

26TH ANNUAL LGBTQ-FRIENDLY FOSTER CARE & ADOPTION RESOURCES DIRECTORY

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May-June 2025 | Issue #160

**INSIDE: 7 Survival Tips
for New Stepparents**
by Renée J. Lukas

**California Dads
Nathan & Daniel**

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Gay Parent
LGBTQ MAGAZINE

May-June 2025 issue #160

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Cover photo courtesy of Nathan and Daniel. Photos this page, top to bottom, photo courtesy of Issa M. Mas, Amy Murphy, and Nathan and Daniel.

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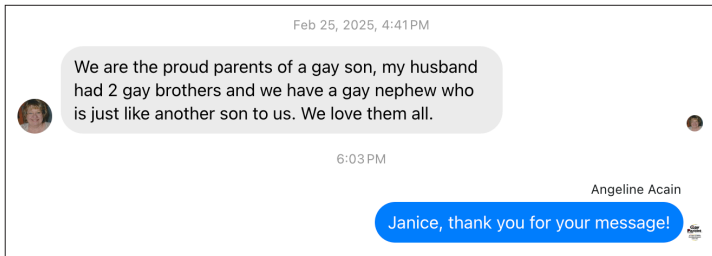
"Hi there, thought I'd send over our family xmas photo. Fun fact, my boys and I were featured on the documentary All Aboard with Rosie O'Donnell...they were 3 and 6...lol they have grown into such wonderful young men. My wife and I have been together 16 years, the boys are 22 and 25. We live a wonderful GAY life, full of love and commitment to family, and our community."

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info@theacademyproject.org

www.theacademyproject.org

See ad on page 23

Aviva Family and Children's Services

323-333-2898

www.aviva.org

See ad on page 27

Barker Adoption Foundation

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www.barkeradoptionfoundation.org

See ad on page 13



Camp Clio

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www.campclio.org

See ad on page 12

Family Legal Advocacy Group

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www.flagfamilylaw.com

See ad on page 12

Hephzibah Children's Association

708-649-7184 - Nancy Silver

www.hephzibahhome.org

See ad on page 10

Lawrence Hall

773-769-3500

www.lawrencehall.org

See ad on page 26

New Alternatives for Children

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<https://nackidscan.org/>

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Spence-Chapin Services to Families & Children

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26th Annual LGBTQ-friendly Camps for Kids Listing

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OVERNIGHT / DAY CAMPS

CALIFORNIA

Camp Xavier /

The Academy Project

For youth in foster care
in Los Angeles.

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www.theacademyproject.org

see ad on page 23

Jameson Ranch Camp

661-381-1572

www.jamesonranchcamp.com

see ad on page 22

CONNECTICUT

Camp Clio

For adopted children

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www.campclio.org

see ad on page 12

MAINE

Pine Island Camp

207-465-3031

www.pineisland.org

see ad on page 22

MASSACHUSETTS

Camp Fable

At The Story School

781-214-1174

www.thestoryschool.org

see ad on page 21

MICHIGAN

Camp Walden

231-625-2050

www.campwaldenni.com

see ad on page 13



NEW HAMPSHIRE

Pride Camp Family Weekend

603-232-8642

bit.ly/pridecampfamilyweek-end2025

see ad on page 11

NEW JERSEY

Appel Farm Arts Camp

856-358-6881

www.appelfarm.org

see ad on page 4

NEW YORK

Atlantic Acting School

212-691-5919

www.atlanticactingschool.org

see ad on page 12

Park Slope Day Camp

718-788-7732

www.parkslopedaycamp.com

see ad on page 8

PENNSYLVANIA

YMCA Camp

Kon-O-Kwee Spencer

724-758-6238

www.ycampkok.org

see ad on page 14

INDEPENDENT SCHOOL SUMMER PROGRAMS / DAY CAMP / EARLY EDUCATION PROGRAMS / COLLEGE

CALIFORNIA

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310-471-1041, K - 6

310-476-9633, 7 - 12

www.bwscampus.com

see ad on page 24

Crestview Preparatory School

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www.crestviewprep.org

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Monica Ros School

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www.monicaros.org

see ad on page 24

Town School for Boys

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www.townschool.com

see ad on page 18

ILLINOIS

Bennett Day School

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www.bennettday.org

see ad on page 12

Council Oak

Montessori School

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www.counciloakmontessori.org

see ad on page 19

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see ad on page 5 & 6

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NEW YORK

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Twin Parks Montessori Schools
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Central Park
Montessori
212-678-6072
Park West
Montessori School
212-665-1600
Riverside Montessori School

www.twinparks.org
see ad on page 25

PENNSYLVANIA

The Crefeld School
215-242-5545
www.crefeld.org
see ad on page 17

Lansdowne Friends School
610-623-2548
www.lansdownefriendsschool.org
see ad on page 16

Summer Friends At Media-Providence Friends School
610-565-1960
www.mpts.org/camp
see ad on page 11

Waldorf School of Philadelphia
215-248-1662
www.phillywaldorf.com
see ad on page 7



WASHINGTON

Bellevue Montessori School
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www.bellmontessori.com
see ad on page 4

Jewish Day School Summer Camp
425-460-0200
www.jds.org
see ad on page 7

New Discovery School
206-447-2377
www.newdiscovery.school.org
see ad on page 9

Summer Camp at Villa Academy Villa Ventures
206-524-8885
www.thevilla.org/summer
see ad on page 17

Westside School
206-932-2511
www.westsideschool.org
see ad on page 20

Whidbey Island Waldorf School
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www.wiws.org
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7 Survival Tips for New Stepparents

By Renée J. Lukas

No one ever says, “When I grow up, I want to be a stepparent.”

