

PERSONAL ADOPTION STORIES

BY MINIGAN BLACKWOOD

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK CAMPBELL,
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BARB DULL

Barb Dull decided to adopt a child in 1995, and adopted her daughter, Rosa, in 1996. Barb is a heterosexual woman, so when she was asked why she decided to adopt rather than having her own children, she said, "I always wanted children, and I was in my late 30s and not married. I decided that adoption was a great solution for me. I adopted Rosa through Rainbow House International." As Barb explained, she spent a significant amount of time exploring options. "I researched a lot of different agencies before I decided to adopt through Rainbow House," Barb said. "Once I finished the home study, they gave me a list of organizations to call. I talked to those organizations about different constraints, and from there, they gave me more options. I also talked to other people I knew who adopted, and they gave suggestions for agencies to look at."

Rainbow House International was an adoption agency that specialized in foreign adoptions. While the organization is no longer around, it was located in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Barb said that "from the beginning, I



Barb Dull and daughter Rosa

wanted to do an international adoption because I felt that there was less of a chance of the parents contacting me to get her back."

Barb explained the home study process. "It's when someone comes into the potential parent's home, interviews the parent, and looks at the home situation to figure out if the person is suitable to adopt. It's done by a third party in order to provide a non-biased assessment."

Once her home study was complete and she had chosen Rainbow House International, Barb was ready to begin the actual adoption process. "I had to get references and fill an application. The application wasn't that difficult. It mostly asked for my preferences in a child: would I like a boy or a girl, what age range am I interested in adopting, would I want a child with special needs, things like that. I thought that, as a single parent, it would have been unfair of me to take a child with special needs, since they require more care. Looking back, I think

I could have handled it, but at the time I didn't want to take that risk." Barb then added, "I adopted Rosa when she was one year old, but I believe I gave them an age range."

Once Barb had the documents signed and notarized by an apostille, she was next evaluated. "Being a single parent, I was required to take a psychological evaluation and a physical evaluation in order to adopt Rosa. I found out afterward that couples didn't have to go through that process. I'm not sure if it was the agency or the Russian Government that required it."

When it came time to choose a child to adopt, Barb was only shown one child at a time, which worked for her. Barb said, "I knew that other agencies would show multiple options and the potential parent is told to choose. I didn't think I could do that. I would want to adopt them both, which would have been more than I could handle. So Rainbow House showing me one child at a time worked out well. Rosa was

the first child I was shown, and I chose her. If I would have said no to her, however, Rainbow House would have sent me another option and so on until I found the child I wanted to adopt.”

By the end, the whole process had taken nine months to complete, plus an extra two months to bring Rosa to the United States from Russia. Barb explains: “It took so long mainly due to my schedule and my time frame for getting things done.” And, while the process was long, Barb had a simple tactic for keeping herself on track. “I looked at the whole adoption process as a work project,” Barb said. “At the time, I worked at Federated Investors and was an Assistant VP/manager in a sales support area, so thinking of the process as a work project let me stay focused and organized. I was able to handle any complications that came my way to the point that the only real surprise for me was the psychological evaluation.”

When asked about challenges she faced as a single parent, Barb said that she didn’t face anything out of the ordinary. “I have a large family with a strong family connection, so they were a big support. My sister actually gave birth to her daughter when I left for Russia, so I had someone that I could be a new parent with. Also, my boss let me work from home for six weeks. At the time, there was no adoption leave, so being able to work from home was a huge help.” But none of this is to say that Barb didn’t face any difficulty in being a single parent. Barb shares that “the main difficulty as a

single parent is that it is all on you - from the financial side of things, to making the decisions, to disciplining the child, you are totally responsible for this child.” The biggest challenge for Barb, however, was how being a single parent limited how much she dated. “The bond between Rosa and I was strong, and I didn’t want to introduce someone into the family that may disrupt our relationship.” Despite this, Barb wouldn’t describe herself as a single parent. “I have great support from my family and friends,” she said, “Everyone helped me raise Rosa. And when it came time for me to go back to work, I had help from the family and also found a sitter that she went to with her cousin.”

Rosa is now an adult. She finished her sophomore year of college at Ohio University where she’s majoring in Spanish. She studied abroad in Ecuador this past fall. “Since she’s still in college, I’m still financially responsible for her,” Barb said, “but now she can make her own decisions, so it has gotten easier in some ways. Although I still have worries that every parent has about their daughter going off to college.”

