Family Vacation

Why would Raechel McGhee fly her two beloved children across the country to stay with a man they had never met? Because he is their father

By Michael Leahy
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His name is Mike Rubino, but until recently none of the women who bought his sperm to get pregnant had ever seen him or known him as anything other than Donor 929. Rubino left the sperm business for good a few years ago, thinking it would be another decade at least before any children found him. Now he is standing inside the Los Angeles International Airport, staring at an arrivals gate, awaiting the appearance of two children he has fathered but never met, along with their single mother, a Massachusetts psychotherapist named Raechel McGhee.

At that moment, 44-year-old McGhee and her children are descending toward him in blackness and rain. "It is kind of unbelievable that this is about to happen, but I'm relaxed," Rubino says, not looking so relaxed, fidgeting with his brown hair, anxiously surveying an airport monitor until he's found a status report on the McGhees' flight. "On approach," he reads, craning his head toward the arrivals door. "I think their mother said she'd have the kids in slickers," he says, "and she said that she would be in a raspberry slicker." He falls silent. "Maybe this is going to take a while," he says, but then he glimpses a sliver of a raspberry-colored garment moving amid a horde of travelers, spotting a tall woman. He mutters, "There she is -- there they are."

He hurries forward, calling out to the woman, "Hi, hi."

The woman changes direction, veering toward him, smiling. McGhee looks Rubino up and down as he gets close, hugging him casually. She turns to her kids, gesturing at Rubino, and says, "Look who's here."

The children -- a brown-haired boy one month shy of 7 named Aaron, and a 3 1/2-year-old blond girl named Leah -- stare up at him, mouths agape. Rubino turns to the boy, crouches, and hugs him gently. The boy's arms hang stiffly at his side. He tentatively wraps a thin arm around this man's neck, glancing up at his mother for some sign of approval. But she hasn't noticed his glance, open-mouthed herself, drinking in the 45-year-old Rubino, this slender, fair-skinned artist in jeans and a gray T-shirt. Rubino comes out of his crouch, simultaneously lifting the boy a few inches off the floor, then putting him down the way he would a fragile package. Everyone is smiling, the boy broadest of all. "Do it again," he mumbles. Rubino reaches out for little Leah, who jumps back as if his arms might swallow her up.

"What do you say to this guy?" McGhee asks her daughter. "Who is this man?"

"This is California," the little girl says, dancing away from him toward baggage claim.

Rubino watches her, thinking, This is my daughter -- the moment so extraordinary for him as to be slightly surreal. This all began for him a decade ago in a small locked room of the California Cryobank, where, amid soft-porn tapes and magazines, he produced semen that was sold around the world. Only in the late

1990s, about five years after he had made his first deposit, did he acquire any sense of his sperm's appeal, when he was lured out of donor retirement by the flattering news that at least two unidentified women had contacted the cryobank and requested that Donor 929 provide additional semen so that they could have more children by him. This was done successfully -- his final specimens enabling McGhee to bear her second child.

"She's cute," Rubino says, pointing at Leah.

"Well, thanks," McGhee responds brightly, "but those aren't my blue eyes she has."

There is silence for a few seconds before Rubino fills it, glancing sideways at her, looking at her hair, which is the color of wheat. "You're very pretty," he says.

He turns back, looking at the children. McGhee can't get out the words she wants to say, which are Thank you. She has self-esteem issues when it comes to her appearance, having been obese once -- and her hair is a dye job, and she can't remember whether she's mentioned that to Rubino. By contrast, she tells herself, he is beautiful. She unabashedly checks him out in profile, though she already knows his physical features without having to look -- 5-foot-11, 145 pounds, blue eyes with long lashes, a cleft in his chin that she likes, strong cheek and jawbone. "You're a good-looking guy," she says, and this hangs there. Her next words come in a rush: "And why should anybody be surprised. Look at the kids. They're gorgeous."

She has committed to spending a week at his home, which some of the single donor-inseminated mothers she knows have had no problem telling her is nuts, nuts. They hit her with questions: What if this guy is a jerk?

What if he wants custody rights? Are you crazy -- staying alone in his house?

Rubino grabs the heaviest of their luggage, simultaneously reaching for Aaron's hand, carefully guiding him through the rain. Pleased, McGhee walks alongside her daughter, who then skips ahead of everyone, turning around every few seconds to stare hard at this man, scrunching up her nose and giving him funny looks.

It is a short ride to the Rubino Gallery, where Rubino's living quarters -- one long room alongside a bathroom -- rest on the other side of a wall from his small gallery, separated by an opaque, sea-green glass door. Once inside, Rubino surprises the kids with gifts -- pillowcases with their favorite cartoon characters, special bathroom lights adorned with more cartoon characters and, a reflection of Rubino's hope that they might take an interest in one of his passions, two bags of fossils. "Some of these fossils came from 100 to 600 million years ago," he tells them. "There were no people on the planet then."

The boy yelps then, having just seen frogs moving near a wall, inside Rubino's glass terrarium. He runs over, rapping on the glass to get the frogs' attention. On the other side of the sea-green door, there are Mike's paintings. Aaron is an aspiring artist himself, having sent Rubino, before he left home, one of his crayoned drawings -- a serpent with a human head. Rubino telephoned to say it was good. Immediately, Aaron sent him another drawing, inscribed with a note: "You are cool."

