



## Customizing Motherhood

SUSAN SCHNUR *talks with kind-of-single mother* JENIFER FIRESTONE

**Jenifer Firestone coordinated an alternative insemination program at a community health center in Boston for seven years. She also founded and ran a non-profit that, among other services, organized supportive programs for children of lesbian, gay and transgender parents. Professionally, she has been involved in the adoption or conception of over 1000 children. She is the mother of Hannah, 16, whom she co-parents with two gay men.**

### **How did you come up with your unusual parenting arrangement?**

Well, in 1988 I went through a divorce that was cataclysmic, and I thought, “I never want a kid to see me in this horribly fragile condition.” I vowed not to have a child with a romantic partner. I also believe that more parents is better. Having only one parent can be terrifying for some children. When I was a kid it was so helpful to have a stable family with all these aunts and uncles and people whom I didn’t even know *weren’t* related by blood until I was older. If a child has more parents, she has more friends-of-parents, more relatives-of-parents. It’s a good-for-everybody experience.

I also live with economic insecurity, and I did not want a child to have to share that. And I’m strongly self-aware, so I knew I had to compensate for my weaknesses—I’m someone who goes radically up and down emotionally. Feelings are just not always functional. Rick and Robb, Hannah’s dads, are very even-keeled, very stable; they just celebrated their 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

### **Did family and friends support your decision to share parenting with two men?**

“Maternal sacrifice” is a cultural doctrine, so the idea that I was systematically arranging to share parenting fifty-fifty with two men in another household was sacrilege. That I was saying, “Well, I want child-free time for myself—to date, to write, to nurture friendships, to enjoy some solitude...” Refusing to be a full-time mom, even expressing this wish, is very very taboo.

Also, in the 1990s, it was hard for most lesbians and feminists to fathom why a mother would willingly “share control” of her child—and with two men!

*[Customizing Motherhood continued...]*  
Didn't I want to make all the decisions myself? Actually, no. I hate making decisions on my own.

### **What does it take to make something like this work?**

You have to recognize the riskiness and be appropriately cautious. We wrote a 35-page document over two years that addressed every single issue—that Hannah would be raised Jewish (Robb and Rick are non-practicing Catholics), to financial logistics, to parenting schedules. You have to be willing to engage in an insane process.

You also have to believe that when you're clear about what you want and why—and you have good goals—you can

figure out a way to do everything. The answers are generally outside the box, I believe. "Creative problem-solving" has to excite you. It excites me. It also creates problems in my life.

### **Tell me about the Jewish part.**

Hannah's baby naming was in my sister's backyard with over 100 friends and relatives, a rabbi, and the two non-Jewish fathers. My father good-naturedly asked if he should introduce Rick and Robb as his sons-in-law. I said, "No. They're Hannah's dads." We just didn't have the words.

Her bat mitzvah has been our crowning family experience. We brought 227 people together, and it was the first time Hannah's three extended families met.

Robb's Catholic father, in his 80s—who had a hard time accepting his gay son and his son's family—came from Nebraska, and everyone stood with us queer parents to pass the Torah down to this child who had brought us all together. I felt enormous gratitude.

I've worked hard to raise Hannah Jewish. My synagogue has raised her in a way I couldn't have done myself—in terms of my literacy. It's magnificent to me. At 16, she's still in school at the shul and involved in social activism.

### **What has it been like to do things so differently?**

As a teenager, feminism gave me an eye for social injustice. The people I admired

were feminists who saw the glaring problems with the status quo. I came out as a lesbian in 1979. I was 24. Once you do that, having a conventional life is no longer an option. I never identified with convention.

I have an ethic of justice that makes me empathic to children's experience, that makes me look at things radically differently. What has driven me most crazy is when gay parents think, "We'll have kids and then we'll be like everyone else"—as though being different is a problem. But most kids *are* different in some way; it's better to have kids who can embrace and value that, instead of trying to adapt to some perception of a norm that isn't—in and of itself—better.



Hannah's first Hanukkah with Rick, Robb and Jenifer. Jenifer notes: "If you cover up me, this photo looks like a gay male couple and their kid. If you cover up Rick, it looks like a straight couple and their kid."

For Hannah, "being different" is a positive value—I'm relieved about this. She has three very different families; she grew up going to Gay Pride parades; our friends are unconventional. Being different opens up the world to you—you can do and be anything.

I would not use the word "confident" to describe myself. I second-guess; I fight my demons. But I do have immense confidence that there are lots and lots of different ways to do things. ■

*[Jenifer and Hannah Firestone both describe their experiences in And Baby Makes More: Known Donors, Queer Parents, and Our Unexpected Families, edited by Susan Goldberg and Chloe Brushwood Rose.]*