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# Standing Up for Rainbow Families

BY JANINE KIRCHGASSNER

**IT ALL STARTED INNOCENTLY ENOUGH.** I eagerly volunteered to be a chaperone for my child's second-grade field trip. As we all sat down to eat our brown bag lunches, I was seated at a table, wrapped with six of my daughter's classmates. Much to my surprise, after taking a big bite of my PB and J, a curious, toothless, cautious child asked me, "How come Jessica doesn't have a Dad?" Seriously, I almost choked on my food. It's not that I am naive or have my head buried in the sand when it comes to the differences our family has, but honestly, I would never have envisioned that at this time, in this place, and under these circumstances I would have to address the conception of my child.

So I did what any confused parent would do - I did not answer the question. Unfortunately, the shy child sitting across from me asked, "How come Jessica has a different last name than you?" Now that was a question I could answer without revealing that Jessica is indeed the product of five years of inseminations taking place over two states, with fertility treatments, psychological evaluations, our longtime physician refusing to perform inseminations due to his personal beliefs, and many, too many negative results on a pregnancy test. That Jessica and her younger brother are indeed the children of a lesbian couple who have endured ups and downs for more than 15 years.

So I told her that I adopted Jessica. It is the truth, just not the whole truth.

The above conversation happened the day after Williston School District held its public forum to discuss the events surrounding the prompt cancellation of Outright Vermont's anti-bullying presentation. As a member of the community with one child in the public school system and another entering next fall, I was personally devastated by the controversy this presentation seemed to conjure up in the community. Parents, educators, and all members of a community must understand the ripple effect gay-bashing and name-calling can have on children. As if it is not horrific enough to image a gay teen enduring the daily stress, we also have to remember that there are children out there who are being raised in gay families. There are children attending our public schools who have gay uncles, aunts, or significant others who are also uncomfortable with negative talk about gay people.

I understand that talking to children about being gay and all that entails is a daunting task, but parents must realize that kids today have been exposed to the idea and may need parental guidance to answer questions. Families in our

community must pull their heads out of the sand and realize that their child will be exposed to gay educators, coaches, and parents. It is my sincere hope that parents explain to their children that it is not acceptable to taunt, tease or otherwise harm another child based on their family makeup. My daughter, in all her sheltered innocence, simply answered her classmate, "I don't have a dad. I have two moms."

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It will happen. My family will brush up against straight families in the most simple ways. At the playground where both my children interchangeably call both my partner and I "Mom." At school, both moms will walk our children to class and volunteer in the classroom and through t-ball, ballet, and at the play structure at Pizza Putt. Chances are the middle school children at Williston have long ago been exposed to the notion of homosexuality. Television has had its share of out gay celebrities. Rosie, Ellen and "Will and Grace," to name a few - not to mention the fact the state they reside in has voted to allow civil union status to gay couples.

So we all agree that our children today have been and will be exposed to the concept of homosexuality, and now we need to agree on how to address this issue. As an openly lesbian mother, I have to be aware of the disrespect, avoidance, and-uncomfortable feelings my family may provoke. I can only hope and pray that our society will become a kinder and gentler place, where my children will be judged on the content of their individual characters rather than the sexual orientation of their parents.

So I say thank you, Williston School District, for addressing this complex and controversial issue. Moreover, by canceling the event, you gave a shining, public example of the exact type of bullying behavior we are desperately trying to eradicate. ▼

➔ Janine Kirchgassner lives with her family in South Burlington. She and partner Julia moved here a year ago from Florida with their children so Janine, a nonbiological parent, could legally adopt Jessica, 7, and Matthew, 5. They all enjoy hiking through the beautiful Vermont landscape.



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