That’s because everything you know about stepparents you learned from children’s movies, like the wicked stepmother who made Cinderella scrub floors. Not a positive image.

A stepparent is the only role in the family that no one asked for. Parents split up and you were brought into the picture. The kids never asked for you.

This was the situation I faced when I first started dating a woman who had kids. And who had been married to a man.

Let me be clear—I was never going to have kids. That was not part of my plan. I was content to be the cool aunt who could get my nephew to giggle by making his SpongeBob slippers talk. Then when he had a meltdown or poop situation, I could give him back to my sister—like a return at *Wal-Mart*.

But when I’d begun to date someone who had two sons—one in his early teens, the other age nine—I was naturally worried. Okay, terrified. I imagined hearing that phrase no

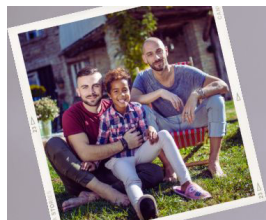


The author, Renée J. Lukas (far right), with her wife and two sons.

stepparent ever wants to hear: “I don’t have to. You’re not my real mom!”

I decided that instead of running in panic, I’d accept this detour that life had presented me.

Now many years later, I have a family I never thought I would have. I can’t imagine not knowing them the way I do



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now. I won't lie and say it's been a non-stop Disney ride. But what I learned along the way might help anyone who finds herself (or himself) suddenly in the role of stepparent.

1. Don't rush the affection.

I wanted to hug the kids. I admit it, I'm a hugger. But my wife, who is also a licensed therapist, wisely said, "Let them come to you. When they're ready, they'll let you know." Months passed. A year passed. Sometimes it was hard because the younger one was so cute he reminded me of a Muppet I just wanted to squeeze.

Then one morning, my wife and I were dancing in the kitchen. When the little one saw us, he cried out, "Sandwich!" and threw his arms around both of us, with me in the middle. It was a safe way for him to give me a hug, and the beginning of letting me know that it was okay to be affectionate.

I'd heard of stories where stepparents push too hard, and the biological parent commands their children to "give so-and-so a hug and kiss." It's a forced, uncomfortable thing for kids. If a hug and kiss are demanded, it will probably take even longer for the kids to develop more natural feelings toward you.

2. Shamelessly use your partner's authority when necessary.

Discipline is the trickiest part of being new to the family. Like it or not, at first you have no authority. It's true. To the kids you're a stranger who, if you start ordering them around, will only cause resentment. And you can forget about bonding. That's why in the beginning, I rode on the coattails of my wife's authority. When I needed to use discipline, the best way was to remind them of Mom's rules: "Your mom said no eating in your bedroom." Or "When your mom gets home, will she be happy to know you guys were fighting like this?" This way, they had to listen to the same person they'd always listened to.

As more time passed and the kids got comfortable with me, I didn't need to mention their mother anymore. I could just tell them to stop doing whatever it was they were doing that they shouldn't be. And they *listened* to me! It was a smooth transition—and a great moment when I felt like a real parent.

Still, when things got really big, involving water balloons in the house or someone's charger being stuffed down another



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er's pants, I could still call on the big guns with no problem: "Your mother is going to take your electronics away if you don't give that back!"

There's just one exception to the coattails tip. If the kids are disrespectful to you in the beginning, you have every right to be firm and make it clear that you expect to be treated with respect. Even though you're not the biological parent, it's your right to expect to be treated in a respectful manner.

3. Understand that the kids may feel guilty for liking you.

Sometimes I would notice that after visiting with his dad, the younger boy, who was always so talkative, would clam up when I asked him about his day. I learned that some kids feel like they're betraying the other parent if they feel a close bond with you, the "new" person. This is normal. They will come to understand that it's okay to welcome new people into their lives without diminishing their relationship with their other parent.

4. Give yourself, and the kids, time.

There's no magic pill to turn you into an instant, cohesive family. Some things can only come with time. I had to prove myself with three things: 1) treat both of their biological parents with respect, 2) don't undermine their mother's rules when she's not around, and 3) be consistent in my behavior.

There was one time when the older boy wanted me to let him do something his mother had forbidden. He pleaded with me. "Please," he begged. "She'll never know."

"But I will," I said. "And so will you."

Sure, it was a tempting time to bond with the older son, to have a secret between me and him. But it would have undermined my credibility if I chose to become his buddy. I didn't feel great at the moment, but I think I earned his respect in the long run.

