

I'm a DAD!

Families are growing and changing. This new baby has four loving, committed parents

by Marilyn Davis

When Charles opens the door he's a little breathless. "Sorry everything's such a mess," he says, pushing a stroller out of the path. "The baby just left." Charles's daughter is four and a half months old. And, right now at least, she is the center of life for her family of loving parents—all four of them. Charles is a gay man who has chosen to be the biological father, and the designated "dad," for this baby. The birth mother is a lesbian and Charles's good friend. Both mom and dad have committed relationships with partners who are also very much a part of their baby's life. "All of us felt that we had a lot to offer," says Charles. "We had a lot in our hearts to give this child. I think she's fortunate to have us, as fortunate as we are to have her."

Since he was in his late twenties, Charles has wanted to be a father. In fact when he made the decision to be honest about his sexuality, he assumed being gay meant giving up his dream of fatherhood, and that was hard. "I felt a great loss around not being able to have children. One of my fears was that I wasn't going to experience that piece of my life." For several years he was happy being out and experimenting with his exciting new life, and fatherhood didn't seem too important. As he began to get older, Charles says, "It was there again, the feeling that life has more to it than just being the center of the universe. There came a time when I felt like I had done the groundwork for something, and I didn't know at first what I was supposed to do with it." Then Charles met his daughter's mother, and they became friends. As they got to know each other they discovered that they shared a desire to have children. "One day she asked me if we could talk seriously about having a baby. I was excited."

Several years later the serious talks and careful preparation turned towards action and commitment, and four good friends became a family.

"We probably overprocessed this, if that's possible. We wanted to make sure we knew what we were doing and what kind of a life we were going to offer this child. We decided to identify my daughter's mother and myself as the primary parents. We wanted her to grow up knowing she has a mom and a dad. She also has mom's partner and dad's partner, who are her parents too."

Both Charles's partner and mom's partner went through Lamaze classes, and were "somewhat prepared" for the experience of sharing in the birth. All four parents, mom's partner's teenaged children, and two other friends of mom's gathered in a birthing room at the hospital to welcome the baby. "Mom's partner and I did all the coaching and were the first ones to welcome our daughter and hold her when she arrived. Right after the birth we had the baby with us in the room for about an hour; they dimmed the lights and it was all quiet and wonderful. We gave her her first bath and then took her to her little bed. I was so pleased and appreciative that my daughter's mother wanted me to be a part of that process. I tried not to push on any of those issues; I tried to respect her primary relationship with her partner; but it was something I told her I just didn't want to miss. It was the biggest miracle I've ever seen in my life. To suddenly be introduced to this child in the first milliseconds of her life was a miracle for all of us."

After the high of his daughter's birth, Charles admits that there have been difficult moments too. He remembers "from a feelings place" how hard it was to leave his daughter at her mother's house after driving them home from the hospital. Even though they had talked about how the baby would spend the first few months at home with her mother, he wasn't prepared for the pain of being separated from her. "That's part of what we've gotten ourselves into; I can't be there whenever I want to. It continues to be difficult. I'm trying not to feel bad when I'm with my daughter, and perhaps I even don't allow myself to be totally with her for fear of having to deal with the separation later." In fact, it's getting easier to adjust to the baby's coming and going, and Charles knows, that as she gets older, he'll be able to have her with him more. "Even now I can go over and put her to bed if I want to. Her mom's brought her



PHOTO BY LINDA KLEVER

over without being bathed in the morning so that I can bathe her here. She loves her bath. To see her kicking around in the water at three weeks of age was really important to me. Changing her is even a pleasure because it's a time when I can giggle and talk with her and take care of her needs at the same time. My partner and I bottle feed her during the day while her mother is at work. She gives you an incredible look when she sees that you're supplying this sustenance for her."

Charles is also learning that the relationship between a child and a father takes effort, and it doesn't happen immediately. "There's more connectedness between a child and a mom long before the child is out in the world. Being a dad, of course, I couldn't experience that. I feel like I have to catch up, and it's been a struggle."

"I anticipated for nine months what it would be like and honestly, (I don't know if this is a male thing) it wasn't exactly what I thought it would be. I thought I would be instantly in love; that this new being would be everything in my world, and I realized that it just wasn't true—maybe because of my age, and the amount of self-indulgence that I've experienced in my life as a male with the freedom society gives men. I've directed my own course in life for 37 years. Now suddenly, I'm

struggling with responsibility and sometimes I view that responsibility as a loss of freedom. It's all about learning how to readjust who I am to accommodate this new life. I try not to jump to the conclusion that this is how life will always be based on what I see today. I do rely on time to be a determining factor in how things play out."

When Charles called his parents to tell them the news, they were surprised, a little confused and thrilled to be grandparents again. That night they broke open a bottle of champagne to toast the baby. "I don't know if they've adjusted to it completely, but they made a decision to be positive and to ply this child with lots of love, just like all their other grandchildren. They respect our family and treat it as a family."

Charles speaks of his partner's role in this family with love and gratitude, and perhaps a new measure of appreciation. "In terms of nurturing and comforting and caretaking, he is the best. He probably adapted to the day-to-day basics easier than I did. He's been very good at it; I'm very impressed. It's made the whole thing so much easier."

Charles's new life as a father has brought new challenges and enormous pleasures. "We have a long way to go with figuring out how it all works," he says. "I hope I can figure it out sooner than later so I don't miss anything along the way. My daughter's life unfolds every day. Last week she held her bottle for the first time and I was ecstatic; I was totally in love with this child all over again because she had done something so spectacular. I knew she was the greatest thing on earth."

Epilogue

Since Charles was interviewed for this article, friends of his have received a violent death threat from a hate group. As a result, all of us involved in this article have decided to identify Charles by his first name only. We feel that his safety and the safety of his family must be our prime concern. Violence and hate crimes against gay men and lesbians are escalating around the country and coming out in big numbers is the best weapon we have to stop the violence. When the violence and threats endanger our children, the choice to come out is no choice.

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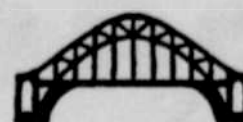
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