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A GAY COUPLE'S JOURNEY THROUGH SURROGACY

Intended Fathers

MICHAEL MENICHELLO



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Through Surrogacy**
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 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc
10 Alice Street, Binghamton, NY 13904-1580

This edition published in 2012 by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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Cover photo: Lillian at four months.

Cover design by Jennifer M. Gaska.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Menichiello, Michael.

A gay couple's journey through surrogacy : intended fathers / Michael Menichiello.
p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-7890-2819-8 (hc. : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-7890-2819-0 (hc. : alk. paper)

ISBN-13: 978-0-7890-2820-4 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-7890-2820-4 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Menichiello, Michael. 2. Gay fathers. 3. Surrogate motherhood. I. Title.

HQ76.13.M46 2005
306.8742'08664—dc22

2005010625

To Lilly, you are my love, my joy, my soul.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Menichiello is an award winning writer/producer. He and his partner, David, have been together for more than fifteen years and finally married in New Paltz, New York, on March 27th, 2004. Michael, David, and their daughter, Lillian, currently live in New York.

CONTENTS

Preface	ix
Acknowledgments	xiii
1. Baby Talk	1
2. Getting Started	25
3. Mike, David, Michelle, and FedEx Make Three?	47
4. Not Quite Pregnant	59
5. Conception Nevada	65
6. Ultrasound Effects	85
7. Last-Minute Complications	93
8. It's a Girl!	107
9. Life with Lilly	119
Index	133

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Preface

When David and I set out to have a child, we didn't know what to expect because neither of us knew anything for sure. Well, that's not entirely true. One thing I did know for sure is that I didn't expect the diaries that I kept during our journey toward parenthood to be made into a book that would be published when our daughter was two years old! So, why write a book about it? Actually, I didn't write a book; I wrote a diary. I have tried to keep a journal, or diary, since I was in high school. On and off throughout my life I have started writing one and then it would fizzle out only to be started up again. I usually keep one during some drama I am having at the time so that I can write whatever thoughts, feelings, moods, or opinions come to mind and somehow it all helps after all is said and done. I started keeping another diary when David and I finally got serious about having a child. My hope was that if we were lucky enough to have a child we could share it with him or her some day and he or she could read how he or she came to be.

Tom Lorio, a friend of mine, and co-worker at the time, is the one who is actually responsible for my diaries becoming a book. So, blame him, not me, if you don't like the book! All kidding aside, Tom was the first person outside of my immediate family to know that David and I were starting the journey toward parenthood through surrogacy. Day after day, week after week, Tom would ask for "baby updates." "I hope you're writing all of this down," he said to me one day at work. "I'm keeping a diary," I said with a puzzled look on my face. "You should think about sharing your diary with other people," Tom said. "It's an amazing story." *Amazing?* I thought. *Is it really amazing?* I guess you, the reader, will have to decide that all on your own. It is what it is. It's our story. Well, it's actually our story told through my eyes. It's the good, bad, and, at times, the ugly. It's my good days and bad. It's my happiest moments and some of my saddest. It's me at my best and at my absolute worst. It's what I was thinking, feeling, wanting, hating, loving, dreading, regretting, hoping, and praying for.

I'm sharing something so deeply personal for many reasons. One is that it's the truth about our journey to become fathers. It's not *the* truth. It's *my* truth. I say it's *my* truth because it's *my* story; not everyone's. Michelle has a story of her own, as does David, and James, and everyone else involved. I told *my* truth although the names of Michelle's children have been withheld and their ages have been altered in order to help protect their identity. I also chose not to disclose the name and location of the agency we worked with as I believe that they were highly unprofessional for many reasons.

I also say that this story is *my* truth because when I first started looking into surrogacy all I seemed to find were happy stories filled with hugs, smiley faces, and happy endings. I knew that there had to be more and every once in awhile there would be a hint that things could, and did, go terribly, terribly, wrong. Part of the truth, I learned, is that some surrogate mothers regret their decisions. Every now and then I would watch how one would come forward and how she was quickly vilified and shunned by other surrogates and intended parents. No one wanted to read what they felt. Some surrogates had a change of heart during their journey—for many reasons—and would end up suing the intended parents for custody. Some intended parents neglected their surrogates and seemed to treat them very badly. All were great learning experiences, but they were rarely spoken of. I'm the kind of person that needs to know the dirt before I get myself, and my family, into something. Tell me everything; the good and especially the bad, then I can make an informed decision. But, when I asked questions about what could go wrong, or what quite often does go wrong, I was often met with a lot of resistance and a few, "why don't you get lost" type feelings. I'm also the kind of person—okay control freak—that needs to have a plan. I need to have an action plan and a response list. If A happens then I can do C, D, or E. That's how I am. But, in this case, I couldn't. As it turned out I still didn't know what to expect despite doing my homework. Maybe this book will help others see, and understand, what a surrogacy journey can be like, or was like, for someone else.