Time takes care of a lot of things, including what name the kids will call you. The older one informed me that he only has one mom, and I told him I understood that, because so do I. So he calls me by my first name. The younger one seemed more troubled by not having some kind of nickname for me. He worked on it for a while, and he came

up with something that was a cross between my name and Rihanna. Remama. It didn't stick, but it was good because he was trying to define my role in his life. Don't worry if they aren't sure what to call you right away. Over time, they'll find something they're comfortable with. As long as it's not an expletive, you're probably doing just fine.

5. Take an interest in what the kids are doing, but not in the usual way.

I don't, nor will I ever, understand Pokemon. But asking questions about one of their favorite TV shows taught me far more than I'd ever learn with a question like, "What's your favorite subject in school?" I tried that question early on, and the older boy said, "Recess." It was a quick conversation.

We played games together. This gets everyone talking, often laughing, while enjoying a shared experience. It doesn't feel like a forced, getting-to-know-you moment. Games will reveal interesting things about kids. For example, I learned the mild-mannered nine-year-old became a cut-throat, take-no-prisoners villain when he got in front of a *Trouble* board.

I asked about things they like because I care. And they could see that. Kids are really good at seeing through insincerity. Even if I don't understand how SpongeBob can brush his teeth while he's surrounded by water, the kids knew I cared because I asked. And I am really fascinated by the success of a cartoon about a sponge. *Really, I am.*

6. Don't expect your life experiences to be interesting to kids.

At first I had delusions of being some great mentor like Mr. Miyagi in *The Karate Kid*. I could teach the boys things from my own school years. I quickly learned they don't care. If they do take an interest, it's usually because they pity you.

One night, the boys' favorite cartoon wasn't on any of the sixty cartoon channels on TV. So my wife and I told them how we only got to watch cartoons on Saturday mornings—and they ended at noon. The little one had a look of horror in his eyes.

"What did you *do*?" he asked with great concern.

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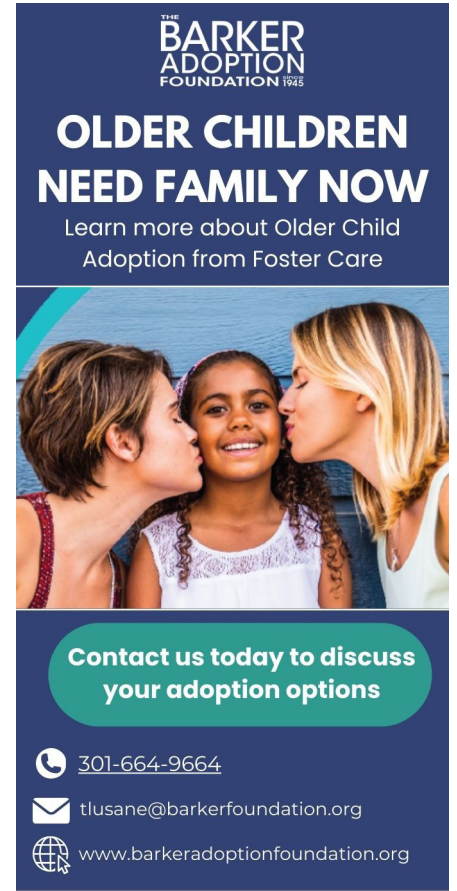
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Both boys were speechless. For them, this was the equivalent of Abe Lincoln reading by candlelight in a log cabin with no TV, or living in Europe during the plague.

Certain we'd had a miserable existence, they think we don't know much about anything. I couldn't believe it, but it finally happened to me. I was viewed as one of my grandparents, starting sentences with, "Back in my day. . ." I learned not to take it personally.

7. Make sure you and your partner are on the same page.

Before the first suitcase crosses the threshold, you should have a long talk about what kind of support you can expect from your partner. If you find yourself with a new husband and "Daddy's little girl" can do no wrong, this will only make you the bad guy no matter what happens. New relationships can be hard enough without adding more stress.

I know I'm lucky because my wife insists on her children



Early photo of Renée (right) with her wife and one of their sons.

treating me with respect. I can't stress enough how the support of your significant other is essential to making this sometimes complex relationship with step-children not just work, but work well.

Remember, being a stepparent is full of challenges and possibly migraine headaches. But if you don't push things, just be yourself, and maintain an atmosphere of mutual respect and a sense of humor, it can be one of the most rewarding experiences of your life. If I'd given in to fear and run the other way, I would have missed out on all of it. ▼

Renée J. Lukas is the author of five novels (Bella Books) and a screenwriter. She teaches screenwriting courses and talks about movies to anyone who will listen. She lives in Massachusetts with her wife and two sons.

Photos courtesy of Renée J. Lukas



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Author and single parent, Issa M. Mas

By Deadra Albrecht-Frasch

Issa M. Mas describes herself as a “born and bred New Yorker who grew up in Hell’s Kitchen Manhattan.” In fact, she shared that she still lives in the exact same building that she’s lived in since she was ten years old, and she’s fifty-one now. Issa is a single mother and has a son named Theo who is seventeen years old. Issa also identifies as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community as a pansexual woman. She explained “I’ve been attracted to both masculine and feminine people my whole life, and I don’t think there was a time when I didn’t know that I was queer. I don’t have a ‘coming out story’ per se, instead, I let people know as I meet them that I am queer. It’s a continual “coming out,” I guess one might say.”

