

HOME » FEATURES » THE NEW FAMILY » ELENI MANDELL AND THE NEW FAMILY



Photos by Daiana Feuer

The New Family

Eleni Mandell and the New Family

One sperm donor, two grandparents, two toddlers and an ex-boyfriend/nanny/uncle. How one single mother redefined “family.”

Like

Pin it

EMAIL

SHARE

Written by
Margaret Wappler

When she was 39, Los Angeles musician [Eleni Mandell](#) hit a crisis point. The wedge in her two-year relationship became painfully sharp: She wanted children and her boyfriend Rob Pash did not. End of story, or so it would seem. Rob and Eleni

called it quits.

There are two expected outcomes to this tale. Either Eleni would dig into an adventurous single life of European tours and Bloody Mary brunches and forget about having kids. Or she'd grab the first man she didn't hate and rapidly procreate. But Eleni didn't take either of those directions. Instead, she turned to donor insemination, leading to almost two years of fertility injections, dashed hopes, the mourning of her married-girl dreams and at the end, twin babies, a boy and a girl. Rob was in the delivery room, distracting her with jokes during the C-section surgery.

Four years later in her sunny living room, Della and Rex, now toddlers, are climbing all over her while she sits in a comfy blue chair. A new kind of family has clustered around Rex and Della, including Rob as their nanny/uncle and Eleni's parents, her aunt, her sister and brother, not to mention a network of friends. After a few minutes of being a human jungle gym, Eleni declares it naptime and ushers them into the apartment's lone bedroom (which, incidentally, another ex-boyfriend, singer-songwriter Charlie Wadhams, painted for her).

Eleni is part of a growing trend of women opting for solo motherhood and forging their own non-traditional support systems. Recent statistics cited in the New York Times show 41 percent of babies are now born to single moms. More than half of births to American women under 30 occur outside marriage. On the [Donor Sibling Registry](#), a website that helps form connections among the children conceived by sperm, egg or embryo donation, 50% of the users, according to founder Wendy

We're distilling and delivering the best in news, entertainment, culture and exclusive offers.



Q&A: Heather Graham, Sex-Positive Feminist

Kramer, are single mothers by choice, a stark departure from its start in 2000 when mostly heterosexual couples logged in.

Getting pregnant through donor insemination is “the hardest thing I’ve ever done,” Eleni says now. “But I was on a mission. I just couldn’t imagine life without being a mother.”

Eleni’s parents, who live in nearby Sherman Oaks, supported her decision but it still wasn’t an easy solution. At night she’d browse through sperm donors’ online profiles, paying separately for each photo and video interview. Imagine online dating but 1,000 times more alienating. Shopping for a biological father “felt like creepy science fiction.”

“I had a lot of judgments about the kind of woman who would have to have a child on her own,” Eleni says. “I felt like, ‘This means I’m a failure. Nobody wanted to marry me.’ So I had to mourn this fairy tale that I was going to get married, have two kids by the time I was 30, and a house and all that stuff.”

It didn’t help that her first several attempts with a few different donors, using both Intrauterine Insemination (IUI) and the In-Vitro Fertilization (IVF) procedures, all failed. Each time it didn’t work, Eleni was crushed.

Louise, Eleni’s mother, fielded the teary phone calls from her daughter who was often performing in a distant city while promoting her 2009 album, “Artificial Fire.” “We kept thinking this would be it but then it wouldn’t happen,” Louise said. “It’s hard to watch your child going through that kind of disappointment.” Plus, resources were dwindling: Each vial of sperm cost \$560, not to mention some \$200 to deliver it frozen. Insurance covered the IUI procedures but the IVF ones, costing \$15,000 a pop (not including medication), were paid for by her parents. Eleni estimates that over the course of two years of trying, she spent \$40,000 and her parents went in for \$30,000.

“Though she’d experienced many setbacks, Eleni decided to try again with a donor who had long hair, a degree in astrophysics and a penchant for classic rock.”

Though she’d experienced many setbacks, Eleni decided to try again with a donor who had long hair, a degree in astrophysics and a penchant for classic rock. This time she paid for it through the Jewish Free Loan Association, a micro-lending agency. Lo and behold, it worked.

