

feature

Two Dads

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structured life. We were ready for a child."

John continues, "We looked at a photo of Levi, and I already knew this was our child. He's had a tough little life - he had to leave his foster home and was in a respite home. We both went and read his file. We knew some of what to expect."

"When it was Keith and I, everything was about us. When Levi came, our lives changed - it wasn't about us any more - it was all about Levi."

When the two men went to meet Levi at his respite care home, "he just ran around the room, waving his arms and making funny noises," John recalls. "We weren't sure what was going on. [The caregiver] said, 'I think he's very excited,' and I knew this was our child. We called that night to tell him goodnight. The next day he spent the night, and the next weekend, he came for a weekend visit. And it was all about what Levi was ready for."

Keith adds, "I don't regret getting Levi at all - and it's been the hardest thing I've ever done in my life." Levi has needed a lot of structure and consistency to channel his energy in positive directions, Keith explains. "I handed off a lot of that to John, and he gave up his social work career to be there for Levi. He took a job as an instructional assistant so he could have summers off with Levi."

John: "We weren't adopting this boy so we could have him be in daycare. When we adopted him, SRS offered us respite care and we said no thanks. Levi was with one foster family since he was two, for three years, and then they said they wanted him gone by a certain time and a line was drawn in the sand. So his 'family' was always in question. I told [SRS], 'My family never got rid of me when they were tired, so we're not doing that to Levi, either.' When we go shopping or anywhere else, Levi comes too."

"I miss doing my social work, but you know what? I love looking out that window and watching him go down the street on his bike!"

Keith: "Our lives changed. We don't go to the bar any more, but the bar was not really one of our favorite places anyway. It does

change you. Before Levi, I'd go out and spend \$60 on a pair of jeans, \$40 on a shirt. I always had to have new things. I thought I needed a new car every other year. Now I wear old clothes and drive older cars. It's worth it to be able to provide for Levi."

John: "We made a choice when we decided to create a family that the bar was not part of that. Having Levi - or having any child, adopted or not - aligns your priorities differently."

"A Child, A Challenge, A Chance"

That's the motto of the Project Family website, which is clear that these kids need another chance to be with a family who will love them unconditionally - since their first families have failed them so badly. "Adoption for these kids," says SRS's Diane Dexter "is an opportunity to break the cycle of neglect, abuse, and abandonment. And the families who are successful see the big picture. Gay and lesbian families have that perspective - and often have some background of having been in therapy themselves."

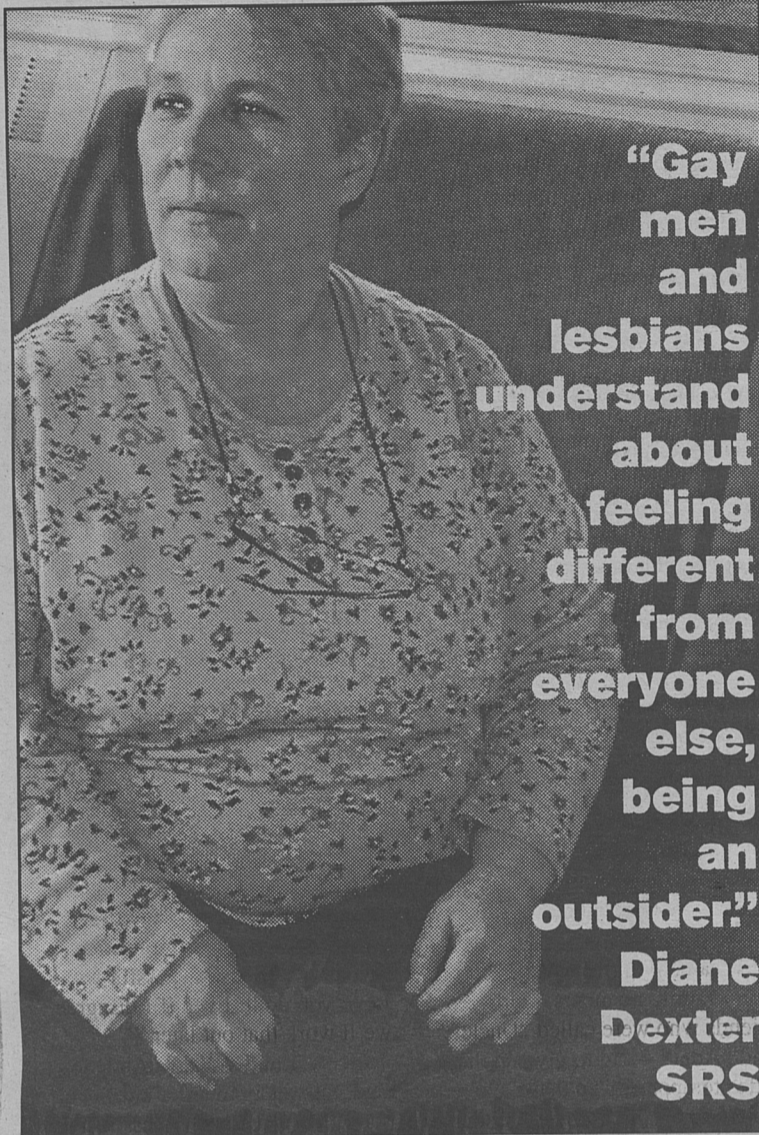
She knows whereof she speaks; Dexter is a single adoptive mom of two children.