Issa said she’s been a writer all her life, with her first piece of writing even winning an award at the age of seven, that she received from the then New York City Mayor, Mayor Koch. Throughout Issa’s writing career, she said she’s been a “...blogger, a writer for corporate jobs, a freelance copywriter and editor, as well as author.” Her book *Grief Thoughts: Brief Anecdotes About Profound Loss* was published in 2022. Issa explained that losing her “...father was a painful journey through grief, one that I shared with my community via my old blog, social media posts, and personal conversations. I realized that my journey was helpful to others, so I decided to compile it into a book so that the entire journey could be laid out in one place.” Issa

Issa Mas (right) with her son Theo at Issa's niece's Sweet Sixteen party.



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also expressed that publishing “is a very difficult landscape”, so she “created my own media company and published my book under an imprint of that company, Theolenn Media.” This no doubt shows a very creative and innovative way to problem-solving her publishing needs.

As a practicing Buddhist, Issa’s views on grief offer a unique perspective, evident after learning of Issa’s religious journey through life. Issa explained that she was “raised in a Catholic home in a very Catholic family and was a deeply spiritual young adult.” She further elaborated that in her “.... late 20s, however, Christianity no longer allowed me to connect with my deep sense of spirituality, so I began to look into other religions — Baha’i, Hinduism, and Buddhism, especially. It was Buddhism that felt the most organic to me, so in 2001 I began to study in earnest through an elder in faith, and in 2002 I officially converted to Buddhism. It has been unfailingly supportive of me and the life I have led thus far.”

GPM asked Issa about her perspective on grief and

death given her varied religious background and if her religion has influenced her writings. Issa replied “Buddhism has absolutely influenced my writings — all of my writings — but certainly my writings on death and bereavement. Having been born into Catholicism, I truly feel that had I only that



Photos from last Christmas. Above left photo, Issa with mother. Above right photo, Theo opening his Christmas gift.

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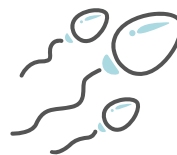
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framework alone, I would've been in much worse emotional shape that I was after my father died. Buddhism gave me a different understanding of the eternal nature of the spirit and also allowed me to delve deeper into practicing mindfulness, a practice that enabled me to sit with heavy, painful emotions instead of running from them. It has been my seemingly-paradoxical experience that the only way one gets to healing and feeling less pain is by sitting with pain and allowing it to exist. Grief isn't something that 'goes away,' or gets smaller. With full presence, I've learned that one grows bigger, thereby lessening the immensity of the weight of bereavement."

Issa said that her book would not have been written if she had not lost her father. In reference to her book, Issa said, "It is entirely about losing someone who is the biggest part of you, and how you recover from that kind of loss. It was extremely cathartic to write it, but what has been most beautiful about my book, are the readers who have



Jacob Houdini Mas

reached out to me to tell me that my book helped them in some way. I've been told that my book is healing, and that is so extremely gratifying. I wrote my book so that others in their own grief journeys would feel less alone, and to know that I achieved that goal makes my book a huge success in my eyes." Though Issa admitted she doesn't have any immediate plans for another book, she did say "I know there is at least one more in me, so we shall see when it comes up and out of me."

GPM asked Issa to share a little about her family including son Theo, and their dog Jake. Issa said she's raised seventeen-year-old Theo on her own his entire life, and they are very close. She did mention that they are a family of three though, "...because we have a 14-lb. Yorkshire terrier mix, Jake, who thinks he's a 100-lb Pitbull. He's 12 years old but you wouldn't be able to tell because he still runs around managing everyone like the tiny boss that he is." One interesting fact about their family is that when Theo was having a difficult time after 6th grade, Issa made the decision to homes-

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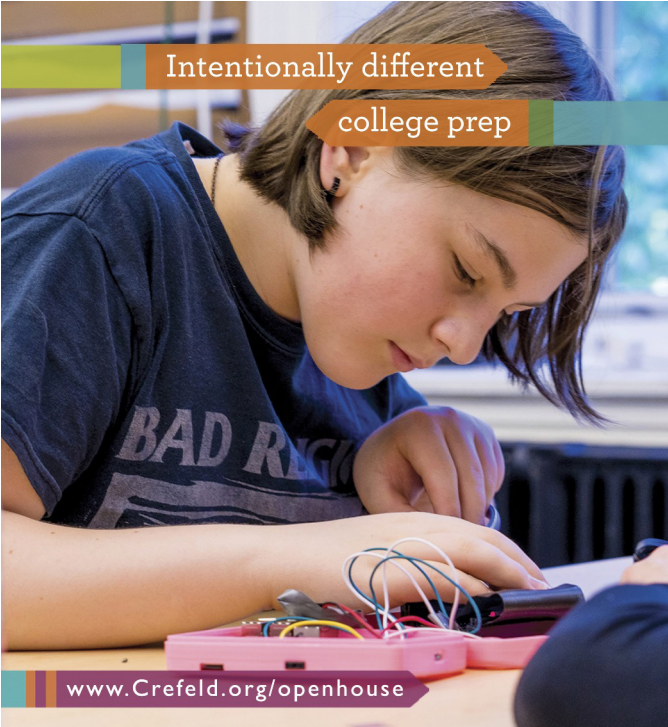


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chool him instead. Issa explained that “Theo is an extremely bright alternative learner whose educational needs were not being met. [Issa decided she would] pull him from traditional schooling and homeschool him instead. It was the right decision for him as he is thriving in a way I highly doubt he would’ve in a brick-and-mortar school.” Amazing that Issa was able to recognize that Theo’s needs weren’t being met and changed the situation to fit his needs.

