

Donna Cooper

Celebrating three generations of women. She, her mother and her grandmother all support and cherish women

Donna Cooper was there when Boise held its first Gay Pride march, and she was in good company. Her mother was there, too. So was her grandmother. They sat at a table, answering questions, talking about the links between them—three generations of feminists, three generations of women who support and cherish women.

Cooper and her mother are lesbians. Her grandmother wholeheartedly supports them both. That support fuels Cooper's vision of family—a form that fits her life now while holding tight to history, repeating the circle of generations.

Cooper, 27, works as development coordinator for the Cascade AIDS Project. On a recent morning, she was at home, struggling with the language of a grant proposal, trying to achieve the necessary formality while writing in concrete, real terms about gay male sex.

Her manner is mild, thoughtful, direct. She sips at a cup of Earl Gray tea as she talks about family—the one she was given, the one she hopes to create. She thinks about having children, probably in the next few years. Her mother encourages such thinking, Cooper reports with a laugh. If Cooper had a child, her mother noted after that day in Boise, there would have been four generations at the city's first Gay Pride.

When I think 'family,' I probably think of my mom first. I was very much a wanted child; my mom had difficulty getting pregnant. She was a traditional middle-class mother at the time. She didn't work, and I had immense quality time with her.

"Then after that I feel sad. Because understanding that I am from an alternative family really excludes me from the middle-class American idea of family. No matter what my family does now, we will never be mom-and-dad-and-kids-and-two cars.

"I knew I was a lesbian when I was 9 or 10. I did a lot of private agonizing about it. I said the word to an adult when I was 13—ironically enough, to a lesbian teacher. She was afraid of getting busted for contributing to the delinquency of a minor, so she took me to a bowling alley, where we couldn't be recorded, and talked to me about what it meant to be a lesbian.

"When I started coming out at 13, I knew that it was very unlikely that I would ever create a traditional family. I knew that it would change the texture of my immediate family, that it would change my relationship with my mom and dad and brother. I didn't know then that my mother was a lesbian.

"I was 16 when she officially told me. But my lesbian friends and I had a bet going for a long time. We used to joke about it—'yeah, my mom's a dyke'—because she had this friend in Boise who she spent about \$90 a month talking to on the phone. They wrote these long, long letters to each other that they exchanged about twice a week. That woman, Darlene, is her lover now. They've been together about 10 years.

"I had been aware of my sexual identification

with women for a very, very long time. I was always very fascinated with sex, very curious. I knew that my response to women was entirely different from my response to men. But I did feel a profound loneliness. It was one of the things that kept me from being comfortable being a lesbian for several years.

"Until one morning when I was on my way to school. I was 13. I was tying my tennis shoes. I just realized—a profound moment for me—that lesbians tie their shoes. We do all the ordinary things. There is this part of us that's different from mainstream culture, but really the larger part of us is not very different. That was a first step toward maintaining some sort of comfort with my identity.

My grandmother is a very extraordinary woman. I think in another generation she would have been a lesbian.

"Originally, I was not fond of [my mother's] partner. I was jealous. My mother, who had lavished a lot of attention on me, was suddenly distracted. It did mean a disruption in my family. When my aunts and uncles were getting divorced, I always had this kind of smugness. My family was intact; my mom and dad loved each other; neither of my parents was messing around. They had this integrity that I thought would be everlasting.

"I was so disappointed that I was off-base on that one. And I was angry for a really long time. It's probably been just in the last two years that I've come to terms with . . . the whole dissolution of my family and have started understanding that Darlene has become another parent for me. She is somebody I can rely on.

"[My mother and I] are closer now because I'm no longer rebelling against everything that is on this planet. I do think that we're closer because both of us are lesbians.

"My mother has a whole bunch of things I don't have—having been married, having her kids. But we do have that essential thing—the whole coming-out process, making decisions about our level of comfort about being 'out.' It's funny; she's becoming more out and in some ways I'm becoming less out.

"My grandmother is a very extraordinary woman. I think in another generation she would have been a lesbian. I've never met a woman who is more woman-identified, despite the fact that she always says John Wayne could park his boots under her bed.

"She really has built her whole life around women. She was really active in Theta Rose, the women's offshoot of the Oddfellows, and in Girl Scouting. She organized a Thanksgiving dinner in the basement of her senior citizen retirement complex for 25 gay people. They came and had

dinner and played *Trivial Pursuit*. She's really become part of the fabric of gay and lesbian culture in Boise.

"One of the ways it comes up, that exclusion from the Great American Family, is that sometimes I try too hard to create something that's equivalent instead of being satisfied with what I have. A lot of times I feel really angry because, statistically, few of us are living in those traditional families anymore.

"It makes me understand that we have an obligation to tell each other what our families are really like and to stop trying to be the Brady Bunch and the Waltons. We really need to be honest with each other.

"I very much would like to have kids. I think a lot of straight women have kids because they just find themselves pregnant. I wish it would be as easy as . . . just driving along the road one day and saying: 'Oh, I'm pregnant. Guess I have to accommodate.' As opposed to having to plan: Am I making enough money to support a kid; what if my partner and I break up?

"If nothing else, I think I want to have kids so I can send them to my mom's for a month in the summer because she's very into kids. She dotes on my brother's children. I feel some sense of wanting to have kids for my family. It goes back to wanting to mark those milestones, the tradition of my mother and my grandmother, to pass that on to somebody else, to give someone else the quality of attention I got from my mom.

"My mother is making a baby afghan as we speak. So I know exactly how she feels about it.

She asks me about [having a child] practically every third time I talk to her on the phone.

"My partner's not into it as much. I at least hope that once I make the crucial decision and actually become pregnant that some of those hard edges will soften. My partner is considerably older than I am, 21 years older, so from a really practical standpoint, our life expectancies are different.

"My preference would be for her to want a kid as much as I do, and for us to enter into a fairly traditional parenting role—well, I guess it's not so traditional—where we're equally invested in the welfare of the child. I think we would have very different things to offer a child in terms of the way we think about the world. But she doesn't feel that way and, biologically, there's a limit. I have to decide at some point.

"My grandmother is 77. I do feel some desire to have a child in the next couple of years partly based on her life expectancy. I really want her to be able to be there for some portion of that child's life.

"Recently there was something going on; I was really upset about something. I called my mother at 6 am to bitch and cry on the phone for an hour and a half. And she was fine. The door is always open. If I lost my job and all my money and was homeless, the person I'd call, of course, would be my mom. And she would take care of me. Not that different from how she took care of me when I was a kid. And someday I anticipate taking care of her that way. It would be very important to me to return that."

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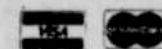
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