



 family story

# All Our Families

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"All Our Families" is a storytelling series that showcases the ingenuity, connectedness, support, and love that exists in all kinds of families.

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# Gay. Jamaican. Muslim. Father.

*Family Story's work is largely focused on representation of families existing outside of the nuclear family construct. As we share stories through All Our Families, we do a certain amount of box-checking to make sure a diversity of structures and the people within them are represented. Some stories have come to us through our networks and communities, others we've intentionally sought. Asadullah (Asad) Muhammad's story is one of the latter. We wanted to make sure a Black, gay father was included in All Our Families. Of course, Asad does not represent all Black, gay dads; his story is his own. But Asad's story among the others adds necessary dimension to how we think about family and how it is created.*



The interviews I've done for All Our Families focus on how people create and conceptualize family. It's an inspiring, moving, and beautiful process. While we center people's experience of family in these stories, family is undeniably a container for the crucial aspects of our lives — our values, sense of purpose, and identity. Listening to Asad's story reminded me deeply of these and other intersections. Since our interview, I've told him more than once that he needs — or rather, we need him — to write a memoir. Until then, I am honored to share a small piece of Asad's story.

"I used to Google 'gay, Jamaican, Muslim,' and nothing would come up. I remember Googling it at work, and being like, 'Yo, you're not about to be the first one. I'm not about to be the first Jamaican, gay Muslim.' I don't have that in me. That's not what I'm trying to do."

Family and identity are deeply intertwined, whether we're aware of it or not. When our identities line up outside the norms of our family and community, we have to navigate unpaved paths toward a sense of belonging. Sometimes we have to find or create new spaces to form community and family. That journey toward personal truth and wholeness is surely a necessary adventure, but it can be incredibly hard as well. Asadullah Muhammad's journey is a powerful, painful story of what liberation sometimes costs and about how bravery and integrity can be compasses to steer one toward home.

Asad, as his friends call him, grew up in a Caribbean immigrant community in Jamaica, Queens. Like many first-generation children of immigrants, he was too American

for his immigrant parents and too foreign for his American friends. But he also grew up with other kids who were similarly situated. "That, I think, humanized me a lot and made it a normal thing that all of our parents were from somewhere else, and we were all born in the same place. So, having friends from Trinidad, and Cuba, and Haiti... that was pretty much my norm."

When he was two years old, Asad's parents divorced. Though he was being raised by a single mother, his experience of family was abundant. His father lived close by and liked to throw big parties that brought together family and friends. A woman who lived across the hall and whom Asad called Grandma, took care of him before and after school while his mother was at work. Summers meant trips to family in Jamaica to. "It was like how many Black Americans send their children down south in the summer," he says. "It gave me a great connection with the island. To go from living on the eighth floor in the building where we grew up in Queens, to walking barefoot to the store, climbing mango trees, and jumping off rooftops... I felt like I was living in both spaces all the time. That was exciting for me and a rich experience."

Asad knew early on that he was attracted to boys. "I would think of girls as pretty — I'd think, 'I like her hair, I like how she put that outfit together, Rita's looking good today. But I like it when I'm wrestling with Gene.' I found myself befriending some of the cute boys in class — not doing anything with them, but just wanting to be close to them." But those feelings weren't welcomed, says Asad, "because

I didn't see anybody who was queer and totally showing up for themselves, I was like, 'you're weird, keep your feelings inside.'"

With no role models or clear path to take, Asad tried to explore his sexuality with the logic of a teenager going through puberty without having had the relevant sex talk. Eventually, he discovered the public restroom scenes of straight — and, often, married — men who hooked up anonymously.

As Asad matured, he did not see himself as gay, but as having an attraction that he needed to manage, restrain, and control. His need to repress his desire only intensified when he started college, where he began practicing Islam as part of a Black, Afrocentric community. "Beyond being spiritually uplifted by Islam, I felt like certain questions were being answered. I grew up Presbyterian, and Islam felt more holistic to me." However, with the grounding of Islam came an emphasis on marriage and family. But he continued having one-night-stands with men while trying to pray away his attraction.

After college, Asad moved to Atlanta where he worked and developed community within the social justice and community service realm. A friend introduced him to Samina\*. "I met her and it was like love at first sight. I was intimidated by her. She was beautiful, vegetarian like me, and we both had locs. It's superficial, but we looked cute together. But it was also scary because it was like, 'this could actually work.'"

Asad wanted to have the version of family his community lauded. "Islam gave me a lot of my values in terms of family. Marriage was half your religion, and children and babies were everywhere. That was seen as part of fulfilling God's plan: You bringing more conscious Muslim babies into the world, that helps humanity." As well, it was the life he'd always wanted. "When I was a kid watching the *Cosby* Show and *Full House*, I was like, 'damn, they having fun.' And I was just me and my toys, so, I wanted a big family. Samina was like God answering my prayers. I wanted to have a family but felt like it would never happen with a guy."

Asad and Samina fell in love. "I never got close to a girl in that way. It was a great feeling. She felt like a soulmate. We were so similar in so many ways, we laughed hard... She was my best friend." Less than a year after they met, Asad and Samina married and soon had their first child. "I wasn't having any relationships with guys sexually, although I thought about it, but I would fight it off. I was doing all these mind tricks to not have an attraction to men. I felt like it was working.[I thought,] 'God's answering my prayers. I feel less attracted to men, and I can control it,' and I was doing all this surveillance of my body and judgment, and adjusting,



all these mental games to prevent what's naturally been my thing for 22 years."

Every two years, they had another child until they had two sons and a daughter. Asad had the family he wanted and felt he was doing what he needed to follow the right path.

"It's so twisted, but I felt almost like a superman in a way — and not in a good way. A straight man gets to just be a straight man, and can chill and do naturally what comes to him, but I had to monitor myself. I felt confident in the strength that I carried because I was holding so much. It wasn't healthy, but I was handling it."

By the time his oldest child was five, Asad and Samina had moved from Atlanta to New York from Atlanta — back to the city where he'd first discovered men's bodies. He began visiting public restrooms again and hooking up with other men. He felt shame every time he did it, but rationalized his behavior. "It was this thing of 'you don't even have to touch, or you may just touch, but not exchange bodily fluids, or you may exchange bodily fluids, but not kiss, but you don't go all the way. You don't have anal.' It was always one more thing of figuring out how to have restraint and not be sexually frustrated."

Simultaneously, Samina began to suspect that Asad was gay. She'd seen him looking at men, and he never wanted to have sex with her. The tension between them and within

Asad was becoming unbearable. One evening while riding the subway, Asad was reading Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson and came across this line, “[G]enerations more will die or live poor butchered half-lives if you fail to act.” He explains, “I kept repeating it in my head and thinking about how, that’s how I feel: ‘You could be all about peace and movement building, but you’re going to continue living in fear, and you can never live up to your potential because you’re in the closet.’”

In that moment, Asad decided that he would tell Samina the truth. In his mind, coming out wasn’t about ending his marriage, but about telling his best friend the truth about who he was and not hiding anymore. He thought they might still be able to be a family.

Asad went home and came out to his wife. Samina, who had committed herself to raising their children as a stay-at-home-mom and was deeply devoted to both their family and the idea of their family, was devastated. Understandably, she felt anger, sadness, and betrayal and was untethered by the unraveling of her life. There was a tumultuous period of anger, therapy, mediation, and hostility as they ended their marriage.

Samina briefly remarried and had another son. It was during her pregnancy that their friendship reemerged, when he supported her in ways her new husband did not. Not only did she invite Asad to her baby’s naming ceremony with her friends and family, but she publicly thanked him for supporting her during her pregnancy. In some way, Asad felt like this public acknowledgement gave him back some of himself and allowed him to feel more grounded in his faith and family. “It took us almost seven years after our divorce to now be in a space where we are rebuilding trust. She respects me. I’m there for her and her son. I told her, ‘He’s not my birth son, but your new son is going to be a part of our family.’ I’m navigating what it is to support her now in that way.”

