

**THE  TIMES****Inside gay Hollywood's baby boom**

Tommy Woelfel and Richard Vaughn with their four-year-old twins, Aiden and Austin Picture by Steve Schofield.

**Rhys Blakely**

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In Britain commercial surrogacy is illegal, but in America gay dads – and their baby mamas – are becoming the new normal

The Fraley Selfs are a very modern couple. For a start, all told, they've been married on three separate occasions – each time to each other.

They first exchanged vows on the island of St Barts, in the French West Indies, in 2008, and again in South Africa on their honeymoon. Then, in 2011, Chris and Victor became the first gay men to legally wed in the town of Rye, in New York State.

Today they live in Los Angeles, in a house with a view of the Hollywood sign, not far from Larchmont Boulevard, the West Coast's answer to Notting Hill. Their living room speaks to their contemporary family: a large brooding Impressionist painting looms over lots of cuddly toys and a pink, knee-high toy piano. Two dogs – feisty shih tzus with bows in their hair – scurry and yap. And on one of several elegant sofas, in between Chris and Victor, sits Kira Sanders, the surrogate who, thanks to a process that began with a Google search, bore their two daughters, three-year-old Coco and her nine-month-old sister, Kiki.

It is a scene of a type that is steadily becoming less extraordinary. Celebrity couples such as Sir Elton John and David Furnish have become high-profile ambassadors for commercial surrogacy, a practice that is illegal in Britain. But in LA's smarter neighbourhoods, this form of "pink parenting" has all but lost its exotic aura. "Just on this side of the street on our block there are three gay families with kids," says Chris with a shrug. "And then one block over there's a single gay dad."

In 2010, the US Census found that a quarter of same-sex households were raising children and anecdotal evidence suggests that the demand for surrogates – or "gestational carriers" in the industry argot, a term that indicates that there is no genetic link between the child and woman in whose womb it grows – is soaring. In Britain, according to Office for National Statistics figures, some 8,000 same-sex households include dependant children. And, in popular culture at least, familiarity appears to be breeding acceptance. In 2008, the Hollywood comedy *Baby Mama* starred Tina Fey as an infertile straight woman whose surrogate was a feckless, working-class layabout on the make. Skip forward five years, and the latest American treatment of the subject is a TV sitcom that depicts a loveable (if hopelessly clichéd) gay couple and their equally fetching surrogate. Its title, *The New Normal*, endeavours to echo the zeitgeist.

Meanwhile, Chris, 43, and Victor, 42, are typical of a new generation of wealthy, urbane gay dads. Chris, who works in private equity, is white, svelte and impeccably groomed. He is softly spoken and considered – a counterpoint to Victor, who is black, muscular and heavily tattooed, with an endearingly forthright, matronly air. Victor used to run a chain of health clubs, but now he stays at home with the kids while Chris goes to work. They met via a matchmaking website in New York in 2003. According to Chris, it was Victor who was "the driving force" behind their decision to search for a surrogate, a path that they chose over adoption partly because, legally, it was far simpler.

In the progressive bubble that is LA, their family seldom elicits surprise, they insist – and you get the sense that only a very foolhardy homophobe would get on the wrong side of Victor. “I couldn’t care less what people think about the fact that we’re gay parents,” he tells me. “If you’re a gay parent it didn’t happen by accident – it just didn’t. It’s expensive and you have to commit emotionally. I’m telling you, kids born to surrogates are lucky: everybody involved has to centre their life on having that baby.”

By contrast, Chris admits to being “less self-confident”. Fatherhood, he believes, is “the last frontier for homophobia. There are a lot of gay people who think gays shouldn’t be parents.” When they embarked on the surrogacy path they suffered two years of agonising setbacks – a surrogate who proved a bad match, an egg donor they had to replace for medical reasons, a miscarriage. “Today I feel we’re great parents,” he says. “But when we were having that trouble, I thought to myself, ‘Maybe this is a sign.’”