McGhee calls out to everyone: "We have a present for Mike, don't we? Come here, Mike."

Leah hands him his gift -- a T-shirt inscribed "BEST BUDDIES." Beneath these words is a drawing of three stick-figures, accompanied by names: Aaron, Dad, Leah.

"Hold it up," McGhee tells him. "You can wear that when we go to Disneyland. The kids have shirts just like it."

"That's sweet of you," Rubino says, looking at all of them.

Aaron is screaming from the other side of the room. "Mommmm, can we watch TV?"

"You have to ask your Daddy."

"Is it all right, Mike?" Aaron asks Rubino.

Rubino looks at McGhee, who nods.

Rubino sits on a tan sofa, Aaron plopping alongside him. They watch a cartoon, and immediately Aaron gets sleepy. He rests his head on Rubino's shoulder, sidling closer, so that most of him lies splayed on Rubino's lap and chest. Enough for one night, decides McGhee, who calls out to the kids to get ready for bed.

Aaron is whispering to his mother, asking whether he can sleep between her and Mike. She tells him that Mike will be sleeping in his own bed across the room, with his dog and cat. She points. Mike's bed is about 25 feet away. In a few minutes, McGhee steps into the bathroom, where she changes into her sleeping garb, a pair of gym shorts and a black sleeveless T-shirt from Gold's Gym. She has spent only three hours with Rubino. But when he flicks off the lights, she is ecstatic: They are spending their first night together as a family.

Mike Rubino was married in 1985, and by the early '90s, he and his wife were frustrated over their inability to have a child, as he tells the story. "We'd been experiencing fertility problems," he says, "and she had had surgery, but nothing had changed."

A hard truth took hold. "We finally realized we wouldn't be able to have children of our own," he recalls. "It was hard, though probably not as hard on me."

He tried to console his wife, who bore most of their sorrow, he remembers. Rubino was disappointed but not heartbroken. For starters, he'd wanted only one child, and besides, he'd never been excited by the prospect of diapers, late-night feedings and crying jags. Still, he felt something missing over the next year. He and his wife were watching the news one night when a story appeared about sperm banks and their use of paid donors, who bore no financial or any other legal responsibilities, it was said, to the women who used their purchased sperm or to any children born as a result. The absence of obligation, however, was accompanied by a caveat: The donors enjoyed no rights to see any of the children conceived with their sperm. "We listened to the report, and I said, 'What the hell?'" Rubino remembers. "It was a chance, if nothing else, to be part of the gene pool. And we thought we could help some people. My wife was very encouraging."

He liked imagining himself as a 55-year-old man answering his doorbell someday to discover a charming, good-looking 18-year-old on his doorstep, a young adult whose long quest to find his biological father had brought him to Rubino. "I could imagine all of the advantages and see no burdens," he says.

In 1994, after tests and assessments, Rubino became a sperm donor at California Cryobank, regarded by many as the largest sperm bank in the country. It opened in 1977, an era when gynecologists generally contacted the cryobank on behalf of their patients, who typically had no idea of their anonymous donors' physical and academic characteristics. The cryobank relied then on a small siring stable, which included several medical students from nearby UCLA. Much had changed by the time Rubino arrived. The small stable had given way to donors -- from 150 to 200 at various times -- who had walked into the cryobank to apply for donation work. The proliferation of sexually transmitted diseases had long since made the testing and screening of sperm routine. The "Cryo" in the company's name -- from the Greek kryo for "cold" or "frost" -- was suggestive of an industry built around freezing the donor sperm so that clients could become

pregnant when they wished. It was a new world, and perhaps the most important advance was the advent of a computer-friendly, online culture in which California Cryo-bank's clients could learn about both the donor screening process and the intimate details of the donors themselves.

The cryobank purports to select only 3 to 5 percent of its applicants, based on sperm potency and an assessment of intellectual, physical and emotional characteristics. Each applicant must be from 19 to 39 years old and a college graduate or an enrolled student at a four-year university. A graduate of the University of California at Berkeley, Rubino filled out a questionnaire detailing his educational background and appearance. His attributes meant that his semen would be regarded as prized sperm -- his 3.75 grade-point average as an art major and his blue eyes, slenderness and the cleft on his chin were all traits the cryobank's informal surveys indicated were attractive to would-be mothers.

Add to this his cryobank-produced audiotape -- on which he etched his artistic ambitions, mentioned his fluency in French, soulfully offered his hope of helping the infertile, and rhapsodized about his love of travel and Puccini -- and what the cryobank had in Rubino was an alluring bon vivant. Welcomed into the program, Rubino fell into the donor's standard routine. Receiving a plastic cup from a technician, he would enter one of the five small locked rooms that the cryobank's co-founder, Cappy Rothman, jokingly dubbed the "masturbatoriums." There Rubino became Donor 929. He generally produced semen twice a week for about a year at the cryobank's offices, where each acceptable specimen (anything that would yield a minimum of one vial of sperm for shipment) brought him $50 -- which translated to about $400 or so a month.

Abiding by instructions, he always walked into the cryobank the same way, off an alley and up a rear flight of stairs, so as to avoid crossing paths with the sperm-buyers. From the beginning, cryobank officials told Rubino and other sperm donors in the program that none of them would receive information about births attributable to their sperm. But, increasingly curious, Rubino tried coaxing them to hint how many children he may have fathered: 10? 20?

