

Some guys will do anything to have a baby. And when you're a gay male couple, you might have to be very resourceful to get one.

Just ask James Giardina, Portland Area Business Association president and a designer at La Rog Jewelers. He'll tell you an incredible story.

Giardina and Brian Miller, partners since they met in St. Louis, knew they wanted to have a child, but there were the obvious barriers. They explored some conventional ideas considered by other gay fathers, including adoption, but everything was problematic. They even considered a biological contribution from Giardina's sister, who was agreeable to being impregnated with Miller's sperm.

Then last February, close to his store in downtown Portland, Giardina noticed a very young and obviously pregnant panhandler. She was smoking and asking for money. On the third day he passed her—and without getting permission from Miller—Giardina acted on an impulse and his long-thwarted wish.

In his usual suit and tie, he leaned down next to her and revealed his intentions. "I have plenty of spare change, but I want to take care of that baby."

During the next couple of weeks, whenever Giardina saw the girl, whose name was Jasmine, he made a point of engaging her in conversation, even bringing her lunch.

He learned that her name on the streets was, ironically, Fairy. He found out she loved Cheetos and milk, which he would buy for her.

She told him her baby was promised to her aunt in San Francisco who could not have any more children because of a hysterectomy. He wondered what kind of woman would allow her unborn child's mother to "sit on cold cement with that baby" and panhandle to survive.

Giardina also learned, not surprisingly, that Jasmine's life had been difficult. She had run away from home at the age of 16 after she stole the aunt's jewelry to "make ends meet." She had lived in a shelter until her time was up, then she was out on the streets.

Jasmine eventually hooked up with a guy who was doing drugs, and she became addicted to heroin. He dumped her after his mother offered to buy him a car if he would get clean and sober.

Then she ran with another guy who was supposed to hitchhike around the country with her. But when she told him she was

AMAZING GRACE

PABA president shares his fascinating fatherhood story
by Jack Turteltaub

pregnant, he ran out on her, never to be seen again. Now, to protect her baby, she was on methadone replacement therapy.

For several weeks, Giardina was optimistic that he could persuade Jasmine to give up her baby. He contacted his attorney, Mark Johnson, to approach the girl with an adoption proposal. But one day, Jasmine just disappeared.

Gazing out from a window in the store where he could see her favorite corner near Rite Aid, Giardina noted the vacant spot and despaired about his lost opportunity. While he made a conscious effort to keep looking out for her, he assumed he never would see her again.

Then, three weeks later, as Giardina was heading toward a business meeting, he saw Jasmine again. He asked her to please "stay right there." When he returned with Miller, the first words out of her mouth were, "Are you guys serious?"

The couple arranged a meeting with her and made a generous proposal. If she would agree to let them raise her child, they would get an attorney to represent her and protect her legal rights.

They would draw up an agreement with Johnson that would provide financially for all of her prenatal care and living expenses. They also would pay for her room and board until she delivered the baby.

Jasmine agreed, and Giardina's attorney went to work. The couple had to undergo criminal checks, agree to a home study and obtain an interstate compact to adopt the child because they reside in Vancouver, Wash.

One night, Jasmine telephoned in a crisis. The older, abusive man she had been staying with had tried to choke her. She needed their help. In the middle of the night, Giardina and Miller retrieved her and then worked out an arrangement for a friend to take her in and provide her housing for the rest of her pregnancy.



Brian Miller (left) and James Giardina say Grace has made a huge impact on their lives

About three weeks before the expected delivery, Giardina drove over to Jasmine's place to sign all the papers with her mother and aunt present. When he got there, the relatives confronted him: "You're horrible. How can you take our grandchild?"

Giardina defended himself. He explained that if he raised the baby, "Your child is going to have an amazing life."

Shortly after this unpleasant encounter, the mother sent Giardina and Miller a packet of family pictures for the baby. She called and asked them to contact her if they needed anything.

Giardina says they took Jasmine to the hospital June 15. The delivery went well, without any complications.

Giardina and Miller stayed in the fathers center. The aunt called them at one point and offered to double the money they'd given to Jasmine if they'd give up the baby to her.

At the hospital, Jasmine tearfully held her daughter—she had decided to have no further contact—before giving the little girl to her fathers. Appropriately enough, Grace was born the weekend of Father's Day and Portland Pride. She was healthy, and her weight was in the normal range (7 pounds, 11 ounces). She had no street drugs in her system and showed no symptoms of withdrawal.

Another crisis soon arose. Five days after coming into the world, Grace suddenly went into a severe drug withdrawal. Their beautiful little girl was screaming, could not keep down any food and could not be comforted. They put

her on a special predigested formula with filtered bottles and waited. Slowly, she came out of the withdrawal and returned to being a normal baby girl.

The past year has been eventful in more than one way for Giardina. In addition to becoming a father, he ratcheted up his involvement in Portland's sexual minorities community by accepting the presidency of PABA.

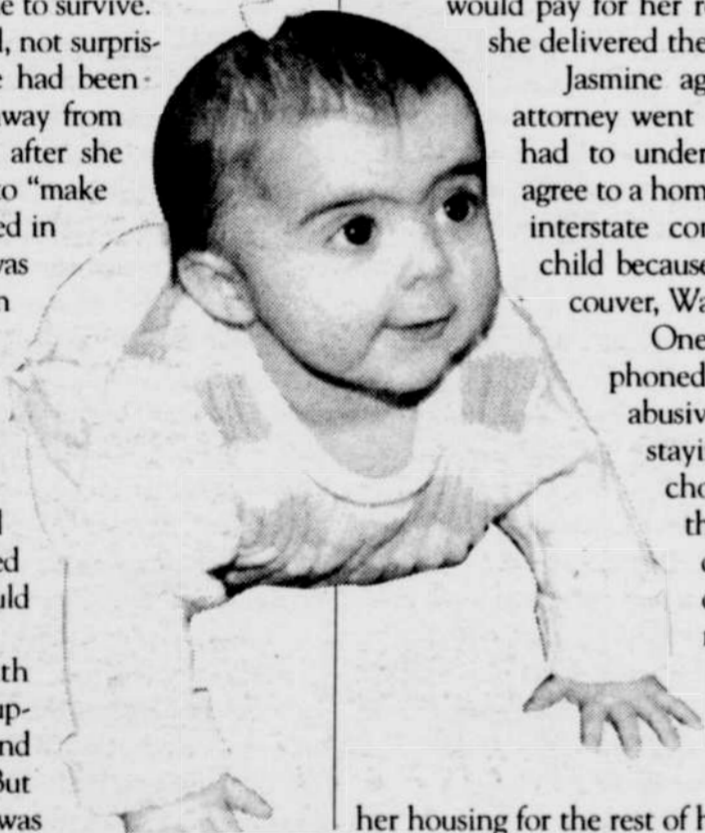
Giardina says that he used to be a workaholic but that now, though he still loves his job, Grace is the main priority. "When you get a child, it just changes your life. Everything is centered around her now."

He describes his daughter as thriving, growing and showing no sign of problems from the methadone her mother took during the pregnancy. "She's amazing, she sits up on her own, holds her bottle and makes great sounds," he says enthusiastically.

Giardina is also thankful for his family, for the work of his attorney and for his strong support system. "The family is so involved, and our circle of friends provides such incredible support. It's been a joy." □

JAMES GIARDINA works full time at La Rog Jewelers in downtown Portland and may be reached at 503-223-5051 or through the Portland Area Business Association.


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