It seems to make sense that, personality-wise, Sanders appears to be somewhere between the two dads. She has two young children of her own and a husband, Jeremiah, who works in IT and who came along to hold her hand (literally) when she first met Victor. The idea of carrying somebody else’s child first came to her when she saw a college friend struggling to conceive, battling her way through countless heart-rending rounds of IVF. “I never felt comfortable about bringing the subject up with her; she was in a lot of pain,” says Sanders. But when that friend had “a miracle baby... the idea of being a surrogate stuck in my head. I thought maybe there was someone else out there I could help.” She doesn’t want to reveal how much she was paid for carrying Coco and Kiki, but will say that because she lives in California, where demand for surrogates is high, it was more than the industry average, which is between \$25,000 and \$30,000 per child (£16,400-£19,600). The money, she adds, went on home improvements and a holiday.

She found Chris and Victor’s surrogacy firm through an online search and theirs was the first profile it presented her with. Carrying a baby for a same-sex couple hadn’t crossed her mind. But Sanders’ brother is gay, her father is black and her mother is white, and the fact that Chris and Victor “were interracial really pulled at my heart strings”. She liked that they had several strong women in their family, who would help raise any children, and how they doted on their dogs. “I fell in love with them immediately. I felt an instant connection with them. My heart was beating so fast,” she tells me. At this, Chris and Victor each sigh, “Ahhh,” in tandem.

If it takes a village to raise a child, then in America it requires a robust bank account to procure one via a surrogate. Chris and Victor spent as much as \$400,000 (£260,000) on their two girls. Their first step on the path to fatherhood came when

they heard, at a dinner party, about Growing Generations, a leading firm in this booming industry.

I visit its high-rise LA headquarters first thing on a Monday morning and arrive early. The office isn't yet open, but a straight married couple are waiting in the corridor outside. Fresh from the airport, they have their bags with them and they look a little awestruck by LA. Like the majority of surrogates, the woman hails from small-town America, a world away from the liberal environment that Chris and Victor inhabit. Indeed, one of the most striking aspects of the US surrogacy industry is the way in which conservative, blue-collar women from the Bible Belt often carry babies for affluent gay men from the big cities of the East and West Coasts. It's a clash of cultures that surrogacy advocates argue has done more to challenge prejudices than any number of gay pop-star dads. But it's also led to women being ostracised by their communities.

The couple in the corridor have flown in from Minnesota for her to be screened for her suitability to carry – and then part with – another couple's child, a vetting process that will involve several rounds of medical and psychological tests. As she sits down at a computer to start a 500-question personality quiz (devised to reveal disorders such as schizophrenia), I'm ushered into a chic office by Stuart Bell, who owns the company. He pours me a cup of coffee and slips into his sales patter. Growing Generations, he tells me with a soft Tennessee twang (he was raised just outside Nashville), has helped bring 1,100 babies into the world since it was founded in 1996. Medical advances continue to make the previously unthinkable possible, he adds. The company's crop of children now includes 50 who, thanks to recent advances in virus-screening technology, were safely born using sperm from HIV-positive men, a feat unimaginable just five years ago.

According to Bell, who is gay and has a five-year-old son born via surrogacy, two factors have underpinned his company's success. First, the internet has played an evangelising role, allowing potential parents and surrogates to research what the process entails. Today, about 70 per cent of Growing Generations' clients are gay men and more than half hail from outside the US. Britain is a big market, he adds. So, too, rather strikingly, is China. Second, after enduring the horror of Aids in the Eighties, the gay community has now achieved a new stability. No longer locked into "survival mode", gay men can think to the future, says Bell. Gay parenthood, he believes, is an idea whose time has come. Over his shoulder, I can see a picture of him posing for a photograph with Barack Obama at a fundraising event – a political leader who, like David Cameron, has backed gay marriage.

Modern gay men, Bell suggests, have developed a sense of entitlement. "My husband is a perfect example. He's 37, ten years younger than I am. And when we first met ten years ago I told him what I did for a living and he said, 'Oh yeah, I know about your

company. I'm going to do that.' His generation has never questioned that they could have children if they wanted. For mine, it was much more challenging."