A typical day for them, Issa acknowledged, is very structured. “I do write from home, and it can be a challenge, but we have a very structured day, which helps us get everything done. We wake up at the same time we would’ve had he been going to a brick-and-mortar school, he has the same schedule he would’ve had in traditional High School, he just gets to do it at home with either my help or the help of his tutor, and without the myriad distractions of overcrowded classrooms. He socializes outside of class time and gets exercise, guitar instruction, and free time in to round it all out.” It definitely sounds like they’ve developed a routine that works well for them and allows Theo to thrive.

Issa said that “Being queer is such an important part

Issa and Theo in 2009.



of who I am, and I am immeasurably proud of it. My sweetheart is a beautiful woman who is loving, supportive, and deeply caring. I can’t imagine my life without her. During these increasingly fractious times, I feel it extremely important for queer folk to be — when safe to do so, of course — out and proud about who they are and who they love.” After 16 years, Issa made the decision to stop her blog, but said that she recently started “a Substack where readers can find my latest musings: <https://issammas.substack.com/>”. ▼

Deadra Albrecht-Frasch lives in the Chicagoland area with her wife Alice and twin daughters Shay and Devlin. Deadra has a degree in Psychology from UNC-Charlotte and works in the healthcare field. In her free time she enjoys writing, and playing the piano and trumpet. She has also written a Children’s book that delves into child anxiety surrounding moving to a new home. Available for order on Amazon via ebook or paperback, *Stretch City: Moving Day*, <https://amzn.to/3zAQKz>

Photos courtesy of Issa Mas

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Meatball Magic: Mixing up Kindness and Acceptance one Date at a Time

By Amy Murphy

Picture this: a whirlwind of tomato sauce, rogue bits of parmesan cheese clinging to tiny hands and chins, and the unmistakable belly laugh when a rogue meatball makes a daring escape from its plate. And, yes, I sing "On Top of Spaghetti," it is just another Tuesday night date. But amidst the joyful chaos, something magical happens – conversations erupt like wildfire.

Just over three years ago, a new Tuesday ritual began with my son, Trey, now age five. After school pick-up, we'd head across the parking lot, not to any ordinary place, but to his self-proclaimed "Meatball House" – a delightful coal-fired pizza joint. What started as a desire to teach him manners, especially towards women, has grown into something far more incredible.

While some might see dinnertime as a pit stop to refuel



Above, the author, Amy Murphy with her son Trey. Left photo, Amy with her wife, Ali (right), and their son Trey.



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before the evening chaos that is bath and bedtime routine, I've come to realize it can be so much more. Yes, date night has been known as the grim reaper of white shirts, but more importantly, it is a space for laughter, stories, and life lessons.

Tuesday night date nights aren't your average date, they are all about quality time with my little guy. He's not one to spill every detail at home, usually responding to "how was school?" with a shrug or a mumbled "good." But these dedicated date nights are different. They're a magic portal where the floodgates open, and I get the full scoop: from learning about exciting new compound words to Ms. Evonne's latest read, what fueled his lunchbox that day, playground scuffles, hurt feelings – everything unfolds over laughter and warm food.

There is no perfect date, more often than not, Trey forgets to hold the door for me, but the dates are designed to embrace the messy magic that is life. Because, let's face it, life can get very messy. These moments are about discovering how those sauce stained shirts and sticky fingers can become unexpected opportunities to connect, teach valuable lessons, and most importantly, cultivate a sense of acceptance.

This article isn't a rigid guide or a roadmap to perfect parenting. I am far from winning mother of the year, but this is more like a peek into our own messy, joyful life, with the hope that you might find some inspiration to do the same. Because sometimes, the most profound conversations spark over the simplest things – like the perfect (or not-so-perfect) meatball. So, let's grab a fork, dive into the delicious chaos, and discover the power of "Meatball Magic."

Beyond the Meatball:

Life Lessons on a Plate

Some of you may have read my earlier article, *Shattering Glass Slippers: Beyond Binary Fairytales* [<https://bit.ly/43aaXX4>], in which I discuss my marriage to my transgender spouse. When Ali and I first started dating, she was the perfect gentleman. Holding every door, opening the car door, sending flowers, etc. you name it, she did it. Ali still does all of these things, but the name has changed from being gentlemanly, to being chivalrous. Given that Trey's Daddy is a woman, it is important to us to teach being chivalrous, hence, date night with Mommy was born. But beyond the deliciousness, it's become a platform for some very important life lessons.