They'd smile but never answer.

He was retired from the program at 35, after the cryo-bank said he had provided all the sperm it needed from him. But he took the unusual step of giving cryobank officials a letter in which he expressed interest in meeting any of his children. The letter obligated the cryobank to do nothing, he knew. The cryobank refused to contact donors on behalf of any biological children not yet 18. But back in Massachusetts, Raechel McGhee was pondering ways to circumvent the cryobank's policy and, for the sake of her children, track down Donor 929.

McGhee didn't match Rubino's image of the donor-inseminated mother. She was neither married nor involved with a man experiencing a fertility problem, but rather was a 300-pound single woman who had decided in 1997, at age 36, to have a family on her own, finding a sperm donor through the cryobank.

The cryobank's clientele had undergone a dramatic change since the early 1980s, when the vast majority of clients had been married women and their infertile husbands. McGhee was representative of a new wave -- a highly educated, unmarried professional able to afford donor sperm and related insemination costs that would

ultimately cost her about $6,000 for her two children. Single women and lesbian couples, most of whom bought the sperm online and had it shipped to them or to their doctors' offices, were on their way to becoming 60 percent of California Cryobank's sperm-buying clients.

Having been disappointed for years that no slim, attractive men wanted to date her, McGhee could, for the

first time in her life, she says, choose from an abundance of fit, intelligent men. "Selecting a donor was empowering," she remembers. "Suddenly I had my pick of these incredible male specimens. I was the one with the power to accept or reject. I loved looking at those donor profiles; I mean, I could have any of these guys."

Eventually, she received the audiotape of Donor 929, whose written profile interested her. She scoured the personal details on his pages: Artist. Blood-type: O-positive. Heavy eyelids. A fondness for classical music, but eclectic enough to enjoy Billie Holiday and Roy Orbison. No interest in sports.

McGhee listened to his tape. Donor 929 referred to the fertility problems that he and his wife had experienced and the disappointment they had weathered together, noting that the accomplishment he was proudest of was his marriage. He sounded so kind and giving. "I'll probably never have a child of my own," McGhee heard him saying. "I feel privileged to help someone do that."

"That was when I began crying," McGhee remembers. "I told myself, 'He's the one.'"

On March 1, 1998, she gave birth to Aaron in New York, where she was a social worker counseling at a group home for children. "Some women in my position wanted nothing to do with a man," McGhee remembers. "That was never me. After I had Aaron, I thought it would be important for a child to develop an important relationship with a male. More than ever, I wanted to meet [the donor]. I just didn't know how I was going to do it, and I had other things on my mind."

Her weight had become a serious medical problem, soaring to 330 pounds during her pregnancy with Leah. Sometimes she had difficulty breathing, leaving her to wonder how she'd possibly be able to handle two young children.

In 2002, a year after Leah was born, McGhee underwent a gastric-bypass operation that would help cut her heft roughly in half. She turned into a workout junkie whose entire life had undergone a makeover. Before the operation, she had become a licensed psychotherapist in Somerset, Mass., building up a practice successful enough for her to buy a house and pay for day care. "I'd become so grateful for everything I had, particularly my family, and I wanted to express my gratitude to the man who'd helped me to do it," she remembers.

McGhee regularly reminded her children about their donor-father, recalling personal characteristics of Donor 929 as if he were an absent loved one. "Do you know your donor lives in California?" she would ask them when a television program mentioned something about the state. She would hold up a drawing and say brightly, "Hey, this is one of your donor's favorite colors: red."

On Father's Day, she made it a habit to gather her children and say: "Let's send lots of hugs and kisses to your donor. Let's think of your donor. Let's send our love."

Her children, as she recounts, happily chimed in: "Thank you, donor. We love you."

She began to correspond over the Internet with an organization called Single Mothers by Choice. There she found another buyer of 929's sperm, a Southern California woman who exchanged photos with McGhee of their children. But all of McGhee's networking and new friends had brought her no closer to 929. Then, in 2003, while watching an episode of "Oprah" devoted to donor-conceived families, she heard of a Web site that invited donor-inseminated women to log on and send out messages in an effort to locate their children's donors and half siblings. Called the Donor Sibling Registry, the site also invited donors to search for mothers and children.

Within a month of the show's airing, on June 1, 2003, McGhee posted a note on the Donor Sibling Registry

site, alongside a reference to California Cryobank Donor 929: "Message to donor: THANK YOU! These children are the greatest gift of my life. They are beautiful, brilliant, talented, kind, absolutely delightful." She added, "We are very open to contact with the donor and/or siblings . . ."

Three thousand miles away, Rubino heard about the "Oprah" episode, too. He logged on, he recalls, to the donor sibling site, but he logged off before coming upon the message to 929. Early last year, McGhee asked the cryo-bank to forward a letter to 929, in which she asked for his baby photograph. The cryobank declined her request, insisting that it had already sent such a letter to all donors, and that 929 had not responded (Rubino says he never received the letter). "I said to myself, 'Forget it, he doesn't want to meet these kids, and he never will,'" McGhee remembers. "I thought, 'Get ready to tell the kids they will never know this person.'"