This isn't to say that surrogacy is easy. For a start, there is the cost. Bell advises clients to budget for between \$150,000 and \$200,000 (£98,000-£130,000), a sum that covers everything from lawyers' fees to psychiatric evaluations. "We have clients now whose parents are paying," he says. "They're in their fifties, and don't want to be old grandparents."

For potential surrogates, step one involves applying online. They must be "financially stable" and must already have children. Bell is especially concerned to tackle what he insists is "one of the big myths" surrounding his industry, "that these are poor women on government assistance". The allegation that surrogacy agencies prey on the vulnerable is often made, and it is true that some companies target certain groups (such as military wives, because of the comprehensive health insurance they qualify for). But Bell is adamant that there are much easier ways of making money. The \$25,000 a surrogate is typically paid is often spread out over two years, he says. "You'd make more working at McDonald's."

Surrogates must be willing to have an abortion should a foetal abnormality arise, and will be checked for any criminal record. Only about 2 or 3 per cent of the original pool will make it past the initial screening steps. Those who do are flown to LA where they complete a complex personality test. Those who pass will see a psychologist for a face-to-face evaluation. Then comes a medical examination – tests for nicotine, drugs and infectious diseases, an intrauterine ultrasound and reviews of previous pregnancy records.

Meanwhile, the gay couples on the other side of the surrogacy bargain will be making a series of life-transforming choices. They will choose an egg donor, a procedure, most likely to be done online, that combines aspects reminiscent of online dating with a process not unlike shopping on Amazon. And then there is the question of whose sperm to use.

When Chris and Victor were in the process of having Coco, they opted to use Victor's. "He has a pretty incredible gene pool," explains Chris. When it came to their second child, Kiki, they used Chris's. On both occasions they used biracial egg donors with the best health histories they could find. Since Chris is white and Victor black, they wanted their kids to identify with both of them.

Part of the service Growing Generations provides is matching its clients with surrogates whom it believes will be a good fit, and once the parties have met and decided they can work together, the business of making a baby begins. The Pill is used to synchronise the menstrual cycles of the egg donor and surrogate. The donor will

take fertility drugs to stimulate egg production; the surrogate will be given hormones to prepare the uterus for pregnancy. In vitro fertilisation (IVF) will take place on the day that the eggs are harvested from the donor's ovaries. The clients will be updated on how the resultant embryos are doing. Three to five days later, the surrogate will be brought in for a number of embryos to be transferred to her womb. Two weeks after that, she will take a pregnancy test. Two weeks later, all being well, an ultrasound will identify a heartbeat. Or it won't – and the process will result in heartbreaking failure.

Richard Vaughn, 44, and his husband Tommy Woelfel, 48, chose their egg donor largely because she had blonde hair and blue eyes and so did they. It helped that she wasn't too tall or too short, and it was important that she had a good health history. "She didn't have to be super-smart, but we didn't want her SAT scores to be super-low, either," Vaughn tells me. "And we thought it would be nice if she was creative."

They decided to use sperm from both of them to fertilise roughly half the eggs each. And they found an excellent surrogate, a military wife who "was good at being pregnant" and whose husband helped break the ice at the first meeting by joking that he couldn't wait to tell his friends that his wife was pregnant and that the child wasn't his – and not his wife's, either.

And then, after months of preparation and tens of thousands of dollars in costs, the transplanted embryos failed to take. The egg donor was stressed from a death in the family, and was frequently travelling large distances to make hospital appointments. The pressure, it seems, was too much. "The surrogate was really crushed. She burst into tears," Vaughn says. "When you're locked into this process it's easy to forget that nature's still involved."

Vaughn and Woelfel refused to give up, and now they have twin, blond, blue-eyed, four-year-old boys, Aiden and Austin. They're not certain, but they're pretty sure that they each fathered one of the children. As a group they make an astonishingly picturesque family. But Vaughn is quick to warn of the many potential pitfalls surrogacy involves. "You must be prepared for failure. You must have an excellent surrogate. You must be on the same page when it comes to a potential termination. You can't afford to overlook anything when it comes to health insurance or legal matters. When you decide this is the route you're going to take, whether you're gay, straight or single, you become vulnerable."

