

Gay dads 'We used the same surrogacy clinic as Elton John'

The singer and David Furnish are the most famous gay men to have become dads through surrogacy, but they are not alone. Tim Teeman meets another couple living the dream

David DeGiralamo and Dan Allen are preparing a party. There are two 12-packs of beer, the gorgeous smell of warm apple sauce on the stove, bottles of wine, snacks in bowls, Saturday night football on TV and, reveals a proud Dan, ten bibs for all the guests, "in honour of Dominic", whose first birthday party it is. A year ago today Jenn, a surrogate mother, gave birth to the men's much-loved first child.

Sir Elton John and David Furnish may have captured the headlines most recently, but they are far from the only gay couple raising children through surrogacy. In the US there are specialist agencies aimed at helping gay men to conceive their own children, and in smalltown, suburban New Jersey, in a large detached house with family and laughter echoing all around, baby Dominic is being raised by his biological father, David, a 40-year-old physician, and his partner, Dan, a 32-year-old paediatric dentist.

The couple used the same agency as Furnish and Sir Elton, the Centre for Surrogate Parenting (CSP) in California. Although comfortably off, they had to wait six years to afford their dream of starting a family. On their third date in New York, in 2002, they told each other they wanted to be dads. The journey to get there was a rollercoaster of hope, shredded nerves, nailbiting moments, detailed planning and extreme expense (it cost \$110,000), but now — even with a newborn's sleepless nights — "sheer joy", as Dan puts it. "Like most new parents, we don't have sex any

more," David laughs, "but we are so happy." So happy, in fact, that Jenn is pregnant with their second child; this time, biologically, it will be Dan's, though both men see themselves as equal parents to Dominic and, health willing, their second child, which is due in September.

In the US, it is estimated that 750 surrogate babies are born every year. From "back-of-envelope-calculations" and from contact with professionals and agencies, David, who is writing a book about the experience of he and Dan becoming parents, estimates that anywhere between 1,500 and 5,000 gay couples have had surrogate babies.

Dan is calm, measured, unflappable. David is passionate, louder, more of a worrier and planner. On their first date in Green-

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wich Village, both were emerging from bad break-ups. Conversation was easy, there seemed to be mutual attraction. But Dan kept excusing himself to go to the toilet; he later said that he was literally sick with nerves at how much he liked David. Both were close to their families. Dan's parents (his father a nuclear engineer, his mother a career counsellor for difficult children) had divorced when he was 11, but he "got over it" and came out to his mother after college. "It was all fine, except she worried that I had been alone during the process and that I wouldn't have kids," he says.

David's mother had a brain tumour diagnosed when he was 2, and died when he was 7. He remembers taking care of her and reading her stories; indeed, he trained to be a doctor "so I could cure someone like her". He was a precocious child, learning his multiplication tables at 4, and was raised by his grandparents alongside his father. He "overcompensated [by] being the wonder-kid overachiever because my being gay would disappoint them". It didn't. But in his twenties he went out with, and had sex with, women; one even aborted a baby of his. "Ever since I knew I was gay, I wanted a child, but I thought if you were gay you couldn't," David says. "The biology just didn't match up. It was one of the reasons I stayed in the closet."

A breakthrough came when his stepmother visited him one day in his late twenties. "You told me when work settled down you'd start dating," she said. "You know, it can be a boy; that isn't a problem."

After the relationship began they were "beyond-boyfriends within three months", Dan says, and they began to make plans to realise their shared goal of creating a family. They discussed adoption at first. "But to be honest," David says, "we thought, 'Why jump through unnecessary hoops and be scrutinised just because we're gay?' We knew to have our own child would come down to money." The saving began. "I knew Dave would be a great dad," Dan says. David adds: "And I knew Dan would be a great dad."

But who was going to be the dad? They wanted two children, one each biologically, and because David had been the bigger proponent of having his own child and was older, "and I would die first" (David), they decided he would go first. Dan says: "It wasn't an issue for me. I am as much Dominic's father as he is, and he will be just as much my baby's father, too." Leaving New York to raise a family in the suburbs wasn't a wrench: "Being gay is who we are, but we weren't tied to living in the city by it," Dan says. "We needed space to raise a family so we came out here." Their families wholeheartedly supported the men.

Dominic is lavished with kisses and hugs by his grandparents and his wider family the night I visit. "I'm so proud of Dave," his father tells me. "And look at my grandson." He kisses his forehead. "Lovely boy."

By 2008 the men had saved \$120,000 for the process (costs can reach \$160,000) and made contact with the CSP to find an egg



Dan Allen, left, and David DeGiralamo with their son, Dominic. They used the Centre for Surrogate Parenting, California, also used by Sir Elton John and David Furnish, left

donor and the woman who would carry their foetus to term. "We wanted two separate women," David says. "The egg donor had to be young and attractive, intelligent. We looked at her grandparents' longevity — we wanted the best genes — and then we wanted someone experienced with carrying children."

The men had to sell themselves to prospective surrogate mothers in a document detailing their lives, while the agency vetted the women through physical and psychological tests; the men would be footing all the medical expenses, as well as paying a fee to the women.

"With a young, first-time surrogate there's the possibility they might form an attachment to the baby, or decide to keep it," Dan says. "It was important that the surrogate had her own family, that both she and her husband didn't want any more children and that she wanted to help someone else."