I don't want to be the poster boy for surrogacy, nor do I want to vilify it. Surrogacy isn't for everyone. In fact, David and I were very, very, lucky. I think it takes some very special people, a lot of soul searching, honesty, faith, and trust, to complete a successful journey. I also think that surrogacy, in general, should be highly regulated. As

it stands, traditional surrogacy, for example, is illegal in some states, legal in others, while some state's have nothing on the books at all. This must change. I also strongly believe that agencies handling surrogacy arrangements should be legislated and that home studies should be required for both traditional and gestational agreements. The truth must also be told. I believe that children via surrogacy have a right to know how they were brought into this world. To lie, in my opinion, sets the stage for the possibility of a great deal of pain down the road for everyone involved. Lying also denotes shame and shame has no place in a loving home.

My biggest fear in sharing our journey with others isn't the impact it may have upon David or I; it's how it might affect Lilly. We still don't know how she will react to being brought into this world. We also don't know how she'll feel about having two dads, not living with her mother, having a half-brother and sister, or about anything, for that matter. But, above all else, I still wrestle with the impact this book might have upon Lilly every single day. What bothers me the most is that it's as much her story as it is ours, but she didn't have any say in whether or not it was to be shared with others. Michelle, James, David, my parents, and others, gave their permission to be included in this book, but Lilly didn't. It's a decision I might regret one day, but only time will tell. The truth is that I have no way of knowing for certain how Lilly will react or feel. She has a right to her feelings and we will deal with it as a family. Most important, we will deal with the truth.

The theme of not knowing anything for sure has followed us around since Lilly was born. A few months ago, for example, we went to dinner and left Lilly home with her babysitter. We got home and Lilly grew more and more upset as her babysitter got ready to leave. After she made her quick exit, Lilly proceeded to throw herself on the floor and scream, "Mommy, mommy, mommy!" Guilt, shame, fear, anxiety, embarrassment all started welling up inside of me. *She knows she's different*, I thought to myself. Everywhere we went if she spotted a woman she would point and shout, "Mommy!" Every time it happened I felt worse and worse. My mind raced with thoughts like, *She's only two, but she knows most other kids have a mommy and a daddy and she feels different. What have we done? She thinks everyone is her mommy because she has two daddies!* Then, about two weeks later I went to do a little grocery shopping. On my

way down the produce aisle I spotted an African-American woman and her son coming toward me with their shopping wagon. As I passed by the little boy pointed at me and screamed, "Daddy, daddy, daddy!" I stopped dead in my tracks. "Why are you calling every man you see daddy?" the mom asked. "I'm really sorry," she said as she turned to me, "He's been doing that a lot lately and I don't have any idea why." "It's okay," I said. "It's really more okay than you know. My two-year-old daughter calls every woman that she sees her mommy. It's nice to know I'm not alone!" "Yeah," the mother said. "It is isn't it?" Just like that my fears were gone. Somewhat, that is. A chance happening in a grocery store ended up meaning the absolute world to me because it made me realize that I'm not alone.

Speaking of not being alone, LGBT families face tremendous uphill battles in the years to come. More and more states are filing for constitutional bans to permanently prevent LGBT people from being able to adopt, or even undergo artificial insemination, forever. It's terrifying, but it's the truth. It's a truth that we must take very seriously as once those rights are gone it's extremely difficult to regain them and they are taken away all too easily.

Hopefully this book will give people a glimpse into how difficult having a child can be for nontraditional families similar to mine. Hopefully it will also help people realize that when push comes to shove, David and I aren't any different from any other parents on the face of the earth. The only difference is that a gorgeous little girl just so happens to have two adoring fathers, not just one.

Acknowledgments

I never dreamed that I would write a book one day, let alone see it published. I owe some very special people a debt of gratitude for making it happen. First, I'd like to thank my friend, and mother of my child, Michelle, for allowing me to share our story. She didn't have to agree to it, but she did. Lord only knows why. When I originally wrote the manuscript I changed Michelle's name in order to help protect her identity, but she kept assuring me all along that I didn't have to. "I have nothing to hide and I've done nothing that I'm ashamed of," Michelle shared one day. That's one of the many reasons why I admire her so much and cherish our friendship. I'd also like to thank Michelle's husband, James. Without James' support there wouldn't be a story to tell; let alone share. I still don't know how he did it, but he did and for that I am eternally grateful.

My mother and father offered so much love, support, encouragement, and strength. I'll never forget the time we spent together in California, Mom. Never. They were some of the happiest moments of my life. Thank you for holding my hand when I was scared and for wrapping your arms around me when I broke down.

Special thanks to Richard Zmijewski for taking the photographs of David and I at our home and for allowing me to use them in this book. You truly have a gift. Thanks also to Carl Niedzielski for copyediting the manuscript for this book back in the spring of 2004. Not only did you copyedit for me, but you offered me more moral support than you'll ever know. I also offer thanks to the staff and creative team at The Haworth Press for all of their work on this project including Peg Marr, Senior Production Editor, for tactfully answering many annoying questions from this first-time author and for your expert, and witty, editing. It was a pleasure working with you and exchanging notes even if they were written in bright red pencil. Thanks also to Dawn Krisko, Senior Production Editor, for helping me with the final stages of the book and for granting me a much-needed extension! Thanks also to surrogatemothersonline.com where I first saw Michelle's ad. I also need to thank our many friends, foes, and a for-

mer friend, or two, who supported us, or made us question our sanity, and motives, during our journey. Thanks to Janine Rose, my former boss, for her help, friendship, understanding, and thoughtful advice during a long nine months when I complained sometimes more than I worked. Okay, when I complained more often than I worked. I always knew you wanted nothing more than the best for David and I on our journey and for that you have our love and appreciation. Another person that I'd like to thank is Tom Lorio. You wouldn't be reading this book if it weren't for him. Tom listened, and listened, and listened, as I explained, vented, laughed, and vented a little bit more about how hard it was to be gay and trying to have a child. Thanks, Tom, for listening and for being my friend.