Shortly before last Thanksgiving, a still curious Rubino logged on to the donor sibling site again, this time noticing partial lists of donors, who were grouped according to their sperm banks and identified by their donor numbers. Then Rubino discovered McGhee's message for 929. Teary-eyed, he couldn't stop looking at two lines in particular: "THANK YOU! These children are the greatest gift of my life."

Having no name or address for his messenger, he left a note on the site: "Hi. I'm Donor 929. I'm Mike and I live in L.A."

That same day, McGhee received an e-mail from a woman who ran the donor sibling site: "Check the site now."

McGhee logged on and saw 929's message. "My heart pounded when I read it," McGhee says. "I cried. I sent him a message, and we exchanged numbers. We were on the phone together in an hour."

In their first conversation, she learned that he had divorced since Aaron was born. She told him a bit about her work as a psychotherapist. The talk turned to the future. As McGhee remembers, Rubino told her: "I don't want to be intrusive. I don't want anything from you." She assured him she wanted nothing from him either; she was simply grateful, she added, to have made contact and to have the chance perhaps of someday introducing him to her children. Within a few minutes, each was extending the other an invitation to visit. Their first conversation could not have been more auspicious, McGhee thought, though she remembered then that Rubino was not hers alone. She knew that, in Southern California, another woman would be thrilled to learn Donor 929's name, the first step to introducing him to her own son. "I have to admit that I had thoughts of keeping the information from her since she didn't know about the [Donor Sibling Registry] Web site," McGhee recalls. "I thought, do I want to share Mike? But, I thought, there's no way I could do that to a kid."

Soon McGhee was seriously contemplating a trip with Aaron and Leah to see Rubino, buoyed by what she had learned about him through a series of phone conversations and e-mails. He was easygoing and respectful of her feelings, she told friends.

Aaron and Leah mailed him holiday cards that addressed him as Daddy and sent along drawings bearing inscriptions of their love for him. Rubino sent presents of fossils and minerals to the children and, on Christmas Day, called the McGhee family to say hi to everyone. McGhee described at length their holiday plans before saying that she should let him go so he could get on with his own day.

As McGhee remembers, Rubino answered, "I have no plans." She was surprised. "I thought it wasn't right that he didn't have someone to celebrate with," she says. "But it made me feel that talking to us was very important to him."

The day after Christmas, she turned on a television to learn of the tsunami that had killed hundreds of

thousands in Asia, sweeping whole families to their deaths in the Indian Ocean. "I thought that you just don't know when the next disaster could strike or where," she recalls. "There are earthquakes in L.A.; there are disasters all over. I thought: What am I waiting for? . . . I bought the plane tickets for L.A. the next week."

Not wanting the emotional stakes of the visit to become too high for her children, she subtly downplayed their get-together with Rubino. She told the kids that their trip would be "a wonderful California vacation," careful to make Rubino sound like just one more part of the itinerary. They'd spend a day at Disneyland, she told Aaron and Leah. They'd see the Pacific Ocean.

This had the calculated effect. In the last couple of weeks before leaving for Los Angeles, the kids sounded more excited about seeing Mickey Mouse than meeting Rubino, thought McGhee; thanks to television and videos, Disneyland and Mickey were more real to them.

She took one final precaution: finding a list of L.A. hotels near Rubino's home, in case staying with him proved to be troubling or awkward. She already knew how she would say goodbye to Rubino if he turned out to be a disappointment.

Still, McGhee was excited, especially about the possibilities for her son, who had not had a chance to bond closely with a man. Her own father had died many years earlier, and she had no brother or brother-in-law. A T-ball coach had been kind to Aaron, as well as a hockey coach and a playmate's father, but none of the men could possibly be more than a pale substitute for a committed and unencumbered man, thought McGhee.

Early this year, as the days ticked down toward their flight to Los Angeles, McGhee was reading Aaron a bedtime story, she recalls, when she noticed his eyes growing heavy, the boy falling into that state between dreams and consciousness, where people are at their most truthful, thought the psychotherapist, who sought an answer to a question nagging at her.

"Aaron, have you ever wished you had a dad?" she remembers asking him.

"I wish I had a dad to play with me," he murmured drowsily.

"How come you've never told me that?"

"I don't know," the boy said softly, his eyes closing.

The moment affirmed her conviction that she was doing the right thing in bringing her children to see Rubino. And, deep down, she did not rule out the possibility that maybe something miraculous would happen and she and Rubino would become a couple. "I'd be lying if I said that my mind didn't go to that fairy-tale ending, and that it ended with all of us living happily ever after," she says. "But, at the same time, as a responsible adult, you realize that such a [scenario] is a fairy tale, and unlikely."

One night, as McGhee and Rubino remember, Rubino called to say that he had placed photos of Aaron and Leah in his home, asking whether she minded that he had referred to them as his "children" around a few of his friends. She was pleased, and then asked what he would like the children to call him when they arrived in L.A.

"If I could choose, I'd love it if the kids called me 'Dad,'" he said.

Despite the good feelings all around, Rubino couldn't be sure what he was getting into with McGhee and her children. He had his own secret plan if the visit became uncomfortable, knowing of a hotel where he could take refuge while politely urging his guests to stay in his home. And, as much as Rubino looked forward to

seeing Aaron and Leah, he did not want McGhee to misunderstand the future he envisioned for himself. "I'm comfortable with my current situation," he told her, shortly before she and the children flew to see him. "I don't see myself as a family man ever staying home raising kids 24/7. I don't ever see myself having a family in the conventional sense."

