

Wonder boy grows up

Ben Szudy, 6, bounds into the room with a poster rolled under his arm. With his mother's help, he slides off the rubber band and holds it up for everyone to see. Unlike what you might expect of a child in the 1980s, the poster isn't of Rambo or She-Ra, it's Mickey Mouse.

Ben is as excited about the poster as he is about his other toys — a hummingbird feeder and an aquarium full of tree crabs — toys that are somewhat unusual, perhaps, for a six-year-old boy.

But in many respects, Ben is unusual, a wonder boy. He was one of the first children in the nation to be conceived by a lesbian using artificial insemination.

Artificial insemination is not new. Since World War II, well over 300,000 children have been born as a result of this procedure. And there are an estimated 15-20,000 children conceived by artificial insemination in the U.S. each year.

For many lesbians, it wasn't a possibility until recently. Today, the estimated number of lesbians with children by artificial insemination is about 1,000-1,500 in California alone. But because so many lesbians use private networks rather than clinics, the number nationwide isn't known.

"There weren't very many options in 1979," his mother, Betty Szudy, said. "It was still pretty new — there weren't even any clinics to go to then."

Betty, a negotiator for the Teamsters Union, doesn't know the donor personally. He is a man whose political activism she admired. Though Betty knows a lot about the man, she has never met him. A mutual friend made the arrangements.

"I have his medical history now," she said, "but at the time I was looking for really stupid things — someone I respected, someone with curly hair."

Ben, who is tall and lanky, doesn't have curly hair. And he has never met the man whose genes he carries. But that doesn't seem to bother him. He's adjusted to his 'mom and his parrot' as he called Betty's lover when they first explained the idea of 'parenting' to him.

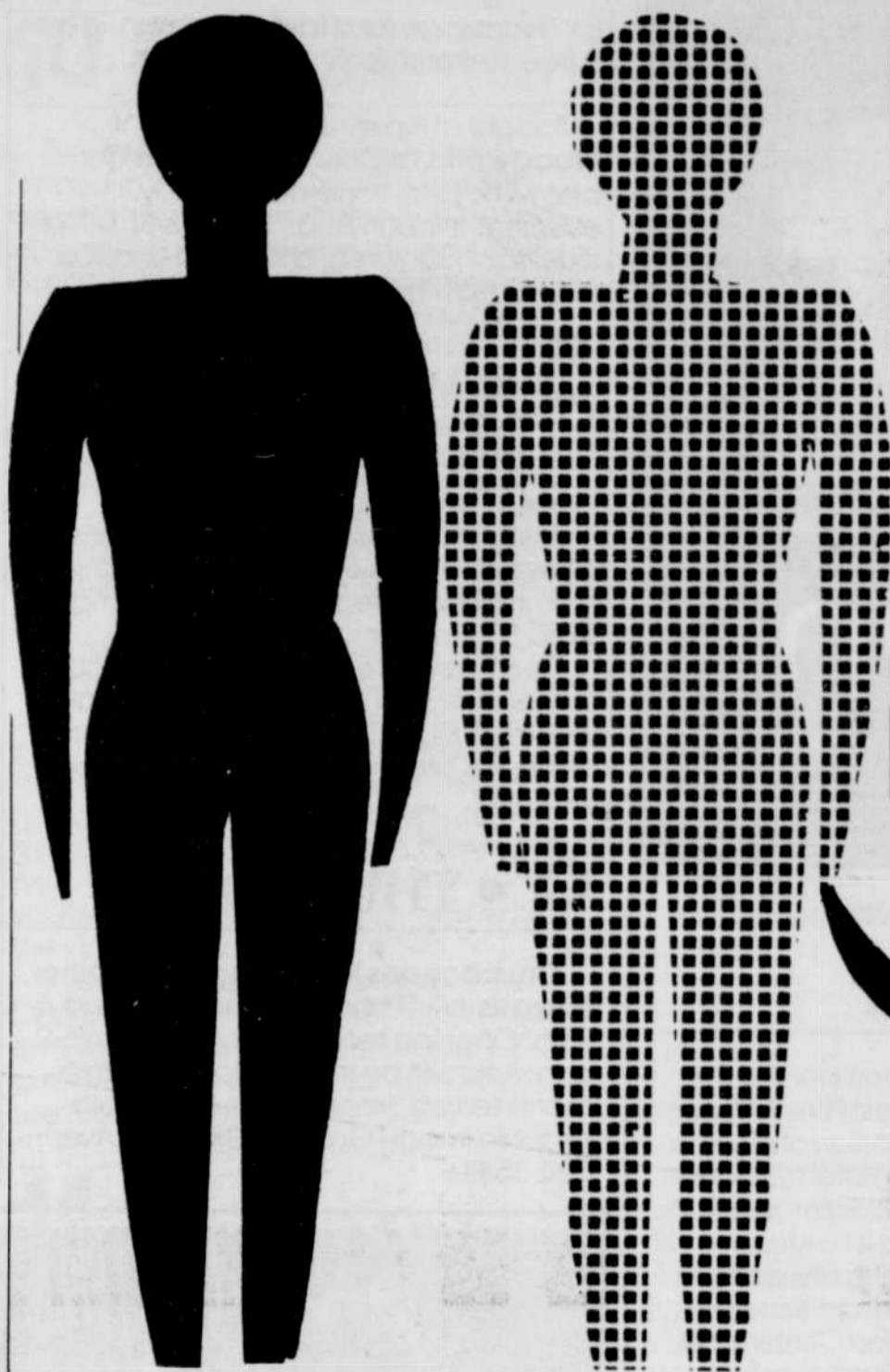
"We tried to explain that though I'm his mom, my lover is his parent — someone who loves him and cares for him — but Ben kept calling us his 'mom and his parrot,' so now everyone goes by their first name."

