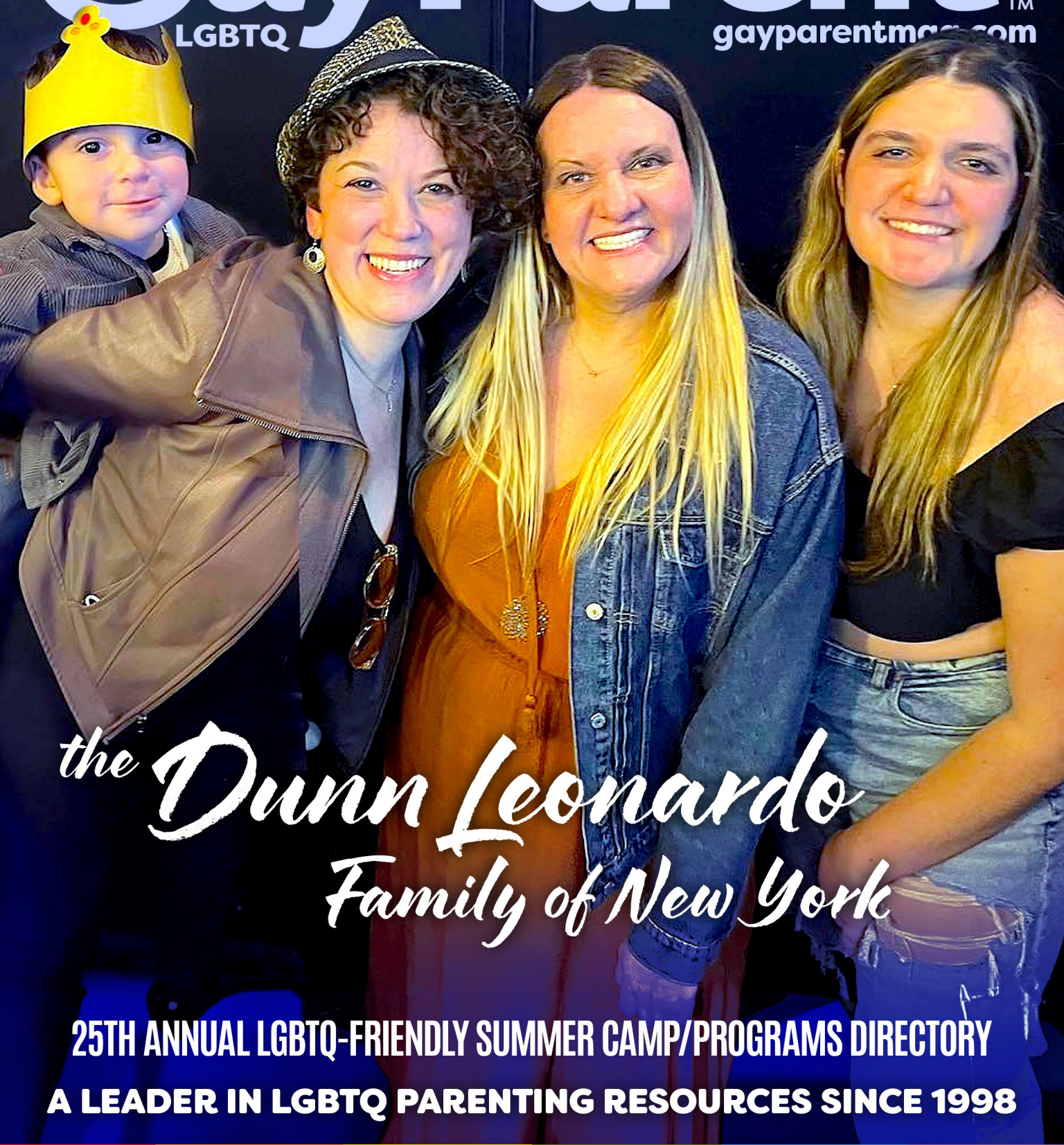


25TH ANNUAL LGBTQ-FRIENDLY FOSTER CARE & ADOPTION RESOURCES DIRECTORY

Gay Parent TM
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May-June 2024 | Issue #154