Asad and Samina’s family story is still evolving, and this chapter isn’t done being written. They are breaking new ground around what family can mean for them outside the narratives they’ve been given. It’s what so many of us are doing (or need to do) as we shed roles and structures that no longer serve us or fit our lives. In this process we can find more room to live fully and bravely and with love.

*\*Name has been changed to protect privacy.*

# Cool Auntie Vivian.

Single mothers are often pitied (or disparaged) because of the assumption that the absence of a spouse means that they're parenting alone. But there are a multitude of ways to be a "single mom," many of which do not involve raising kids alone. In fact, many single mothers have a network of co-parents, partners, family, and friends who help them raise their children. Married parents could learn a lot from single mothers about creating the "village" every parent and child needs.

Vivian Davis\* was 14 when her middle sister, Rita, had a daughter and made Vivian an aunt. Vivian's niece, Leslie, joined her, her parents, and two older sisters in the family's household in the Far Rockaway neighborhood in Queens, NY. "I think at that time I was just very happy to not be the youngest anymore," Vivian remembers. "Someone was actually looking up to me and calling me an official title — Auntie. That was exciting to me."

Like many families, the Davises had mixed feelings about their 19-year-old, unmarried daughter becoming a parent. Vivian's parents had come to the US from the West Indies to, like many immigrants, provide a "better life" for themselves and their children. "We were to do nothing else but go to school, do well, graduate from high school with high honors, go to college, and become professionals in some way, shape, or form," Vivian explains.

While deviating from that path was not what Vivian's parents had in mind for any of their children, everyone loved Leslie and played a role in raising her. For Vivian, that meant typical teenage babysitter tasks like feeding the child and providing a watchful eye. As Leslie got older, Vivian's role sometimes included picking her up from daycare or school, watching her until Rita got home, and providing discipline ("probably poorly, given that I was a teenager").

When Leslie was 11, Vivian and Rita bought a duplex just a few blocks away from their parents' house. Vivian moved into the top, Leslie and Rita lived on the bottom floor. After her mother left for work, Leslie would wait for the bus in the morning in Vivian's upstairs apartment. It's also where she and her group of girlfriends gathered to hang out and have sleepovers under the supervision of Leslie's "cool aunt Vivian."



Vivian, who worked at an Early Head Start center, also took Leslie with her to work during the summer and other breaks from school. Leslie got to volunteer playing with and caring for the babies at the center.

Vivian was part of Leslie's everyday life.

"Then as she became a teenager, she went off on her own a little bit more. Sometimes I wouldn't even see her as much as I saw her friends." Even as Leslie gained independence, she and Vivian remained close.

Leslie became a mother for the first time when living in the duplex. Then, when Leslie was 22 and pregnant with her second child, Hurricane Sandy destroyed the apartment she shared with her mother. They lost everything. Leslie moved in with her boyfriend under less than ideal conditions. Vivian soon realized that Leslie's job at the airport wasn't going to be enough to support her and her kids. That awareness pushed Vivian to follow through on her own plans to move to Brooklyn, and have Leslie move into the upstairs apartment, which had been untouched by Sandy.

"She could have gone on welfare and been in the projects, but I couldn't deal with the thought of that," Vivian says. "I gave her my apartment and said, 'You live there. You're close to family, so you've got good support.' [Leslie] says, 'Well, I can't pay that rent.' I said, 'You just get yourself together. You're going to have the baby soon. Stay with the baby for a little bit, get on your feet, go to work, and then we'll talk about how much you can pay.'"

That support ended up being critical for Leslie, whose daughter was born with Phelan-McDermid Syndrome, a genetic disorder that causes severe physical and mental disabilities. Her baby's needs meant that staying home for only a few weeks and then going back to work was not an option. Vivian's support meant Leslie didn't have to face the impossible choices many parents have to make between caring for their child's immediate needs and working to earn enough money to ensure necessities like housing, food, and medical care are covered.

Today, Vivian helps make Leslie's kids' lives fuller. She does standard auntie things like trips to the nail salon, museums, and restaurants, but her involvement goes beyond fun outings. Vivian explains, "For example, my oldest niece wanted to do gymnastics, so I got the family together to chip in for six months of lessons. Also, she hated going to her school, but she's such a bright kid and used to love it. So, I found a school out here in Brooklyn that is much more appropriate for a child of her intelligence and her hands-on learning style." And since the distance to the new school was so far, Vivian got a driver to take her to school and bring her home.

Like her mother Rita, Leslie is navigating being a single mother in a society that prioritizes marriage and nuclear families. And also like her mother, Leslie has the support of people like Vivian who provide her and her daughters with practical help and additional love and attention — something all families need, regardless of structure.

While Leslie has benefitted from her aunt's support, Vivian is quick to emphasize how much she gets out of the relationship. "I've loved just watching her grow, having seen her go from this little child to this very caring mother. I feel completely fortunate to have witnessed that more than anything else."

*\*Names have been changed to protect privacy.*



# The Possibility, Hope, and Uncertainty of Being a Foster-to-Adopt Parent.

“You could have a kid who has issues even if they’re your biological kid. You still have to take them to therapy. Or you can have a kid with special needs and be dealing with that stuff. It doesn’t matter if you’re biologically related to them or not. With foster care, you have to deal with someone else controlling your life. That’s the piece that is the hardest for me.”

As a child, Tracy Hanna knew she wanted to become a parent. When she got married at 34, she and her wife immediately started trying to get pregnant. When that didn’t work, Tracy eagerly considered adoption — an enthusiasm her wife didn’t share. When their marriage didn’t work out, Tracy shifted to the idea of adopting on her own. “Honestly, one of my first positive thoughts after the divorce was, ‘Now I can adopt a kid. Yay! This is a good thing.’ So, within a few months of moving out, I started calling foster care agencies and trying to figure out when orientations were and got started on the home study.”

Becoming a parent — biological or adoptive — always involves waiting. But the nine months a pregnancy takes is relatively predictable. You know how long that wait is and a lot about what you’re going to get at the end of it. For Tracy, so much was completely unknown as she moved through the process of becoming a foster parent. During foster parent training, home study, a waiting period, and visits to her social worker’s office, Tracy had a lot of time to think about becoming a parent. “Since I had no idea about how old this kid would be or what gender they would be or how many there would be, I really didn’t have any concept of how to think about it.”

Every month, Tracy would go through a list of available children with her social worker and prioritize those she thought were a good fit. Her social worker would contact the kids’ social workers who, when interested, would send questions for Tracy. She would answer them immediately, but get no response. This went on for months — choosing, answering questions...then nothing. Tracy was held in a continuous loop of possibility, hope, and endless uncertainty.

Then she learned about three sisters, ages two, four, and six, who were the youngest of five siblings all in foster



care. When she put them on her list, things moved quickly. Less than a week later, Tracy picked them up for a three-night visit.

Already in a temporary foster care situation, the girls were told that their foster mom was leaving town for a few days and that they would be staying with Tracy. They were not told that she was a prospective parent.

“I don’t know that I really knew what to think about having three kids at once. I was so focused on really quickly getting my house ready to be approved for these kids coming a day later that I didn’t have much time to think about it. Then when I picked them up, they were so friendly and instantly sweet and chatty...I think we went into this whirlwind of excitement with each other and, at the time, it just seemed so much fun and exciting. It just felt like instantly we got along really well. They did some slightly nutty stuff for the weekend, but they were actually mostly really easy kids, and so it felt like ‘Oh, this is great!’ Then I had to take them back to their foster mom, and after I dropped them off, it was suddenly so quiet. I was sad and felt really empty. It was an intense crazy weekend. But the kids were great, and I could totally see them being my kids.”

After that, Tracy visited the girls once or twice a week for an afternoon in their home or to take them on outings. It was fun and exciting, but not necessarily enough, she says in retrospect. “It’s kind of a weird set up because you’re seen as the fun parent. You don’t really have the opportunity to deal with the discipline issues because you’re just out to have fun, and you’re not just hanging around the house

trying to get stuff done on a given day. It was an interesting experience to get to know these kids, but only on a very surface level. I think for them, it was this exciting new thing. I don't think any of us realized at the time how traumatic this move was going to be for them, for their old foster mom, for me...for everyone who has to make this huge transition. It's not all bad, but definitely like, 'Whoa! This huge change is happening!'"