In one sense, all of this is merely a modern gloss on a process as old as civilisation. Surrogacy was regulated in the Code of Hammurabi, a Babylonian script dating from 1800BC. In the Bible, in Genesis, the infertile Sarah gives her servant, Hagar, to her husband, Abraham, to bear a child for them.

Today, however, the process is often viewed with suspicion, which helps to explain why commercial surrogacy remains illegal in Britain. In the UK, a couple can offer a woman “reasonable costs” to carry a child for them, but nobody is allowed to profit. Paying a lawyer to draw up a contract is against the law, as is advertising for a surrogate. Never mind that modern surrogates may well have no genetic link to the child, for many onlookers the term “surrogacy” appears to conjure up images of babies being traded by unethical opportunists – a perception bolstered by media coverage of India’s booming cut-price “rent-a-womb” industry.

In America, not every woman’s experience is positive. Surveys of other surrogates have shown that many have struggled emotionally after losing contact with the babies they carried. Others resented being told what to eat and drink during their pregnancies. Many say they entered the process because they are good at being pregnant – and, quite frankly, because they enjoyed being the centre of attention. A few admitted that money was a factor: that it allowed them to provide luxuries for their own kids that were previously out of reach. But a greater number said that the travel, invasive IVF procedures, morning sickness, bed rest, C-sections and stretch marks were only really worth it when they saw their “client” hold their baby for the first time.

But, of course, there is another strand of thought: that children thrive best in “traditional” families, a belief recently voiced by Rupert Everett, the gay British actor. His mother, he said, “thinks children need a father and a mother and I agree with her. I can’t think of anything worse than being brought up by two gay dads.” Needless to say, Victor disagrees. Parenthood, he argues, is “the great equaliser”. No matter the circumstances of their children’s conception, all parents share the same anxieties. Are the kids all right? Are they eating? Are they sleeping? Are they happy at school?

The few studies conducted on the issue seem to back him up. A report by the Ethics Committee of the American Society for Reproductive Medicine, which represents doctors and other fertility experts, concluded, “There is no persuasive evidence that children raised by single parents or by gays and lesbians are harmed or disadvantaged by that fact alone.” The American Psychological Association found that fears that there would be a higher rate of psychological or social problems among children born in such settings could not be substantiated. Other research suggests that sexual identities develop in much the same ways among children of lesbian mothers as they do among children of straight parents.

Indeed, one piece of research appeared to favour gay fathers. They were found to be more alert to children’s needs than their straight peers, who were more likely to see themselves as bread-winners than nurturers.

But being brought up by two dads or two mums is no walk in the park – as evidenced by interviews of British children carried out by the Centre for Family Research at the University of Cambridge.

When asked whether there was something “different” about their family, younger kids of gay and lesbian parents didn't really latch on to the question's agenda. Eleanor, 8, suspected that her family was different – but not because she had two mothers. When asked what makes her family unique, she replied: “I think it's different. I think that... Well, first of all, they don't have Charlie, my little brother, running around the place spoiling everything, dribbling all over your homework. I don't know how to explain it, but I just feel there's some difference between the other families and us. The way we all work together really, yeah. We all link up like a puzzle.”

As they got older, the children appeared to become more aware of their family circumstances. For some, such as 17-year-old Lauren, who attended an all-girl school, having a gay dad brought with it a certain kudos. “Everyone looks at me like, ‘Oh, she's got the gay dad, how cool.’ Lots of people have divorced parents and stuff but yeah, my story's special so it makes me special, in a good way.”

But, unsurprisingly, many others experienced bullying. The report concluded that these kids' experiences are “often similar to that of so many black or Asian or Jewish children. It's the prejudices of others that cause them far more distress than their own personal or family characteristics.”

Back at the Fraley Self household, such concerns are far from three-year-old Coco's thoughts – and perhaps, in LA anyway, that's how things will stay. She is watching *Dora the Explorer* on an iPad with one of Kira Sanders' children, and her two dads say they intend to stay in touch with the woman who carried her before she was born. Time will tell whether such an arrangement really does constitute a “new normal”. For now, though, it's all that Coco knows.

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