*the Dunn Leonardo
Family of New York*

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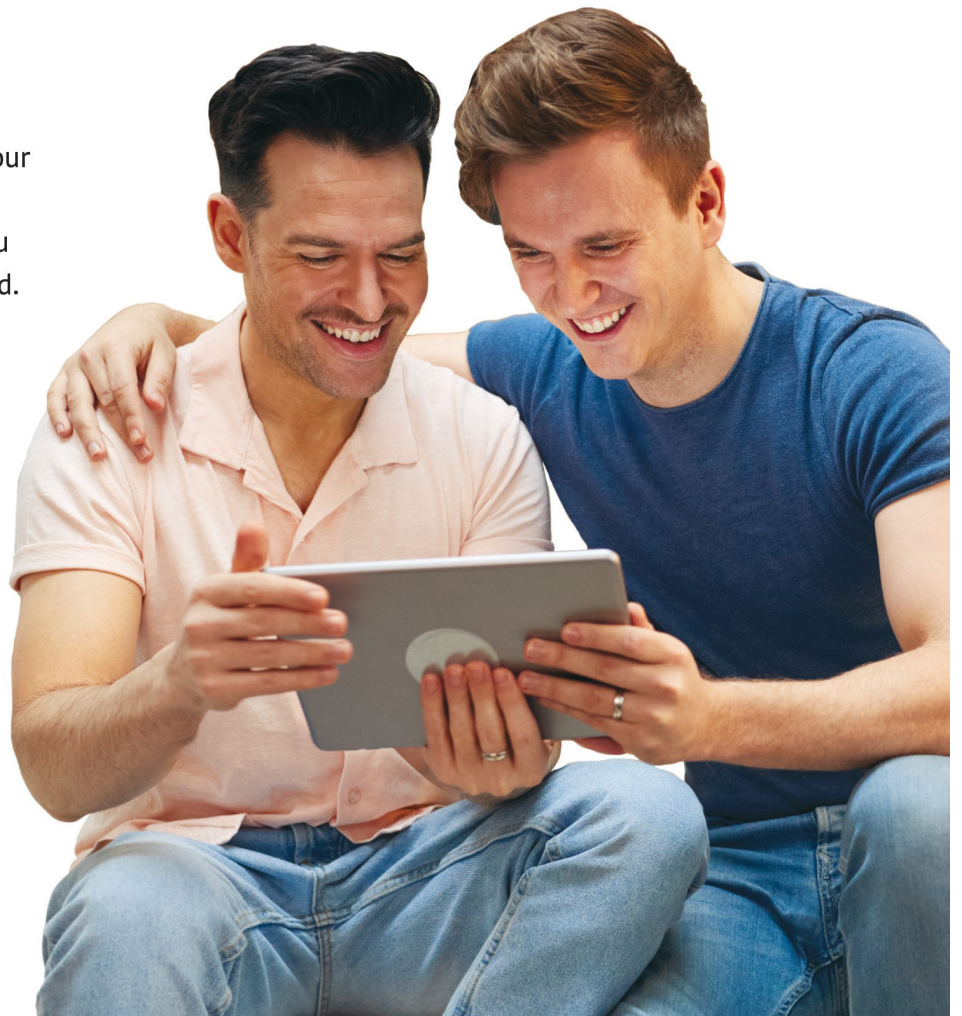
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Cover photo courtesy of Aynisa Leonardo and Suzie Dunn. Photos this page, top to bottom, photo courtesy of Tee N Rena, Tay Down The way Hudson, Michael Sharp, Aynisa Leonardo and Suzie Dunn, and Mary Colleins/the West family.

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May is National Foster Care Month

Visit www.fostercaremonth.org

Below are LGBTQ friendly foster care and adoption resources for family building and nurturing.

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888-517-6294
www.adoptionconnection.org
See ad on page 17

Ascentria Care Alliance

774-243-3100
www.ascentria.org/become-a-foster-parent
See ad on page 21

Barker Adoption Foundation

301-664-9664
www.barkeradoptionfoundation.org
See ad on page 9

Camp Clio

For adopted children
984-439-2308
www.campclio.org
See ad on page 10

Coalition for Hispanic Family Services

718-497-6090 ext. 750
www.hispanicfamilyservicesny.org
See ad on page 6

Glove House

877-687-1265
www.glovehouse.org
See ad on page 25

Graham Windham

929-493-5149
Kayon Phidd
646-759-7571
Eileen Rivera-Salas
www.graham-windham.org
See ad on page 16

Hephzibah Children's Association

708-649-7184
www.hephzibahhome.org
See ad on page 14

Little City

847-358-5510
www.littlecity.org
See ad on page 19

National Youth Advocate Program

877-NYAP-CAN
www.nyap.org/fostercare
See ad on page 25

RaiseAChild

877-417-1440
www.raiseachild.org
See ad on back cover

Rising Ground

Debra McCall (VP, Family Foster Care)
212-602-5862 (Brooklyn)
718-794-8274 (Bronx)
www.risingground.org
See ad on page 12

Spence-Chapin Services to Families & Children

212-400-8150
spence-chapin.org
See ad on page 13

Therapeutic Interventions

833-LUV-KIDS
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25th Annual LGBTQ-friendly Camps for Kids Listing

It's time to think about plans for the summer. Each year in our January-February, March-April, and May-June issues we publish a list of LGBTQ friendly camps and summer day programs that advertise in this issue. Also listed are independent schools, some offering summer programs. The camps and schools are located online, in California, Connecticut, Illinois, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, and Washington.

OVERNIGHT/DAY CAMPS/ CLASSES

REMOTE/ONLINE

CodeWizardHQ

1-800-213-2417
www.codewizardhq.com/summer
or <https://bit.ly/3OEIzFA>
see ad on page 17

CALIFORNIA

Jameson Ranch Camp

661-381-1572
www.jamesonranchcamp.com
see ad on page 24



CONNECTICUT

Camp Clio

984-439-2308
www.campclio.org
see ad on page 10

Silver Lake Camp & Retreat Center

860-364-5526
www.silverlakeect.org
see ad on page 14

NEW HAMPSHIRE

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603-232-8642
www.campfoss.org
see ad on page 8

Granite YMCA

Camp Mi-Te-Na for Boys

603-232-8642
www.campmitena.org
see ad on page 8

NEW JERSEY

Appel Farm Art Camp

856-358-6881
www.appelfarmartscamp.org
see ad on page 5

NEW YORK

Park Slope Day Camp

718-788-7732
www.parkslopedaycamp.com
see ad on page 5



INDEPENDENT SCHOOL SUMMER PROGRAMS / DAY CAMP /EARLY EDUCATION PROGRAMS

CALIFORNIA

Westside Neighborhood School

310-574-8650
www.wns-la.org
see ad on page 18

ILLINOIS

Bennett Day School

312-236-6388
www.bennettday.org
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www.chicagofriendsschool.org
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Council Oak Montessori School
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www.counciloakmontessori.org
 see ad on page 15