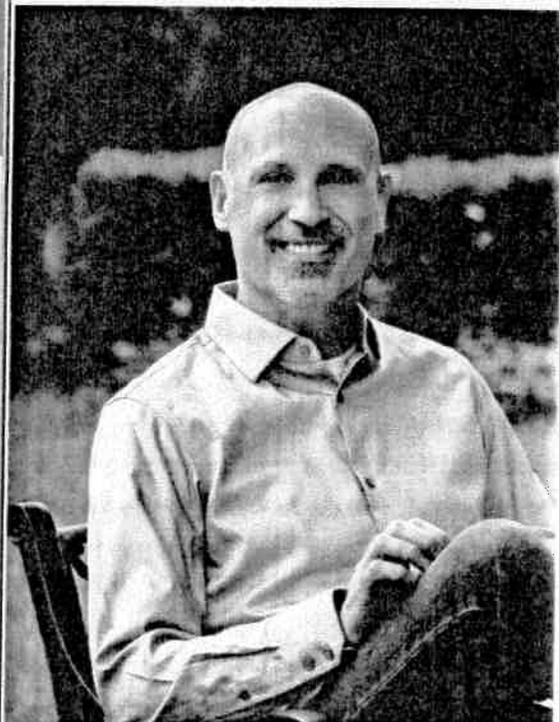
When asked how she felt about adopting, Barb said, “I highly recommend adoption to those who cannot conceive or cannot give birth. It’s an awesome and rewarding experience, and you get to help a child who needs a loving home. My advice for adopting is to do your research. Find out which route to adoption is best for you, and which agency you think can work best with

you. Also, be as truthful as you can on your applications. Being truthful makes the process work out for the best for everyone.”

KARL SOKALSKI

Karl Sokalski is The Lead Test Engineer at Bombardier Transportation in West Mifflin. He adopted his son Bryan when Bryan was 16 years old. According to Karl, having a family was always his plan. “I always thought when I was young that I’d grow up and have kids. I always liked the idea,” Karl said. “When I realized I was gay, I knew it wasn’t going to happen the normal way. I felt blessed for everything that I had, so I wanted to pay it forward. I wanted to help someone. Because of that, I decided to not find a surrogate mother. There were plenty of kids already born who needed someone, so I chose to adopt instead. For me and what I wanted to do, adoption was the best way to go.” Karl adopted Bryan 14 years ago, when he was in his late 30s. About the adoption, Karl said, “I got Bryan when he was 16 through Adoptions From The Heart Adoption Agency in Greensburg. I had the home study done, and the whole process took about three years. So, I decided when I was either 38 or 39 that I was going to adopt, and by 41 or 42, he moved in with me.”

Bryan’s last name is Murphy, not Sokalski, like Karl. Karl had a good reason for this. “I decided to not have Bryan change his name, because it didn’t make sense to for us. He already had



Karl Sokalski

an identity, and I didn't want to change it." Karl never finalized the adoption, either. Karl explained that "by the time it was possible for me to finalize the adoption, Bryan was 19 and he didn't think it mattered then. What he said to me was 'Why waste the money to make it official now that I'm an adult? You're already my dad.'"

Bryan had a rough upbringing with his birth parents. "Bryan was born when parents were 19, and his dad left when he was 6. His mother had a lot of problems, and brought a series of boyfriends into the house to help her raise Bryan and his three younger siblings. Then, one of those boyfriends molested Bryan's sister, so Bryan and his siblings were removed from the house. Bryan was an unruly teenager," Karl shared. "Fosters couldn't handle him, so he was put into a group home. He didn't trust anyone, which

is understandable because up to that point none of the adults in his life earned his trust. Thankfully, when he turned 16, he finally started cleaning up his act, so I was able to adopt him." Challenges that Karl faced did not come from the adoption process, but from raising Bryan. "The adoption process was straightforward, so I didn't have any issues there. But when it came to raising Bryan, there were quite a few. He ran away twice, once for a week, and then for a month. He got himself expelled while he was in 10th grade, although he did eventually get his GED." Karl then added, "I always assumed that my worst 'enemies' in raising him would be my kid's friends and peers. The pressure they put on a kid and when they know someone is adopted, especially at a later age, the teasing and bullying can be brutal. However, and this was totally unexpected, instead my worst enemies were my kid's friends' parents. He was good at talking up his sob story. He learned at some point that he could play on people's sympathies by telling a good, "poor little me" story and his friends' parents' heartstrings got pulled. In most cases their intentions were good, but even in those cases it made my job more difficult. Some of these people posed true threats to him, which he didn't see. The times he ran away were these. Those parents would let him crash on their sofas instead of telling him to go home or calling me. It didn't help that part of his sob story included that I was mean to him."

