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Jonah in Atlanta showing his newly found half sister Breeanna on an iPhone.

Half Siblings Linked by a Mystery Father

By JON CARAMANICA Published: November 24, 2013

Single mothers, happily married couples with sterile men, gay couples: They all turned to the California Cryobank in the early 1990s to buy what they couldn't provide on their own. And they were successful, conceiving children with the sperm that came in the mail in an ice-cold tank.

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The fascinating MTV show "Generation Cryo" follows Breeanna, daughter of a lesbian couple who conceived through sperm donation — "Grandma signed for the sperm," her parents tell her — on a search to connect with her genetic half siblings and, ultimately, her sperm donor.

It all amounts to a secret history of American family making. Here are several clans, spread across the country, all of which owe their existence to Donor 1096, one very industrious, athletic, cornet-playing, 5-foot-5 Jewish man from Oakland, Calif.

He remains an object of mystery, at least through the first two episodes of "Generation Cryo," which begins a six-episode run on Monday. For now, the show focuses on Breeanna's getting to know her half siblings: Jonah and

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The Jacobson family in Atlanta (the children Jonah and Hilit and their parents, Eric and Terri) with Breeanna, far right, who is bringing together her half siblings from a 1990s sperm donor.

Hilit in Atlanta; Jayme and Jesse in Ojai, Calif.; and Jesse and Julian near Boston — with many more to come.

Breeanna is a winning, infectious narrator: 17 years old, with a pierced septum, she's self-possessed and curious, and able to form fast bonds. Given that she's traveling the country, turning families on their heads somewhat, these qualities are crucial.

The premiere episode focuses heavily on the [twins](#) Jonah and Hilit, high school students whose parents couldn't conceive on their own. To this family — Eric, the father, in particular — Breeanna's not a pure harbinger of joy; she's also a disruption.

Referring to his wife, Terri, he tells a stunned-silent dinner table: "She didn't lose anything. I lost everything." He adds, "I went through a grieving process of accepting that I couldn't produce kids." Later, to Terri, he breaks down, saying, "Any attack on my picture of what my family is, is an attack on me."

Breeanna had asked Jonah to submit to a DNA test in hopes that the results might bring her closer to finding their common donor, and Eric ultimately signs the consent form, but his sense of familial calm has been uprooted.

These connections have been made possible by the [Donor Sibling Registry](#), which aims to connect children conceived from donor sperm with their genetic kin, and possibly their sperm donors. Many of the offspring of Donor 1096 [have been meeting for years](#) before Breeanna and her cameras ever entered the picture.

By the end of the second episode, she's met six half siblings, each of whom has a different feeling about tracking down the donor. Broadly speaking, the ones who grew up with a father are less interested than the ones who didn't. Almost all the mothers are curious, too. One of the single moms says, jokingly, "I'm hoping he's still not married."

On "Generation Cryo," technology is both a vehicle of discovery and obfuscation. Without the registry website and Internet sleuthing — to say nothing of the technology of sperm donation — there would be no show. But there are limitations to what's available to be found online, both in terms of pure data and also emotional connection.

In a way, "Generation Cryo" is part of a larger MTV project of identifying how young people use technology and then building programming around it. This is true of "Catfish: The TV Show," naturally, and also of "The Hook Up," the channel's new dating show that helps winnow suitors based on their social media profiles. (MTV has also recently issued [a casting call](#) for people who "find it easy to flirt with someone you like through social media or dating apps but no idea how to talk to them in person.")

These shows are reflections of how young people organize their lives: Facebook, video chats, deep Google searches and so on. If television is to prosper in an Internet age, it needs to mirror the habits of its audience. These shows, more than almost any others, are rhythmically and structurally attuned to the habits of the present day.

The arc of "Generation Cryo" is an inevitable buildup to a possible meeting with the sperm donor who, based on evidence in the first couple of episodes, doesn't relish the prospect.

It's clear Breeanna hasn't thought much about the collateral damage (or benefits) of her quest, or about why some of her half siblings feel differently about tracking him down. And only in a conversation with Julian — a half sibling who seems to want to remain largely hands off with Breeanna's process — does the idea of the donor's right to privacy get taken seriously. At the time of donation, each donor filled out a questionnaire with identifying details, but it's unlikely he envisioned that two decades hence those scraps of information would become the loose threads that begin to unravel the anonymity.



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Even though it's moving to watch a bunch of young people turning to one another for strength and counsel, finding what they need in the others, the clear narrative through-line of the show is Breeanna's mission.

It can be jarring when she addresses the camera as "you" — not because of the narrative device, but because it's a reminder that this show about technology and patchwork families really boils down to one girl's search for her father. Technology made her, and maybe technology can make her whole.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: November 25, 2013

An earlier version of a summary with this article misstated the name of the program. As the article correctly notes, it is "Generation Cryo," not "Generation Cyro."

A version of this review appears in print on November 25, 2013, on page C1 of the New York edition with the headline: Half Siblings Linked By a Mystery Father.

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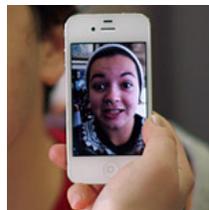


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