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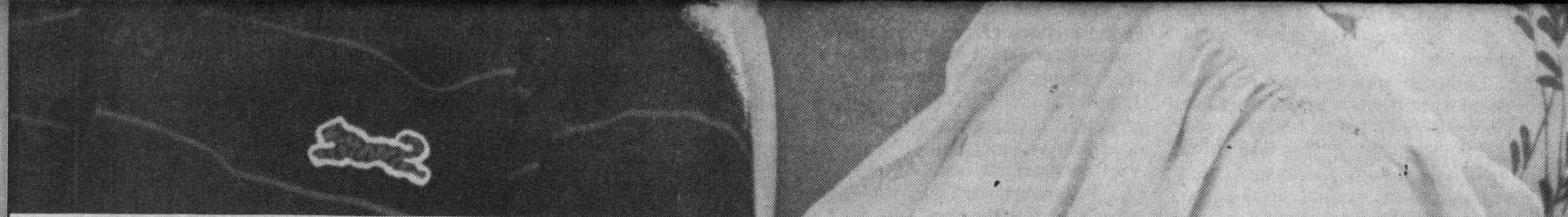
Living

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Sunday, Sept. 29, 1985 — Santa Cruz Sentinel

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An uncommon kind of **MOTHERHOOD**





Noah and Iola Gold: 'The greatest gift we can give our children is to love and respect ourselves.'

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Family life is a little different when Mom is a lesbian

By LAURIE SLOTHOWER
Sentinel Staff Writer

The names of the lesbians interviewed for this story have been changed at their request.

FIVE-YEAR-OLD Jason isn't shy about letting visitors know what's special about his family. "You know what?" he says brightly as the visitor takes a seat in his mother's living room. "I have two Moms!"

"We've talked about how people can be different," says Barbara, a lesbian who is Jason's biological mother.

"We've talked about how some families have one Mom or a Mom and a Dad, or two Dads."

Or in Jason's case, two women. Lesbians. And mothers. It's a touchy subject, even for people who may accept homosexuality among consenting adults.

But local lesbians interviewed say more gay women are choosing motherhood despite the social stigma attached to homosexuals raising children.

Lauren Crux, a marriage, family and child counselor in Santa Cruz, said there's been a "baby boom" among lesbians in San Francisco, Santa Cruz and the East Coast.

"I'm certainly seeing the issue come up a lot more in therapy," says Crux, a marriage, family and child counselor. Many of her clients are lesbians. "And I'm certainly seeing a much higher percentage of lesbians who are choosing to have children."

Crux pointed to a forum on parenting staged last year by the Freedom Democratic Caucus, the local gay political lobby. More than 100 persons jammed into a

room at the Loudon Nelson Center to hear men and women discuss parenting.

"That's the first time anything like that has been presented here," Crux said. "That's just an indication of the growing interest that the subject has."

Santa Cruz has an image as having a large lesbian community, although statistics are difficult to come by. There are about half a dozen lesbian groups in town, ranging from Dancemakers, which puts on a monthly women's dance, to the Monterey Bay Women's Alliance, a business and professional women's network which boasts 100 members. The Santa Cruz Women's Health Collective advertises lesbian health counselors, and lesbian leadership is strong in the Freedom Democratic Caucus and in the UCSC Gay and Lesbian Alliance.

Defining the number of lesbian mothers, a subculture within a subculture, is even trickier.

The Kinsey Institute of Bloomington, Ind. estimates there are two million lesbians nationally. Other researchers' estimates are higher. The Lesbian Mothers' Support Group of Seattle estimates that 16 percent of all women are gay.

A Santa Cruz woman who did her master's thesis on adolescent children of lesbian mothers estimated that one-third to one-fifth of all lesbians raise children.

And the presence of the Oakland sperm bank administered by the Oakland Feminist Women's Health Center has made artificial insemination for single women easier to accomplish.

"We have several lesbians in the Santa Cruz area who are using

our service to get pregnant," said Barbara Raboy, an administrator with the sperm bank.

The number of lesbians using artificial insemination to get pregnant "is definitely growing" in Santa Cruz, Raboy added.

The sperm bank supplies about 200 insemination samples a month. About 60 percent of the bank's clients are single women, and half of these are lesbians, Raboy said.