"I always tried to use humor at every point. Being serious

about things and laying a heavy hand is rarely a positive thing. For example, the second time he ran away, he was gone for a month and I suspected where he was. I was getting close to hiring a private eye to prove where he was, but still had one trick up my sleeve. I called his girlfriend at the time and asked her if she knew where he was. She said she couldn't tell me. I said I didn't ask where, only if she knew where he was. She said yes, she did. So I said I suspected he was staying at X's house and I suspected that X (the single mother of a school friend) was feeding him and giving him a place to stay and using him for sex (which I did truly suspect based on what his school advisor and the police told me about X). I said I couldn't believe that his own girlfriend would be okay with that going on. Then I told her that if I could prove he was staying with her, I would drag X's butt so hard through court so that she'd never forget my name and told her, thanks, have a nice day. Two hours later he was knocking at my door. I said through the closed door, 'who is it?' He said, 'It's me,' I said, 'who is me?' He said, 'Bryan.' So I opened the door and said, 'Wow! You just saved me \$750.00!' The look on his face was one of 'how so?' So I said, 'I was about to hire a private eye to prove you were at X's house. But now I don't have to. Thanks!'"

"Most importantly," Karl added, "I figured out after about a year and half after he moved in (after the two run away incidents) that my role in his life and the best gift I could give him was to be

the one person in his life that he could reject over and over again but that would never reject him back. If prospective adoptive parents can accept that this might be the best that it gets, and they can be happy filling that role, they will be successful.”

“I think it’s good to note that through all of that stuff that went on with Bryan, I was rarely stressed out or felt at a loss. You take each day and issue as it comes and try to do what’s in the best interest of the kid. You can’t change their past, but you can provide them a better and safer living situation with better examples of how to approach the problems life presents and guide their thinking process in a more productive direction. Set an example and rather than tell them what to do or what not to do, give them choices (just never include among the options you present one that you won’t accept if they pick that one!). This exercises their decision-making, personal responsibility and gives them a sense of control over their own lives which is something they’ve never really had in the past. Their lives were messy with their biological parents and when the state takes over, the state pretty much controls everything. They were pawns in a chess game, so guide them to be the king or queen in their chess game of life.”

Karl knew from the beginning that these problems with Bryan could happen. “I knew these things were possible, but I still didn’t expect them to happen. I took it all in stride, though. I will say, however, it did almost get to the point where I sent Bryan

back. I wasn’t angry, but I asked him, ‘If you’re not going to give this a try, then what’s the point?’ I reasoned with him logically and made him realize that he didn’t want to go back into the adoption system.”

A lot of things have changed for Bryan since his troubled teenage years. “Bryan is 31 years old and serving in the Army. He is stationed in Fort Meade with his wife, Amanda, and their daughter, Emma. Emma is Bryan’s third child. The oldest, Devin lives in Monroeville with his mother. I keep in touch with him, and he still calls me grandad. Bryan’s second child, Abigale, lives in Arizona with her mother and her mother’s husband. Bryan gave up the parental rights to Abigale, and the husband adopted her.”

Karl never encountered any challenges during the adoption process related to his sexual orientation, but there could have been if he chose to adopt a child from Florida. “I was told by the agency that if I wanted to adopt a kid from Florida, I would have to lie about being gay,” Karl explained. “The state of Florida insists that gay men and women cannot adopt their kids. I could have lied, but I really didn’t want to, so I told the agency to not show me any children from Florida. I never viewed that as being my problem, but Florida’s.” It’s important to note that Karl was looking to adopt a child 14 years ago. Since then, Florida has repealed the law banning same sex adoption. “When I went to Cincinnati to meet Bryan for the first time,” Karl added, “I wore

my Pittsburgh and gay flag shirt, and no one cared. Bryan spent two weekends with me before we decided it was a good fit, and he didn’t care about my sexual orientation either.”

