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Lesbian couple create a child who is deaf like them

M Spriggs

A deaf lesbian couple who chose to have a deaf child receive a lot of criticism

A deaf lesbian couple in the US deliberately tried to create a deaf child. Sharon Duchesneau and Candy McCullough hoped their child, conceived with the help of a sperm donor, would be deaf like the rest of the family. Their daughter, five year old Jehanne, is also deaf and was conceived with the same donor. News of the couple choosing to have a deaf child has only been revealed with the birth of their son Gauvin.¹⁻⁴

To increase their chance of having a deaf baby the women sought a deaf sperm donor from a sperm bank but were told that congenital deafness is "precisely the sort of condition" that disqualifies would-be donors. Rather than dismiss the idea they found their own sperm donor by asking a deaf friend who comes from a family with five generations of deafness.¹

The women, both professionals in the mental health field, insist that they would still love their child if it could hear: "A hearing baby would be a blessing. A deaf baby would be a special blessing".¹

Like many others in the deaf community, the couple don't view deafness as a disability. They see deafness as a cultural identity and the sophisticated sign language that enables them to communicate fully with other signers as the defining and unifying feature of their culture.¹

Both women were born deaf and want their children to share their culture. They each suffered from being raised to function primarily in the hearing world. Ms Duchesneau experienced "numbing isolation" at school without the benefit of sign language or exposure to other deaf people. She grew up feeling that she "was flawed". Ms McCullough, the child of deaf parents, was brought up using sign language and attended a hearing high school with an interpreter. She also suffered isolation: "No teenage conversation can survive the intrusion of third-party interpretation".¹

Both women later attended Gallaudet, the world's only liberal arts university for the deaf. Gallaudet also nurtures a

Current controversy

A deaf lesbian couple who sought a sperm donor with a family history of deafness in order to have a child they hoped would be deaf have attracted a lot of criticism. They have been criticised for deliberately creating a deaf child, for denying their child a hearing aid, and for raising the child in a homosexual household.

"lively deaf intelligentsia". Ms Duchesneau took sign lessons and describes her time at the university and becoming part of the deaf community as "the best time. . . . People understood me. I didn't have to explain myself. . . . It was a positive thing to be deaf at Gallaudet".¹

In trying to have a deaf child, the women see themselves as no different from parents trying to have a girl. Girls can be discriminated against the same as deaf people and "black people have harder lives", one of them argues. They compare themselves to a "minority group".¹

At four months of age, hearing tests confirm that Gauvin is quite deaf though not as profoundly deaf as his sister. It appears that Gauvin's right ear has some residual hearing and a hearing aid is suggested. The doctor says, if they want to take advantage of it, they should do it now: "Right now it's an ear that could be aided, to give him a head start on spoken English". Most parents would try a hearing aid in the hope that the child could hear something or that it would help with lip reading, but Gauvin's parents will not permit him to have one at present. They say if he wants a hearing aid later, they'll let him have one.¹

There has been some sympathy and support for the women's decision to raise a deaf child. Brian Rope, head of the Deafness Forum of Australia said: "I understand where they are coming from. . . . Lots of deaf parents would like to have a deaf child, but most of them take what they get".² Zina Emmerson, who, like her husband and three of her four children is profoundly deaf, said: "For me, I would just let it happen naturally. I was happy either way (with my children). As long as they were healthy.

But I can understand why they did it. It's so easy to communicate with your own kids in your language".⁵

Mostly though, the lesbian couple's actions have attracted criticism. "I can't understand why anybody would want to bring a disabled child into the world" said Nancy Rarus, of the National Association of the Deaf. Deaf people "don't have as many choices", she says.¹

Ken Connor, president of the Family Research Council, a profamily organisation, also criticises the deliberate attempt to create a deaf child. "To intentionally give a child a disability, in addition to all the disadvantages that come as a result of being raised in a homosexual household, is incredibly selfish", he claims.⁴

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