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We Are All Families

By Carol Tice ***Photographs By Jimmy Townes***

OK, hands up — who's for family values? Everybody, right? But when Dan Quayle launched his attack on single women who dare to parent alone, he focused national scrutiny on a political buzz phrase that, until that moment, had been comfortably vague. Now, across the country, people are asking: Just what constitutes a family? What are its most important values?

And, perhaps most crucial for this presidential election, what's really behind the call heard at the Republican convention for families to just stay together?

There's a battle emerging over the definition of family, who's in and who's out," says Thomas Coleman, executive director of the Family Diversity Project. Who gets included in that definition will affect laws and public policy — for instance, whether an unmarried couple with a baby can qualify for family health-care coverage. (Right now, on many plans they can't.)

To Coleman, the family-values rhetoric is a chilling reminder that, back in the fifties, married people often stayed together because of legal obstacles. Divorce was a difficult, ugly process. "Thirty-some states had laws against interracial marriage," he says. "It was OK to rape your wife. Police didn't respond to domestic-violence calls."

As these laws changed, so did the shape of the family. And as women began to earn their own money, they didn't need to stay in abusive relationships just to survive. Coleman says that, if trends continue, by the year 2000 a majority of households will not contain a married couple. In Los Angeles, the trends that are occurring nationally toward more diverse families are even more pronounced (see chart on page 11).

Coleman cites the 1989 Massachusetts Mutual Life Insurance Family Values Survey of twelve hundred adults as evidence that not only is the shape of the family changing, but people's ideas about the family are changing, too. Just 22 percent of respondents defined a family purely by ties of blood, marriage, or adoption. 74 percent said a family is people who love and care about each other, where respect for others and taking responsibility for one's actions is learned.

When the Republicans call for a return to traditional nuclear families — particularly the kind where mom stays home full time — they're describing less than 14 percent of Los Angeles city residents. "The political right would like to have people believe family values are a specific structure. But the trend is to define family by function rather than structure," Coleman says. In other words, does the family work for the people in it or not? That's the new bottom line.

Personally, among my friends, the most traditional-looking family I know is ... well, mine. I have been married for ten years, it's the first marriage for both of us, and we're having a baby in December. I say "traditional-looking" because I don't consider myself a traditional person in many ways, and I wonder whether my family is a good one because of its form or because of its content. If everyone's family looked like mine, would it necessarily make this country better?

Coleman thinks the Republicans are saying it would. "I think they'd like to turn back the clock," he says. "They feel they've let a lot of public policy change without a big enough fight. They don't like to talk about divorce, because so many people are divorced. So the scapegoats are welfare mothers and gays."

The *Reader* decided to seek out a varied group of real Southern California families — including welfare mothers and gay people — and ask them about family values. Republicans, legislators, and insurance companies may not recognize a lot of these groups as families yet, but these are probably the families of the future, and their values are what a new generation of children are learning.

Since Murphy Brown made Dan Quayle so irate, it's a good thing he doesn't know about Karen Cullie and Salley Stott. These women live in the Van Nuys home they bought together, and their household includes Stott's five-year-old adopted son Patrick, Cullie's toddler, Mackenzie — the product of artificial insemination — and Cullie's twenty-year-old daughter, Gillian.

"There are lots of different kinds of families in the United States today," Cullie says simply, "and this is one of them. I think the family is basically a group of people who support each other and care about each other, not necessarily a mom and dad and a baby."

It wasn't an easy family to put together. Widowed and then divorced, diabetic and forty, with her daughter grown, Cullie says, "I didn't feel [that] what I had to offer a child was over." She found it easier to inseminate than to work with an adoption system that "doesn't consider us good parents. And even when I delivered [Mackenzie], the hospital sent in a psychologist to deal with me because they were sure that, to artificially inseminate at my age, I must have done it because of some emotional problem. But my perception is I haven't done anything wrong."

Stott, a social worker and therapist, chose to become a foster parent, taking in Patrick and then exercising her option to adopt when Patrick became available. "I've always been real interested in working with people who were already here, more interested than in having a child," she says. "If we had more room, I think we'd get a whole series of kids."

Cullie and Stott are offended that anyone would think their family lacks values just because of its unusual structure. "We've rescued one little boy from the system," Cullie says. "He was nonverbal when we got him. We're raising these boys together — they call us Mom-Salley and Mom-Karen. Mackenzie doesn't feel to me like a kid who's missing something."

Cullie, whose career is in nonprofit charities, says, "At my workplace and my home I've chosen to do things that are very rewarding and make a difference. And the truth is, I'm much better off and more centered and valuable to society right now than if I were out there desperately looking for Mr. Right."

"I don't like the rigidity that there's only one way to do anything," says Stott. "Just because you haven't found the right male to partner with doesn't mean you don't have the ability to nurture. If we're talking about family values, what we've communicated to these kids is there's a responsibility to take care of children who don't have people to take care of them."