Adds community organizer Iola Gold, "I don't know if there are more lesbian mothers in Santa Cruz, but there's more visibility."

Gold is a chairwoman of the Freedom Democratic Caucus and administrator of a local service organization.

She is one of the few lesbian mothers willing to let her name be used in conjunction with this article.

Gold has acknowledged her lesbianism to her son Noah's teachers and school administrators, and helped organize a lesbian mother's support group two years ago. Gold shares custody of their son with her ex-husband.

Recently, she and Noah sang a song together at a talent show sponsored by several gay and lesbian organizations. "Honesty is an important value to me," Gold said. "The greatest gift we can give our children is to love and respect ourselves."

Other lesbians, however, balked, saying they didn't want to subject their offspring to "homophobia," the gay community's buzzword for irrational fear or hatred against homosexuals.

Lesbians with children can be divided roughly into two

categories: those who have children from previous heterosexual relationships, and those who choose to become parents after they are lesbian-identified.

Santa Cruz lesbians have chosen a number of not-exactly-Ozzie-and-Harriet ways to raise children.

For one lesbian and gay man, having and raising a child is like a business arrangement. They signed a contract stipulating the conditions under which they would share raising a child, born to the lesbian and using the man as a sperm donor.

Having a child that way "is so deliberate," says Alan S., the man involved. "It's not like we're getting it on in the back seat of a Chevy."

Alan and the mother of his child signed a sperm donor-recipient contract and a visitation agreement which is re-negotiated every six months. Alan also contributes money.

Theirs is a unique agreement in that Alan is more than just a sperm donor; he wants to co-parent his daughter.

Attorneys advised them on how to write their contract.

It hasn't been easy, said Alan, "but we're still committed to working this through."

A few gays and lesbians have acted as foster parents for children, and a lesbian is currently being recommended by the Adoption Division of the Human Resources Agency to become an adoptive parent, said adoptions supervisor Susan Archibald.

Linda, a Santa Cruz health care worker, decided to have a child using sperm donated by a gay male friend.

"I'd always wanted children in

my life. The woman I was living with had a son, and I thought that would satisfy my child-urge, but it didn't," she says.

"I kept putting it off ... I got a kitten instead, but that didn't work. I still wanted a child."

After some deliberation, she decided to become pregnant. She artificially inseminated herself at home using a needle-less plastic syringe, the so-called "turkey baster method" which is popular among lesbians who wish to become pregnant without having intercourse with a man. The sperm was donated by a male friend.

Linda broke up with the woman she was living with. She lived with another woman for a while and is now on her own.

The problems which have come up are much the same as in any blended family, says Linda. Her last lover never planned to have children, or to live with someone who did.

"Being in a relationship with a mother is never the same as being in a relationship with a single person," Linda says. "My lover didn't realize how much time and energy my daughter demands of me."

Linda's ex-lover visits Linda's daughter every week and her gay male friend sees her on holidays and birthdays.

Linda considers Santa Cruz "an excellent place" for lesbians to raise children. "Santa Cruz has a wide variety of lifestyles and people tend to be relatively tolerant," she said. "It's an excellent community to have a child, period. There's a strong awareness of the needs of children and women."

Linda says she's glad she decided to have a child. "I really

enjoy her in my life," she says as she watches her daughter play in the garden. "I've grown a lot from being a mother."

KATE, the mother of four teen-age children, acquired children the old-fashioned way: she was married for seven years.

She believes she made the right choice in being a lesbian, but her kids have at different times felt uncomfortable about her lifestyle, she says.

"Teen-agers, especially, go through phases where the most important thing is their peer group. They want sofas and Wonder bread," Kate says. "Unfortunately, we have futons and macrobiotic food."

Kate lives in Capitola in a sunny Victorian home which she shares with her four teen-age children, a foreign exchange student a t UCSC and her lover of eight years.

A meditative, communal atmosphere prevails. The walls of her living room are filled with books and pastoral etchings. "This is a student household," she says.

The children get along with her lover, with whom Kate has lived for three years, but her 14-year-old son, a strapping Emelio Estavez-look alike with a burr hair cut, doesn't want his friends to know Mom is a lesbian.

"He doesn't feel awkward about me. He feels awkward that his friends might find out," says Kate.