Like a growing number of families today, Ben's is not a traditional nuclear one. His consists of Betty, Betty's lover of five years, and a female roommate who's lived in the rambling 2-story house with Betty even longer.

When he goes to school, Ben isn't the only child with gay parents, either. Last year, there were three children with lesbian mothers in his class of 30 kids.

"He is aware of the other kids who have two moms," Betty said. "For him, some people have one mom; some people have a mom and dad; some people have two moms."

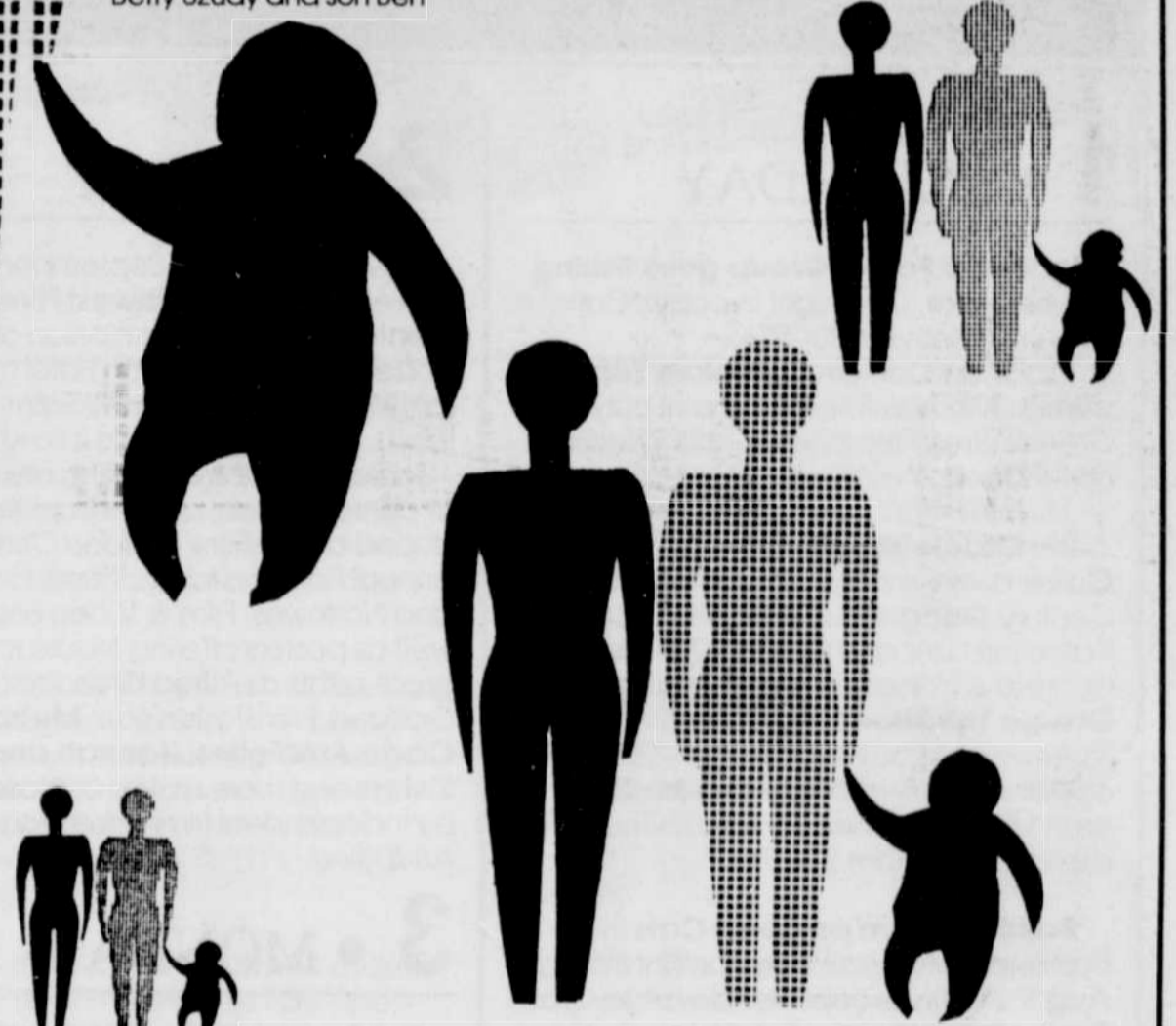
Oakland, which borders the city of Berkeley — the birthplace of the "Free Speech Movement" and a hub of left-wing and radical political activity for decades — is no bastion of conservatism, either. It has a large gay population and is liberal in many other ways. Ben's neighborhood and



