as having "conservative, Christian" views, was shocked when she announced that she was pregnant.

"My sister cried. They weren't excited. Basically they thought we were going to straight to hell in a handbasket," she said.

One of the most painful parts of the situation centers around the fact that her younger sister's children, Graham and Anna's cousins, are not allowed to spend time with Harrington and Leach as a couple.

into her daughter's mouth. "It's important that they honor us as a family. They try to make us happy, but I'm disappointed in them that they can't stretch their thinking."

They do feel that the relationships that the children have with their extended family, even those who disapprove of this non-traditional family, are valuable.

"I'm not afraid of (Graham and Anna) absorbing their values. I'm afraid of them being hurt by their values. We want our children to be loving and understanding in their views and respect others. ALL others," Leach said.

Harrington and Leach said that they would like to introduce their children to some sort of religious training at some point.

"We want them to have some sort of spiritual awareness. There are lots of good things about being in a religious community. Our experience with a few narrow-minded people is not representative of all religion," Leach said.

♦♦♦

The disapproval that the Harrington family's faced from their extended family is not atypical, nor is it limited to their personal life.

Some political and religious groups such as the Christian Coalition and the Family Research Council strongly oppose same-sex couples becoming parents. Robert Knight, a spokesman for the Family Research Council, claimed in a public statement that "there is a mountain of social science that tells us that children have the best

About these photographs:

Angie Gaul is a sophomore photojournalism major in the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications. Beginning on May 8, these and other images will be on display as part of a Mothers' Day exhibit at My Sisters' Words bookstore, 304 North McBride Street in Syracuse. There is a reception for the artist at 10 a.m. on May 8.

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