Kate realized her lesbian feelings in the 1960s after participating in a consciousness raising group for women: "I had been

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When Mom is a lesbian

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attracted to women for a long time but I never had a name for it."

She and her husband divorced. A custody battle ensued, and Kate lost, although she says her children wanted to live with her. Kate says a judge told her she was "psychologically unfit" to be a mother.

"I called every lawyer in town and they'd never dealt with this situation before," Kate says. "It was a fiasco. I almost had a nervous breakdown." She rolls a cigarette slowly, her eyes moistening with the memory of those days.

Her former husband kept the kids for two months, then voluntarily returned custody to Kate, saying it was too hard to be a full-time father and work every day.

Kate moved to Santa Cruz from Southern California six years ago because, she says, of the organic food co-ops, alternative schools and "parents who cared about their children's education."

"It's the best city for children of all the places I've seen, including Europe," says Kate. "It's a children's paradise."

Kate, who defines herself as a mother first and a lesbian second, is working on her master's degree in psychology at San Francisco State University. Her goal is to create a "children's commune" where children feel safe and where they may stay for as long as they wish.

Kate's children are the center of her life. "I have an amazing relationship with my children," she says. "People ask me how I do it."

MARION has a similar challenge: raising a son in a feminist environment that is not always supportive of "male energy."

Marion became pregnant seven years ago when she was living with a man; three years later she became aware of her lesbian feelings.

Marion she worries a lot about finding a male role model for her seven-year-old son Jamie.

Last year Marion tried to make friends with men who might want to spend time with her son. Nothing panned out.

The situation was resolved when Jamie's father, who lives in



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Noah Gold, 8, spends half his time with his mom, Lola, and half with his father.

Oakland, decided that he wanted to play more of a part in his son's life.

Marion, a fabric artist who takes odd jobs to pay the rent, is as careful about what ideas she puts in her son's head as she is about what food she puts in his stomach.

She uses "she" instead of "he" pronouns, says "police officer" and "firefighter" rather than gender-specific synonyms, and is hesitant to let her son participate in competitive sports.

As a consequence, Jamie has grown up thinking women are big and strong and always get what they want, says Marion.

"He asks me, don't men ever get to do anything in the world?"

As the mother of a boy, Marion

finds herself trying to help her son develop his own masculine identity while trying to battle sexist stereotypes.

"He's the biggest boy in his class, and people will tell him, oh, you're going to be a football player when you grow up," says Marion. "I don't like people putting stereotypes into his head."

Having a son has taught Marion to "appreciate the male essence."

"His energy is definitely different than mine," she says. "He still wants to be one of the boys."

RAISING a son also put Barbara through some changes.

At the time she she decided to become pregnant, Barbara she

did not even want male friends.

After she gave birth to her son, Jamie, she feared he would not be accepted by the lesbian community. Boys past a certain age, she knew, were not allowed at some lesbian social events.

"But Santa Cruz is a lot more accepting than other communities," she said.

Barbara got pregnant through artificial insemination. Her lover four years ago found a donor through friends of friends. The prospective fathers completed questionnaires about their health, education and family background.

Barbara picked one donor, and she still doesn't know who he is. She prefers not to.

She has lived for three years with a lover who co-parents Jason. Her lover cooks breakfast and tucks him into bed at night. When Jason was a toddler, her partner changed his diapers.

"But the bottom line is that I'm the care-giver. I'm the one who has to be there," says Barbara.

Barbara says her son is not any more likely to grow up gay than other children. After all, most gays were reared in heterosexual families, she notes.

But if she had a choice, "I'd prefer he be straight," Barbara said. "It's a lot easier."

Like other lesbian mothers interviewed, Barbara told her son early-on that Mom is a little different.

When Jason's pre-school class had a discussion of the different types of families, he shared that his family had two Moms, Barbara says.

"It hasn't been as bad as I thought. He's gotten it so ingrained that it's OK that I don't think there will be a big stigma over it," Barbara related.

Jason plays with stuffed animals in the parlor while the visitor asks questions. He tells the visitor each animals' name, and about his his dog, "Thena," (short for Athena, goddess of wisdom and the arts.)

The visitor notes that Jason seems to be a sweet, extroverted child.

Barbara smiles. "I was trying to avoid bragging, but ... I do get a lot of good reports about him. He's very engaging."

Some things about moms never change.