

northwest

Out in the Open

Queer families have ally in adoption

by Malka Geffen

Lee Amberwood and her partner, Jacklyn, began talking about starting a family 10 years ago, after they had been together for eight years. "We knew we both always wanted kids in our lives," she said. "But it took a long time for it to happen." The couple started the adoption process with Oregon Child and Family Services in 1999, and they brought home their daughter, Rosie, 36 hours after she was born in 2002.

For Amberwood, adoption was clearly the way to go. "There are so many children already here in the Northwest who need loving parents."

Though the couple were interested in adoption only, they were required to take state foster care classes in addition to having a thorough home study. "It got convoluted and problematic when our caseworker disappeared," said Amberwood, "but then we got a new counselor who was a lesbian and went through the whole process again."

At first they thought they wanted to adopt a 4-year-old and were shown dozens of biographies and photographs. "Suddenly we thought we wanted a younger and younger child," Amberwood said. "Wanting a baby is different with the state—babies immediately go into foster care. It seems to me that the relationship of the foster care system and the state adoption system worked against each other. We found out how difficult it was to navigate those two systems, and after a year and a half, we decided to explore other options."

With no colleagues or friends looking into adoption at that time, the couple turned to the phone book. "We suspected at some point that certain agencies most likely would not be serving gays and lesbians, and we did run into that with an agency that did placements from Europe, China and Russia," said Amberwood. "There,

you have to be 'single' to adopt if you're a gay couple. We knew dual adoption had been done in Multnomah County even before we moved here in '93, and that's what we wanted."

When the couple found Open Adoption and Family Services (OAFS), Amberwood said it was like a light bulb went on. "Open, openness, no secrets. We've never been in the closet, so that just fit with us. Why wouldn't we want our child not to have any secrets about who his or her birth parents are?"

The agency facilitates child-centered open adoptions in which birth parents and adoptive families create healthy long-term relationships that address the ongoing needs of children. According to executive director Shari Levine, the concept of open adoption was pioneered in the Northwest 21 years ago when the agency began. "The definition of open adoption ranges from the birth mom meeting the adoptive parents once to possibly receiving pictures and letters to one visit a year for the first three years all the way to the adoptions we have, supporting real, genuine friendships between birth parents and adoptive parents and birth parents and child," she said.

A moment on the OAFS Web site, and it is clear how gay-friendly the agency is. A slide show

of waiting families running on the home page shows one prospective gay or lesbian couple or family every few seconds, interspersed with photographs of straight couples and families also waiting to adopt.

"We work with straight families, gay and lesbian families, married couples and single people. We strongly believe the choice of adoptive parents should lie in the birth parents' hands," Levine said. "This reflects the foundation of our agency's philosophy to empower our clients to create healthy, self-sustaining relationships to reflect their adoption vision, not ours."

According to Levine, OAFS has 60 to 65 families in its pool, most of which live in the region and 40 percent of which are gay and lesbian couples. She said the agency has become popular in the sexual minorities community because it is one of the only agencies in the world that welcomes same-sex couples into its infant adoption pool.

"Most agencies, if they work with same-sex couples at all, would only invite them into their special-needs pool, where a child is older, has been severely drug- or alcohol-affected, suffered from neglect or abuse, or is mentally or physically handicapped," Levine said. "We feel that that's insulting. [Gays and lesbians] should have the same rights to adopt a newborn that straight couples have."

According to lesbian mediator and therapist Lauren Mac Neill, "Where some folks once upon a time thought once you came out you were giving up hope of ever becoming a parent, they now know parenting is indeed a possibility, even if we have to jump some hoops others don't have to."

Mac Neill, who recently held a workshop in Portland for prospective queer parents called "Maybe Baby," said the nature of adoption began to change in this country about 20 years ago. "There was a time when kids didn't know they were even adopted. Then there was a trend where [parents] would tell the child. Then more adoptees became activists and said closed adoption files were very

Resources for Queers Curious About Adoption

- www.openadopt.org: Open Adoption and Family Service explains its philosophy and provides great resources and information for prospective queer families.

- www.adoptioninstitute.org: The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute presents adoption research, education and advocacy information.

- www.oregon.gov/DHS/children/adoption: The Oregon Department of Human Services provides links to adoption resources and a list of the state's waiting children.

- www.laurenmacneill.com: Lauren Mac Neill offers family conflict resolution. She plans to offer another "Maybe Baby" workshop for the queer community in the spring.

- www.lambdalegal.org: Lambda Legal provides an excellent overview of state adoption laws.

- *The Kid* by Dan Savage (Plume, 2000): The gay advice columnist's hilarious account of his and his boyfriend's efforts to adopt a child. The couple used OAFS.

- *A Legal Guide for Lesbian & Gay Couples, 13th Edition* (Nolo Press, 2005): A practical guide for gay and lesbian couples to protect their rights.

painful for them. Not everyone wants to know, but a significant majority wants to know at least some information, if not to meet their birth parents." Mac Neill added, "This is why I chose an identity-release donor; I'd rather my kids have the option."

Amberwood said: "We were willing to try this new relationship with the birth mother. People still reel back and say, 'How do you do that?' For us it's quite natural."

The couple, who spent a total of 15 months in the pool at OAFS, were moving on with their lives while they waited. In the fall of 2002, Amberwood was starting graduate school at Oregon State University, and Jacklyn was preparing for a new career in real estate. Two days before Thanksgiving, they had plans to go to the coast and "get away from all the nasty waiting." According to Amberwood, the phone rang at 8:30 p.m., and it was the agency calling to tell them they'd been picked.

"I just screamed into the phone," she said. "We sat on the couch and just laughed. We said: 'This is not a good time for this to happen! Look at all the things going on in our life!' But we knew she was ours." ☐



Jacklyn (left) and Lee Amberwood utilized an open adoption to bring Rosie into their family.



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