Yet now, after just one full day together, Rubino is having a very conventional moment with his new family. Aaron again rests his head on Rubino's shoulder, watching another cartoon.

"Aaron, do you want something to eat?" his mother asks him.

The boy doesn't seem to hear.

"You're happy right there with your Daddy?"

The boy nods, burrowing into Rubino's shoulder. Rubino puts an arm around him, drops his chin on the top of the boy's head. For an hour, they don't move.

Aaron McGhee has inherited, it seems, his father's ability to shut out the rest of the world in favor of his passions. He sits on the hardwood floor across the room from everyone else, head buried in his artwork, studying his drawings. His mother, his sister and Rubino sometimes call out to him, but he doesn't answer. "He's concentrating," says Rubino, who understands the feeling.

Since spending the first few hours of her visit so raptly watching Rubino, McGhee has turned her attention to her children's activities, trying to monitor their moods. Leah is prancing and dancing like Tinkerbell, still avoiding Rubino's efforts to pick her up. Aaron is working on a drawing of a smiley face. He says he wants to do a smiley face drawing for each day he's in Los Angeles, happily showing the latest face to Rubino. It is surrounded by swirling patches of red, orange and violet that Rubino interprets as reflections of Aaron's bliss.

Rubino has told McGhee that he sees much of himself in the boy, particularly a need for time alone. McGhee has wondered about some of her son's inclinations, since he is not nearly as outgoing or comfortable around groups of people as is his sister, she thinks. Now, listening to the man who accounts for one-half of her son's genetic makeup, she believes she is hearing the reasons for Aaron's personality. "I was a lot like that as a kid," McGhee remembers Rubino telling her. "I wanted to be off by myself. I was pretty quiet . . . I just didn't need a lot of people around."

That explanation alone is worth the price of a plane ticket, thinks McGhee.

On a Saturday morning, they all drive in Rubino's old blue Buick LeSabre to Long Beach and one of his favorite places, the Aquarium of the Pacific. Rubino takes the children's hands and leads them toward a family of sea turtles swimming behind glass. "This one here can hold its breath underwater for more than an hour," he says. He reads a placard: "On extra-long dives, the sea green turtle is able to absorb oxygen through its anus. Now that's weird!" Aaron cackles. He thinks he has figured out what this word anus means. He makes a face at the sea turtle and turns to his mother. "Did you hear that, Mom? Anus."

For a while, the day only gets better for Aaron. Rubino brings him to the petting tank, where the boy touches stingrays and small brown-banded bamboo sharks the size of trout. "Don't hold their tails," Rubino says, watching Aaron grab. "Just pet the tops with your fingers."

Aaron is stroking everything that swims by. "I am petting sharks, I am petting sharks."

"Yes, you sure are," Rubino says, laughing.

"You pet them, too, Mike. Pet them."

"Okay." Rubino's hand reaches into the water. "You notice how they feel a little rough, like sandpaper?"

The boy isn't really listening. "Can I come back here with you again?" he asks.

"Sure you can."

"Soon?"

"We'll do it again, sure."

The idea of "again" is still on the boy's mind as they grab lunch in the aquarium restaurant. They're sitting at a table, eating sandwiches, when Aaron blurts to his mother: "Can we just stay here? With Mike? We could live here."

She smiles at her son, pondering how to make him happy without misleading him. In the back of her mind is the conversation she had with an old friend, the actress Ellen Burstyn, whom she met in the '90s while Burstyn was researching a role and McGhee was counseling at a New York group home for children. Burstyn is now considering making a film about the McGhees' experience with Rubino, McGhee believes. "Sweetheart, if Mommy sells the screen rights," she says, "maybe we can buy a second house here someday, and you can come here a lot to see Daddy."

This isn't nearly good enough for the boy. "I want to stay here," Aaron says.

McGhee rubs his arm. "This is a fun time, a vacation time, a fantasizing time. But, day to day, we would have work to do, and it wouldn't be as fun, wouldn't be the same. And you have school."

The boy looks down at his sandwich. "I could skip a day of school," he says firmly. "I could."

"You can't, sweetheart."

"That's life," Rubino interjects, rubbing Aaron's head to soften this.

"Right," McGhee says, "that's life."

On their way back to the gallery, Leah asks her mother, "Do we really have a Daddy?"

McGhee understands the challenge posed by Rubino's presence. It is early in their stay, but even when Rubino has invited Leah to sit on the couch next to him, the little girl usually dashes into Mommy's arms. It's the consequence of never having had a close relationship with a man before, McGhee thinks. Her instinct and her work as a psychotherapist tell her that Leah may see any Daddy as threatening. "Maybe Leah thinks if it happens, I get squeezed out and there's no more Mommy," McGhee tells Rubino later.

Nonetheless, she is delighted when later in the day, back at the gallery, she sees Leah resting on Rubino's lap. "Who are you sitting with there?" she asks Leah.

"Mike."

"And who is Mike to you?"

Leah beams, delivering her answer, "the donor."

As the children tire and rest late in the day, the attentions of McGhee and Rubino turn to each other. They sit on opposite wings of the sofa, sharing a little wine, talking about their tastes and interests, and usually, in the end, finding something to rib each other about. "Turned out to be a gorgeous afternoon," McGhee says, fingering a plastic octopus that Rubino bought for Aaron at the aquarium.