One particular memorable evening, Trey and I were working on his homework. They had been working on vowels at school and he was tracing the word “eat,” just as our meatballs arrived, he looked up at me and said “Mommy, I hit Liam today.” Now, Liam is his best buddy, so I was taken aback. I said “Trey, honey, can you tell me a little bit more? What happened?” He went on to say that Liam wanted to play with Gabriel. What I understood was that Liam wanted to play with Gabriel, Trey felt left out, and his feelings were hurt.

This is where I had my A-Ha moment. I asked Trey how he would feel if I gave my meatball away to someone else, he immediately cried “No Mommy! That’s your meatball.” I swear to you, I started to sing *The Sharing Song* by Jack Johnson. “It’s always more fun to share with everyone.” I explained that it’s ok to share our meatballs, and it’s ok to share our friends. We then went on to have a lengthy conversation



Amy and Trey.



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about feelings and better ways to express them. I also reminded him that Liam was still his best buddy.

This got me thinking, what other life lessons will we encounter on date night. Turns out quite a few. Having a transgender woman as your biological Daddy can be confusing. Trey had just finished his juice box, turned to me and said: "Mommy? Daddy looks different than Ryan's Daddy." I turned to my sweet baby Trey and said, "Yes baby, Daddy does look different than Ryan's Daddy. How does that make you feel?" He responded with a simple shrug, and I took this as a sign to delve a little deeper. We talked about how, just like meatballs, people come in all shapes and sizes, with unique personalities and backgrounds.

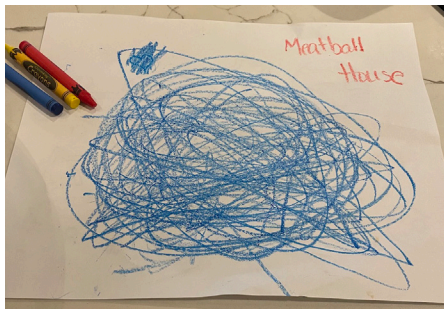
These simple dinnertime discussions opened a door to explore the beauty of diversity and acceptance. It has become a launching point for us to dive deeper into important life lessons:

- **Kindness is Contagious:** We discussed how even small acts of kindness can have a ripple effect. During dinner, not just date night, we share kind deeds we saw or did throughout the day. Sharing these acts at dinnertime not only celebrates good deeds but reinforces the importance of spreading kindness. Our big mantra is "No one has the right to make another person feel bad." Sharing kindness makes a person feel good and goes so much further than you could ever imagine.

- **Embrace Imperfections:** Let's be honest, not every meatball is a masterpiece. We've had our fair share of burnt batches and lopsided creations. We use these mishaps as opportunities to teach resilience and acceptance of mistakes. We talk about how even "wonky" meatballs can be delicious, just like everyone has their flaws and imperfections. It's a reminder to be kind to ourselves and others, burnt bits and all.

Of course, keeping the conversation flowing takes a little effort. Here are some tips I've found helpful:

- **Active Listening:** Put away distractions and give your child your full attention. I don't go so far as to leave my phone in the car on date night, but I do leave it in my purse. Kids pick up on where your attention lies. Make eye contact and acknowledge what they're saying with simple phrases like "hmm" or "that's interesting."



Trey's drawing at the "Meatball House."

- **Open-Ended Questions:** Instead of questions with yes/no answers, ask prompts that encourage your child to elaborate. For example, "What do you think would happen if everyone looked the same?" or "How can we be kind to someone who seems different from us?"

- **Judgment-Free Zone:** Create a safe space where your child feels comfortable sharing their thoughts and feelings without fear of being criticized. So, yes, while I am not pleased my little man hit his best friend, I was pleased that he felt comfortable enough to tell me.

From Tiny Bites to Big Hearts: Building Acceptance

Acceptance. It's a powerful word, isn't it? It encompasses everything from embracing someone's quirks to celebrating differences. In a world that can sometimes feel divided, fostering acceptance in our children is more important than ever. But how do we translate this grand concept into bite-sized lessons for tiny humans? Enter the magic of dinnertime conversations.

Here at "Meatball House," dinner becomes a springboard for building a foundation of acceptance in our child. We explore how treating everyone with respect and understanding can create a more inclusive and kind world.

The Importance of "Everyone Belongs":

It all starts with the simple message that everyone belongs. We talk about the beauty of differences, how each person brings a unique perspective and story to the table (pun intended!). We read books that celebrate diversity, showcasing characters from different backgrounds and abilities. This helps our child see themselves reflected in the stories and fosters a sense of empathy for others.

Remember, building acceptance is a journey, not a destination. These dinnertime discussions are just the beginning.

continued bottom of page 25

By creating a safe space for open communication, we can empower our children to embrace differences, celebrate individuality, and ultimately, spread kindness one tiny bite (and conversation) at a time.

The Recipe for a Lifetime: Putting it All Together

"Meatball Magic" and date nights aren't just about feeding our bellies. It's about nurturing a space where conversations flow, questions are encouraged, and hearts grow a little bigger with each bite. It's a reminder that some of the most profound lessons happen not in classrooms

or on screens, but around the dinner table, amidst the joyful chaos of family life.

By weaving acceptance and kindness into the fabric of our daily meals, we create a "recipe for a lifetime."