Single parent Joanna Martie would like to get a job. After graduating from Narbonne High School in 1982, she worked for four years as a secretary, then married a Navy man and moved with him to Virginia. But she ended up getting a factory job because her husband wasn't bringing his money home. "I didn't know what he was doing with his money, where it was going," she recalls. "I later learned he had a girlfriend the whole time and she had three kids, and he was supporting them."

Martie's father sold his van to pay for her return home to San Pedro, where she now lives in a subsidized Section 8 apartment above a store. She has four children — a five-year-old, three-year-old twins, and a two-year-old — and has for two years been on Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). She thinks people who believe welfare women are just lazy are "unfair and prejudiced and ignorant" of the realities facing poor mothers.

"I could get a part-time job to start," Martie says, "but a part-time job wouldn't cover babysitting. And you get cut from Medi-Cal. A lot of people don't get off aid because, if they get a job, they lose their health care. My sister has a job and is making pretty good money, but she has no health care so her daughter hasn't had her shots."

On October 1, Martie's monthly grant was reduced from $899 a month to $859 a month as part of the state budget cutbacks. How will she cope? "Stop buying clothes for my kids, I guess," she says. Martie is frustrated by the state's slowness in collecting her $925 monthly child support order, even though she has provided complete information on her ex-husband's $11-an-hour job in Virginia. To date, he has never paid child support. "I want them to get the money so I don't feel so guilty about taking state money," she says. If the state does collect, it keeps the money to reimburse itself for the AFDC payments Martie has received.

Like a lot of welfare mothers, Martie is concerned about the additional AFDC cuts that will take effect if Proposition 165 is approved on November 3. (The measure would grant the governor power to cut spending to balance the budget. It is anticipated that Gov. Wilson would use Prop. 165 to make additional large cuts in welfare programs.) She attends meetings of the Barton Hill Neighborhood Organization in San Pedro, a grass-roots group that has been organizing demonstrations to raise awareness about the impact of the cuts. At the meetings, women trade tips on how to get the most for your food stamps, how to appeal unfair reductions, where to find a cheap apartment. The predominant family value is simply fighting to keep the family together. One woman at a recent meeting has already lost her children to foster care.

Alberta Harris, who lives with her six children in the Jordan Downs housing project, attends the Barton Hill meetings as the project's representative. She moved to Los Angeles from Texas in 1979, and has been on aid for eleven years. She has three teenagers from her marriage to a man who has never paid his $150 monthly child support order. "He was supposed to pay child support, but he was in another state and they just began to be able to cross over to Louisiana," she says. "Now they can't even find him."

Harris's ten-year-old and seventeen-month-old twins were fathered by a Nigerian man who never married her, and has since returned to Africa. "In my children's life, it's basically a single-parent home," Harris says.

"There's a lot of mothers who want to work where I live," she says, "but even if you do get in a job-training program, there's no good jobs out there, so you have to have some kind of aid."

The recent cutbacks, though, have Harris thinking seriously about going back to work. Her daughter is expecting a baby, and may be able to look after Harris's younger children. "Since they cut this money down, I can't depend on it," Harris says. She feels hampered in her job search by inadequate education. She has been working toward a degree in child development, but has found it difficult to finish, especially with twin toddlers.

Harris tries to set a good example to her kids by being active in the community, trying to improve conditions at Jordan Downs. "It's not a good place to raise your kids," she admits, "but if you have nothing other, you try to make the best of it and improve it — and learn to mind your own business. But a lot of kids grew up and went off to college and became good kids from here."

For Lois Banner, a better education meant her divorce had a very different outcome from those of the welfare mothers at Barton Hill. Because she had "always worked" during her twenty-two-year marriage, the University of Southern California professor did not face economic ruin when she left nine years ago with son Gideon, now fourteen, and daughter Olivia, now twenty-three.

Banner, a professor of history and the Program for the Study of Women and Men in Society, recalls her marriage as "very regimented — I had no independent identity. I think all this stuff about getting married and being one person is insane. There was massive emotional abuse, and we were both doing it, and that wasn't good for the children. Now I allow the kids a great deal of freedom. There isn't the manipulation that went on in the marriage."

The new family group Banner created has included about a dozen other people who have stayed in her remodeled Santa Monica home at various times in the last four years — several young men from Scotland, a woman who gave Shiatsu massage, a graffiti artist. "It's all happened because my daughter likes to tend broken-down people," Banner says.

No one is staying with them right now, and Banner says she misses the energy the extra young adults brought to the household. She is having a guest house built in the back of her property to more easily accommodate these family additions. "I'd prefer to fill all the space with people," she says. "I believe in family and I think it's important the children be raised in a stable environment with loving caregivers, preferably two or three. I think the formation of these kinds of extended families are a good solution."

