

Nancy Becker and Pam Derderian (right) enjoy a moment with daughter Kali, 4½, whom they adopted in China when she was 11 months old.

# Partners ... With Children



American Civil Liberties Union  
**Steven Lofton and Roger Croteau** (right), seated amid several foster children. The Florida men are challenging that state's adoption law regarding gay couples. Lofton and Croteau were barred from adopting a foster child they raised, and now the state wants to remove the boy from their home.

As more gay couples opt to adopt, they are relishing the joys of parenthood — and enduring some special challenges.



**Wendy Witzel and Teresa Smith** (right) at home with Matthew, 10 months. His birth mother chose the couple for the adoption.

SARAH J. GLOVER / Inquirer Suburban Staff

By Murray Dubin  
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

**W**endy Witzel, 39, changed clothes five times that morning and kept redoing her makeup. She remembered to take the gift she had made, a wall-hanging with dried flowers.

Her partner, Teresa Smith, 40, took along the biggest stuffed purple Barney that the Sickleville couple could find. "We just didn't want to blow this," she said.

On that July day last year, Smith and Witzel were about to adopt a baby. But first, they had to meet and be approved by the birth mother.

A yes, and they would finally be par-

ents after three years of trying. A no? They did not want to think about it.

The two appear to be typical suburbanites — two cars, three dogs, and a deck in the back. But they are part of a lifestyle change seen across America at dance recitals, play groups and supermarkets: More same-sex couples are becoming parents.

The growth in two-mother and two-father households also is gaining attention in the fractious, diverse, and oft-stereotyped gay and lesbian community. PrideFest America, an annual gay and lesbian festival in Philadelphia, will host a panel Tuesday discussing the ways same-sex couples are becoming parents.

See **ADOPTION** on D10

## As gay couples adopt babies, they make 'a leap of faith'

**ADOPTION** from D1  
In February, the American Academy of Pediatrics announced its support for homosexuals who wanted to legally adopt their partner's children. The group said legal restriction — at least in many states — would benefit the children.

Last month, television host and adoptive parent Rosie O'Donnell came out as a lesbian and as an ardent critic of the State of Florida, whose laws prevented two gay men, Steven Luban and Roger Croson, from adopting one of the foster children they are raising. The state wants to remove the boy from their home, and the two men are challenging the law in court.

Note of that was on Mark Woodland's mind one Saturday morning this month in Center City. His six-month-old adopted daughter had just risen on her hands and knees, fallen down, rolled, and done it again. It was her "linebacker" move, and he couldn't stop watching.

Woodland, an obstetrician, and David Blum, a lawyer, both 43, are the parents of Ashley and 2-year-old Scott. "I always loved kids and the idea of nurturing children," Blum said. "It didn't occur to me that — sexual orientation and having children were mutually exclusive."

For some gays and lesbians, it has been.

They went to a 50-year anniversary party last month for a gay couple. "They said to us that they would have loved to have done it, to have children, but it wasn't part of the message," Blum said.

"The feeling was we were doing the next thing, having children," Woodland said.

Generational differences were apparent again when the two men and their parents went to Woodland's mother's country club in Blue Bell two years ago to celebrate Scott's adoption. Her bridge club was there, and three of its members came by to offer congratulations.

Mark Woodland: "One woman said that she was adopted. My mother didn't know that. Another said she had adopted children. Then the third woman started to cry. She said, 'This gives me hope that my son will not be empowered to have a child.'"

"My mother and this woman had never talked about having gay sons."

That party demonstrated how a public appearance by same-sex parents can become an open showing of sexual orientation — even for one who is out. "We're much more of a curiosity," Woodland said. "On airplanes, flight attendants are much more likely to help us than other parents."

Another adoptive gay father says parenthood brings inclusion.

"Holding a kid's hand, there's a certain middle-classness or respectability to it," said Fernando Chang-Muy of Germantown. "It's not outing, it's *being*."

Chang-Muy, 47, is a lawyer, an expert on immigration and refugee law as well as braids and hair extensions. He and Len Reiser, 53, his partner of 21 years, are the parents of 1-year-old Isabel, who is African American.

"He's better at doing my hair," she said, looking at Chang-Muy, or "Popi." But he also buys her clothes at the thrift store, she said, with a little barograph. Reiser, or "Daddy," takes her to better places.

They smiled as she artfully pressed her parents' buttons, and talked about being fathers.

Chang-Muy was raised in Cuba and Miami. "Growing up Chinese, expectations were to get married and have kids."

He met Reiser when he was 17 and both were working at the U.S. Justice Department in Washington. One reason Chang-Muy liked Reiser "was that he liked children."

They tried to adopt in 1983, but a Catholic-run adoption agency refused. "We didn't know what to do," said Reiser, also a lawyer. "Was it isn't ask, don't tell? We were put on some agency lists, but it was discouraging."

They contacted Abby Ruder, a family therapist and adoption specialist in Wynnton, who walked them through the adoption maze. Parents preparing for adoption have issues to face, Ruder told them. Same-sex couples have those issues — naming the child, for instance — and more, including who assumes what role in raising a child with two mothers or two fathers.

"But Abby told us the biggest issue for an adopted kid is adoption," Reiser said.

When Isabel became a possi-



**Mother love:** Teresa Smith kisses 10-month-old Matthew. She and Wendy Witzel, like many same-sex couples, have become parents.