"I promised California sun for Leah, and it finally came," Rubino says, "after you Easterners had your great Eastern blizzard of 2005 -- all that snow falling."

"Rubbing my nose in it again."

"Falling all over that bunch of tiny states you have out there," he adds.

"Which we call New England."

"We usually leave our windows open out here -- fresh air," he says, smiling.

Aaron grins, enjoying this banter between his mother and father. He plops on Rubino's lap, nuzzling there. Leah is resting alongside Rubino's dog and cat. Rubino refills McGhee's wineglass.

At night, after the kids have gone to sleep, each of the adults has a martini. They watch a retrospective of one of their favorite television comedies, "Saturday Night Live," howling at the "land shark" skit from the '70s, in which a talking shark knocks on an apartment door and tries to entice an unsuspecting woman to open it up. "Candygram," the shark says, and Rubino and McGhee laugh like kids when recalling how cast regular Laraine Newman excitedly answers, "Oh, candy," and then opens her door to be ravaged. "We've discovered that we grew up liking much the same things," McGhee says later, "and that we came of age at the same time, being attracted to the same cultural and political ideas."

Watching television, they talk and laugh, but they don't sit near each other, remaining on separate wings of the sofa. McGhee doesn't think it would be appropriate for her to sit next to him, believing this might suggest an uncomfortable intimacy. "We don't want to give even the impression of lines being crossed," she says later. "And I'd never screw up something for my kids because of some romantic fantasy."

Their emphasis has been in slowly forging a comfortable connection so as to make Rubino a member of the family. "Part of what's wonderful right now with Mike," she says, "is that we have no negative baggage between us -- no marriage, no divorce, no custody fight, no emotional vendetta."

She spends much time looking around his gallery. One night he points out perhaps his most arresting painting, a work called "Photo-Op," in which a nude couple lords over a virginal jungle filled with exotic birds and, bizarrely, human fetuses. The woman is pregnant, and her own fetus visible, while a roughhousing baby at her feet dumbly chokes a native bird to death. Rubino tells her that the birds depicted in the painting are extinct, and that the work serves as his personal statement about the evils of overpopulation. "I know that's kind of ironic," he says, "because I'm probably responsible right now for a lot of kids in the world."

Rubino takes the McGhees to California Cryobank, where they receive a tour. For Rubino, the visit is a sentimental, even triumphal return. He strolls around the lab and tells McGhee and the children: "This is where they drew my blood for testing. That is where they put the donors' sperm under the microscope." He pauses at the five masturbatoriums and grins. "I remember some of these rooms," he says, chuckling. Surrounded by Cryobank administrators, he gestures at the fruits of his seed. "These are my children, Aaron and Leah," he says, rubbing Aaron's neck. "My ready-made family."

The administrators are beaming, too. It is the first time in the cryobank's 28-year history that any of them can remember a mother, her children and their sperm donor gathering together in this office. Someone takes photos, and McGhee asks Aaron if he wants to see where the sperm is kept; Aaron has grown up hearing about sperm. Everyone is led into a chilly room, where vapors are rising from six liquid nitrogen tanks that store the semen of hundreds of donors.

"We expect a lot of beautiful children will be born from what you see in the tanks," says the cryo-bank's Cappy Rothman. He points at a small portion of the semen vials being readied that day for a FedEx shipment -- headed to Nacogdoches, Tex., Chesterfield, Mo., Panama City, Fla., Sacramento and Boston, in addition to shipments going overseas.

"You have wonderful-looking children," he says to McGhee.

"I have to go to the bathroom," Aaron announces.

"Daddy will bring you," McGhee says.

Rothman nods, looking impressed. "Daddy will bring him, huh?"

Looking to entertain the kids, Rothman asks his lieutenants to find souvenirs for everybody.

An assistant chimes in: "May I answer any questions for anybody? About anything?"

This sounds like a formality, but Rubino takes advantage of the offer. "I've asked this question before," he says. "But I'm going to try again now, though I know you probably won't answer. Could you tell me, roughly, how many kids of mine are out there?"

Silence in the room.

The assistant sweetly smiles, saying nothing.

Rubino smiles wanly. "You can't tell me?"

Nothing.

Rubino shrugs. "Okay, I understand."

The souvenirs have arrived -- silver sperm pins. "Oh, cool," Aaron says. "I got a sperm, I got a sperm."

"Sperm for everyone," Rubino says.

He drapes his arms around Aaron and Leah. "It is amazing how good it feels to be with them," he says to Rothman, bidding the doctor goodbye. Rothman shakes his hand and tells him that the cryobank is moving to larger quarters and that maybe Rubino could paint a mural for the new building. McGhee clasps his elbow on their way out, whispering as they step into the rain, "Wow, you might even get some work out of this."

In Colorado, the woman whose Donor Sibling Registry Web site enabled McGhee and Rubino to find each other keeps a curious eye on their developing relationship, hoping it might serve as a model. Wendy Kramer has made a cause of helping women search for donors, but few women, says Kramer, have been as lucky in their searches as McGhee. Kramer herself is still trying to connect with her donor, thinking how much that meeting the stranger would enhance her 15-year-old son's knowledge of himself and his background.

