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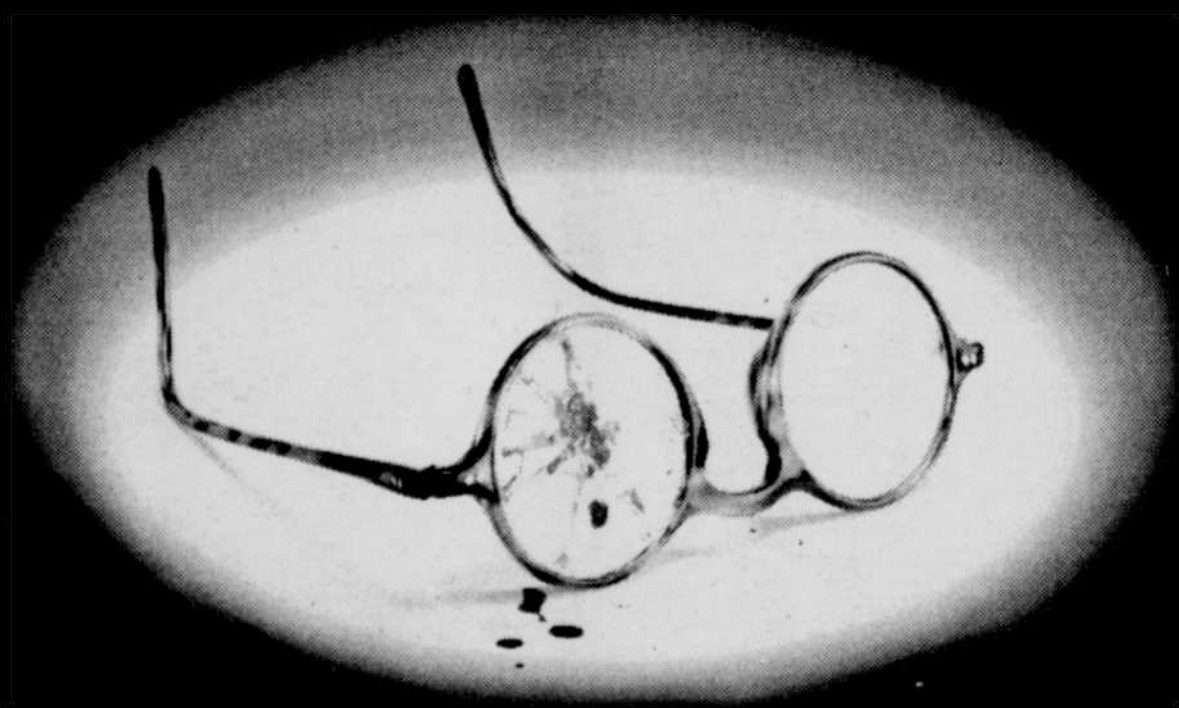
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Heather had two mommies

A new cable film examines a landmark custody case

BY STEVE WARREN



It's love at first sight for Brooke Shields (left) and Cherry Jones

If you think the Elian Gonzalez affair and the presidential election made Florida look bad, wait till you see *What Makes a Family!*

Rarely does as much as 15 minutes go by in this Lifetime original movie without a reminder that Florida is the only state in the country with a law forbidding adoption by homosexuals. That point is the crux of this true custody story, which achieves its aims as both a tearjerker and a call for reason and compassion in awarding children to the most loving and deserving parent without letting sexual orientation or even blood relationships be the sole determining factor.

The film has a formidable list of executive producers: Barbra Streisand, Cis Corman, Whoopi Goldberg, Craig Zadan and Neil Meron—essentially the team that made *Serving in Silence: The Margarette Cammermeyer Story*. Their new film is another powerful story of a lesbian fighting injustice.

Brooke Shields, establishing her dramatic credence and for all, stars as Janine Niessen, who is introduced outside the Pinellas County (St. Petersburg/Clearwater) courthouse soliciting the help of powerful civil rights attorney Terry Harrison (Goldberg). She tells her story in a flashback that takes up about two-thirds of the picture.

Janine wasn't even out when she was cruised by Sandy Cataldi (Cherry Jones) in a store. Her wealthy, conservative parents had come down so hard on her over her first crush at age 12 that she had suppressed all sexual feelings since then. On their first date, Sandy takes her to a dance at the queer Sunnyview Community Church, and next thing you know they're having a holy union at the same church.

Beaming in the front row and supporting them enthusiastically are Sandy's parents, Evelyn (Anne Meara) and Frank (Al Waxman). That support doesn't wane when, years later, they learn they're going to be grandparents: Sandy is pregnant by artificial insemination. The donor, she says, "is everything you'd want in a man—if you wanted a man."

At the christening of their daughter, Heather, Sandy passes out. She's diagnosed

with systemic lupus, which is said to be treatable and "not usually fatal."

This being the story it is, Sandy's case is obviously not usual. The medical drama eventually evolves into a legal case, and the screenplay by Robert L. Freedman is unabashedly partisan.

If I weren't on the same side, I'd really come down hard on it for its heavy-handedness. The grandparents turn into monsters who will say or do anything to keep their granddaughter.

With so much crammed into two hours, the effect is somewhat melodramatic, but director Maggie Greenwald and her excellent cast make each individual moment ring true. Janine's first clue that she's no longer in the bosom of her partner's family comes when she reads Sandy's obituary in the paper and she's not mentioned. She sighs, "I would have settled for 'longtime companion.'"

Unlike *Philadelphia*, in which Tom Hanks and Antonio Banderas rarely touched, the women in *What Makes a Family* are affectionate, exchanging several passionate kisses. Tony Award winner Jones has been out for years, and this might be the first role that's allowed her to be both sexual and sexy.

An impressive Shields holds her own opposite her in their dramatic scenes. Meara brings what humanity she can to what is essentially a wicked role, and if Goldberg coasts through the part of the attorney, I'd

rather watch her coast than watch most actors act.

You might feel a sense of "been there, seen that" as you watch *What Makes a Family*, but I think that's less from seeing similar movies than from reading news reports year after year of lesbians and gay men embroiled in similar battles for the custody of children they've parented. I hope this film will give them strength and comfort and perhaps move and enlight-

en the people with the authority to rule on what makes their families. **JW**

WHAT MAKES A FAMILY premieres at 9 p.m. Jan. 22 on Lifetime.

STEVE WARREN is a free-lance writer.



Whoopi Goldberg