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<https://bardacademy.simons-rock.edu/>
 see ad on page and 11 and 14

British International School of Boston
 617-522-2261
www.bisboston.org
 see ad on page 9

Charles River School Summer
 508-785-0068
www.charlesriverschool.org/crs-summer
 see ad on page 13

NEW YORK



Atlantic Acting School
 212-691-5919
www.atlanticactingschool.org
 see ad on page 22

Camp Brooklyn at Brooklyn Friends School
 718-852-1029
www.brooklynfriends.org/summer
 see ad on page 21

Pustblume International Preschool
 212-206-1137
www.pustblumenyc.org
 see ad on page 18

PENNSYLVANIA

Media-Providence Friends School Summer Friends Camp
 610-565-1960
www.mfps.org/camp
 see ad on page 12



WASHINGTON

Bellevue Montessori School
 425-454-7439
www.bellmontessori.com
 see ad on page 26

Westside School
 206-932-2511
www.westsideschool.org
 see ad on page 19 ▼

Allies at the Ready: How Quick Thinking Helped Build a Family

By Michelle Nobriga, JD, MBA

For many aspiring same-sex parents, the path to building a family through open adoption was once littered with discriminatory, out-of-state legal barriers. Couples were often forced to make the heartbreaking decision of which partner would adopt as a single parent first, with the other initially labeled as their "roommate" on paperwork. The emotional turmoil was agonizing but accepted as the only option at the time.

However, for some lucky couples in San Francisco, hope emerged when the city briefly issued same-sex marriage licenses in 2004. This move would eventually be overturned by the state Supreme Court, but an estimated 4,000 couples married during that window— including two dads who would later be guided to parenthood by Adoption Connection.

In 2008, after completing their home study, the couple was chosen by an expectant mother from another state who was specifically seeking two dads to adopt her baby. They immediately traveled to meet her, and a beautiful relationship was forged between all parties. The out-of-state agency approved their home study without the discriminatory "roommate" amendment, and all signs pointed towards a positive outcome.

With consents signed, the monumental task of obtaining interstate clearance began. Hit with an initial denial based on "no legal authority to clear a

The author, Michelle Nobriga



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same-sex couple," Adoption Connection refused to accept this discriminatory stance. In response to Adoption Connection's request to review the case, the state's legal department challenged them to produce a marriage certificate.

In a make-or-break moment, Adoption Connection's coordinator called the dads, who were huddled in an out-of-state hotel room: "Please tell me you ran to the San Francisco Clerk's Office and got married between February and August of 2004!" They responded with a resounding: "YES!" This would be the golden key that unlocked the door to parenthood.

With their 2004 marriage certificate faxed over, the legal roadblocks crumbled. After overcoming tremendous obstacles, the two fathers were finally able to bring their daughter home to California, their long journey rewarded with the ultimate prize—a loving family.

For LGBTQ+ couples facing daunting challenges, having a tenacious ally like Adoption Connection is invaluable. Working with an adoption professional who not only has the expertise but is also creative and quick-thinking will always prove to be the most beneficial investment while navigating the adoption journey. For more information on Adoption Connection, phone 415-359-2494, email families@adoptionconnection.org or visit www.adoptionconnection.org. ▼

Michelle Nobriga, JD, MBA, is the director of Adoption Connection, a nonprofit program of Jewish Family and Children's Services of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties. For over 24 years, Michelle has specialized in guiding and supporting birth parents and adoptive parents through the legally complex journey of nationwide adoptions.

Photo courtesy of Christina DeLeon



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An Earlier Heaven

By Mary L. Collins (for VT DCF)

There is a quote by George Bernard Shaw that goes, "A happy family is but an earlier heaven."

Ask Jonathan and Thomas West about their "earlier heaven" and they will fill you not with stories of "before" children, but life since adopting their three daughters and one son; Grace, Charlotte, Eleanor, and Henry. Admittedly, it's been quite a journey. As parents of four children under the age of eight, all who were adopted through foster care, the Wests are understandably busy and they are understandably devoted to their children.

In June, their book, "A Kid's Book About Gay Parents" will be published. It's part of the "A Kid's Book About" series of books important to a child's understanding of many topics. As former owners of the Northshire Bookstore in Manchester, the Wests understood the need for a book that chronicled the joys and challenges of fostering to adopt as gay parents. "We've been together since 2005, married in 2012, but it wasn't until we attended the wedding of a friend a few years later that we realized we truly wanted to start our own family."



Jonathan West (far left) with his husband Thomas and their children, Grace, Charlotte, Eleanor, and Henry, on Christmas morning 2022.

The West children came to the couple through foster care. Charlotte and Grace, who are just six weeks apart, arrived at birth. "Our story began with a failed private adoption when we lived in Texas," which, Jonathan admits, "was not LGBTQ friendly and was not handled well by legal counsel." The trauma of losing that child and of that experience was extremely difficult to reconcile, he admits. The couple then moved to Baltimore,

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Maryland, where they were introduced to foster care by a friend. Here is where they began their journey to adoption - first with Grace, then baby Charlotte, Eleanor, and most recently, Henry. "We went through the classes and within a minute, we started getting phone calls." Jonathan shares that they turned down over 30 foster care placements because they felt vulnerable and unsure as first-time foster parents or whether the children would be able to stay with them."