There are so many other people that I should thank and I know that I've forgotten some, but please know how much your support meant to me. It wasn't easy for you I'm sure. If I wasn't the first openly gay guy you ever met I was certainly the first overly stressed out gay guy that you met who was having a child via surrogacy with a surrogate mother living 3,000 miles away. Thanks for never showing how scared to death you truly were and for never telling me how insane you thought I really was.

As for David, what can I say? I'll never forget the look on your face when you first heard me mention surrogacy. It was a mix of curiosity and you've got to be kidding me. Thank you, booger. Thank you. Thank you for standing by me for almost seventeen years, for picking me up when I fell to the ground, for never looking down on me while you stood up to support me, for always wanting the best for me, and for always wanting me to be happy. Above all, thank you for supporting me while I took the chance to be a father. Without you I wouldn't be tucking our daughter into bed at night and helping her say her, "night nights" to everyone, and everything, from the moon, and mommy, to our cat. I love you, and thank you, from the bottom of my heart.

Last, I thank God for my daughter, Lillian. Never in my wildest dreams did I ever think that I could love something as much as I love her. I truly thank God for every day that Lilly is in my life.

Baby Talk

Journal Entry, December 2001

I just got home from a horrible day at work. First, one of my colleagues told me that a commercial I had just edited looked like it belonged on a public access channel rather than a cable TV network. This coming from a woman who can't pencil her eyebrows on straight, but she has final approval of my work? I'm just a little bitter today. Then a co-worker asked me why I had bleached my hair platinum blond. As if that weren't bad enough, then he proceeded to ask me whether I cared that people would think that I was "queer." Nice day, huh? "If they don't know by now," I said to him, "then they never will." Then I thanked him for noticing. He left in disgust. Then, while sitting in horrible traffic on the way home, I heard a news story on the radio about a surrogate mother who is carrying twins. It started out okay, I guess, but now it's a total mess. Wow. I can't believe the things people get themselves into. You'd think it would have scared the be-jeezus out of me, but instead I'm completely fascinated by it.

After almost fifteen years, David and I finally decided to get serious about having a child. We had always talked about adopting, but it never seemed to be the right time or place: we weren't living in an area where we would dare raise a child or we had the money but something else took priority or we didn't have the money at all. One of the biggest reasons why we hadn't gotten serious about having a kid in the past was that we could never seem to justify the whole idea of gay parenting in our own minds. We kept asking ourselves if it was fair to the child to have two gay dads. Could he or she have a normal life? Would his or her life be a living hell filled with endless taunting and teasing? Would the child resent us somewhere down the line and wish we hadn't been so selfish as to bring him or her into such a

mess? Was I cut out to be a parent? Would I ever stop asking myself questions?

In short, our own self-doubts were holding us back from doing anything serious about becoming parents. What troubled us more than anything was our constant worrying that a child of ours could have a normal, healthy life. In the mid-1990s we were living in upstate New York, and it was the first time in many years that we started to actually talk seriously about adopting a child. We were living in a beautiful home on two-and-a-half acres, complete with three bedrooms and an inground swimming pool. Life was pretty darn good. David and I had been together for nearly ten years, and it seemed as though we were settled. It was the perfect time to start looking into extending our family . . . or so we thought. That summer we woke up out of a dead sleep one night to hear some neighborhood teenagers screaming profanities at us. “Faggot” and “fag,” along with some other choice words, were being shouted at us at two o’clock in the morning. We lived in a pretty upscale neighborhood and no one had ever given us any problems before, so we were completely taken by surprise.

The nightly tirades lasted for several weeks. Our neighbor’s teenage sons pitched a tent right next to our house. Night after night I prayed for a thunder-and-lightning storm. Night after night we were woken up by their name-calling and disgusting comments. At its worst, one of the neighborhood thugs woke us up at three o’clock in the morning by standing at the end of our driveway and shining a flashlight through our bedroom window. That’s when I had had enough and called the sheriff’s department to file a formal complaint. We were very lucky, as it didn’t take long for a sheriff’s deputy to arrive at our neighbor’s front door.

Weeks went by and then, lo and behold, our next-door neighbor showed up at our house with his son to apologize. I will never forget that day, for more reasons than one. We had lived next door to them for years without ever uttering as much as a word to one another, so the fact that two of them were making a beeline down our driveway was a total shock. What was also shocking was the outfit I was wearing.

“Michael!” David yelled. “They are coming down our driveway to talk to us and you’re wearing your Smurf outfit! Go change your clothes!”