



IN THE FAMILY WAY

AN INTENTIONAL MOM

In last month's column, Anna shared her process in deciding to become a parent. This month, we'll share Cathy's journey. Cathy is Oliver's non-biological mom. Baby Oliver is now 2-months-old and amazing.

When Anna arrived at 'yes' to parenthood, I was still wavering. The fears I had to explore were: money, job, and age.

Money. I grew up in a decent amount of economic chaos, which included several evictions and deep shame from being teased because my dad was a taxi driver and because I didn't wear the 'right' jeans (remember Jordache and Sassoon?). Therefore, I thought Anna and I should have at least one million dollars in the bank before we ever even considered parenthood (Dear readers - I clearly have worked through that false belief).



Photo by: Heace Long

Also tied to money was job "stuff." Anna and I have been together six years and have both experienced a lot of job transitions during that time. To be parents, I thought we should both have "solid careers" with linear, upward paths where we had great benefits and retirement plans.

Age. My parents were older than most people's my age (my mom was 35 when she had me and my dad was 49). While I could articulate the many benefits of older parents, I also recognized one of the main challenges - that older parents may not be around as long to enjoy building adult relationships with their children. I was 30 years old when my dad died and 35 when my mom died. I am 41 years old.

I had already worked through some difficult messages I received from my mom about parenting. In her moments of overwhelmed-ness, frustration, and mental health difficulties, my mom would say to me, "Don't have children - children ruin your life." (She sometimes forgot I wasn't a confidant, but one of her kids.) She would list all the material things, vacations and career opportunities she perceived she gave up to have children. Contradictorily, she would then say, "My children are my greatest accomplishment." Even as a Gemini, I struggled to reconcile the mixed messages she shared about parenthood.

From listening to my mom, I mostly thought having a child meant sacrificing your entire life. Having no interest in being a martyred mom, when I came out as a lesbian at the age of 25, it seemed the parenthood decision had been made for me. In conservative Lancaster, PA in 1996 I didn't know any other "out" lesbians, and certainly not lesbians with children. I put away any ideas or desires I had around parenthood.

However, my ex-partner and I started to explore the idea of being parents when I was 34 years old. It was actually during those conversations that I began to realize that I 1) likely wanted to be a parent but 2) I didn't want to raise a child with my ex (I remember thinking, "If you can't trust me to load the dishwasher without picking a fight with me, how will we raise a child together?"). So in a way, our parenthood discussions led me to realize that our relationship was over.

There was another barrier I had to work through on the path to parenthood. It was clear that Anna wanted to birth a baby and I had no interest in being pregnant; however, I had some feelings when thinking about what it would be like to be the non-biological mom. When we lived in Arizona and started these conversations, it was true that the law wouldn't see me as an equal or legal parent; in fact, in Arizona I wouldn't have been seen as a parent as all, but instead a legal stranger to our child. We are grateful to live in Oregon, a state with domestic partnership and second parent adoption. Beyond the law, I also worried that others (myself included) wouldn't see me as an equal parent. One of the few things my birth family and I have in common is biology, so I wondered what it would be like for me to create family that is not based in blood, particularly when Anna would be biologically related. I began talking with non-bio lesbian moms and reading books and articles from that point of view and quickly realized that 1) my fears were normal and 2) my fears were unfounded.

While there are people who see Anna as "the real mom" (when we found out we were pregnant, I had a well-meaning friend say to me, "Congratulations! Anna's going to be a mom!") and struggle to find a way to make sense of me or what to "call" me, it is clear from my friends who are queer parents that the children see both parents as equal and that the non-biological moms and children bond just as closely.