

## Lesbian Moms a Growing U.S. Phenomenon

By Teresa Carson

PORTLAND, Ore. (Reuters) - "I love my lesbian moms," read a hand-lettered sign a teen-ager held up recently to motorists passing a county building in Portland, Oregon, where gay couples lined up to get marriage licenses.

The message, prompted by the heated national debate over gay marriage, underscored a growing phenomenon -- lesbian couples having babies and raising families.

According to the Family Pride Coalition, a national advocacy group for gay and lesbian families, some 9 million children in America have at least one gay parent and one in five lesbian coupled households include a child under 18.

"I wouldn't call it a baby boom exactly. It has been steadily growing all along," said Aimee Gelnaw, a lesbian mother of two and executive director of the coalition.

Using artificial insemination to get pregnant, lesbians are four times more likely to have children than gay men.

"Same-sex couples and single women are 40 percent of our business, and it is the fastest-growing segment," said Marla Eby, vice president of marketing at Californ Cryobank Inc., Los Angeles, which ships semen nationwide.

The earliest lesbian-couple families often included children born into heterosexual marriages before the mothers "came out" as lesbians.

But in the 1980s many sperm banks opened their doors to unmarried women, making it more feasible.

Gay pride celebrations have begun including child-centered events with face paint and parents can flip through the glossy magazine "And Baby" geared to their families.

### CHOOSING A DONOR

The first step for lesbian would-be parents is choosing a sperm donor. Gay rights groups look for physical and mental attributes. Legal issues can arise, such as whether the donor is of legal age. **Continued ...**

Once the baby is born, couples often take legal steps to protect their families. In the states that allow it, the non-biological mother often adopts the baby so both mothers' names can go on the birth certificate.

Unlike heterosexual married couples, lesbians often have to draw up complicated wills and directives to protect their families should one partner die or the relationship end.

The fragility of these families was recently brought home on a story line of the television show "ER" in which a female doctor and a female firefighter have a baby together. When the firefighter dies, her parents -- the biological grandparents -- refuse to hand over the infant boy to his other mother.

"The story line is very significant in my own life," said "ER" executive producer Dee Johnson, who has two sons with her female partner of 10 years.

Gelnaw relocated while she was adopting her partner's baby. When a judge declared the adoption "provisional," Gelnaw had to fly back several times for follow-up interviews.

"I have a master's degree in child development and I had to prove I was a fit parent. I had to sit there with this caseworker and tell her what we feed Dewey (their daughter) for breakfast," Gelnaw said.

Despite greater acceptance generally, vocal opponents of same-sex parenting remain. "We do not support gay marriage, gay adoption or gay

people becoming parents," Michelle Ammons, director of communications for the Christian Coalition said. "We don't support bringing children into the gay lifestyle."

### GOOD PARENTS

As a result, lesbian mothers sometimes move to "friendlier" states or communities, including Seattle and Portland.

Many lesbian couples also consider their children's well-being before they conceive, including the impact of not having a male role model in the home. Couples also worry that their children would be teased at school or the playground.

"We would have never had Carson if we had thought she would be bullied or have a hard time," Liz Viggiano, a Portland nurse said, rocking her 10-month-old daughter to sleep.

Studies show lesbian parents are doing a good job. "Absolutely, these kids do fine," said Dr. Nanette Gartrell, a psychiatrist at the University of California, San Francisco, who is in the 18th year of a study on lesbian families created by donor insemination.

Sometimes the children themselves put the whole controversy in perspective. Gelnaw said her son Zack decided on his own to stop giving interviews by the age of 12.

"Time magazine wanted to talk with him. He usually enjoyed doing the interviews, but we discussed it and he said 'No, I don't want to do it. I'm just a kid with parents, there is nothing to talk about.'"