Grace came home to them when she was just four days old. Six weeks into Grace's arrival, the Wests received another call. This was their introduction to Charlotte, another newborn. Barely four hours old when they arrived at the hospital to receive her,

Charlotte and Grace were raised as "twins".


The family had moved a few times due to work and while the children were still babies. After a year of traveling, Jonathan felt a calling to return to his home state of Vermont. The Wests then learned that Vermont had one of the highest per capita incidences of opioid abuse, the other states being West Virginia, Kentucky, Indiana, and Montana. From that, more children were entering foster care. The Wests jumped into action.

"It's kind of majestic how everything came together," Thomas explained. "We were already approved for foster care in Vermont. We owned a house here. And within a week of arriving back in Vermont, we were called to take in another infant. That's




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how Ella came to us. "On the very same day that he and Thomas received the call about this newborn baby girl, he received a Facebook friend request from the woman who had been their social worker in Baltimore. Jonathan took that as a sign further cemented by the fact that the baby had been given a name in the hospital that happened to be the same name as his cousin. To Jonathan and Thomas, she was meant to be theirs. "We didn't give DCF a chance to find another foster care home for her. We told them, she's coming home with us." Ellie is now three years old.

"I still remember the judge in Bennington County reading through our daughter's case. At one point, the judge stopped, needing to acknowledge her own emotions to explain the traumatic world of addiction in which our youngest daughter was born. Now," the father of four says, "You would never know of her traumatic beginning. Our daughter is healthy, happy, and resilient; cute, loving, and amazing." West further explained, "But these are the things we remember about our story and we still believe that foster care is an amazing opportunity for people, especially in the LGBT community, to build their families."

In June of 2021, the couple received another call from the adoption counselors in Atlanta about another newborn. So, the family traveled to Atlanta, worked with the birth mother through all kinds of difficulties, and finally was able to bring Henry home. Henry will turn two in September.

All of these experiences underscore the West family's understanding of how children come into our lives - not always through birth but sometimes through foster care that can lead

Given that the theme of National Foster Care Month is mental health care, the West family recognizes that attending to the individual needs of each child supports the mental health of the entire family.

to adoption. He says, "We were all gung ho at the beginning believing that love can solve anything. What we've come to know is that it's much more complex, messy actually. We are trying our level best to give each of our children what they need to thrive."

Given that the theme of National Foster Care Month is mental health care, the West family recognizes that attending to the individual needs of each child supports the mental health of the entire family.

"Specifically here in the State of Vermont, building a proper network around your child is incredibly important," West says. "Especially with one of our daughters, who is struggling somewhat. She has the support of a great team at her school, with her primary care physicians, and among the many development experts who are working to keep her ticking."

He explains that "While some parents are taking their kids to soccer games or ballet classes, our goal is to make sure our kids have everything they need to get through the day. Because of



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the support through things like Medicaid, we can afford the care they need and deserve. All of our children have been evaluated fully by every available program throughout the state: WIC, early intervention, Medicaid, Easter Seals, and others."

He describes the relationship he and his husband have with the case worker who often acts as a sounding board providing the two parents with the support they need and the assurances that they are doing the right and best things for their children. "We work with the family resource team at UVM, one of whom he says "is an immeasurable asset to our state" providing training for foster care families. The couple just completed their second course on trauma-informed parenting of which West says, "Understanding that aspect of how even a child who may not have been in a household where they were harmed, there is a trauma that comes with them in utero."

In Vermont, West underscores, there is one person to contact for specific needs and issues. "We are not a number here. We know who to reach out to and have personal relationships with that person on behalf of our children. We are very upfront with our schools who are fantastic advocates and who are prepared to assist as needed." He said, "We expected to get a response, "Oh, they're just foster kids" but we've never had that experience. Our kids are getting everything they deserve. We've always felt supported, and in Vermont, we've always felt much more trusted than in other states. DCF has always been there for us."

Summing up his own family's evolution, the children's needs, and the struggles of becoming a permanent family, the father of

four sums it up this way, "The bottom line is that, as a foster parent, you're given so much support. Even though the hope for most children is for reunification; there are always children who will need a forever home. Those children will receive a ton of amazing services that make it so much more possible for a family - at any financial or other level to provide for that child. Between free child care, Medicaid, WIC, and all of the other resources available, I know our children are taken care of - and that isn't even talking about the stipend to care for a child."

"We have always believed that even if we have to say goodbye to a child, for us, we hold that if we can change that child's life for even a day, that is the most important thing we could ever do. We knew that for that time in our home, that child was perfectly loved and cared for and ultimately, our home might not be the forever home, but there was the possibility that they would be with us forever."

"We believe that as a family, acceptance through visibility, showing ourselves as a transracial, LGBT family, makes it more acceptable for other families, particularly ones that look like us, who never thought they could raise a family to do so."

Find out more about the west family, their forthcoming book, and their work on behalf of foster and adoptive families at:

<https://daddyandpapa.com/> ▼

The author, Mary Collins, is the Foster Parent Recruitment & Retention Specialist for the Vermont Department for Children and Families. Email Mary at mary.collins@vermont.gov.