Wanda Audette, Director of Adoptions at the Lund Family Center, which is partnering with SRS on Project Family, agrees with that assessment. "We've had great experiences with gay and lesbian adoptive families. They are often more willing to take on the challenge because they've already been up against a challenge."

The requirements for becoming an adoptive parent are not as strenuous as you might think. Dexter listed a few: no criminal history, no complaints of domestic violence or issues of abuse or neglect or abandonment in family court, no pattern of motor vehicle violations (especially DUI). There is no need for a parent to be a stay-at-home, and having other kids is usually fine, too. There needs to be a working phone, but indoor plumbing is not required.

SRS requires that the child's room be of a certain size and have at least one window of a certain size, and be equipped with a working smoke alarm.

The process is not simple, but then again, with a child's life



"Gay men and lesbians understand about feeling different from everyone else, being an outsider." Diane Dexter SRS

and happiness at stake, it shouldn't be. Once a single person or a couple has decided to adopt, the first step is a home study.

The Lund Family Center conducts the home study for Project Family, and then keeps that document on file, Audette explained (a privately done home study can cost up to \$800). The home study consists of three meetings and filling out a 15-page questionnaire. Documents must be collected and copies filed with the Lund Center: if the potential parents are a couple, their civil union certificate (marriage license for straight folks); a single parent's designation of a legal guardian for the child in case the adoptive parent is incapacitated; letters of reference. Fingerprints will be taken for background investigation through criminal databases.

Potential parents begin to learn in these meetings about who

the children are and what needs they have, while the social workers are finding out who the potential parents are and what their experience is in their current and past family relationships. Not least among the questions is "What will the child call you and your partner? And can you adjust to calling your partner by that name?"

Through this process, the social worker begins to get a sense of which child might be a good fit for these parents. Audette admits that some kids say they never want to be adopted at all; others are hesitant about being adopted by a lesbian or gay couple. "But," Dexter agreed, "that's usually a fear that some role will go unfilled, not knowing who will cook and who will play catch. Mostly they want to know, 'Am I gonna be safe and will they like me?'"

Audette related other reac-

tions: "Some say, 'Aren't I lucky, I never had a dad, and now I have two.' Some kids are so damaged [by males in their previous families] that two moms feel safe."

Once all that is completed, the Lund Center establishes a placement-transition plan, where the child and the new family spend time together, beginning with overnights and weekend visits. The new parents compile a "Welcome Home Book" with pictures of the child's new home, the school, the neighborhood.

There's a pre-adoption trial period that typically lasts six months. Some kids may be on their best behavior until after the adoption is finalized and they feel safe, Audette said, while others may test their new families right away.

"The important thing," said Audette, "is to be able to say and show 'We love you, but we don't like your behavior.'" Audette also knows whereof she speaks as the mother of three daughters, two adopted and one biological.

When the adoption is finalized, everyone celebrates. The Nelson-Miles family will be celebrating their first anniversary as Levi's forever family soon.

"The key to success," said Dexter, "is for the families or the individual adopting to be really honest - 'is this working for me?' These kids come with baggage, and so do we. And sometimes the kids can trigger our baggage."

Expect the Unexpected

John and Keith offer their experience as advice to prospective adoptive parents. Keith says, "You really need to be out at work. I sat down with my boss and told him I was in a gay relationship and we were adopting a child, and asked did he have a problem with that. There was no problem. So now, if John has to work and Levi is sick, I can stay home with him, or I can go on a class field trip just like any other parent."

"Read as much of the files as you can get your hands on before you even meet the child," says John - especially any medical history of the child's family of origin. Before the adoption, you have a chance to ask these questions, and afterward you might not.

Decide ahead of time, before you even meet a child, what you want the child to call you, says

Bridget or Mark Could Have Two Moms

Lesbian couples and singles have also adopted Vermont children from foster care, although Project Family was unable to locate those who might be willing to be interviewed in time for this story. Sharon Randall, the producer and co-anchor of the Vermont Rainbow Connection cable access television program, however, came forward with a few comments. She is an adoptive mother of a school-aged boy.

"It's nice to know that we live in

a state that recognizes that our parenting skills have nothing to do with our sexual orientation," Randall said by phone. "Adopting has been a positive experience."

Her advice to parents adopting school-age children is for one member of the couple to seek appointment as the child's 'educational surrogate parent' even before the adoption is finalized. That creates a legally recognized role for the

adoptive parent that the schools cannot ignore. "Sometimes it takes a lot of activism at the school," Randall said, referring to getting schools to acknowledge both partners of a same-gender couple.

For example, several years ago, a curriculum discussion on 'diversity' ignored gay and lesbian families while celebrating other kinds of families. One school official resisted the inclusion by

making a comment about not teaching "sex" in school. "We're not drawing diagrams. This is about families, not sex," Randall replied. At Randall's instigation, a teacher and the guidance counselor helped assemble appropriate materials recognizing gay families.

Sharon Randall is willing to talk to any member of the lesbian and gay communities about her adoption experience and gave OITM permission to publish her phone number: 802-849-2739. Or you can contact her via email: lavender@together.net. ▼