



Parents break status quo

10-year-old gets her love from lesbian moms

By Anne Steyer
Staff Reporter

Christina is a typical 10-year-old. She talks on the phone with her friends, admires movie stars, likes roller blading and insists on being a part of every conversation around her.

She is a normal, healthy, happy child.

Like most parents, Christina's hope her life is filled with a lot of happiness and little heartache.

Unlike most parents, Christina's are lesbians.

But her biological mother Jolene and Jolene's partner Eileen share the typical parenting situations. They have been to parent-teacher conferences together, they bought a home together, they drive to work together, and they make family decisions together.

Most importantly, they are just like any other couple in the United States when it comes to raising their child.

"We have the same concerns straight couples have," Jolene said.

But heterosexual parents can deal with those concerns differently.

"In traditional families there are distinct roles for both parents to play," Jolene said. "The mother is usually the nurturing, caring parent, while the father plays the disciplinarian.

"We're both the mother in this family. I'm the mother, the biological mother, but we share the decision making and the discipline."

Jolene said there was no set definition of who did what in their household, and there was none of the role-playing people assumed existed with lesbians.

"Eileen is not the 'father,'" Jolene said.

Christina's father died in an automobile accident shortly after her birth. He and Jolene were not married.

This absence of a male role model for Christina does not stop Eileen and Jolene from pursuing the same goals that straight parents would pursue.

"We try to instill in her the important things. No sex before marriage, say no to strangers, no drugs, no alcohol, no cigarettes. We have all those old values," Jolene said.

They also stress understanding, compassion and tolerance.

Eileen said the main difference between their parenting style and the traditional style was that they did not insist that Christina have any religion.

"It's my belief parents should not choose religion for a child," Eileen said.

And they allow Christina to make her own decisions regarding religion. At one point, Christina expressed an interest in finding out more about Catholicism, a religion with which both Jolene and Eileen had been raised.

For a short time she attended classes with a friend, but after a while, she decided not to go anymore. The nuns, Christina said, put too much stress on sin and not enough on the goodness in people.

"There's a lot of craziness in religion," Eileen said. "If you teach your children the rights and wrongs, I think that's good enough."

Christina agreed. "Real Christians are people who are good — it's not about not shopping or working on Sundays.

"I think of my mom as a good Christian person because she's a caring, good person."

But, Jolene said, the world is not always filled with good Christian people.

Although Christina said no one had been really cruel to her yet, the fear of how people would react to her family was real.

Christina said many of her friends did not know her mother was a

"They cannot ignore the nontraditional lifestyle," Jolene said. "There always have been and there always will be nontraditional lifestyles."

But regardless of that fact, Jolene said, she and Eileen are limited as to what they can and cannot do as a family.

"It would be wonderful to say to everyone we're a couple, we're married, we bought a house together, we are together. I would love to walk down the street holding her hand, but you can't do that here."

But Jolene and Eileen can do that at home. Their relationship — even sitting on opposite sides of the room — is evident. They have a mature, affectionate relationship that is tempered with a healthy dose of communication. And they share that communication with their daughter.

"She seems to be a caring, intelligent individual," Eileen said. "She understands it, I guess."

"Well," Christina said, "I've been around it all my life. This is who my mom is."

Jolene wishes the world was as understanding as her child.

"Sometimes you just have to be careful, and it's really too bad. What we need people to know is that we're no different. We have the same hopes for our family, the same worries. We're not a threat to the American family by any means."

In fact, the American ideal may be more threatening to them than the other way around. Jolene said most of the difficulties they faced as a family were outside their family unit.

Jolene and Eileen's marriage — a ceremony performed five years ago — is not legally valid. Because of that, they are not eligible for family health insurance and cannot file taxes jointly.

Their internal family problems are typical. Christina said the arguments were usually about cleaning her room and washing the dishes.

There are those, Eileen said, and also Christina's desire to add a puppy to their family, which already includes nine cats.

The family hasn't had any problems they couldn't overcome.

Eileen said she wasn't sure she wanted to be a parent when she and Jolene met 6 1/2 years ago. Eileen said she wasn't interested in children, had never seen herself as a parent and didn't want to.

But Christina grew on her. They spent time getting to know each other, and when Jolene was at work Eileen would take Christina out to the movies and to dinner.

"We got to be friends," Christina said. "We had a lot of fun."

Eileen said she had almost forgotten how she felt before. "We've really had a good five years."



lesbian or that her parents were both women. She's not ashamed, she said, but some people just do not understand.

"I'm afraid they won't want to be my friend anymore." With that she sounds like the 10-year-old child she is, but moments later, when asked how she would respond to a negative reaction, Christina said she would tell people how it was.

"It's part of my life. I'm safe here. So don't worry about it," she said.

Jolene said those who spoke out for "traditional family values" had an outdated view.

"Their ideal of the American family is a mother and father and 2.2 children. That's not the way it is anymore.