After that first weekend and during the period of weekly visits, Tracy diligently prepared her home for the potential permanent placement of three children. "The social worker was like, 'I want to move quickly on this.' So, during that time, I was doing things like rearranging furniture and painting their room and switching rooms because I used to have a big room and suddenly, I have three kids, not just one. So, I had to give up my bedroom and office to create more space for them."

Once the girls moved in, Tracy began to realize that she didn't have all the information about them she should have had to understand what they needed. Parents of newborns immediately join the process of their baby's developing personalities, desires, temperament, etc., and have a clear sense of the emerging person in their charge. For adoptive and foster parents, the process of getting to know an older child can be much trickier. "For several months," Tracy says, "it was just us getting used to each other, and I started to realize all of the stuff that the older one was dealing with and trying to figure out whether it was a situation where providing enough love would work. I was asking myself, 'How much love can I give? I should be able to be unlimited. I should have unlimited love, unlimited patience.' This is what I'd always believed, but I was realizing that I have limitations."

Tracy began to understand, through her own experience and conversations with the girls' former foster mother, that the oldest sister had needs that could not be met if she were in a household with other children. She was becoming a physical danger to her younger sisters, which concerned Tracy even more. "It was a really hard place to get to because I'd always had in my head that I'd never give up on a child. I would never send a child away once they lived with me. But here I was saying, 'This is not a good situation. It's not happy for anybody and it's not safe. We can't do this.'"

When Tracy made the heartbreaking decision to have the oldest sister move out, she struggled to talk about it with the child. "It was really hard to have those conversations with her because she was constantly just pushing and fighting. I think I knew at the time, and I know now, that she was doing it because she didn't believe that anyone would

keep her. Unfortunately, what it led to was a situation where it really wasn't safe to have her in the same house with her sisters."

The eldest sister leaving created a lot of anxiety, initially, for the middle sister. "She went through her own phase of, 'Am I going to get kicked out? I have to be this perfect child or I'm going to be gone, too.' She told me she thought her sister had to leave because she yelled too much. I tried to explain it to both of them, but at two and four years old, how much did they get when I said their sister needed a lot more support and had her own path to take? They didn't really understand that."

After a few months of adjustment, the two younger girls and Tracy have really settled into being a family. With their older sister's absence and Tracy's enhanced capacity to devote herself to them, her daughters have blossomed. "They love to go on adventures with me — and I love to go on adventures. We are able to do stuff and hang out together and be social with other people. They're easy in that way. They're very sweet, and they want to cuddle up and hug me and love me." She goes on to say, "I'm trying to figure out how to say this so it doesn't sound like I'm emotionally dependent on my kids, but I before I had kids, I always felt a little bit lonely. Now there's this piece of my heart that's just full and that I really like."

As Tracy and her daughters grow together, they also have to navigate the foster care system, which imposes restrictions on their lives. Tracy needs permission to travel out of state with the girls, and choices about their care and schooling are not entirely up to her. She and other foster parents she's talked with are also frustrated by the lack of transparency they experienced with their children's social workers. Many foster-adopt parents believe the system makes the process more difficult than it should be, as they struggle with issues like critical information being withheld about their children's backgrounds and inconsistent updates on the adoption process. (Social workers, birth parents, judges, and others, no doubt, have their own valid opinions and perspectives on the foster care system as well.)

Tracy says, though, that the system is not all bad. Years of advocacy have created a few frameworks of benefits for foster children and foster parents. "There are different services you can qualify for, and for certain things — just because they're foster kids — you get bumped up in line. For example, for Head Start and certain state pre-schools, foster kids are actually supposed to get ahead of the line and get access to those schools before other kids. Our local school district also bumps up foster kids in their school lottery systems, which made getting into the school I wanted a little bit easier. I can get access to free mental

health services for the girls, although it's limited and I question how much more it's going to be around in future years. You also get free medical coverage until they're 21."

All of these benefits are helpful, but as a single mom, Tracy has much more significant supports — other people — in place for herself and her daughters. The family has a crew of friends who love playing the auntie role, like taking the girls on outings or watching them so Tracy can have time to herself.

Tracy's partner, Amita, lives out of state but visits frequently, and the girls adopted her as a parent before she thought of herself as one. "Mariah\* wanted to call her Mommy. It was too confusing, though, because she'd call me Mommy and we didn't know who she was talking to. So, now she has a name for Amita that is Mithi. Only Mariah and Samira\* are allowed to call her Mithi. No one else can."

Amita and Tracy weren't intending to co-parent. "She didn't really want kids," Tracy says, "but she's actually come around, and sometimes she's actually way better with them than I am. Perhaps it's because she's not always around. She has a level of humor in life that I just don't have and says, 'I'm kind of like the fun parent, right?'" Tracy believes that, now, it's not a matter of if they will parent together, but when.

A long-time friend of Tracy's also became part of the family. "When the girls moved in, Prema was unemployed and running out of unemployment. I was like, 'Do you want to watch my kids? I need a nanny.' From there, it's just become this really sweet thing where she is clearly their family and has very much become part of my family, as a result. She's not just a nanny who watches them. I've been really clear with them, when they're with someone else who watches them on other days, like, 'That's not a member of our family.'"

In addition to being available for the kids, Prema is a model for Tracy. "It's really helped me watching her response to things," Tracy shares. "She's really loving and respectful and expects the kids to deal with certain things. You can't have a tantrum every day as soon as we walk into the house. Like, 'There's no reason for you to have a tantrum right now. You're not hurt. You might be tired, but you can use your words.' Amita and Prema together have worked within my sense of how parenting should look, but added their own flavor. That's helped add this piece to my parenting.

Tracy, Mariah, Samira and their chosen kin are moving forward as a family, making long-term plans and dreaming new dreams, but Tracy knows she won't feel totally secure until the adoption goes through. "I do have some legal rights now that standard foster parents don't have because

they've been with me long enough, and I know the person that I am that I would fight for them if their social worker decided to move them, but as long as the adoption is not final it still feels a little unsettled." This is one of the downsides for foster-to-adopt parents. As Sharon Van Epps writes in the *Washington Post*, "Choosing to adopt through the foster care system means accepting that the process, and sometimes the outcome, can be uncertain...[E]ven for prospective parents who come with eyes wide open, the experience can be emotionally fraught."

Despite the uncertainty, Tracy is loving how being a mother is changing her. "I see the world in a slightly different way than I did before I had kids. I'm able to experience things in a new way even though they're not really new to me. We went to the city yesterday morning and had breakfast and Samira was yelling about the buses outside. She's like, 'A bus, a bus!' Being able to see the world in that way, I think that's probably the most fun."

*\*Names have been changed.*

# Make a Family with a Friend.

Anyone who has ever raised children knows that it's easier to do with more people. Part of our society's attachment to the nuclear family is predicated on the idea that without two, married parents, kids will not have the love, support, and care they need. But not everyone wants to — or can — be married even if they want to be a parent. Increasingly, people are figuring out ways to create families that include children, but may not include romantic partners. These families can provide the kids and adults involved with the love, support, and care they need. We need more models like this that allow for the reality of our lives and provide the freedom we need to make those lives on our own terms. Tena LeBeau and Terri Fyock provide a beautiful example of how we might do it.



Tena is the mother of two kids: Scarlett, 12, and Declan, seven. “It’s sort of the classic. I got pregnant; oops,” Tena shares. And Scarlett’s father and I had broken up. It was a very short relationship and I would’ve stayed in California had he wanted to co-parent, but he did not. I was a live-in nanny at the time. My options for employment were diminished because I was about to become a mom. I was terrified because I thought that Scarlett’s father and I might work something out, but we didn’t. So, I decided that I had to come home to Pennsylvania. My brother built on to his home so that I would have somewhere to go and I stayed with him until I had Scarlett.”