Photo courtesy of Mary Collins/the West family

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Teague McDaniel Endeavors to Raise Compassionate and Creative Children

By Gary Hurtubise

What parent has never thought to themselves – hip-high in laundry and scrambling to cobble together something that could be considered supper – *am I a good role model for my child of how to be a compassionate, centered, creative and capable human being?*

Teague McDaniel, solo parent and founder of Creative Integration Initiative in Boulder, Colorado, might just be the closest thing to that role model...

Teague was born in 1992 in Golden, Colorado. Their mother is a massage therapist and Pilates teacher of 34 years; their father is a reiki consultant – professions that inspired Teague from a young age.

“I started my first business at age twelve sewing dog bandanas, dog beds, and making organic dog treats. I raised enough money to take a school trip to Europe, buy a digital camera and more sewing supplies.”

Teague studied at Pacific Northwest College of Art in Portland, Oregon, at Metropolitan State University (MSU) of Denver, and at Western Colorado University, earning a BA in Studio Art and an MA in Curatorial Studies.

Teague is a trans and; genderfluid person. Their journey towards recognizing their identity is rather unique.

“Many of the people I looked up to in the DIY community in Denver were trans and I had a trans mentor in high school,” they explain. Despite being comforted by the presence of this community as a young person, Teague still struggled, not having the language or understanding of the issue to fully realize their own gender.

Upon moving to Portland for college, Teague learned about zizem, they/them, and it/its pronouns, and started to work through their relationship with their gender identity.

As many LGBTQ+ individuals come to realize, coming out is a continual process; this was no exception for Teague. “I came out



Teague McDaniel, left, with their children.

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as a trans man to my mom when I was 19 then proceeded to have a varied relationship to my gender over the next decade.” Parallel to figuring out their identity, Teague was also learning to navigate being a young single parent, as well as recovering from a rare genetic condition.

“My family and doctors were encouraging (about my trans identity) but wanted me to focus on treating my newly diagnosed genetic disease before medically transitioning.”

Teague’s journey towards parenthood began when they were 21, discovering they were pregnant “with a person who I felt more platonic friendship feelings towards than anything else.”

Teague would get married twice throughout their twenties, to two cis-het men, having another child with their second husband.

Teague’s spouses knew Teague was queer from the beginning, though Teague found advocating for their identity harder and harder as their second marriage progressed. “At one point, my second spouse wouldn’t allow me to express my gender to him, or in public,” they reveal.

Teague further reveals that both their marriages included either substance abuse or interpersonal violence. In survival mode, raising two children in unsafe situations as the COVID pandemic loomed, Teague began divorce proceedings to escape their poisonous second marriage.

“I decided I wanted to be a solo-parent in a committed deep community of enriching relationships,” Teague explains, adding that, along with reimagining what parenting could look like, they immediately restarted their transition.

“I somewhat quickly and accidentally found a very trans, autistic / ADHD, queer second family of incredible people who saw me and wanted to be in my life in meaningful and supportive ways.”

Despite this good fortune, Teague found it difficult to have confidence in coming out *again* as a trans person during their late twenties. “It felt like water though,” they explain, “the more that I was myself and uncovered layers of my previously guarded gender, the more energy flowed in that direction.”

“I was thrilled to be myself authentically to other people again. Being able to engage with the world in this way was also a chance for Teague to redefine their role as a parent, specifically as “an introvert on the asexual and aromantic spectrum.”



Teague McDaniel, left, with their younger child.

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Teague McDaniel's older child.

"I wanted to be the stay-at-home parent that picks my kids up from school right when the bell rings, but *also* the parent who is fully established in their career, identity, and life goals."

"Somehow, I was able to pick both!"

After years of working endless hours in unpleasant jobs while simultaneously tak-

ing night classes *and* trying to get their firm Creative Integration Initiative (CII) up and running, things finally hit a tipping point.

Nowadays, Teague has the flexibility in their life and work to prepare all the meals they want, exercise daily, read to and play with their kids, and rest a full night's sleep.

"To me," they explain, "this was more important than a larger house or more frequent vacations. I structurally changed my busy life into one that was modest enough that I could afford to pick my kids up from school every day and not log back into work after."

"That is not always an option, but with sustained, prioritized effort over time, I have increased my family's quality of life and our quality time together through efforts like simplifying things like our budget where we can to focus on what really matters to us."

When asked about their relationship status today, Teague explains somewhat cryptically, "I practice relationship anarchy." Explaining further, they add, "I have close friends and chosen family who I share time with. My kids and I live alone."

Teague's kids include a non-binary neurodivergent nine-and-a-half-year-old

("...who loves dogs, video games, basketball, science, and art,") and a younger child of six ("...who loves engineering complex designs out of Lego, artwork, rock climbing, and riding bikes").

"They call me mom, but I also like being called by 'pare' – short for parent."

Both old enough to understand how their family differs from the average make-up, the kids have unique ways of handling questions and comments about it.

"My younger child can be a good advocate by saying 'they' over-and-over again until people get my pronouns right," Teague says.

"Recently, though, he has been more cautious around gender, after encountering pushback in his other home where my pronouns aren't used correctly and he has little agency in expressing his gender."

Because of this, Teague's youngest continues to advocate for his family – albeit in a more passive way – but has sometimes railed against his family members' pronouns, "on one occasion," Teague recounts, "him yelling at my other child and I that 'they/them pronouns weren't real!'"

Teague's older child, by contrast,

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seems mostly unaware of others' impressions of their gender, often receiving a mix of pronouns when in public. "They seem to have a solid self-perception without being affected by how *others* perceive them.