### Adoption Laws

■ Six states, including New Jersey, permit the second parent in a gay couple to adopt a child.

■ Delaware and Pennsylvania are two of 20 states in which county judges have approved second-parent adoption for same-sex couples; there is no guarantee a judge in another county would do the same.

■ In Pennsylvania, adoption petitions by second parents in gay couples are on hold, pending a ruling by the state Supreme Court in two cases in which lower courts denied petitions.

■ Three states — Utah, Florida, and Mississippi — bar gay and lesbian individuals and couples from adopting.

### For information

■ To learn more about gay adoption issues, visit the Human Rights Campaign Web site [www.hrc.org](http://www.hrc.org), and click on FamilyNet, or call 1-202-452-4160.

■ To find gay and lesbian family events and parent groups, contact the Family

Pride Web site at [www.familypride.org](http://www.familypride.org), or call 1-202-331-6015.

■ To talk to local gay and lesbian families, contact Philadelphia Family Pride at 215-844-3360.

Reiser was afraid. He was 44 and about to have a baby. "Gay parents, adoption, and now racial differences. Add them together, and I thought, isn't this kid going to be in a difficult situation?"

"I talked with friends, straights, gays, African Americans, and they all said parenting is a leap of faith, and this was a leap of faith. I just pray all the issues don't hit on the same day. So far, they haven't."

Reiser, who is white, wasn't had chosen them because she thought they "were used to prejudice." At a TGIF Friday's, she said OK.

Matthew is 10 months old now and in a neighborhood full of small children. "We're in the mommy's club now," Smith said. Her colleagues gave her a shower at work. Neighbors have given Matthew clothes. "Being a mom transcends being gay."

In July, when Matthew is 1 year old, they will go back to Adoption From the Heart. He needs a brother or sister.

Reiser from. He stared at the woman she stared at him. Finally the woman spoke.

"The stroller. I've been looking for one like that."

Nancy Becker and Pam Derdarian don't have a Chinese-Cuban, Caucasian and African American story. There is Jewish, Armenian and Chinese.

They are both 42, live not far from the Commonwealth public relations and marketing agency that they run, and have been a couple 17 years. Their daughter, Kall, 4½, was adopted in China when she was 11 months old.

"Kall has been asked which of us is the mom," Derdarian said. "She said, 'Both are.'"

"When we walk down the street," Becker said, "the comments are about Kall. They are, 'Isn't she cute.'"

They had heard some gays and lesbians decide heterosexuals with children as "breeders," but that remark never rung true for them. Derdarian wanted children, Becker agreed.

There are fewer nights out now, and neither woman works as many hours.

As for their rules: "One of us isn't the mother and the other the father," Becker said. Both do everything, though Derdarian is more likely to play ball with Kall and Becker to draw wild hair.

"We're just parents," Derdarian said, "like everyone else."

Organizations serving same-sex couples grew in the 1990s and continue to get larger.

Rainbow Families, a Minneapolis-based education and support group, began in a church basement with 100 parents and 50 children in 1995. At its meeting two months ago, there were 750 parents and 350 children.

Philadelphia Family Pride began in 1993 with several lesbian parents sharing stories and support in a living room. Today, the group has 50 area families; about a dozen are headed by men.

And where there is a need, business follows. The number of gay-friendly adoption agencies has grown in a decade from about 20 to more than 130, said Lisa Bennett, a deputy director for the Human Rights Campaign, a Washington group working for equal rights for gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender people.

One such agency is Adoptions From the Heart, in Wynnton, which also has offices in New Jersey. In 1997, founder Maxine Chalker said, same-sex couples were, maybe, 1 percent of clients. "It's 5 to 10 percent now."

Smith, from Sieklerville, called when Witzel's yearning effort to have a baby with donor sperm failed. "I wanted to get pregnant," said Witzel, a physical therapist.

Witzel met Smith last year at adoption, and the two women went to an informational meeting late in 1999, the only same-sex couple there. "The social worker treated us like it made no difference," said Smith, chair of the chemistry department at Camden County College.

And so they waited. The good news came last July — a biracial baby had been born in Wilkes-Barre. The bad news was he was very sick. The woman didn't want to see him until they were certain he was there.

But first, the birth mother wanted to meet them. The social worker suggested the couple take gifts to the woman and her toddler daughter. Witzel wore a pants outfit with a vest and jacket; Smith, a long skirt.

The birth mother was 21 and had chosen them because she thought they "were used to prejudice." At a TGIF Friday's, she said OK.

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In July, when Matthew is 1 year old, they will go back to Adoption From the Heart. He needs a brother or sister.

Contact Manny Duder at 215-654-2797 or [mduder@phillynews.com](mailto:mduder@phillynews.com).

### PrideFest: If You Go

PrideFest America 2002, from Monday through May 3, will feature a "National Family Values Panel" on parenthood on Tuesday from 7:30 to 8:45 p.m. at the Prince Music Theater, 1412 Chestnut St. Admission is \$5 (free for high school and college students).

Other events include:

■ A "National Religious Colloquy" from 9 to 10:15 p.m. Wednesday at the Prince Music Theater.

■ "Living in a Rainbow Nation: Gay & Lesbian Dynamics in South Africa," from 9 to 10:15 p.m. May 2 at Prince Music Theater.

For more information, call 215-732-3278 or go to [www.pridefestamerica.com](http://www.pridefestamerica.com).