In Banner's own childhood, her parents both worked, and she recalls being raised in good part by her grandparents. "My mother always worked," she says, "but I knew she adored me. Every Saturday and Sunday afternoon we would go somewhere together."

Even if more mothers used to be able to stay home, Banner says, "There's no way you can go back because, even in the middle class now, you have to have two incomes. There's an economic equality issue behind all this." Banner thinks Republicans are immersed in "the mythology of golden ages. Historically, I think women always worked and hid it — they took in sewing or did bookkeeping on the side, or the church newsletter."

Indeed, there's growing evidence that Republican nostalgia for the post-World War II era may be misplaced. In the recently published *The Way We Never Were*, Stephanie Coontz reexamines 1950s reality, revealing that the period was not a particularly happy time: Women's tranquilizer use was at an all-time high, and teenage births were nearly double what they are today.

And Banner's USC colleague Barrie Thorne, a professor of women's studies who edited the 1982 book *Rethinking the Family: Some Feminist Questions*, says, "What they're missing is reality. They have also really romanticized the past. There were always widows and people who were single, and gay people and women who worked."

Ask the women at the El Greco apartments in West Hollywood if they worked, and heads nod all around. "Who didn't work?" says Edie Margolis, laughing. "We all worked!" The twelve-unit El Greco, a project of Alternative Living for the Aging, is home to a unique group of able-bodied seniors over sixty-five, who are living in what's known as an apartment community.

"We all interviewed to see if we wanted to live in community," says Margolis. She enjoys the privacy of her small apartment as well as the socializing that takes place in the beautifully restored, historic Spanish stucco building's courtyard patio. "Here, if we want to be together, we can," she says.

Though they all have kin, many of their families don't live in Los Angeles. Residents like Muriel Mines now call the El Greco's denizens their family. "I feel that this is the most important aspect to me at this stage of life," Mines says, "being independent and living here."

She recently got a job babysitting for a young girl who lives in an apartment building across the street. "I'm their substitute grandma," she says happily. The El Greco residents all seem to have formed new family bonds outside of their biological families, some with gay men who live in the neighborhood.

Residents operate on a "buddy system," keeping an eye on each other to make sure everyone's fine. "We have a certain responsibility to each other," says Lee Henry, "so we keep track of and check up on each other."

The system came in handy when Nettie Goldstein became dehydrated, then disoriented, falling and cutting her head. "B. J. Kelly called the emergency people," Goldstein recalls. "I was in the hospital a couple of weeks."

Mines is happy to have her El Greco family, and happy to be doing well. The residents express fears about bankrupting their families if they should become ill. "The younger people don't have the capacity to help," says Mines. Kelly, a Canadian citizen, says he will never become naturalized because he can get free Canadian national medical care now. "Lack of health care — that's what destroys families," he says.

Robert Miller is still a little baffled by the demise of his first marriage. "I don't think there was a reason for us to get divorced," he says, but the bride who married him at seventeen, had three children with him, and lived in Germany with him while he was in the army had apparently had enough of being far from home. She left him five years later, initially leaving the children behind.

Elizabeth Miller's first marriage also ended unhappily, leaving her alone with a young son. Elizabeth was raised Catholic, and Robert came from a Mormon family. "For both of us to get divorced was very difficult," says Elizabeth. "But the reality was, you can't stay with the person. I can't even imagine being married to that man."

For ten years, the Millers have been remarried to each other, creating a combined family that includes Katie, sixteen, Jared, fourteen, and twelve-year-old Neil from Robert's first marriage; twelve-year-old Scott from Elizabeth's first, and the daughter they had together, Aubrey, seven. Robert works in marketing for Toyota and is in the National Guard. Elizabeth is recovering from cancer surgery and recently went back to work.

In their Catholic social circle in Torrance, "usually we're the weirdest couple," she says. Though half of all marriages now involve at least one previously married person, she says, "There's a lot of stigma against stepfamilies — it definitely wasn't accepted ten years ago when we started. Katie didn't tell her best friend for years that we were a stepfamily."

Though the Millers describe themselves as pro-life Republicans, they think the GOP is wrong in trying to outlaw abortions. "You can't legislate morality," Robert says. "I don't believe the answer is laws. I don't want women dying in back alleys.

"I'm voting for Perot," he adds in disgust. "I don't care whether he runs or not."

"We don't have any choices," Elizabeth says. "We're conservative but we're not, we're middle-class but we're not. We're one paycheck away from trouble — that's not middle class."

The Millers don't feel included when their leaders talk about family values, either. "The Republicans are a little bit off because they're only looking at mom and dad and kids — they should be looking at the moral and spiritual part," says Elizabeth Miller. "I think we have the strongest values for our kids of anyone I know. I don't know what the point was of bringing it up in the campaign."