The men were turned down by two egg donors who didn't want to give their eggs to

a gay couple. Then they were matched with 31-year-old Catherine (not her real name) as a donor. Jenn, then 36, happily married and with two children of her own, aged 5 and 3, was chosen as the surrogate who would carry the embryo created by Catherine's egg and David's sperm.

In America surrogacy laws vary from state to state, with California, where CSP and Growing Generations, another leading gay surrogacy agency, are based, being far the most friendly, in legal terms, to the rights of gay surrogate parents. These two fathers can have their names listed as the parents on the baby's birth certificate, for example. On the East Coast, Maryland, where Jenn and Will, her husband, live and where Jenn gave birth to Dominic, is the most gay-friendly state for surrogacy (it is legal, though the finer points of law vary from county to county). David accepts that Catherine could, at some point, turn around and say "that's my baby", which was why he and Dan spent time getting to know her. A bond of trust was formed. She

is also the egg donor for the second pregnancy and Jenn is also the surrogate.

"Strange as it may sound," David says, "Jenn's grammar and punctuation were faultless, and that convinced me first about her. You can't go far wrong with anyone who knows how to use commas and infinitives." There was a problem trying to synchronise Catherine and Jenn's hormones ("they had to suppress Jenn's hormones to stop her from sabotaging the process of pregnancy", Dan recalls, "but her body wasn't letting them"). Twice the process of conception didn't take. "Four months into the process, we were faced with liking Jenn a lot but wondering if we should choose another surrogate, but we went with her and changed clinics," Dan says.

The men liked Jenn because she was their equal, they felt: she couldn't be bossed around and was also responsible about her own health. It was strange for David, "trying to retain control but also learning to trust Jenn — and hey, we were two men with medical training, and you know

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what they say about having too much knowledge."

The best eggs were harvested from Catherine and on a Petri dish injected with the "strongest swimmers" of David's sperm; two embryos were then implanted into Jenn's womb. One took. Jenn fell pregnant, but a few weeks in suffered bleeding and cramps. David feared that she was miscarrying. "The doctor told me it was 50-50, and that was awful. I thought, 'It could all end tonight'; we were terrified at the prospect of doing the whole process again. We had come so far. It was terrible. We had done and planned so much to get to that point. We didn't have another \$25,000 to spend, and emotionally..." His voice tails off. But Jenn was all right and a collective sigh of relief was exhaled at 24 weeks.

The pregnancy progressed smoothly until Jenn went into labour four weeks early. Another panic. But the men were present for a healthy birth. "We didn't have time to feel blissful, we just went straight into protection mode," David says. "We

also noticed that Jenn was very quiet and we were worried: was she forming an attachment to the baby, was there an issue?" "But," Dan says, "she told us she wanted him to bond with our voices now that, inside her womb, the baby had gotten to know hers." "A pretty astonishing act of selflessness on her part," David says.

Dominic is named after David's beloved grandfather (Domenick) and the name, the men note, means "child of the Lord" or "gift from God".

David and Dan and Jenn and Will have become good friends (David and Jenn are similar "type-A organisers", David says; Dan and Will are more laid-back). Catherine — though on good terms with the men — did not want to know the name of the baby, or anything about Dominic. "So meeting up again to discuss the second pregnancy was very weird," David says. "Imagine having a son with someone and not mentioning him. Here she is, sitting across from me at dinner, and I have to remember not to get emotional in case it pushes any wrong buttons for her." Dan adds: "Dominic will know who she is and how he came about. If she ultimately wants contact with him, we would be grateful for it, but we respect the rules she has set down."

Are they nervous about any future claim she might make? "No," David says, "because as control-freaky as I can be, we have all been open and honest with each other from day one. We hope only good can come of that."

Though gay surrogacy is legal in Maryland, it was still to the men's good fortune that they found a judge willing to accord both men shared parental rights, allowing them both to be listed as Dominic's parents on the birth certificate. "He wished us congratulations," David recalls. "The unequal nature of the laws, state to state, county to county, shows that the law is not keeping pace with life and culture: parents like Dan and I are faster than the law."

So far the only negative reaction has come from a gay acquaintance who said that David and Dan were "selling out to straight life". He didn't think it was "normal" for two gay guys to do this, Dan says. As for social disapproval and prejudice, the men note that the nastiest criticism levelled at Sir Elton — that he and Furnish had baby Zachary as some kind of lifestyle accessory — ignores the reality that gay surrogacy requires a great deal of planning and expense: there is nothing frivolous or accidental about it. Consider, for example, Jenn pumping four months' of breast milk, which was then FedExed to David and Dan in dry ice.

As we sit beside Dominic's crib (below a painted diorama of city, country and ocean), David smiles. "The irony is that we wanted a biological child each, and a year on I realise I was totally wrong: biology really doesn't matter. Sure, sometimes I look at Dominic and think, 'Holy crap, he looks like me,' but it's all irrelevant. Dan wakes up at 5.30 in the morning when it's his turn to deal with Dominic. He puts him to bed. He is not a lesser father than me." He may only be one, but Dominic calls both of them "Da". "We've discussed it and I'm going to be 'Daddy' and Dan's going to be 'Dad', just because he's a bit more serious," David smiles. "We are whatever he says we are. And when he wants to know anything, we'll tell him. We're not going to hide anything."

Dan says: "We do ask ourselves, 'Will ►