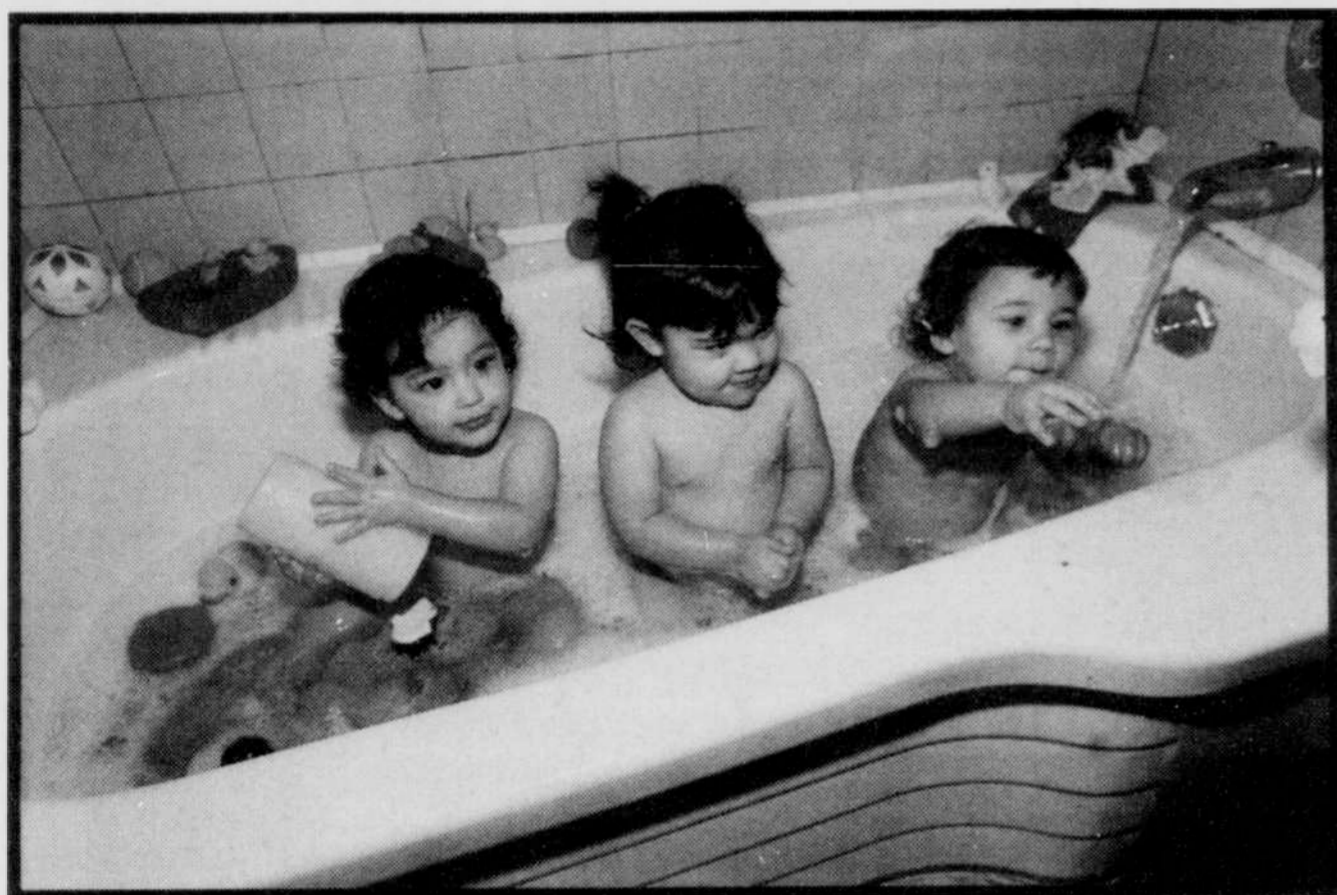




# TRIPLETS!!!



From left: Sam, Risa and Gabby

**Whew! They're three times the fun—and three times the work. Just Out checks in with moms Sheila and Mimi one year later...**

by Risa Krivé • photos by Linda Kliever

It is midwinter. Leaving my partner to shovel us out of the drifts of dirty dishes that pile up around our house, I visit a Hawthorne-district home in Portland to interview the lesbian mothers of triplets, Mimi Luther and Sheila Robinson.