Their oldest child began using ne/nim/nir pronouns after an art exhibit that Teague put together with a variety of pronoun pins available for audience members to make.

"We read books about gender in our home and the term non-binary struck a chord with them (the eldest child) many years ago," Teague says. "They have been articulating their gender for a few years verbally and started growing their hair long in kindergarten after growing up with a fluid fashion sense."

While most marketing towards children is still aimed towards the two traditional genders, Teague mentions that they tend to provide their kids with a "chaotic mix of any toy, show, clothing, and behavioral rewards that defy a gendered experience."

When faced with gender discrimination in the school system, Teague has made use of a gender support plan from the website genderspectrum.org, and has worked to "let peers know when they make a mistake what pronouns could be used as well."

The young family live in Boulder, Colorado. Teague sees their parents about once a month. Beyond that extended family contact, Teague and the kids have "built a robust network of acquaintances including incredible neighbors and a supportive professional arts community, and a handful of close relationships.

"These folks cared for me after top surgery, watch my pets, bring me groceries when I am sick, flowers when I am sad, and babysit. We are very rich in community, and it enhances our quality of life ten-fold."

Being a work-at-home parent, Teague is able to organize much of their schedule around family-time.

On weekends, for example, their day might look as follows: "we get up and the kids build with Legos while I make breakfast. The kids then find a friend in the neighborhood to jump on the trampoline, ride bikes, or play in their tree fort with. After a couple hours, I call them in for a snack and we pack a lunch and go to the children's museum, an art gallery, or to a playdate



Teague McDaniel's children.

across town."

"We eat dinner together and then read plenty of books. My younger one will stay up a bit later and snuggle with me as the eldest falls asleep immediately after I sing them lullabies during our one-on-one time."

Organizing their own life this way has led to opportunities to help other people rearrange their schedules. "I offer creative coaching for people who want to identify a goal and work to make more time in their

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lives to live their passions and raise their kids.”

Outside of family time, Teague is heavily involved in social equity endeavors, both as a volunteer and as part of their career.

“I have been on the board of PTA’s at all three of the elementary schools that my children have attended since 2018.” This past year, Teague co-launched an initiative made up of parents and educators to do equity work within the school through a Diversity Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) Committee.

“I teach as an adjunct art professor in the foundations department of MSU Denver,” Teague continues, adding that they teach 2-dimensional (painting, etc.), 3-dimensional (sculpture, etc.), and 4-dimensional foundations. They explain the 4-dimensional aspect of their teaching as “the introduction of time to an artistic medium, such as animation, performance art, or social practice.”

Outside of their academic work, Teague is the founder and curator of Creative Integration Initiative (CII), a creative firm that partners with organizations to solve problems through arts societal integration. “For example, we’ve worked with graphic designers, educators, industry lead-



Teague McDaniel, left, with their children.

ers, and woodworkers to produce structures and systems that support autistic children and children with sensory processing disorders in having a supportive environment when going to the dentist.”

CII has partnered with the WOW! Children’s Museum in Lafayette to produce programming for Family Pride Night, with ‘Girls Inc’ to add trans-artist-designed inclusive gender signage to their restrooms, with the Boulder Public Library to work with children throughout the district to display their art in the libraries as a part of a scavenger hunt through the Winter Reading Program, and has hosted events at local pride fairs and art galleries for people to make their own pronoun pins, zines (mini-magazines), and collages to express and celebrate their gender or lack thereof.

Teague also finds time to feature their own artwork through residencies and art shows – some of

which will be featured at the Center for Visual Art over the summer. “My artwork has been a lot about top surgery and medical transition



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in the last year and spans augmented-reality prompted paintings, found-object assemblage using medical supplies from my top surgery, performances art, and queer abstraction."

On the CII website, Teague identified that their vision for the world they leave behind for their children, "is a world that is creative, equitable, inclusive, sustainable, and environmentally sound." When asked to expand on this, Teague has this to say:

"As individuals, we can endeavor to raise compassionate and creative children while living by example.

"If we start by listening and feeling deeply as individuals to see what we value and how we want to spend our time in this lifetime, we will have a sense of where we would like to put our energy, and our actions gain deeper intentionality and purpose.

"For example, each person is capable of doing things that center them or allow them to live closer to their values.

"In my life, this takes the shape of frequent seated meditation. This stillness is where I create capacity. Capacity to be calm when my child throws a fit, capacity to act compassionately towards a co-worker who is discriminating against me, capacity to respond and not react.

"If I feel overwhelmed, I take a step back and practice smaller steps of change. Even a gesture that feels small: making sure to add a building access description on your next kid's birthday party invite, or sitting and reading a book instead of looking at a phone when your child is in the room.

"When we *live our values*, our children notice and follow."

For more information on Teague McDaniel and CII, visit www.ciiart.org. ▼

Gary Hurtubise lives in Eastern Ontario with his husband Trevor, their two sons Noah & Meo, and their two yellow labs. Gary attended the Royal Military College of Canada and served in the Royal Canadian Navy before becoming a high school physics teacher, and part time Ghostwriter. Gary finds time to write during those odd moments between life: at 4:30 in the morning, on long road-trips with the kids, while back-country camping, and when he should be doing his share of the chores.

Photos courtesy of Teague McDaniel

Aynisa Leonardo and Suzie Dunn, a Coupling of Caring and Creativity

By Gary Hurtubise

Aynisa Leonardo and Suzie Dunn of the hamlet of Holbrook in Long Island, New York, have deep ties to their community, where they are raising their eighteen-year-old daughter and four-year-old son.