Scarlett was born prematurely. Living with her brother, Matt, meant she could take some time to get on her feet and find her own home. Five years later, under similar circumstances, Tena was again pregnant, this time with a son, Declan. “I always wanted to be a mom. I didn’t plan on it. I tried to be careful, but I have allergies and issues with chemical birth control and that kind of stuff, and obviously, I wasn’t careful enough. I’m very pro-choice and I have chosen not to have children before, during pregnancies. At the same time, I was 30, so I was okay with it. At 30 and 35, I was okay with making the choices I made and I’m of course happy that I made the choices.”

Tena largely parented on her own for a decade. This challenge was exacerbated by having kids with special needs — Scarlett has autism and Declan has both Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and oppositional defiant

disorder. “Even when I lived with my brother, he worked a lot and you know, he just wasn’t really there. He had his struggles with addiction, and I didn’t realize that’s what it was at the time, but I just knew he wasn’t there. He wasn’t available. He was supportive in some ways but not parenting-wise, not truly having a buddy.” That all changed when Tena met Terri.

Terri has two adult children from her first marriage and raised her second husband’s son, Elijah, until he was five. While Terri is not Elijah’s biological mom, she played the primary parenting role in his life from the time he was two weeks old until his biological mother got custody of him four years ago. Nine-year-old Elijah visits Tena and Terri’s home every other weekend. “He is part of the family, too.” Tena explains.

After two marriages, Terri was happy to be single again. And after a drunken night with her best friend, she realized she was happy to be done with men as well. While that relationship ended, she has only dated women since then. Being gay in a small, conservative Pennsylvania town is not easy. But the roller derby community that brought Tena and Terri together has been a sanctuary of sorts, and it’s this sanctuary that created the possibility for their relationship.

“I was going to an away match,” Tena recalls, “and one of the gals let me know that Terri needed a ride, so I picked her up and then we just started talking and chatting and became friendly. At some point a few weeks later, Terri

mentioned that she had to leave her sister's home where she was living and she didn't want to go back to her old house."

When her sister — a pastor — became ill, Terri moved in to support her. A member of their family, uncomfortable with the fact that Terri is gay, threatened to out Terri to her sister's church. "My sister was absolutely, totally, completely fine with it," Terri says. "She said, 'I tell you what. If the church comes to me and tells me to kick you out, I'm just going to quit my job. I am not going to pastor in a church like that.'" And I said, "No, we're not doing that. This is how you live. This is how you pay your bills." I packed my stuff and the very next day I was gone."

When Tena and Terri met, Terri had recently moved out of her sister's home and was couch surfing. Tena immediately offered her a place to stay. "I said, 'Well, you know, I have an extra room. You can stay upstairs until you figure out what you want to do. Get your own place or whatever. This will give you some time to think.'" That was nearly a year ago and as they've become a family, everyone's life has become better.

"Having somebody who backs me up and helps me keep my head on . . . I mean, my head blows off on a regular basis, but she helps put it back on," Tena says. "It has made all the difference. I remember what happy is. I remember what it's like to laugh. It's been tremendous. Before Terri came along, I was the kind of lonely that...I was in despair..."

Terri adds, "When I first moved in, you could actually feel the...I don't know, the darkness, the tension, the depression. I could feel it when I moved in." For Terri, who was dealing with her own depression from lack of acceptance from her family and the community around her, moving in with Tena was a comfort. "She accepts me," Terri says simply.

"I didn't blink an eye," Tena continues. "Because we grew up knowing it was just fine for you to be however you are. There isn't anything wrong with her. I think when you're surrounded by people who are saying the opposite of that, it is soul-crushing."

Tena and Terri co-parent together well. "We work. It works," Tena says. "We were just talking yesterday about how well it works, and I hadn't imagined that anybody would be able to step into this craziness and not only exist here, but make it better — make it happier and help — and she has. She just jumped right in with both feet and pitches in, whether it's helping with the chickens or redirecting Declan or calming Scarlett down or whatever it is. She does it and it's just...it's really been helpful."

"It seems to me just so easy," Terri adds. "I would be alone in an apartment someplace and I do not like to be alone whatsoever. I really enjoy being in a family. What I get out of this is a family that I want."

While the arrangement works well for Tena, Terri, and their kids, they do encounter obstacles. Benefits like health insurance assume a romantic relationship and financial dependence between adults who live together, and when Terri was applying for health insurance, they wanted information about Tena's income. While the two share some expenses, they don't share everything, and benefit and policy systems don't know how to deal with that. They've also had to navigate the resistance of systems that don't want to consider them family.

"Terri will defer to me because I am their mom, but my kids know, if Terri says so, that's that. I think that we co-parent and I think that's legitimate. We are a legitimate family. It's not a family that looks the same as yours, maybe, but it's just as legitimate. We have had a lot of trouble with systems that don't want to accept her as a co-parent."

In addition to what Tena and Terri get from the arrangement, they are both clear that their kids benefit tremendously. "Our home is warm and stable and predictable," Tena says assuredly. "The kids understand why we are set up the way that we are and what the rules are and what the expectations are. It's consistent."

Unsurprisingly, given the oddity of their family in their community, a lot of people assume Tena and Terri are romantically involved. "It's really funny," Tena chuckles, "because we get a lot of questions from people about what our really relationship is. There are a lot of assumptions made, but, to me, it's a no-brainer. Why don't people do this? As a single mom, there are already so many limitations on you. You are limiting yourself in more ways by not being open to the idea that you could move in with a friend, that you could make a family with a friend. So many people need that and we're not open to it. I mean, if only I'd have thought of this 10 years ago!"

# Babies Coming Through: Co-parenting Foster Kids with Your Mom.



It is not unusual for an older child to help care for younger siblings. When the adults in a household are outnumbered by children, the help becomes essential. Olders often keep a watchful eye on youngsters while an adult makes a meal or goes to the bathroom. Olders may walk youngsters home from school and get them a snack before an adult comes home from work. Olders may babysit youngsters so adults can go out for dinner or a movie or other “grownup time.” I’ve talked with many older siblings from big families who had fairly significant responsibilities for their siblings or were tasked with household chores like meal preparation and laundry — especially if they were girls — which enabled adults to care for younger siblings. But the role Amber Butts played in her family went beyond those tasks. Amber was a co-parent with her mother.

“I love that I come from a long line of people who have created safe spaces for other people who might not have access to certain resources,” Amber says with pride. Her great-grandmother, grandmother, and mother all took in and cared for children, in addition to those they birthed. Sometimes the children were biological relatives, like nieces and nephews, and sometimes they weren’t.

As a young child, Amber lived with her grandmother, mother, and some aunts, uncles, and cousins — not all of whom were blood relatives. The mashup of biology and choice to make family was a long-standing tradition in Amber’s family, as it is in many Black families. Amber reflects, “It’s something that has been in my family for so long that I have aunts and uncles that we’re not sure if they’re actually biologically related, especially my great aunts and uncles. My family is very mixed, with all different

ethnicities and identities. Looking back at some photos, we’re like, ‘They could be family, technically, or they could be chosen family. We’re not actually sure. It doesn’t even matter.’”

After a fire in Amber’s home, she and her mother, Lisa, moved to their own place. Even then, Amber’s aunt and uncle, who were her age and raised with her like siblings, split their time between Amber’s and Amber’s grandmother’s (their mom) home. Though they all moved to separate places, the family functioned as it always had. “There was always a newborn in the home,” Amber explains, “or maybe a kid from down the street who was going through a rough patch.” Amber’s mother and grandmother would insist on giving parents in their community a break, sometimes as an intervention to protect children.

“My mom’s always been into taking care of children, since she was a child,” Amber explains. “Her passion is children.” When Amber was a teenager, Lisa decided to become a foster parent. She was working in a day care and running an after-school program with Amber out of their home that served kids in the neighborhood and in their family. Both took early childhood development classes, and Lisa completed the process to become a licensed foster parent. Initially, Amber and Lisa’s agreement about their specific childcare roles was not deeply defined. Amber remembers, “I’m in high school. I’m also working and stuff and she was like, ‘You know, we’re going to have some babies coming in here soon.’”



