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The Samara Foundation of Vermont is a charitable foundation whose mission is to support and strengthen Vermont's gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered communities today and build an endowment for tomorrow.

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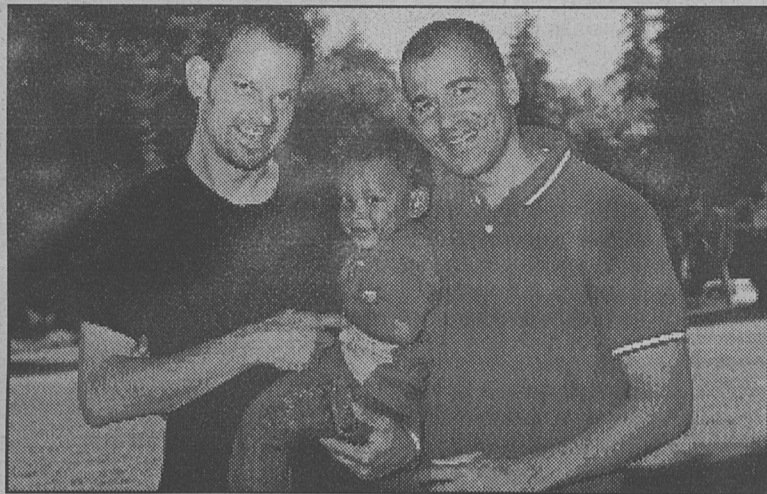
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Johnny Symons, Zachary Symons-Rogers, and William Rogers in Daddy & Papa

Zachary Has Two Dads: Gay Life After Adoption in a New Documentary

By KEVIN McATEER

The independent documentary *Daddy & Papa*, which will have its premiere on *Independent Lens* on June 2, 2003 on Vermont Public Television – check your local listings – offers an honest and engaging exploration of gay men raising children. It goes beyond Dan Savage's book *The Kid: What Happened After My Boyfriend and I Decided To Get Pregnant: An Adoption Story* (1999).

The Kid focused primarily on the process of adopting a child and provided only a brief glimpse of the equally hard work that follows the usually arduous process of adoption. For anyone who has been curious about post-adoption realities, this documentary fills in at least part of the story. *Daddy & Papa* offers a voyeuristic glimpse of life on the other side: how our lives change – or stay the same – when a child enters them.

Director Johnny Symon's *Daddy & Papa* explores the stories of four gay male families, including Symon's own. Although all the stories come from a large population center (San Francisco, Miami) and a middle- to upper-class background, Symon's camera conveys the aspects of adoption that are universal to gay fatherhood, even for parents raising children in rural areas. In addition, the four stories highlight how gay adoption intersects with even larger, more pervasive societal issues, including racism, marriage and divorce in the gay community, assimilation to the "straight" world, single parenthood, surrogacy, and the legality of gay parenthood.

The film begins with a profile of Symons and his partner William Rogers, an interracial couple who adopt an African American baby boy named Zachary. Before they have children, they struggle with reconciling the hard-won independence and sexual freedoms they value as gay men with a self-described "internal clock" which has prompted them to think more and more about raising a family.

Throughout the documen-

tary Rogers offers honest responses to his new role as a parent. When Zachary proves to be quite the "jock" as a toddler, Rogers and Symons share their own anxiety around how they will handle it: neither had much athletic experience as a child. Later in the film, we see Zachary prancing around in dress-up high heels borrowed from a cousin. Rogers acknowledges that although his son's athletic "talent" makes him personally anxious, it is more "acceptable" behavior than if Zachary was to be outside the house in his high-heeled play shoes.

Rogers' candid reaction marks not only the burden of gay families being targeted by conservatives as the *antithesis* of family – if we stray from the norm, they'll have proof! – but also how our own pervasive internalized stereotypes about gender seem to emerge more freely as we become parents.

The overall reaction to the gay community's acceptance of children is powerfully conveyed by the interviews with Kelly Wallace, a 38-year-old single gay man living in San Francisco's Castro district. The film follows the process of his adopting two brothers, ages two and three, from foster care. Kelly talks about how few children there are playing in the park near his house in the Castro and the isolation that comes with working full-time – Wallace is the Executive Director of the Marin AIDS Project in San Rafael – and then coming home to be with his sons.

In the third portrait we meet Fanny Ballantine-Himberg, an amazingly insightful nine-year-old who became the daughter of Philip Himberg and Jim Ballantine with the help of their friend who acted as a surrogate birth mother. Nine-year-old Fanny is comfortable with having two dads, and she is active as an on-line pen pal with other children of lesbian and gay parents through the non-profit organization Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere (COLAGE). However, their security as a family is challenged by Philip and Jim's breakup after thirteen years. Their daughter's biggest problem now is not that her fathers are

gay, but that they are divorced.

Finally there is the incredible story of Oscar Williams, who is being raised by Doug Houghton, a nurse who cared for him when he was hospitalized and who subsequently became his legal guardian. Because Florida law categorically denies Doug, a gay man, the right to formally adopt Oscar, he has joined a lawsuit filed by the ACLU to force the state to legally recognize his parental rights. Oscar's paternal grandparents convey in very simple words the very real love and respect they have for Doug. Though Doug is not Oscar's legal parent they consider him Doug's "real father."

Although the documentary offers an in-depth look at the social ramifications of gay parenthood, where *Daddy & Papa* may fall short is in its failure to acknowledge the fiscal realities of raising children; perhaps this is largely due to its focus on mainly white males in seemingly middle- to upper-class backgrounds. There is no mention of the cost of adoption, whether it is by surrogate birth or from foster care, not to mention the subsidized "benefit" which may come from the state for adopting a child from foster care.

While it is clear that Wallace works during the day we are never told how his two boys are taken care of when he is at work, not to mention the emotional and financial costs for a single parent of putting children in day care. There are scenes of Himberg and Ballantine in the hospital's birthing room but there is never talk about the bill or insurance.

Although there seem to be no lawyers present at the two separate courtroom scenes where Symons/Rogers and Wallace make their adoptions legal – an emotionally poignant moment despite the formality of the act – one can't help but wonder what fees there may be for the judge and processing the paperwork.

At the end of the film the social worker telephones Symons and Rodgers to let them know that Zachary has an infant half-sibling "just in case they were interested" in adopting another child. There's a quick film cut to the next scene with the doorbell ringing and voila! Baby #2 enters! The sequence not only seems to ignore the real day-to-day challenges of the social worker trying to place that child, but it also diminishes any indication of the emotional and financial costs of such a decision.

Despite this shortcoming, *Daddy & Papa* is a touching and real portrait of four gay families opening up their lives and their hearts to children, many of whom would have likely been shifted from family to family within the foster care system were it not for these gay men. ▼

Kevin McAteer hangs out with his five nieces and nephews whenever possible and lives with his partner in Bristol.