Karl’s family was also supportive of his decision, and welcomed Bryan into their family with open arms. “Everyone was happy about my decision to adopt Bryan. There wasn’t a single negative reaction from my family. I didn’t need a lot of help from my family, but it was there the times I did. Overall, my family is happy that Bryan’s part of the family.”

The whole adoption process, from beginning to end, costed Karl several thousand dollars. “I cannot remember the exact number, but I think it was around \$4,000,” Karl said, “That money went to the home study, agency fees, and the background check. Going through a government agency costs less, but it usually takes more time. Private agencies cost more but the process is quicker.”

Karl’s first piece of advice for anyone thinking about adopting a child is to ask themselves why they want a child in the first place. “Once, another gay man who was a friend of a friend asked me about the whole process. He said that he was thinking about adopting. When I asked him why he wanted kids, he said, ‘I want someone to call me dad.’ When I heard that, I told him that he wasn’t ready to be a father yet. Being a parent isn’t about you, and it’s not about validation. It’s not about a kid completing

your family, either. It's about the child. If you want to be a parent, make sure you're doing it for the good of the child."

Karl also offered books that could help adoptive parents. Karl said, "The first book is for adopting teens. It's called *Adopting the Older Child* and it was written by Claudia L. Jewett. It's the better of the two. It tells you to never try to be the child's biological parents, and it helps you understand how the kids think. The other book is titled *Raising Teens With Love and Logic* by Foster Kline and Jim Fay. There are other versions of this book that deal with different age ranges. It was also very helpful.

KIMBERLY MAVILLA

Kimberly first decided to foster a child eight years ago. She explained, "I started working as a teacher's assistant at Northgate school district at that time. I was working with teenagers and special needs kids, and I realized that I could take any of them home. I ended up choosing to foster because we need more foster parents." However, at the time, her home situation was not ideal. "I was living with my husband, and the situation wasn't great for fostering a child. We eventually separated, and once he moved out, I started the application process. Also, once my youngest daughter moved out, it opened up my house for fostering." Kimberly actually has two biological daughters. "Terri is 27, and Stephanie is 25," she explained, "My husband was not the biological father.

Kimberly was registered for three months before she was paired up with her foster daughter. Kimberly said, "I started Fostering through Circle C. They unfortunately had to close and I switched to Gwen's Girls. It was while we were with Gwen's Girls that the adoption happened. Gwen's Girls has also closed since then so I am between agencies at this time. I was a registered foster parent by June 2014, and by August, I met Tristan, and then on March 17th of this year, I finalized the adoption. Tristan turned 18 a month later."

When asked why she chose to foster to adopt, Kimberly said, "Fostering is the first step for these kids getting adopted. I chose to foster because I knew those kids would be the neediest. Plus, I could get to know the child before I adopted her to make sure we were a right fit. That way I could focus on the child and his or her development. I kept an open mind and an open heart. Quite often, I had to remind myself that if it works, it works, if it doesn't, it doesn't.

"I didn't face any problems going through the foster to adopt process as a single mother," Kimberly said, "The foster agencies allow any kind of family set-up as long as they qualify, so they welcomed me. The whole experience was very easy for me." Kimberly added, "I didn't have



Kimberly Mavilla and Tristan

any problems as a single mother either. However, I did have practice being a single mom to my two biological daughters. My husband didn't help parent Terri and Stephanie that much, so being a single parent to Tristan wasn't that much of a difference for me."

Kimberly does home care assistance for her second job. "I have one client that I take care of," Kimberly said. Working two jobs can, at times, make it difficult to get Tristan where she needs to be. But thankfully, Kimberly has the support from her family. "I have some of the same support when my biological daughters were growing up. My sister helps when she can, and now that my daughters are adults, they help



out too. Plus, even though we're separated, my husband still helps when he needs to. It's a big help."

Kimberly's experience in fostering and adopting a teen, as she explained it, was a positive one. "Tristan and I get along very well," Kimberly stated. Tristan is beyond her years in maturity and thought process, which makes her easy to talk to and to parent. I feel the same way about her as I do about Terri and Stephanie. She's my daughter, just like my biological daughters, and I love them all."