Kramer didn't choose her child's donor. In the late 1980s, she and her then-husband delegated the task to her gynecologist. Then, as now, there were about 20 sperm banks in the country, and Kramer had had no idea where to go. "I just said to my doctor, 'Here is what my husband looks like; please find a sperm donor who matches him,'" Kramer recalls. "People ask me now, 'Didn't you think your child would be curious to know about his donor?' I was only thinking in that moment about how lucky I was going to be to have a child . . . It wasn't until later, after my husband and I divorced and my son started asking me about his donor, that these questions started occurring to me . . . Then when I started asking, a lot of cryobank people didn't want to have anything to do with me."

No one on any side of the discussion about the rights of American donors, mothers and their donor-conceived children, has any doubt over who shapes the rules of the industry. The sperm business in the United States has always hinged on the wishes of the adults paying for the semen and the desires of the adults providing it. If any party wants anonymity in a transaction, then anonymity reigns. The child created by the process has no voice, particularly over when or whether that child will ever be able to meet the donor.

"Looking historically at it, kids have been the ones left out . . ." says Ryan Kramer, Wendy's precocious teenager, who co-founded the Donor Sibling Registry site with his mother and who is a freshman engineering major at the University of Colorado. "[Sperm banks] and parents are happy to produce children through the use of sperm donors, but then a lot of children's interests are ignored."

The Donor Sibling Registry has brought him no closer to any contact with his biological relatives. Ryan knows that his donor is an engineer, but it is what he doesn't know about the man that preoccupies him. He feels stymied over having to wait until he turns 18 before California Cryo-bank will formally contact his donor and ask whether the man wishes to speak with him. "If I had the chance," Ryan says, "I'd tell him, 'I want to meet you now because there's a half of me -- mental, emotional and physical -- that I'm not sure about, and also because we have a common interest -- engineering.' To see him would complete me."

Nobody knows for sure how many donor-conceived children are out there. But the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's estimate that 80,000 to 100,000 inseminations with donor sperm are performed annually suggests there may be a large group of kids like Ryan seeking to meet a biological father. Complicating their challenge, says Wendy Kramer, is that California Cryo-bank and other U.S. sperm banks do not have records of where all their donors live. Nor for that matter, the sperm banks acknowledge, do they have complete records of how many sperm-purchasing women have given birth, or where their children live.

One school of international medical ethicists, pointing to legal reforms in several foreign countries, argues that the only realistic means for guaranteeing that children be able to contact their donors is to prohibit anonymity in the donor process. In Britain, where a national registry keeps track of sperm donors, a new law gives every child conceived with the aid of donated sperm the right to learn the donor's identity upon turning 18. Switzerland, Sweden, the Netherlands, and New Zealand have similar laws requiring varying degrees of donor identification.

A rival of California Cryobank, the Virginia-based Fairfax Cryobank, has announced its hope to institute a voluntary donor identity release program next fall, though a Fairfax spokeswoman reported that so far only about 10 percent of active donors indicate they are interested, about the same level of interest as among California Cryobank's donors.

Rothman knows that such numbers will not please critics of the sperm banks. But he says that the openness activists among donor-inseminated mothers have forgotten about the goal that had once been their priority: giving birth. "I know Wendy Kramer would like Ryan to be able to meet his donor by the time he turns 18, and preferably before," Rothman says. "I know she thinks she didn't get the right deal. But she signed a paper [before purchasing sperm]. She knew what [donor] anonymity was. And she knew that our donors

wanted anonymity and trusted they would receive anonymity. Here's a question: Ask Wendy Kramer and Ryan if they would take their kind of 'openness' if it meant Ryan would never have been born?"

On their last full day together, Rubino takes Leah, Aaron and Raechel McGhee to Disneyland. Leah is wearing her sperm pin, and Aaron his Best Buddies T-shirt. By 1 p.m., they've already been on several rides and had their pictures taken with Mickey Mouse; Leah is humming "It's a Small World." Now they're in Mickey's Toontown, and a beaming McGhee, noticing everybody relaxing on a bench, says she'll use the moment to visit the restroom.

"Stay with Daddy," she orders the kids.

"We'll all sit together," Rubino says, asking Aaron to stay put, please. Just to test the situation, Aaron walks off a few steps. Rubino retrieves him, tickles him, and the kid laughs.

"Where's Leah?" Rubino asks.

Leah's not around.

"Where's Leah?"

With Aaron staying close, he checks the nearest attraction, the S.S. Miss Daisy boat, scouring both the top and lower deck. Nothing.

"Leah? Leah?"

She's been missing two minutes, maybe. Now he's running, headed toward the next attraction, Goofy's Bounce House. "Leah?" He steps over a barrier, ignores a Disneyland employee, cuts through a line, and there she is, her blond hair making her stand out among a pack of kids. He swoops her up, calls for Aaron, and they trudge back to the bench.

McGhee reappears. "Hi, everybody." She turns to Leah. "Where's your jacket?"

Rubino scurries back to find the jacket.

McGhee watches him, smiling. "A little parental mishap, I see."

Aaron says grimly, "We have one more day, and then we gotta go."

"We'll be coming back, sweetheart."

After Rubino returns with the jacket, McGhee says, "We're all going to work hard and maybe make lots of money, and maybe Daddy will make the big mural for the sperm bank."