More Than Just a Meal: A Lasting Legacy

Dinnertime becomes more than just a refueling stop; it's a chance to connect, build memories, and shape our children's worldview. The hope is that these "Meatball Magic" moments, filled with laughter, honest conversations, and acceptance, will have a lasting impact. We dream of raising



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California Dads

By Gary Hurtubise

There's a dad in California who is writing a love letter to his young son – one YouTube video at a time. While his son is the intended audience, this dad hopes the story of their family inspires others, particularly those in the LGBTQ+ community.

This Dad's name is Nathan. He's the youngest of three boys, raised in a small, conservative Midwestern town, in a strict Catholic household. "Religion was always present," he recalls, "I was expected to live a good Catholic life, marry a nice Catholic girl, and start a family."

Most of Nathan's early life revolved around family or church. There was a clear expectation for him to stay close to the family and not question beliefs or authority. "We were raised to avoid influences from outsiders with different values."

Of course, a problem with that plan emerged when Nathan realized he liked boys. "When a child happens to be gay, there's no room for acceptance in these religious communities."

"When I came out to my parents at age 16, everything blew up. There was no support in my household, in my family, my church, my school. My life became a living nightmare."

Nathan moved out the day after his high school graduation, finding an apartment in a bigger and more-diverse area of the state. "It's unfortunate that it came to that. I had to grow up quickly and find my




The family in 2024. Left to right, Nathan, SJ, and Daniel.

own way."

In 2010, attending a friend's birthday party, Nathan met a man named Daniel. "There was an instant spark, and we fell pretty hard and fast for each other," he recalls.


"We tried to take things slowly and go the friend-route for a few weeks. But our feelings were undeniable. We both dreamed of the same happily ever after – it didn't take long to realize we'd found it in each other!"

Daniel was born and raised in a big Midwestern city with two older brothers and an older sister. Like Nathan, Daniel grew up in a deeply



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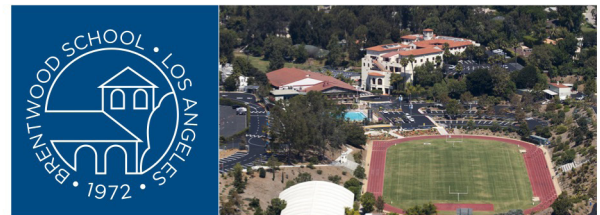
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Catholic home, where he felt similar pressures.

Early in grade school, Daniel remembers being attracted to other boys. "Of course, I never told anyone; it was the 70's, and homosexuality was looked down upon."

Daniel began seriously dating a girl during his senior year. "At some point I felt the need to reveal my secret to her. It was the scariest thing I had done in my life."

"When I told her 'I think I might be gay', her only reply was, 'That's okay, we'll get through it together.'"

Daniel ended up marrying her, and they had two daughters together.

"After almost 15 years of marriage, I began to struggle mentally with my sexuality. I saw a therapist and got to a place of fully accepting that I was gay."

What followed for Daniel was a contentious divorce, and a forced coming-out to his family and friends.

Thankfully, his parents were very supportive of his announcement. "They were my rock through everything." Sadly, however, the same could not be said for the rest of his inner circle. "All my siblings turned their backs on me, and almost every friend I'd made in my adult life abandoned me."

Meatballs continued from page 23

a child who not only appreciates a good meatball but also embraces differences, celebrates individuality, and spreads kindness wherever they go.

Life isn't a Disney fairy tale, but I'm all about shattering those glass slippers anyways. There will be spilled sauce, picky eating phases, and disagreements. But amidst the mess, there's the magic – the magic of connection, the magic of learning, and the magic of raising a kind and compassionate human. So, let's grab a fork, pull up a chair, and continue creating our own "Meatball Magic," one delicious, heart-warming conversation at a time. ▼

Amy Murphy! Now there's a name synonymous with breaking rules and going against the grain. A couple of years ago, she ditched the traditional career path and stability of a government job to chase her dreams of becoming a publish author. Talk about a plot twist worthy of a bestseller! Her story was recently shared in the *London Digest*, graced the cover of the *Los Angeles Tribune*, and featured in *NYC Independent* as well as *Seattle Independent*. Her story is simple, it is about defying convention and celebrating the power of love.

Amy embraced her wife Ali's (formerly Alan) journey through transition, challenging societal expectations and redefining the concept of "happily ever after." This experience ignited a passion to empower others. Amy uses her writing and coaching to bridge the gap for cis partners of transgender individuals, offering support and fostering understanding within the LGBTQ+ community.

Photos courtesy of Amy Murphy



"I was now 40 years old and felt totally lost in the world... I basically started life over."

This new life led him to Nathan, at that fated birthday party in 2010.

The couple started dating, and were (as Nathan puts it) "pretty much living together within a month."

Five months later, Nathan popped the question.

"We went out to a dinner theater to celebrate our six-month anniversary. Afterwards, I proposed to Daniel, and we held our wedding six months after that, on our one-


year anniversary in 2011."

Due to state laws at the time, their marriage was not recognized. In 2014, they flew to California to be legally married. "This offered us additional protections and rights as we were working on our adoption process."