I expect to find a triple dose of cabin-fever chaos. Instead, Sheila ushers me out of a wild wind into the warmth of their cozy, clean living room. Not a toy is out of place. A child-sized plastic picnic table dominates the surrounding chairs. A block-lettered picture proudly proclaims that RISA, SAM and GABBY live here. A cotton-bearded Santa Claus collage watches us from the wall.

"I did my first arts and crafts project with the kids," Sheila explains. "A HoHo mask—Santa Claus. When we talk to Risa about Santa Claus she says 'HoHo,' and so everything around Christmas was HoHo: presents, decorations, trees, lights—everything she saw was 'HoHo, HoHo.'"

A little voice from the nursery echoes, "Hoho." "That's Risa," Mimi says. "She's usually the first to wake up."

It seems fitting that HoHo is her word for the season. "Risa" means "laughter" in Spanish.

"I'm not a Christian," Sheila says, "but we had fun at Christmas. I believe in the spirit of giving, a time to connect with the people you love, a time to reflect on a year gone by."

One year ago, I interviewed the triplets' moms. The babies were then six months old. Now they are full-fledged toddlers of 19 months. They walk and talk and share and shove and poke and play, and they are learning new things every moment of every day. They need constant care, cuddling, communication, changing. Mimi, the biological mother, is 37. Sheila is 36. The couple has been together for seven years. Many relationships suffer through or don't survive the seven-year itch. I wonder if this past year has taken a toll on the moms. There are no models for this form of mothering. Three little people depend on their ability to make it up as they move along.

"So how's it going?" I ask.

"It's going well," Mimi says. "I think it's better in some ways, don't you?"

"Definitely," Sheila confirms.

"I think we have good structure, great routine, and that makes it a lot easier," Mimi says. "They are so much more independent now. They can walk. They can communicate pretty effectively. Any of us can take care of them by ourselves now. We couldn't do that when they were six months old. That's a huge improvement. I think it's easier on Sheila. As the kids get older and they communicate more, Sheila becomes a more confident parent and that makes her a better parent. Is that true, Sheila?"

"Except for the whining."

Mimi continues, "They sit at the table to eat now, so we're not picking them up, putting them in the highchairs, strapping them in and putting on bibs. We clean the carpet four times a day, though. This independence has its tradeoffs."

"Such as what's going on in the bedroom right now," Sheila interjects. The commotion sounds like all of the babies are awake. The moms seem to know it's OK.

Buddy (Karin Lang) joins us. This longtime friend and part of the family lives here. She quit her job when the babies were born to help take care of them. Now she works 60 hours a week as head chef at a restaurant. But when she is home, she is a very involved domestic partner. Buddy concurs that the toddlers' independence is an improvement.

"They don't need to be held all the time. They can entertain themselves. Sheila doesn't have to jump around waving her arms to keep them occupied. It is easier."

Still, "easier" is a relative concept. "When we did the last article in *Just Out* we sure made it sound rosy, didn't we?" Mimi comments. "We made it sound a lot rosier than it was. When we looked back at that article we thought, 'Were we on Valium or what?' It was hard, hard, work, and it still is. It is a lot easier now, and it's also really fun, but it is really hard having three one-and-a-half-year-old toddlers. It's hard to be attentive to all their independent needs."

"I think the thing lacking in this family is individual attention. The tradeoff is that they have more love and attention and devotion by this very large extended family than any other kid ever gets. There are easily 10 adults they see all the time, whom they

love and who love the babies, and that's great. But we rarely get to have just one baby. And then they wonder where their brother and sister are."