By 5 o'clock, Rubino looks a little tired. With the kids trolling for souvenirs, he sits, chewing on a big piece of red licorice, watching Leah trying on princess crowns, wondering how much of this day she'll be able to recall in a few years. A determined McGhee, trying to bolster the chance that Leah will remember this week with him, has had the girl sitting with Rubino on all two-person rides today. "Leah, take your Daddy's hand, and let's go," McGhee says, and they bound down Disneyland's Main Street, looking for a spot from which to watch the afternoon's last parade.

The little bit of sun that is left falls out of the sky, and the temperature plummets. Rubino and Aaron sit on a curb, and the boy looks up at him with a serious expression. "I want to stay here late," Aaron says.

"Sure, sure," Rubino says. "We don't have to go anywhere for a long time."

The next morning, Aaron lies on the tan sofa, not moving. His mother has changed out of a long T-shirt from California Cryobank that she has been wearing on these last nights as a nightgown, the front of which has an illustration of swimming sperm headed into eggs, and the back of which offers a slogan: "All Of The Tomorrows Are In The Seeds Of Today." She is scurrying around, calling out over her shoulder: "What are you doing, sweetheart? We have to get ready to leave for the airport."

Aaron just stares at her. Zero more days. He has packed away his art supplies, finished with the last of his smiley face drawings. As his departure day has approached, he has colored steadily less around the smiley faces. Today's smiley face has no colors around it.

They eat muffins out on the backyard patio. McGhee turns to Rubino and taps his shoulder. "I want you to get yourself a cell phone," she says. "You need one, because you don't have the best car in the world. You're a father now . . . And you need to get a vent in this place so that when you paint you won't breathe the fumes . . . And you're going to stop eating all that crap you like, right -- all that food with the MSG in it? And you'll get to a gym?"

Rubino chuckles and nods compliantly.

Aaron walks over to Rubino, holding a milk-rimmed, disposable plastic cup that he has wrapped a rubber band around and turned into a present. "I made this for you," he says. "So you'll remember me."

Rubino bends and tousles the boy's hair. "Hey," he says, trying to summon his happiest voice. "I have so many memories of you that I'll remember you all the time. Oh, my gosh -- I'll be sending you tons of e-mails and calling you."

The boy just looks up at him.

"I better grab your things," Rubino says to McGhee, his eyes welling. He hauls their luggage to the car. Then he walks inside to join the boy on the sofa, lifting him and depositing him on his lap, tickling him as Aaron watches a cartoon.

"Don't do that, Dad," Aaron says.

"What did you call me?" He's seen the name in notes and holiday cards from the children, but he's not sure he has ever heard Aaron call him that.

"I just want to sit here. No tickling, Dad."

"Okay."

But, finally, it's time. Aaron pets Rubino's dog and says goodbye to the frogs. Then everybody gets into the car. The sky could not be brighter.

"Wouldn't you know the weather is finally perfect on the day we're leaving and headed back to a snowstorm," McGhee says.

Once at the airport, everything moves so quickly. Lines are short today. McGhee gets their boarding passes, and they're walking to the security line, Leah skipping in front of her mother, Rubino holding Aaron's hand.

"Hey, stop," Rubino says to him. They've reached the security line. "I have to say goodbye here. Give me a

hug."

He bends and hugs the boy. "'Bye," Aaron says, hugging back, staring at him.

"See you next time," Rubino whispers to him.

"Okay."

He looks up. "Bye, Raech." He embraces her, kissing her on the cheek. He turns and hugs Leah. Then the three are walking through the security scanner, looking back at him, waving.

In the days ahead, he will remember keenly what this parting felt like, the swift desolation of it. By the time he will leaves the airport parking lot, however, he will already be thinking about other things, pondering his work, refocusing his attentions, vowing to spend long days with his canvases. He will realize over the next month that some things about him have not changed. "I guess the future is wide open, but I still can't get my mind around the idea of a traditional family," he will say. "I've told Raechel . . . that I'll be there for [her] and the kids. At the same time, as an artist, I seem to do better and be more creative alone. I need solitude often. I can't ignore that fact. On the other hand, every moment I spend with these children I cherish."

By then, Raechel McGhee will be taking early steps to uproot her psychotherapy practice and move with her children to Los Angeles, talking about it from Massachusetts to Rubino. With his support, she will have begun the process of redoing her will to give custody of her children to him should she die, and of changing her children's names to Aaron Rubino McGhee and Leah Rubino McGhee. She will say that she still sees, in her mind's eye, her children's expressions as they are hugging Rubino goodbye. "They couldn't stand letting him go," she will say. "I can see the looks on all of our faces during that week -- the happiness. I know this: Those looks are on Mike's mind, too."

Back at the airport, those looks during the last moments in Los Angeles freeze Mike Rubino. Leah turns and blows him a kiss from the top of a stairway beyond the security scanner. McGhee smiles at him and mouths slowly: Love you, love you. It is only Aaron who hasn't looked back, already well beyond the stairway and gone, it seems. But then he's back, standing on the top step and looking down at his father, his small hands jutting out, waving slowly. He has waited his whole life to wave at the former 929.

Michael Leahy is a Magazine staff writer. He will be fielding questions and comments about this story Monday at 1 p.m. at washingtonpost.com/liveonline.