Suzie was born in Manhattan, the eldest of three daughters. Her father worked in the newspaper industry, and her mother was employed by the Society for the Preservation of Long Island Antiquities (SPLIA).

Most of her youth was spent on Long Island, where she was heavily involved in the arts: performing, singing and dancing. Suzie attended SUNY Oneonta, where she earned her Bachelor's degree in Elementary Education and Theater.

This early exposure to the arts led directly to what Suzie does today, which is "directing, choreographing, and still remaining a leader in the arts."

"I've specialized in the development



Left to right, Jackson, Aynisa Leonardo, Suzie Dunn, and Gabrielle.

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of educational lab theatre,” she explains, “and curriculum-based arts & education, designed to help students find their way through the theater experience.”

Aynisa was born in Queens, and – like Suzie – grew up in Long Island. She lived with her older brother, their nurse practitioner single mom, their aunt, and their grandmother.

Aynisa went to Fordham University (described as the Jesuit University of New York) for a BA in Communications and minor in Psychology, then to Brooklyn College to study Psychology and Art, rounding out her education at Hofstra University in Hempstead for a Master’s in Creative Art Therapy.

“I was always passionate about creativity through film and photography, but also had a desire to help people, so I merged those together to form a career,” Aynisa says. “I’ve trained in a variety of trauma therapies as well as holistic services, and have always been drawn to progressive healing methods for myself as well as others.”

Growing up, Aynisa always knew she was attracted to others based on their personality. Today, she identifies as pansexual. “I didn’t know what that meant,” she admits, “because during my teenage and young adult years, there was a

lack of awareness and terminology for the LGBTQ+ community.”

While not undergoing a formal coming out, Aynisa did not hide who she was. “Some people were receptive, while others were not.”

The poor receptions she experienced occurred mainly during her college years. “I was confronted several times in New York, Kansas, Mississippi, Florida, Hawaii, and even Italy. These acts ranged from throwing objects to denying services. One hotel in Mississippi sent me and a friend away in the middle of the night, preventing us from checking in, and forcing us to ‘rough it.’”

Like Aynisa, Suzie grew up having feelings of attraction to “the person, and not their gender,” as she describes it, also identifying as pansexual.

“I came out when I was 28, but growing up



The couple starting the process of having Jackson.

in theater and being surrounded by people who were part of the LGBTQ+ community, my family was always a safe space for my queer friends to come, especially when their families didn’t accept them.”

“I also have a gay aunt who is happily married,” Suzie says, “so when I came out there wasn’t much stigma within my family.”

The main source of annoyance that Suzie has felt over the years, “is the assumption from others that I have a husband, because I present very feminine.” Being a mother, Suzie has also found that institutions – specifically schools – do not have forms or language that cater to families outside of the traditional hetero norm. “Many forms and comments are still geared towards ‘mom and dad,’” she laments, “which can be exclusionary for many family systems, including ours.”

On a positive note, Aynisa has noted that – specifically in New York over the past decade – “the movement towards overall acceptance for


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Right photo, celebrating Jackson's birthday. Left photo, celebrating Aynisa's birthday.

the LGBTQ+ community has really paved a way for myself and my family to make things much easier than they may have been years prior."

The two women first met in 2008 through mutual friends, remaining just friends for six years. "In 2014 our lives lined up and we decided to start dating," Aynisa explains.

In 2015, Suzie beat Aynisa to the punch when she proposed. It happened following a showing of 'Rent' – the show Suzie was directing at the time. She called Aynisa to the stage and popped the question while her cast sang 'Seasons of Love'.

Aynisa of course said yes, but wanted to do a proposal of her own, so strung their favorite tree with playing cards, each with one of the "52 reasons why you should say 'yes'" written on them.

"We were married in 2017 at our dream venue on the water, on a beautiful day in September. We each had five groomsmen, and our families, friends and colleagues packed the place with singing, dancing, and lots of love and support."

"We still to this day hear about how our wedding was the best party of the century," Suzie reports. "We had planned dance routines, and surprise



performances for each other, as well as a private boat getaway into the sunset."

The couple waited until January to escape the New York winter and enjoy a honeymoon in Costa Rica.

When the two women first got together, Suzie brought with her a three-year-old daughter from a previous relationship. "Having Gabrielle as a part of our dynamic made us a little family right away, so the idea of expanding was a no-brainer," Aynisa explains.

Since Suzie carried and gave birth to Elle (what the couple call Gabrielle for short), they decided that Aynisa would carry their next child.

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However, after several years of trying to get pregnant through IUI's, a test revealed a fibroid that would require several surgeries to give Aynisa even a chance at a successful pregnancy.

"The odds were no longer in our favor," she admits. Carrying the Hunger Games references one step further, Aynisa adds: "Suzie was nice enough to 'volunteer as tribute'."

From that point on, everything fell into place for the couple, "just as it was meant to be."

"We harvested Aynisa's eggs, chose a private donor with traits, interests, and heritage similar to Suzie, implanted an embryo, and nine months later, Jackson Thomas entered the scene to complete our family."

Today, Jackson is almost four years old – and the prince of the family. "He is charismatic, smart, and extremely loving. Full of energy, he definitely keeps us on our toes." The couple admit.