Kimberly, as she explained it, is not Tristan's first adoptive mother. While she did not go into Tristan's birth parents, Kimberly explain how she got into the foster care system. She said, "Tristan's first adoptive mom, Rose, passed away a couple years prior to her going to Gwen's Girls. There were attempts to stay with her adopted mom's family but they did not work out. Tristan made the choice to leave the abusive environment she was in and enter the foster care system. She was at Gwen's Girls about 5 months before we were introduced." In total, Kimberly fostered Tristan for a year and a half, three months longer than the 15 month maximum for fostering. When asked about this, Kimberly replied, "I was unaware there was a 15 month maximum. I informed Children, Youth and Families (CYF) in June of 2015 Tristan and I wanted to do adoption. She was with me 10 months at that time. There was a delay starting the process because CYF did not receive the death certificate in a

timely manner. My first meeting with the adoption counselor was not until October 2015 to start the process."

Kimberly said, "Go into it with an open mind. Good parents have an open minded, especially when they have teenagers. Teenagers are going to test you in many different ways, so keeping an open mind will help keep you from being too controlling while also helping you realize what issues are too important to ignore. Also, learn to embrace their differences. An obvious difference between Tristan and I is that she is African American and I am not. I learned a lot about African Americans while fostered Tristan and I'm still learning more now that I have adopted her. The first thing that comes to mind is African American hair. Through Tristan, I have learned how different African American hair is to Caucasian hair, and the products needed to care for it. I obviously learned about other things dealing with larger aspects of African American culture, but hair care was one of those things I never expected to learn about.

TRAVIS AND STEPHEN SIMPSON-HUNT

Travis and Stephen Simpson-Hunt were living in North Carolina, but when it became clear to them that it would be difficult to adopt a child in that state due to their sexual orientation, they moved to Pittsburgh. When they were asked why they wanted to adopt,

Travis said, "I always wanted to get married and have kids, and even though I'm gay, I had always planned to do just that." "I wanted the same," Stephen added, "I'm ten years older than Travis. And I also wanted kids, however I never thought it was possible. But that ended up changing with my previous boyfriend, who had a daughter, and I learned that I like raising kids, and I like helping kids. I also like kid's things and doing kid activities, but those weren't the only deciding reasons for me."

Currently, the couple resides in the Blackridge area, in Wilksburg. "We live in Gaywood Manor with all the more domesticated gays," Travis joked. "There are around 130 gay owned households, so we have a lot of community support. Stephen said, "We originally lived in Mount Lebanon, but there wasn't much diversity there. And since I'm white and Travis is Native American, we wanted to live in an area that was more diverse.

Travis and Stephen have been talking about having kids for their entire relationship. "We first talked about it on our first date," Stephen explained. "Travis had raised his nephew for 2 years with an old partner, and I fostered three girls, so we both had some parenting experience." "But we really started working to adopt their second year together," Travis added, "It was 2013, and we were living in Charlotte, North Carolina at the time, but we had a second home in Pittsburgh." "We chose Pittsburgh because I was living

in near New York City, and Travis was living in Los Angeles when we met. We had heard great things about Pennsylvania, and Pittsburgh was a nice combination of the culture of New York City and the laid back lifestyle of L.A.," shared Stephen. "We wanted to start a family," Travis continued, "So we planned to do a private adoption. We found a pregnant birth mother who planned to give up the child after it was born, and we hired attorneys. But the adoption ended up falling through." Stephen added, "Apparently the woman's boyfriend beat her up just before she was due to give birth, and while she was in the hospital for her injuries, she went into labor. Then the boyfriend showed up and proposed to her, so she decided she was going to keep the baby and raise it with him. We were devastated." "But while we were going through the adoption process for that infant," Travis said, "it was made clear to us that the judges likely wouldn't approve of a same-gender couple adopting, even if the adoption agencies and mother approved. We were told that the chances of it working out would be very slim. We wanted a child so badly that we moved to Pittsburgh in fourteen days just to adopt the child." "Six months later, in January, the mother got back in contact with us," Stephen explained. "Her boyfriend had left her, and she and the baby were homeless, so she contacted us and said to meet her the next day to get the baby if we wanted it. We left Pennsylvania for North Carolina that night and contacted our attorney on the way down. The next day when we tried to

contact her, she had disappeared. No one has heard from her or the baby since," Travis added.