"Or the other adults," Sheila adds. "I took Sam down to Starbucks one day in the backpack and he said, 'Mimi? Mimi? Mimi? If I leave he'll say, 'Mama, Mama.' When Buddy leaves he says, 'Bubba?' They are really concerned about each other. They want to know where their siblings are."

"Though they don't like each other very much right now," Mimi adds. "They fight over me, they fight over toys—they're not crazy about each other, but they don't want the other ones to be gone. Buddy's at work so much now that Gabby really misses her. It was very hard for her to decide whether to stay home with the kids or go back to work. She chose to go."

"We're glad she did, because she bought the video machine for Christmas," Sheila quips. "We saw a tape that was taken a year ago and everybody said, 'Oh, how cute, don't you miss it?' I hated those days. The sleep deprivation, mostly. Getting up every two hours. Feeling like I didn't have a life. Like I had no time. Lots of babies crying. Being extremely worn out. Still having ambivalent feelings about parenting, and being unsure. Thinking that sleeping through the night would never happen. That's what it felt like."

Sheila may have felt ambivalent then, but she is extremely enthusiastic now. "Their learning capacity is incredible," she says. "You can see it daily—in vocabulary, in motor skills. Sam, two days ago, couldn't get off that bike. I saw him get on and off today. They're starting to be creative. It's amazing, the rate at which they're learning. It's scary too, because we think everything is critical. We want to do it just right. It's hard to know."

Mimi adds, "Sheila's niece Gail moved in with us in September. She's 19. She works and goes to college, but she's another person in the house. The kids love her. She's one of the few people outside of the three of us who can take care of them all by herself. She has the confidence. It's all confidence. If you think you can do it, it's a piece of cake." She laughs. "Well, not quite cake."

"If you think you can do it it's a walk in the park—with a stroller, a backpack, the dog, three kids..." Sheila interjects.

"We can't take them to the park alone," Mimi says. "Gabby wants to try to climb the ladder and Sam wants to get on the teeter totter and Risa wants to do something else..."

"Up and down," Risa chirps from the nursery when she hears "teeter totter."

We go into the bedroom. Mommies and babies haven't seen each other since nap time began. The reunion is joyous. I am reintroduced to the triplets. Three pairs of luminous luscious chocolate eyes gaze up at me through thick lashes in tiny faces. They get blankets and Pooh bears and toys and kisses and hugs and many choices about what they want to bring into the living room.

Risa and I talk about having the same name. Sam and Sheila play with a puzzle. Mimi changes Gabriella's diaper.

The children are the focus now. We talk on toddler time. Our conversation intermingles with the constant needs, no's and newnesses involved in interacting with one-and-a-half-year-olds. Last week they were learning how to hold crayons. Then they pounded on the table with them. Today, they are drawing. Each colorful line is a demarcation into the uncharted territory of lesbian parenting of alternatively conceived triplets.

"There's still a lot of stuff we don't know," Mimi remarks. "I wish I had my own private child development specialist who had experience with multiple births and children of lesbian families at the same time. A heterosexual couple came over last week who have a baby they adopted. It was like an oasis in a desert. We don't hang out with anybody else who has kids our kids' ages. We can't just go over to somebody's house without being an invasion. It was so wonderful to talk to other people who had a really honest perspective about the difficulties of parenting, especially for Sheila. I think it was so validating to have somebody else who said, 'You bet, there were moments where we thought—'"

"—this was a *bad* decision we made," Sheila finishes, completing the sentence in the intimate interweaving way of longtime lovers. "Let's give 'em back."

"Risa, you're only supposed to be hammering on your toy, remember? Can you bang on your toy?" Mimi asks.

Risa continues to bang on the table. "Otherwise, I'll have to put it away." Risa bangs on her toy.

"That's a good girl," Sheila says.

"Who gave you that toy?" Mimi asks.

"HoHo!"

A new fire engine toy is making a real siren sound. "The firefighters stop the truck at our house and turn the lights on for the kids," Sheila mentions. The toy siren roars.

"It's loud, isn't it?" Mimi asks.

"Not so loud," I respond.

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From left: Gabby, Mimi, Risa and Sam