"He loves to be on stage, prefers to have a microphone in his hand, is currently obsessed with cars, trains, and everything Paw Patrol. He also loves playing instruments and making music. You can catch him in our home almost daily playing singing bowls or drums. He also loves to paint, bake, build things, and perhaps above all things, take care of our two puppies, Freddy and Coconut."

The couple's daughter Gabrielle will turn 19 in September, and is currently a Freshman at the Fredonia School of Music, in their honor's program. "She's studying Music Education with Vocal Performance and a minor in Theater," Suzie reports.

"She loves all genres of music and performance, and plays multiple instruments. She's been dancing for 16 years and has been in countless theatrical productions with many lead roles."

"What stands out most about Elle's personality," her stepmom continues, "is her sense of humor and unwavering care for others. She's diplomatic and has been referenced as an 'indigo child' throughout her life due to being wise and creative beyond her years."

Like Jackson, Gabrielle is a lover of animals, and when she's home from college, can be found either playing with Jackson, or cuddling with Ziggy, the family cat.

When Jackson was around six months old, the couple tried to establish that Suzie would be 'Mama' and Aynisa would be 'Mommy'. Jackson had other ideas. "He decided to start calling Aynisa 'Ba', which oddly enough we later found out was a term for father in Asian cultures."

When asked about how they explain their family make-up to their son, Suzie replies, "we have explained to him through different books and stories that love makes a family, that he has two moms, and many families look different."

"To be honest," she continues, "Jackson seems to be figuring most of it out on his own. It's hard to explain but he points out different things, constantly showing us that he gets it."

As for Gabrielle, she has been quite vocal in advocating for her family. "Elle wrote her college essay about paving the way in school in terms of having a non-traditional family, like having to constantly cross out 'father' on forms."

"She wove in (to her college application) a slam poetry project from the year prior, titled 'Two moms'." Excerpts of Gabrielle's poem are below:

*When I was younger
I thought that having two moms was a normal thing
that more children had but it turns out
I was wrong.*

*I didn't quite understand homophobia
until I got to high school.*

*Sure in middle school
I would make a friend
and ask if they wanted to come over
and they wouldn't be able to
because their parents
would always say no
no matter how many times I asked.*



Clockwise starting at the top, Aynisa, Jackson, Suzie and Gabrielle.

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I didn't catch that it was most likely because of my moms...

When asked to share her thoughts on having two moms, Gabrielle has this to say: "I was so young (when her moms got together), I don't exactly remember having to adapt! It's just what I always remember."

As she grew up, Gabrielle would encounter her share of ignorance among her peers. "There were instances where I would be

accused of being gay due to my moms or due to genetics, which isn't at all possible! I felt like I had to educate people often."

Outside of raising their two kids, both women demonstrate a keen interest in helping those in their community.

Aynisa is the founder of the Military Resilience Foundation (MRF), which she started in 2013, after working at an inpatient psychiatric hospital exclusively with active-duty military personnel and veterans.

"I never served (in the military) but learned trial-by-fire, mostly from the clients who told me what to read and watch, to learn how to work with and support the military on the healing side of war."

"This then inspired me to develop and found MRF outside the four walls of treatment, and in the community, providing healing outlets for veterans."

"MRF has always been a passion," Aynisa declares, "but my full-time job and how I spend most of my days, is as a treatment placement specialist. I get anywhere from three to ten calls a day, from individuals in crisis seeking support and services for themselves or their loved ones."

Aynisa publicly provides her email address and cell number (646 599 0577) so that those in need can call her anytime day or night for assistance in navigating treatment.

Also in 2013, Suzie started a charitable organization called The Cue Theatre,

(www.thecuetheatre.org) an educational lab theater that teaches students of all ages all aspects of performing arts. "It's a safe space for students to be able to express themselves and fit in, especially when they have nowhere else to go."

Several years later, Suzie was able to add her expertise to MRF by bringing an additional



Suzie and Aynisa

layer of creative programming and partnership. "I'm not a veteran," she says, "but I was raised by one (my father)."

As the Artistic Director of MRF, Suzie oversees partner projects with The Public Theatre (Vets on Stage) and Theatre Three in Port Jefferson (Adopt-a-Veteran Program) and provides acting outlets for many of the agency's retreats and expressive

workshops.

"Coupling my love of the arts with my desire to serve those who have served, endless opportunities have opened up in our community for us to merge our passions while serving others."

Aynisa shares her wife's sentiment, adding, "the two greatest honors of my career have been serving the veteran community and serving the 'crisis' community."

When asked about their thoughts about the broader community of LGBTQ+ families across America and around the globe, the couple first acknowledge their own good fortune. "We've been very well received and supported in our lives but recognize that we are also in a very gay-friendly part of the country and the world."

Based on the awareness and acceptance they've witnessed in their daughter Gabrielle's generation, the women are conditionally hopeful for the future.

"We only hope that things keep moving in the right direction for all minorities. Progress has been made but we of course think there's always more to be done in the way of equality."

For more information about the couple's organization, the Military Resilience Foundation, visit www.milresilience.com. ▼

Gary Hurtubise lives in Eastern Ontario with his husband Trevor, their two sons Noah & Meo, and their two yellow labs. Gary attended the Royal Military College of Canada and served in the Royal Canadian Navy before becoming a high school physics teacher, and part time Ghostwriter. Gary finds time to write during those odd moments between life: at 4:30 in the morning, on long road-trips with the kids, while back-country camping, and when he should be doing his share of the chores.

Photos courtesy of Aynisa Leonardo and Suzie Dunn.

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