"We took a sabbatical from adopting," Stephen said, "For over a year we didn't try to find a child to adopt. But last year we ended up taking care of three of our nephews over the summer." Technically, that would be a part of the Kinship Care Program, but Stephen and Travis didn't take that exact route. "We actually did not do 'Kinship' for the boys, explained Stephen. "It was like kinship but was not official. We had legal papers prepared and notarized for guardianship, but we didn't have custody." "The boys were actually pulled out of school about a month early and delivered to us," Travis explained. "They were from a troubled home. They were never allowed into the kitchen at their old house, so they had been raised to hide food around the house. They also lied, and stole candy from a convenience store. They were taught by their birth parents that stealing was okay." "One of the challenges for us," added Stephen, "was to correct these behaviors while also not ruining their view of their parents. After all, they still loved their parents." By the end of the summer, the boys were removed. "When it was time to register them for school, their mother refused to give us the legal documents needed for school registration. We contacted the boys' grandparents and asked for help. Unfortunately, we weren't able to keep them and all three boys were split up and went with a different set of grandparents in North Carolina, Virginia, and

Maryland."

After the three boys were gone, Stephen and Travis were ready to find a child they could adopt. They decided to foster to adopt. "We contacted an adoption agency called Families United, and we started the process of applying to be foster parents," Travis said. "But when Families United lost their contract to provide foster care services in Allegheny County, we had to start the process over." "We are now working with 3 Rivers Adoption Council," added Stephen, "and they have been a lot of help. So far, we have been looking for around six to nine months." "We are looking to foster either boys or girls, under nine years old," Travis added, "from two to three siblings of any race. We're about 50% through the process." "We're currently working on our CPR training," shared Stephen, "which we are required to have, as well as a set of other classes to prepare us to become foster parents. The problem is that every year the laws change, so we're constantly updating our files. However, due to our diligence we can adopt from all over the world through adoptuskids.com. That is a great tool for anyone looking to adopt. You can read the biographies of the kids." "All kids looking to be adopted have certain needs," Travis said. "They're all special needs, just not necessarily in the traditional way."

Spending this much time looking to adopt, Stephen and Travis have already figured out what they are going to do for child care. "We both work in

pharmaceuticals,” Stephen said, “I work at Boehringer Ingelheim, which is based in Germany, and Travis works at Bayer. We also own rentals and are looking into getting our real estate licenses.” Travis added, “Our plan is for me to stop working for Bayer, so that both of us will be working from home and be stay-at-home dads. That way the focus can be on the kids and we can be there when they need us.” But in case they both have to be away, Stephen and Travis have a backup. “We have a housekeeper who has grandchildren,” Stephen explained. “We talked about it with her, and she agreed that she can be the baby sitter when we’re away.”

Other than the housekeeper and community support, Travis and Stephen have a support system built in from both sides of their family and their church. “We both come from large families,” Stephen said. “My mom and cousins live in Mercer County, and adoption isn’t a new thing for my family, so they are supportive.” “And I have some family in Morgantown,” Travis added, “so we will be raising the kids in the mix of cousins, sisters, and grandparents. We host a lot of family events, usually one on Memorial Day, as well as family reunions, so there is a lot of family interaction.” “And our church, East Liberty Presbyterian, is supportive,” explained Stephen. “They march in the pride parade, and they even host gay adoption support groups.”

According to Stephen and Travis, the amount you pay to adopt largely depends on which route you take. “It cost \$0 for



Travis and Stephen Simpson-Hunt

us.” Travis said. Stephen then clarified, “There were legal fees during the private adoption, but in the foster to adopt program, the county and state pay for a lot. They have even given us \$3,000 for travel expenses in case we have to go across the country to meet the children.” “Pennsylvania is one of the best states for same sex adoption,” Travis added. “They take the cost out of Foster to Adopt, and Three Rivers offers free therapy services after you adopt. It’s all very supportive.”

When asked if they had any advice for people thinking about adopting, Stephen shared that “it can be scary at times, as you might not know what you’re getting yourself into, but keep in mind that this is also scary for the kids, as their whole world has been flipped around. That said, the experience is also exciting and rewarding.” “We were able to talk to grown kids of LGBT parents,” Travis said, “and they told us that the playing field is equal for them and for kids

born to straight parents. And the parents said they would do it all over again.” “Also, if you wait until you have enough money to have kids, you’ll never have kids,” Travis added. “You will make it work, and you don’t have to be rich to do so. You just need to have a loving home and an open heart.” “For a long time,” Stephen added, “kids will choose their biological parents over you. That will be painful, but be patient with them. The kids will eventually realize and appreciate what you do for them.” **MB**