After fostering children for a couple years, Amber and Lisa became much more explicit about their roles, in a way that

likely few romantic partners talk about their child-rearing principles. “I told her, ‘This is not effective because we have different ways of communicating and concepts of discipline.’ I like to let kids know, ‘So, this is my expectation of a thing, and there are house chores and things like that, and if you don’t do a house chore, there’s consequences. Maybe we won’t take that walk today because you didn’t make up your bed,’ or whatever. Whereas my mom’s like, ‘Mmm, yeah, I mean, you didn’t make up your bed. It’s day three. Please make up your bed.’ We noticed the kids were kind of confused because they knew my reaction and my mom’s reaction, but our reactions together were just very confusing. So, we sat down and talked about the roles that best suited us.”

Amber took on the pieces that involved creating structure, such as supporting with homework and setting expectations around chores. She also did most of the cooking. Lisa was more about nurturing and getting kids where they needed to go, like school or outings. Theirs was not a rigid delineation — sometimes, Lisa cooked and Amber took on the nurturing.

While this kind of mother-daughter relationship is unusual, it felt right to Amber and Lisa. “It wasn’t weird for us to be like, ‘Yeah, I’m co-parenting with my mom,’ or ‘I’m co-parenting with my daughter.’ My mom was like, ‘This is my partner in crime. We do everything together.’”

Amber believes co-parenting made their relationship even stronger. “My mom and I have always been very close, but I think there’s a different type of closeness when you’re raising children together. You have to be more accountable — for things you’re saying and doing. You have to have clear communication.”

The first child to come into their home was two-year-old Brandy. She only stayed for two months and was placed with her grandmother. “Sometimes, what ends up happening is short-term while there’s trials going on and stuff like that,” Amber explains. “There were a couple of court cases where a judge needed to decide where to place Brandy — like, if she should be placed in permanent foster care or if she had family members that could assist.”

Amber admires her mother’s commitment to fostering kids, especially since caring for a child who could leave at any time can be heartbreaking. “My mom’s amazing,” muses Amber, “because it is so hard for her to have a child you care for to leave. And she chooses to do it all the time with that risk.” Amber recounts, “A few years ago, we had a little girl named Izzie who came into our home when she was 18-months, and she was with us for two and a half years. Then there were just literally one or two meetings with a newly-married couple who wanted children. The caseworker decided to introduce Izzie to them, she met



them twice, and then they adopted her. It was really hard on my family because Izzie was such a core of our unit, and it was so sudden. We didn’t feel like they were greatly matched, and we wanted her to stay with us. But it wasn’t up to us and it wasn’t up to her. That was hard, because I think they didn’t allow her any agency. She didn’t have the capacity to name what was going on for her and say, ‘I want to stay with mom. I don’t want to be with The People.’ Izzie referred to them as ‘The People.’”

She continues, “My mom is really invested in parents being able to care for their children. She’ll offer resources and remind them of classes they need, and stuff like that, so they can be better prepared to care for the kid. She does it in a way that’s not condescending or anything, which is such a gift.”

Joaquin came to their home when he was just five days old and stayed for five months. “It was multiply bittersweet,” Amber says. “He was able to be placed back with his mom because my mom and I tried to help support her and encourage her to deal with some mental health stuff. She was able to do that, so he was placed back with her, which is great. He’s two now, and we still get pictures.”

Amber and Lisa work to stay in touch with the children who move out of their home, but it doesn’t always happen. Amber clarifies, “If children are placed back with their parents — which is something my mom is, like, super focused on, so it happens at least half of the time — it seems like the parents kind of want to let that be. Like, the kids’ foster care was a bump in the road, so they’re wanting to focus on their children’s lives and their own, which makes sense. The hardest part is when we don’t hear from them, especially around the holidays.”



Some of the kids have become permanent members of the household. Amber was 23 when they adopted nine-month old twins who were born three months prematurely. “They were really tiny,” she says. “They could each fit in your hand.” The twins, now five years old, were dropped off late at night at Amber and Lisa’s home with very little instruction about how to care for them. Amber’s reflection on the foster care system aligns with Tracy Hanna’s, who was recently featured in an All Our Families story. Amber laments, “Social workers are overworked and there aren’t a lot of resources for foster children. We’d get debriefed somewhat, but not fully on what some of the kids had experienced, or on triggers or anything like that.”

The twins had special care needs because they’d been born early. While caring for two sickly infants was challenging, Amber says that, more than anything, “They kind of just fit in our family.” And everyone pitches in to care for them. “My grandma would watch them and read them stories all the time. My aunts and uncles and cousins will come to the house or pick them up and take them out, which is great because they’re twins.”

Lisa is in the process of adopting another child, who is three, while also fostering his older sisters. In the last decade, she’s had 22 children come in and out of her home. Amber, who is 28, moved out of her mom’s home about a year ago to focus more on building her life with her partner and focusing less on parenting. But she’s clear she wants to raise kids in the future and thinks a lot about how she will do it. “I would adopt,” she says. “I don’t think my heart is built for foster care. I do also want to have biological children — with a partner and my community with me.”



# Raising Your Dead Friend's Child.

Born into a big military family — the third of seven children — and caring for her household and younger siblings by the age of nine, Marjorie never had dreams of a partner, 2.5 kids, and a picket fence. It was friendship and circumstance that led her to motherhood and a daughter she loves as her own.

Marjorie met Brenda when they were both working for a garment manufacturer in Los Angeles and the two developed a friendship that would last a lifetime, even when Marjorie moved across the country to Washington, DC. Brenda had her only child, Lindsay, shortly after Marjorie relocated. While Marjorie and Brenda remained close over the years, the distance kept Marjorie from building a strong relationship with Lindsay.

Marjorie was never considered part of Lindsay's extended family. "[Brenda] was Guatemalan, and she had a very close extended family. Brenda and Lindsay lived with Brenda's mom after Brenda's divorce. Also, Lindsay had two cousins that were just a little bit older than she and they grew up together." Marjorie's chance to get to know Lindsay better came through Brenda's tragic diagnosis with ovarian cancer in 2004.

The following year, while Brenda was facing her own battle with the disease, her mother was also diagnosed with ovarian cancer and died two years later. Shortly after her mother's death, Brenda—still undergoing experimental treatment for her cancer—asked Marjorie if she would be Lindsay's guardian if she were to pass away. Marjorie agreed. "I would do anything for Brenda," she says. "But there's that part in my mind that was like, 'Oh, she's probably not going to pass away.'"

Marjorie remembers the day she got a call from Lindsay's therapist while on a business trip to San Francisco. "This woman I had never met before in my whole life called me. She says to me, 'Have you spoken with Brenda lately?' And I said, 'Yeah, I probably talked to her about two weeks ago.' She says, 'I think Lindsay may be falling through the cracks. You should check in with Brenda.' 'So, I called Brenda and although she said she was fine, she didn't sound fine. I cut my trip short and went to see her for a few days. Brenda explained to me that she'd been sick with the flu, but otherwise fine. She seemed like she was managing. So, that was in May, and I went back to see Brenda again



in late June, and she was very, very sick, and she passed away in July."

By the age of sixteen, Lindsay had lost her mother and grandmother in addition to her father, who died when she was just six.

Brenda had left clear instructions that Marjorie was to be Lindsay's guardian, though Lindsay's maternal aunt and uncle had been close to Brenda and Lindsay. Lindsay was also close to a family next door whose kids she went to school with. Marjorie says the neighbors initially really wanted to care for Lindsay and that Lindsay also wanted to be with them — that she wanted the nuclear family experience they offered that she never had. "Lindsay said she wanted the 'American family' — a mom and a dad."