Growing their family was important to both men, and it was one of the shared values they bonded over early in their relationship.


"I wanted to *raise* children and Daniel wanted *more* children," Nathan says. "So we started the adoption process a year after we were married, in 2012."

Their first foray into adoption was through the foster care system.





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"It's a stressful and slow-moving process," the couple soon found out. After two potential matches fell through, Nathan and Daniel decided they might have better luck through a private adoption agency that worked directly with expectant mothers.

"This involved another two years of waiting," Nathan laments. "We had one match that almost went through, but it, too, ended up not happening."

The men were feeling hopeless. "We doubted this would ever happen for us."

Ironically, it was at this point they recalled something they'd been told at the beginning of their journey: *adoption takes about three years.*

Almost like clockwork, three years after they started, the couple were matched with their son, SJ.

SJ's birth mother approached their agency shortly before giving birth. "We'd provided a photobook sharing pictures of us and stories about our lives. She felt like we were the perfect match for the baby."

"The agency called us the night SJ was born. He was a thousand miles away in another state and it was too late to get a flight," the couple recalls. "So we packed our bags and drove 15 hours, taking turns driving and napping so we could get to our son."

"SJ was one day old when we met him at the hospital." The young family stayed in a nearby hotel for a couple weeks, to sort out the legal issues. "Because SJ was born in a different state, there's a process in clearing his paperwork and granting permission to travel back to our home state."

"It was certainly interesting caring for a newborn baby in a hotel room, but we made the most of it! The hotel staff was very supportive; they loved seeing us carry that sweet newborn baby through the



Nathan and SJ in 2022.

lobby!"

SJ's adoption is closed, though the family keeps in touch with his birth mother – sharing photos, videos, and updates on his life.

"She's very sweet, and we have a unique and wonderful relationship," Nathan says. "As to how that evolves... we'll leave that up to SJ. He's aware of who his birth mother is and has a positive and healthy understanding of his adoption."

While adopting a child is typically more than enough to keep new parents occupied, two more life-altering changes were right around the corner for the family.

Shortly after bringing SJ home, Daniel was offered a job in California – a state both he and Nathan had dreamed of calling home for a

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long time.

However, far less-welcoming news soon followed. Nathan had been suffering from an *unusual* ache, and when he got it checked, his doctor found a lump that shouldn't have been there. It was cancer.

With the California move all but finalized, Nathan was told he needed immediate surgery. Only days before the family was due to fly, he went under the knife, boarding their flight with virtually no recovery.

With this rough start to their move, the family settled into their new life on the West coast. Fortunately, Nathan recovered fully – and has been cancer-free ever since!

Today, the couple and their son call Northern California home.



The family in San Francisco in 2016.

Nathan is self-employed in the tech field, and Daniel works for the government, scheduling his work hours between home and the office.

Things have improved with Nathan's parents, too: they love Daniel, accepting him as their son-in-law, and are crazy about their grandson, SJ.

"It's surprising," Nathan muses, "bringing a child into the family has healed a lot of old wounds and built bridges."

For his part, SJ has grown into an incredibly kind, thoughtful, and loving young man. His parents describe him as creative and insightful,

with a wicked sense of humor. "He's a big fan of Minecraft, Pokémon, Star Wars, and Lego... and he's fascinated with the Titanic!"

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The family in Disneyland in 2019.

The family, including their pet Anna, at Lake Tahoe in 2020.



The family traveled a lot when SJ was younger. "He has been all over the U.S. and to parts of Canada," SJ's dad says.

When Covid hit in 2020, it put an abrupt stop to their travels, of course.

Being a COVID-cautious family, they pivoted to visiting outdoor spaces, avoiding crowds and places with poor ventilation. "We love driving to Lake Tahoe in the winter to play in the snow, or spending a day on the beach in San Francisco, or Yosemite for the beautiful hikes."

Now almost a decade since adopting their son, Nathan has created a YouTube series he calls, 'Love, Daddy'.

"This series comes from my nostalgia," he explains. "I'm a very sentimental person."

"When SJ was a baby, I created an email account for him and started writing letters to the address. I would share my thoughts and feelings on a particular event in his life, or just talk about how much I love him, how much I appreciate him, and how in awe I felt as I watched him grow. Every email closed with my signature, 'Love, Daddy'."

"Similarly, I also write a letter to him each year on his birthday and include it with his card."

SJ has never read these emails or letters. Nathan's goal is to hand everything to him when he's older – perhaps in his teenage years.

The 'Love, Daddy' YouTube series is an extension of these emails and letters. In each

episode, Nathan shares his thoughts with SJ, telling the boy's story through his dad's eyes."

"The first season of the series covers the first year of his life. Each subsequent season will also be in chronological order," Nathan explains. "I'm currently working on the second season."

"I hope other parents will also consider writing letters to their children, and documenting or journaling their feelings, so they can share them with their children and treasure those memories forever."

To learn more about Nathan and his family, check out his YouTube series, <https://bit.ly/4bgU3bn> or <https://www.youtube.com/@CaliforniaDads> [<https://bit.ly/41hSrcz>]



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 Nathan and Daniel.

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