“I still have the pregnancy test. The nurses all crowded around to congratulate me,” Eleni said. “I’d been there so much I knew all their names.” During her pregnancy, Eleni stayed busy recording her eighth solo album, “I Can See the Future,” which frequently references Eleni’s unique experience in the lyrics. She’d also talk about it on stage, to the occasional gasp of concert goers.

Rocky pregnancy aside – she had gestational diabetes and pre-eclampsia -- her babies were born healthy. “They came out weird-looking, according to Eleni, but I thought they were gorgeous,” Rob says. “We’d been talking about these kids for years and years. To be there when they’re finally born and they’re OK, it was very moving for me.”

If he sounds like a proud dad, that’s because in many ways, he is. Once a week, Rob works as a nanny for Eleni, coming in by train from his parent’s place in Placentia, an hour away. He’s also accompanied Eleni on a couple of tours, including nearly a month in Europe. He was with the kids the first time they saw snow in Germany.

“For a guy like me, prone to depression,” Rob says, “it’s a privilege to spend time with these kids who remind me that life can be amazing.” But he also gets to hand them back at the end of the day. “I’m ingrained in their lives and I’m a member of the family,” Rob says. “But if I had been the biological dad, I would feel obligated to be fully involved.”



Erica Oyama Gets Paid To Spoof The Bachelor



The Fight to Criminalize 'Revenge Porn'



Emily Bazelon on Bullying



Financial Advice For Broke TV Characters

-
- **How to Get Animal Rights Wrong Without Realizing it**
 - **Finding Mr. Right (-Sized Penis)**
 - **Does Porn Affect Teenage Sex Lives?**
 - **Why Men Fake Orgasms**
 - **How To Pass Gun Legislation**
-



What's The Fantasy Behind 'Yellow Fever'?



The First Ever Madam President Will Be....



Why The Boston Marathon Bombers Could Have Been Women



Mother Uses Daughter as Surrogate



How To Pass Gun Legislation

Eleni agrees that having clear divisions helps. “We get along so much better,” Eleni says with a laugh, “now that he’s a paid employee.”

Della and Rex aren’t lacking for love or support. It’s fair to say they have people clamoring to be close to them. At least once a week, they’re at their grandparents’ house, baking cookies and playing with water guns. Eleni’s aunt has also stepped up, converting her residence into a veritable playhouse. Even Rob’s parents are jockeying for time.



Maybe other relatives will factor into Della and Rex’s life later on. Using the Donor Sibling Registry, which has been featured on Oprah and Good Morning America, Eleni’s made contact with a few of the parents of Della and Rex’s half-siblings. Turns out, according to who’s currently registered as using the same astrophysicist donor, that Della and Rex have 25 half-brothers and sisters, definitely enough to start a harmonizing family band a la *The Sound of Music*.

People are shocked to see these kinds of numbers, Wendy Kramer says, but it’s typical for an industry that barely has regulations in the U.S. She’s seen some donors have as many as 150 offspring. But she’s also seen some of the connections fostered by the DSR flourish into full-fledged familial bonds.

“I hear stories every day of people expanding and redefining their family. I’ve seen some people share parenting duties,” Kramer says. The DSR claims 38,680 registered users; more than 9,889 have gotten in touch, a number that grows everyday.

In her own sphere, Eleni’s children have already expanded the outlook of her parents. Her father Michael, a dentist, says he’d always believed in women’s rights to make their own reproductive decisions but he also believed a family needs a man and a woman. “Now I feel otherwise,” he said. “Fortunately she has lots of family here but it’s still been a big change for her. Eleni is an extraordinary mother on her own. It makes you wonder about all those profound, deep questions.”

Eleni, too, has questioned the assumed definition of family. “People said to me, ‘I would never do it without a husband,’ and I just think, Look around at the marriages that you know. Most of my married friends are very resentful of their husbands because they’re doing 90% of it by themselves.”

Parenting by herself hasn’t led to resentment for Eleni. Instead, it’s yielded more freedom and a sense of fulfillment. “Before I used to feel like something or someone was always missing. But I live so much more in the moment now.”



What is a Computer, Anyway?

[More Videos](#)