Becoming a legal guardian isn't automatic. While the legal proceedings to become guardian were taking place, Marjorie agreed to Lindsay's wishes to be with the neighbors. Although Marjorie was designated in Brenda's will to become Lindsay's guardian, the court still had to approve it. At this point, Marjorie and Lindsay lived in different cities and Marjorie would visit Lindsay every few weeks to check in on her.

Things didn't work out the way Lindsay wanted or the way Marjorie hoped. Marjorie recounts, "This family, unbeknownst to me, was struggling financially, and they were in the process of making a decision about whether or not they would leave Los Angeles. They also had a daughter who had just gone away to college and was really

having a hard time...and they were choosing their kid. Their only daughter was having a lot of challenges adjusting to college, and Lindsay was having challenges too, but the mom went to her daughter.”

During one of Marjorie’s visits, it became clear that Lindsay needed critical care that she wasn’t getting. According to Lindsay’s therapist, Lindsay didn’t feel like she fit in with this family and did not have the support she needed to process the grief she was feeling after her mother’s death. The therapist strongly recommended that Lindsay move back into her own home. So, Marjorie decided to leave her job in Michigan and move to Los Angeles. “I moved into Brenda’s house and became Lindsay’s parent.”

Marjorie did her best to fulfill Brenda’s wishes. For example, Brenda left instructions to make sure Lindsay was aware of different types of religions and exposed to spiritual practices. Marjorie, a practicing Buddhist, exposed her to Eastern religions and also made sure she was exposed to Jewish culture and religion, especially important because Lindsay’s father was Jewish. Marjorie says they would talk about religion often. “It would always be her choice what she wanted to follow, and I made that really clear to her, too.”

Marjorie, who is Black, and Lindsay, whose father was white and whose mother was a light-skinned Guatemalan, appear noticeably different. This has made for some interesting interactions in public. “People literally thought that I was the maid. All the time, they thought that I was the maid,” Marjorie recalls. Once, while they were in New York on college tours for Lindsay, a waitress at a restaurant approached Lindsay and her white friend, when Marjorie left to use the restroom, and asked ‘why is she with you?’

While Marjorie’s path to parenting is less typical, and is called into question because representation of Black adults parenting non-Black children is rare, she is clear that she is a mother. Marjorie’s friends of color are more understanding of the relationship between her and Lindsay.

“What I say is, ‘I have a daughter from another mother.’ My African-American [and women of color] friends and my parents will always say, ‘How is your daughter?’ My white friends, they always say, ‘What is her name?’ They don’t have a way of describing this relationship.” Marjorie’s experience speaks to the way people of color are more often accustomed to various ways of creating and navigating family.

At first, Marjorie was just diligently doing what her friend Brenda had asked of her—caring for her child. Initially, Lindsay only referred to Marjorie when introducing her as “my mom’s friend.” Over time, the two have grown closer. “She considers me kind of like her backstop. If she needs any advice on anything, any guidance on anything, she will turn to me. I think she does look to me as her parent, you know? I text her every day, to see how she’s doing, see if she needs anything, and to let her know that I love her.”

# He Should Stay Here; We'll Be His Parents.

Anthony and his wife Mariana met in graduate school while pursuing their Masters of Fine Arts. After graduating, they moved to Oakland, California and lived the lifestyle of young artists, enjoying their childfree existence. As their relationship deepened, they agreed that they would not become parents. For Mariana, the choice seemed predestined, as she'd been told she was unlikely to be able to get pregnant. For Anthony, his own childhood — characterized by extensive contact with the criminal legal system, living in foster care, disconnect from biological family, and being uprooted — informed his reluctance to become a parent.

Anthony grew up in the projects of East and South Boston with a cohort of older and younger half siblings, navigating blended family and community racism as a white and Mexican person who appears racially ambiguous. In Anthony's own words, his childhood was "super complicated, but in ways that weren't apparently complicated until I was older. I think the nature of both childhood, and everyone's individual family experiences, is that what you've got in front of you, particularly when you're young, just is what it is. It's the norm because it's what you know. The way that I grew up was in Boston with my mother and siblings as my main family unit."

Eventually, his older siblings left to make their own ways in the world after difficulties with their mother. At 14, Anthony was removed from his mother's household at her request. After a heated argument, preceded by months of deteriorating relations (including escalating alcohol and drug use by Anthony), his mother called the police saying she feared for her safety. Anthony was arrested and spent the weekend in jail. "When I hit my adolescence, I too had difficulties at home with my mother, and I ended up in foster care," Anthony says. At this point in his life, he fell out of touch with his biological mother and siblings. After bouncing around for several months in group homes, he found new family with his foster mother, Cindy; her adopted daughter, Michelle; and her biological son, Matt. Cindy, Anthony says, provided "the kind of implicit safety that comes from stability and predictability."

Anthony's time in foster care allowed him to finish high school and build a village of support that would last into adulthood. Central to this village are friends with whom he created graffiti. He speaks to the power of this community, saying, "Graffiti saved my life. That's genuine. Me and some of my friends that are still some of my closest friends



in the world were too busy painting. That got us in trouble, including legal trouble, but that kept us out of the drug game, and that kept us out of gunfights, literally. Our lives are significantly better off than they would have been without graffiti. A sense of home, a sense of belonging, and a sense of purpose emerged out of all those things."

After moving out of Cindy's home at 18, Anthony worked to stay in touch with Cindy, Matt, and Michelle. Michelle struggled with mental illness, substance use, and a number of health issues that accompany both. Anthony did what he could to help her once he returned to Boston. "I helped her move a couple of times from shelter to shelter, was trying to advocate alongside her with her different social workers. There's a limited amount that you can do, particularly if somebody doesn't want the help, particularly if they're in bad shape like she was." Michelle had two children, one of whom Cindy cared for. Michelle was raising her second child Anto when, Anthony explains, "she had a dissociative episode, and social workers came, got involved, saw where she was, and did an emergency removal of her kid. I was top of the list of people they called."

What Anthony and Mariana assumed would be a weekend stay became permanent. Although Cindy was willing to care for Anto, she no longer lived in Massachusetts, so she could not take custody of him until legal arrangements were made. Anthony and Mariana agreed to foster Anto in the interim. In the ensuing year, the courts decided Michelle would not regain custody of her son. The need for temporary custody shifted to finding a permanent adoptive



home for Anto. By that time, little Anto was so settled in with Anthony and Mariana that they made the decision to keep him with them. “Ethically, it just wouldn’t have been the right thing to do to remove him from us, because the process had taken so long, and we had bonded,” Anthony explains. “Removals are traumas...we just said, ‘He should stay here; we’ll be his parents.’” Despite their earlier decision to not have children of their own, when called upon by people Anthony had come to know as family, the couple stepped into the struggle, love, and growth that raising children requires.

Anthony and Mariana had the help of Mariana’s family, as well as that of friends they leaned on for support and community. “I’ve got great friends and good connections,” Anthony says. “We built what we needed there to get by and do well. In Boston, my friends have kids his age. They can go hang out. We can all get together in somebody’s backyard, let the kids run around, have some beer, shoot the shit, do sleepovers. I had a community of people that were also in foster care when they were kids, but also are a community of people that are raising adopted kids, multi-ethnic families, folks that just get it implicitly.” For Anthony, all of these people are family. He says that family is “the people that I choose to be bound to, and committed to, and loyal to. Most of that is not blood, which is totally fine by me.”

When Anthony, Mariana, and Anto moved away from Boston for career reasons, they found it harder, and Anthony misses the “buttressing,” as he describes it, “that comes along with deep roots and people that you have these affinities with, that tacitly understand what you’re dealing with and who you are.”

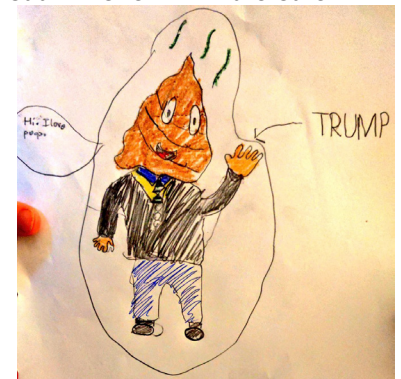
But his childhood gives him some perspective on how much harder things could be. “People like me, in terms of just the descriptive statistics about who I was demographically, are supposed to fail. The only reason that I wound up where I am, is because of a really unlikely mix of luck and circumstance, and some stubbornness on my part. I wouldn’t call it hard work,” Anthony says.