"I don't think they know what they're talking about," Robert Miller says. "I think they're saying, 'If everyone was just like me, there wouldn't be any problems.' The piece of the equation that's missing is the working together, the equality of the spouses. Family values is work." When his ex-wife decided to seek custody of the children, a bitter court battle ensued that the Millers agree destroyed their marriage. "The marriage we have now is a completely new marriage," he says. "But we stuck it out."

"What makes a family are the connections between people," Elizabeth Miller says. "If there's a lesbian couple out there and they love each other and have been together for years, isn't that better than if there's adultery and abuse and alcoholism?"

Dyan Ullman and Terri Levine think it's much better. They met four years ago, when Ullman started helping Levine with acupuncture treatments for her asthma. Soon they were living together in one small room, and Levine says, "We realized we were probably made for each other."

As their relationship grew, they began to think about having a family. Both women's mothers are dead; Ullman's father lives upstairs in the Venice house where they recently moved. "We both really love family, and we don't have very much," says Levine. "For a long time I said, 'I don't want to have children,' but a part of me felt dead. When I realized I really wanted to have children, that dead part of me just came alive."

Ullman says, "I had to get over my fears that the finances weren't perfect. But we're people who honor each other and love each other and we wanted to create a life together."

Their dream was realized with the birth of Hannah Eleah Ullman-Levine, now three months old, whom Levine carried. Ullman was present at the Caesarean birth and cut the umbilical cord. Hannah was the product of artificial insemination at home, with the help of a male friend they refer to as "the donor." He will be signing off paternity of the child, and Ullman is beginning the process of adopting Hannah. "I have no legal rights at this point," Ullman notes.

Describing themselves as "very out" lesbians, Ullman says, "We find it very important that people know Hannah has two mothers. I know we've been food for thought for a lot of people."

Ullman and Levine are part of what health professionals acknowledge is a lesbian baby boom. "There seems to be a broader acceptance of lesbians having children now," says Suzanne Gage, a gynecological nurse-practitioner at Wholistic Health for Women in West Hollywood. "There used to be no support for us living our lives, much less having a child."

Gage says studies have shown gays and lesbians make good parents. "There's a lot more to happy family life than two straight parents," Gage says. "It can be a lengthy and discriminating process for lesbians to adopt, so they see it's going to be easier to get pregnant. For gays to have a baby is an incredibly premeditated act." In other words, these are very wanted children.

As this new generation grows up in gay households, Gage says, "Our cultural values are being normalized and accepted as we raise children with our values. I think it's a beautiful thing."

"I think familiarity breeds non-contempt," agrees Ullman. "The people who say, 'I don't know a lesbian' are the ones who're prejudiced." Owners of the Venice cruelty-free handbag store Just in Case, Ullman and Levine are used to double takes from Main Street shoppers. "We own our own business and get to be who we are," Ullman says.

"It's important for people to know there is not just the nuclear family anymore — there are lots of options," says Levine.

With an extensive network of male friends, both gay and straight, Ullman and Levine aren't worried about Hannah lacking a father figure. "She may need to claim a dad," says Levine, "and all the men in our life are ready to be the chosen one. I think she'll have everything she needs."

"My definition of family is different from what the Republicans are thinking about," says Levine. "It's just really all about loving."

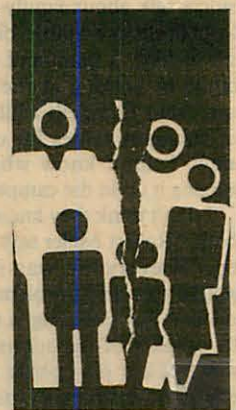
"When I hear this stuff about how families should stay together," says Ullman, "when people say homosexuality is deviant, when there's so much abuse in nuclear families ... I think they're saying, 'If it looks OK, it is OK.' It makes me angry that we're being judged by these people.

"How dare Bush and Quayle talk about this heterosexual life-style when statistic after statistic shows the heinous crimes committed in traditional families?" Ullman continues. "The phrase dysfunctional family is so common — and this is what people want to uphold? I think we need to create a new kind of family."

Goodbye, Donna Reed

Statistics from the 1990 Census

	USA	Calif.	L.A. County	L.A. City
Type of family				
One person	24.6%	23.4	25	28.5
Married couples *(total)*	55.1	52.7	48.6	42.6
Married couples with kids	26.7	26.9	26.2	22.4*
Married couples without kids	28.4	25.8	22.4	20.2
Single parent	9.3	10	11.2	11.7
Single male parent	1.7	2.4	2.9	3.1
Extended family *(blood relatives living together but no married couple)*	5.7	6.1	7.6	8.1
Unrelated adults *(includes unmarried gay and straight couples)*	5.3	7.8	7.7	9.1



***60 percent of married couples with kids now have both parents working.**