Betty Szudy and son Ben

Mom is a dyke.

Non-traditional families explode myths.



school are racially integrated, for instance, as well as tolerant of different lifestyles.

"Both my lover and I go to parent-teacher conferences," Betty said. "The PTA is very progressive and in many ways, we're typical parents."

Ben knows he was conceived by artificial insemination. Betty always told him that she got the sperm from a donor. But when Ben first went to school, Betty realized she should explain how most babies are conceived — before Ben heard it from someone else.

Not everyone, she said, gets donations from a friend or a sperm bank. Some people have sex. Ben, who is as squeamish as most young children when hearing about reproduction for the first time, was horrified by the thought. He equated human eggs with chicken eggs and wasn't at all sure he wanted to eat egg sandwiches after that.

In fact, Betty didn't think it would be that easy to get pregnant when she decided to have a child. She'd heard how hard getting pregnant with the turkey baster method was and never had been particularly careful about birth control in the days when it mattered.

Thinking of the first attempt as a dry run, she kidded about it being an immaculate conception. Donning a white gown,

she put a cloth on her head and held a sprig of gladioli in her hand as part of the joke. To everyone's surprise, the first attempt was a success.

The only male in the house, Ben has a bedroom and bath downstairs while the women have bedrooms upstairs. While most boys his age tend to be loud and boisterous, Ben is quite the young gentleman, quiet and polite. By his behavior, he breaks the myth that boys are aggressive by nature.

Neither Betty nor her lover believe behavior patterns are inherent. They think that the stereotypically aggressive male behavior is as much a product of conditioning as anything else. Alter the environment and you have a more emotional, more sensitive child — even if the child is a boy.

Their philosophy seems to be working. Ben is only six but he's already learned to talk about being upset when he's angry, for instance, rather than breaking things or acting on his hostility.

But there is a downside to the idealism, however, one's own conditioning.

"When you have kids," Betty said, "You see the ways you're more sexist than you think. I hear myself saying things my mother said — things I swore I'd never say."

Though Ben has friends and relatives to rely on, "He doesn't have a significant (male) role model," Betty said, who wonders if that will hurt his development in the long run.

"But he seems bright and does well in school," she continued, "and he was tested by a woman doing a doctorate in psychology. Despite the fact he often seems like 'Mr. Crash-Bang' to me, he appears to be less aggressive than most boys his age."

If she had it to do over, what advice would Betty give women thinking of having a child by artificial insemination?

"When I used insemination," she said, "there was no question of AIDS or of legal issues. Today, you have surrogate mothering and contracts — and it can get a lot more complicated."

"And it's a very personal choice, having children," she continued. "Most people have a romance about little babies and no conception of what it means when little kids grow up to be big kids. It's at least an 18 year job and it's expensive. It's not that expensive but day care and clothes are! And the thought of college!"

"If I were to do it again," she concluded with a smile, "I'd wait till I had a partner I'd been with a while, then I'd have two instead of one."