Anthony, a former social worker who works on economic justice issues, is also clear on the role policy approaches can play in making life easier for people who experience marginalization. “Having fewer strings attached to more generous social programs, including cash, not just in-kind transfers like SNAP or WIC, would be where I would start. Then it would be about having really good public infrastructure, including good public schools and libraries, public transit, public hospitals, housing that’s public and affordable — or free — and safe and desirable. That is the policy platform, I think, that I would embrace and promulgate if I could.”

Anthony also acknowledges that changing personal and systemic biases are important. “We also need to think about how to, in a very structural and meaningful way, deal with a lot of the biases that are baked into our culture, primary among them racism and sexism, but also homophobia and classism, among many other things. It’s impossible to disentangle the structural policy responses of just giving people the things that they deserve, and need to flourish, from these other pieces that are built into us, and associated with stigma and bias and prejudice. They’re difficult to talk about in isolation. They’re very intertwined. It’s critical that we try to respond to both of them simultaneously and not think one will fix the other.”

Looking back on a challenging journey, Anthony offers some perspective on his path to parenthood: “This wasn’t what I imagined for myself, and wasn’t what I planned, but I can say that it’s made me a better person. If you

ask my wife or friends about what fatherhood has done for me, they’ll probably tell you I’m kinder, more patient, mellower.” He also describes the joy any parent would recognize in seeing their own best aspects mirrored in their children. “Anto is totally our kid,” he says, “Mariana and I met in grad school because we were two of the only people making political art in the run-up to the Iraq War, and now Anto is a budding political cartoonist...you should see his anti-Trump drawings,” he says with a laugh.



# It's Going to be Complicated; It's Going to Have Moments of Real Depth and Beauty.



When Mariana invited Toni for drinks, she was looking forward to simply catching up with the younger sister she helped raise, but ended up getting a surprise that changed her life. Mariana noticed Toni wasn't drinking and when she inquired about it, Toni pulled out a onesie. It read, "My crazy Titi lives in Brooklyn."

"I was like, 'Oh my god, you're pregnant!' I was really excited. I spent a lot of my childhood and adolescence helping to raise my sister when my parents split up, so the thought of her having a child was just super important to me knowing that our biological lineage could carry on in some way," Mariana recalls.

Mariana was diagnosed with premature ovarian failure at the age of twenty-seven and has had difficulty becoming pregnant. "I was unsure if I wanted to be a mother, but when I was told that it was going to be really hard and likely impossible, it created a sense of urgency around it for me," Mariana shares. After unsuccessful attempts at conceiving with her then-partner, Mariana decided to put having a child on the backburner. "I really just wanted to explore my own self and figure it out."

Toni had also been diagnosed with premature ovarian failure, but she was able to get pregnant and give birth to her daughter Sonja. Where one might expect pain or resentment about her sister's pregnancy, Mariana only had love and support to give and wanted to have a significant role in her niece's life. Mariana committed to supporting her sister.

Mariana's willingness and desire to be a support to her sister was partly inspired by the safe haven their grandparents had provided for them as children. "Our relationship with our grandparents was really important. When my parents broke up, we spent a lot of time with them. That idea of intergenerational caregiving is a deep-rooted value to me. I just always want Sonja to feel like in me she has that level of unconditional love and somebody that is helping to raise her and that wants to see her succeed and love herself."

Early in Toni's pregnancy, her relationship with Sonja's father was rocky. In order to support her sister and fill the gaps, Mariana made arrangements with her employer for flexibility in her schedule, allowing her to act as part-time caregiver to Sonja. "I had basically brokered a deal with my boss that I was going to take care of my niece and provide childcare for my sister one day a week for six months. They didn't have a policy around family members that are not primary caregivers, but...I negotiated that for myself. I did that from the time Sonja was three months to nine months and provided other kinds of support as well. I was really a primary caregiver."

Expanding ideas of who is considered family is critical to support families as they are today in America. Too many workplaces have policies that revolve around assumptions of and about marriage and nuclear families. Mariana's personal experience has impacted how she thinks about those kinds of policies for organizations she works for or runs.

"After that experience with them it made me realize that if we want to be really progressive in our organizations, we have to really expand the concept of family and trust that the people that we've hired are incredible and amazing... What a beautiful gift it is to be able to allow someone the space to provide support to their loved ones and their family however they choose to define it."

As for her own feelings about motherhood, Mariana recently revisited the question of whether or not to have a

child. She says her acceptance of the likelihood that she won't have her own biological child has created room for her to imagine building a family in a different way, if she and her partner decide they definitely want a child.

Mariana's caregiving for Sonja has evolved over time. First, Toni's partner stepped up to the role of father, shifting how Mariana engaged with Sonja. "He moved in, and there was a way in which I moved out a little," Mariana recalls. "I think somewhere in the back of my head I thought maybe I would move in with my sister and Sonja, like we would live together and I would be supportive and I'd have this sort of niece-slash-daughter. Then I realized that actually that's not really what my sister wanted. She wanted my support and she wanted my love, but she wanted Sonja's dad to step up. As he has stepped up...I have taken less of a role in the relationship with Sonja."

While Mariana is no longer Sonja's primary caregiver, she maintains a critical role in Sonja's life and works to maintain their close relationship. Mariana and her current partner Joseph take care of Sonja overnight, take her on special trips, and try to expose to different things. In particular, Mariana tries to discuss race and anti-blackness with Sonja, who is Black and Cuban. "She is a little Black girl growing up in the world and we need to be building up her self-esteem all the time," Mariana shares.

"I recognize that my relationship with Sonja is going to be like all of my relationships. It's going to be complicated; it's going to have moments of real depth and beauty; and it's going to have moments of distance, and my hope is that she and I can continue to build a deep and loving bond throughout our lives together so that we can have a really profound relationship with each other. I just hope that we can continue to foster real closeness with her throughout her life."



# There Were These Constant Reminders, ‘You’re Not a Family.’

“Family, kids, marriage is my top priority,” shares Sammi, a 20-year old college student. “All I want are kids. I want a career too. I’m thankful I don’t have to choose, I really am, but if I had to, I know what I would choose, which I think comes from my family. We grew up as a cohesive unit. My family is very, very, very close. And they modeled that when things are hard, you can figure it out, when you love something.”

Sammi’s parents did just that at a time when same-sex marriage wasn’t legal. But her moms, Deb and Ro, made it work.

“I grew up with two moms and an older sister,” Sammi recalls. “I think that that is rare for someone my age, and very rare for someone my sister’s age, who’s 27 I feel like most people who have gay parents from our age had ‘straight’ parents who got divorced and then one of them met their partner. My moms were together. Deb desperately, desperately wanted kids and was picking between the love of her life and a family, because it was the ‘80s.” Deb felt like she had to choose between having kids and staying with Ro, thinking she would have to be with a man in order to have kids. Sammi explains. “Gay people didn’t have kids then. It wasn’t easy to do. But sperm banks existed. That’s how my sister and I ended up being born.”

When Deb brought up with Ro the idea of getting pregnant, she was supportive and encouraged them to go for it even though kids weren’t at the top of her life list. “Ro never particularly wanted kids, but she wanted Deb more than anything, and was just like, ‘We can do this.’ That’s why Deb carried my older sister, because Deb was the one that wanted to be pregnant. She really, desperately wanted that experience,” Sammi says.

The couple turned to sperm banks to build their family. Deb carried Sammi’s older sister Avery and Ro carried Sammi, after some convincing from Deb. “She just really thought Ro would connect to the experience of being pregnant and she was right. Ro is thankful every single day that she was pregnant. Ro said it was the first time she ever connected to feeling like a woman and loved every minute of that process and can’t really imagine her life without it,” shares Sammi.

The sisters, Sammi and Avery, don’t share biological parents because their moms weren’t able to use the same



sperm donor, despite trying. While the sisters are close in every other way, their lack of biological connection has always been a source of sadness for Sammi. “I think people’s obsession with biology really contributed to my own obsession with biology,” Sammi says. “I had a very hard time not being biologically related to my sister and my mom. I did a million things to be like my sister.” The absence of biological and legal ties also presented some logistical challenges for the family of four.

Ro is Canadian and the family would fly to visit family there, but couldn’t go through customs as a family. Avery and Sammi each has the same last name as their biological mothers, so in going through customs, they would pair off — Avery would go through with Deb, Sammi with Ro. “The customs officials would be like, ‘Well why are you guys here?’ ‘To see family.’ ‘Well you don’t have family.’ We did it a lot. It was very anxiety-producing for me. There were these constant reminders, ‘You’re not a family.’” At school, the two were never listed together in the school directory because they didn’t share last names, although that was the custom for siblings with straight parents.

Deb and Ro did what they could to ensure Sammi and Avery were protected from homophobia and raised in an understanding environment. “I went to a very, very liberal, progressive private school in Manhattan, which was very intentional on my parents’ part. I think that my parents did the best job they could to protect us.”

Deb and Ro even went through a complicated and intrusive adoption process when Sammi was seven to ensure that

their children would have two legal parents in case anything happened to either of them. Sammi describes the process as “really terrible. We had home visits many times. It was a woman with a clipboard coming in observing and taking notes, family interviews. I had to be interviewed by myself. I call Deb Emama, because Ema is mom in Hebrew. They were like, ‘Do you want your Emama to be your mother?’ I was young and confused and just started to cry. I felt like she’d always been my mother.” For Sammi, the process was also frightening at times. Sammi remembers the anxiety it caused her and her parents. “I was just like, ‘If I answer these questions wrong, is Deb going to be taken away? Is my sister going to be taken away?’”

The cross-adoption and Ro adopted Avery and Deb adopted Sammi while keeping each biological mother’s rights intact. But it came with a hefty price tag of around \$15,000. Many families have managed to navigate the process of adopting their own child in a system that is designed to transfer parental rights from one or two parents to a separate parent or couple. But the time and money that process takes is clearly prohibitive for most people.

What makes families strong and functional is clearly more about love and commitment than biology, but the legal status and benefits conferred to those biological ties unnecessarily deprives families that are created through different kinds of bonds. With an increasing number of people choosing to make family in ways that aren’t supported by our policies, more of us are recognizing the many ways in which families are being failed by systems.





# Separating Romance and Parenting.



“I remember having conversations in college about how many kids I wanted and how I wanted to start having kids before I was 30. It was a lot; I was like I’m going to have six kids or four kids or something,” Taren recalls. “I think I assumed it would be a ‘traditional’ nuclear family. I had these visions of having these kids and putting ornaments on the Christmas tree, and I couldn’t imagine giving that up.”

Raised by two heterosexual, married biological parents in rural Indiana, Taren was largely envisioning a replication of what she’d experienced growing up. Her family included two younger brothers, one of whom was adopted from Korea. Her adopted brother took her family “outside the norm for rural Indiana,” but they were seen as not just normal, but exceptional. “I had multiple experiences as a kid of people telling me that ours was the perfect family, which I would imagine is weird for almost anyone to hear. Every family has weird stuff.”

By her 33rd birthday she’d shifted her thinking on how family would happen, but remained committed to becoming a parent. After the death of a long-time partner, a series of dates that went nowhere, and a couple of short romances, Taren decided to freeze her eggs to give herself a little time to pursue becoming a parent. What became more important to Taren than building a family with a romantic partner was finding someone with whom she could co-parent.

While seeking out a sperm donor through family and friends, Taren simultaneously took to OkCupid for dating reasons. Among what she found was a profile called FutureBestDad. “We had a 96% match score. Obviously, I clicked. His profile made him sound really cool. He was really in a parallel situation to me in that his whole profile was to find someone like me. Not to find a traditional dating

partner. He’d always wanted to have kids and was turning 40 soon. He didn’t feel like he was going to be ready for a serious marriage kind of relationship any time in the near future and didn’t want to be like the 46-year-old who can only date younger women to still have kids, or whatever, and didn’t want to wait until he was 46 to have his kids anyway. We messaged and got coffee and hit it off. Then after eight months of discussions, he became my sperm donor.” Taren eventually became pregnant through in-vitro fertilization (IVF) and gave birth to a healthy baby.

That eight months of discussion allowed Taren to really get to know Greg, to clarify the nature of their relationship, and to agree how they would co-parent their future kid or kids. To get to know Greg, Taren asked a list of questions, including: How do you feel about vaccinating your children? How would we split holidays? How do you talk about money? and How do you talk about race? “We also met each other’s families,” Taren says. We babysat together to see each other interact with kids. We met each other’s friends and asked them questions. I think his friends found the whole thing weird, in terms of this random woman Greg has met a handful of times, grilling them, asking them questions, like, “What’s the angriest you’ve ever seen Greg? How did he handle that?”

Taren’s process of unlinking romance and parenting points to something many people discover once they’ve had children with a romantic partner or spouse: “I think people probably undervalue the things they should be looking for in a co-parent when they are looking for a romantic partner.” Many of us stop at romantic and sexual attraction even if we know we want to have kids. What might it look like if more future parents looked beyond typical compatibility to thinking about parenting when committing to partners? What might it look like if more of us unlinked some of the multiple roles — lover, roommate, co-parent, travel buddy — we typically assign our partners and spouses?

When it came to agreeing to co-parent, Taren and Greg had identified a few different scenarios. One involved co-parenting with joint custody. Another involved him donating sperm and her donating some of her frozen eggs to him and raising their kids close to each other so that they would have a cousins-like relationship. At the time, Greg was uncomfortable committing to fully co-parenting and Taren was uncomfortable donating eggs. Instead of waiting to figure it all out upfront, they decided to take the first step. “We realized the right solution was just for him to donate

sperm to me initially and see how that goes. The first step was ‘Taren gets pregnant,’ so we did,” she shares.

While getting pregnant through IVF was straightforward for Taren and Greg, the cost was substantial. IVF cost between \$20,000 and \$25,000. On top of that, egg freezing cost between \$7,500 and \$10,000 each. Additionally, Taren and Greg relied on lawyers to work out the many legal gray areas that exist for them. People with limited financial resources who want to start a family this way likely have to do so outside of the legal or medical system.

Despite making the choice to essentially become a single mother, Taren is not parenting alone. Her mother, who’s retired, moved in with her a month before her due date to help care for their new family addition. Taren shares, “I started talking to my mom about the possibility of moving out here. She was open to it, so we just kept talking about it. In the end, it clearly made sense because she was willing to do it.” In addition to her mother and Greg, Taren has an extensive network of support. Greg’s partner Crista is supportive and involved in caring for their son. Taren is also in a romantic relationship with a man who is polyamorous.

“Basically, once Greg and I decided to go ahead and have a kid, then I was like, well, regular dating is going to be kind of hard or weird, but maybe poly dudes would be cool with this. So, I opened up all my settings on OkCupid to say match me with poly guys. Then, all of a sudden, all my top matches were poly guys.”

In addition to her mom, a brother who also lives in the area, Greg and Crista, and her current romantic partner, Taren’s friends form a key part of her extended family network. Two of her close friends gave birth in the few months before she did. The three of them are very close and have even discussed buying houses together. In the meantime, Taren plans to stick close to her extended family. “We share child care and do all the kid stuff together. I’m renting very near one of the other couples I’m friends with. They live in a house where — depending on how you count — with at least three other people who are also very integrated and excited about being aunts and uncles in this kind of role, too. I intentionally only looked for places very close to their place.”

Taren’s approach to becoming a mother was both atypical and forward thinking, allowing her to create a network of family — something we all need, whatever form it takes.