



Photos by Jennifer Roberts
Peter Ellenstein hams it up with some of his biological children at the home of the producer who's hoping to spin a reality series out of the story

This Sperm Donor Didn't Think Much About His Side Gig—Until 20-Plus Children Surfaced

Decades after a stint as a prolific sperm donor, Peter Ellenstein's biological brood continues to grow

By **Rene Chun** - September 10, 2018

It's a clever lie that comforts and reassures us: *sperm donor*. We know the truth. Men don't donate sperm. They sell it. Current market price: \$100 a "sample." Like most sperm donors, that's all Peter Ellenstein thought about: the money. Then, on October 6, 2017, at 10:55 a.m., a Facebook message pinged his iPhone, and things changed. "Hi, Peter," it began. "I was born in 1994 due to in vitro fertilization.... The reason I am messaging you is that I believe you may have been the donor.... If you choose not to maintain contact or even respond, I understand completely and will not hold it against you. I just want to say thank you."

The sender was Rachel White, a 24-year-old musician raised by a single mother in Malibu. Ellenstein didn't reply to her message immediately. Fear, anxiety, and confusion washed over him. Denial, too. Maybe the sperm banks were hacked. There was regret as well. After all, he had been a prolific sperm donor during the period when Rachel was born.

Like everything Ellenstein did to bankroll a fledgling acting career—waiting tables, background acting, TV production gigs—selling sperm was just another job. There was paperwork and a schedule. But unlike those other positions, being a sperm donor offered high pay for minimal effort.

From 1987 to 1994, the L.A. native sold his gametes to two local sperm banks. Seven years is quite a run. The typical donor stint lasts no more than a year. Eighteen months is gold-watch territory.

Even more impressive than the longevity was the output. The most ambitious donors strive to deposit three specimens each week. Ellenstein would often pencil in up to five appointments in the same time span.

The boilerplate guideline at sperm banks is for donors to abstain from sex for 48 to 72 hours between appointments; some clinical data suggests that not ejaculating for a few days improves sperm quality. The metrics include things like morphology (as in shape; poor symmetry queers the deal), motility (forward movement is good; swimming in circles is bad), and concentration. A high count is vital because the process of freezing sperm with liquid nitrogen vapor at minus 321 degrees Fahrenheit and then thawing it for implantation kills a lot of active ingredient. Only about half the swimmers survive the perilous journey from the cryo-vat to the tepid water bath in the exam room.

Not only was Ellenstein donating far beyond the recommended norm, but he was sexually active. Yet his sperm still passed muster. At the 1980s market rate, he could, without breaking a sweat, clear \$900 a month, enough to cover the rent on a Sherman Oaks apartment, make a car payment, buy ramen, and stay off unemployment.

His official ID status, as with every donor during that period, had always been “anonymous” at the sperm banks. He was identified as either Donor No. 305 or No. 217, depending on the sperm bank. The combined inventory was tremendous, perhaps as high as 2,000 vials, each capable of fertilizing an egg and producing an embryo.

Ellenstein knew his potent seed had sired some children. Occasionally he would hear from a nurse or receptionist at the sperm bank that one of his vials had hit the mark. These success stories earned him the honorific that infertility specialists, and the clients who sought their consultation, put so much stock in: “Proven Donor.” He took pride in those pregnancies, but like the population of a distant city, those births were an abstraction—numbers, not real people.

Then Rachel White came along. She had managed to locate [Ellenstein's IMDb profile](#), with its batch of acting credits from the 1980s. He was “Boy #2” in *The Last American Virgin* and “Roy's Ski Buddy #3” in the cultish *Better Of Dead*. His small-screen persona was more of the same: A recurring role on *Knots Landing* as “Male Jogger/Young Man” marked the pinnacle of his TV career.

That anonymity vanished after Rachel posted her personal information on the [Donor Sibling Registry](#), a nonprofit website billed as a clearinghouse for donor-conceived individuals seeking to locate their half siblings as well as the people whose eggs and sperm had made their existence possible. It wasn't launched to out gamete donors or facilitate the stalking of donor siblings. The phrase used in a promo video is “mutually desired contact.” With only 59,000 members worldwide, this is a modest operation, but it works. So far the DSR has posted more than 15,000 donor-sibling and sibling-sibling matches on its website.

While Rachel waited for a reply from her biological father, Ellenstein hunkered down like a trial witness caught in a lie, repeating to himself: “She has the right to contact me, but I have the right to refuse that contact.” But Rachel's words weighed on him. Eight hours and 25 minutes after her message arrived, he pecked out a reply on his phone. He would talk to her. The two agreed to meet the next day. Ellenstein chose the location: a friend's house on Rodeo in Beverly Hills. He wanted to make a good first impression.

“A different part of my brain opened up,” Ellenstein says, describing that first encounter. “I felt like I owed her something.” What exactly? “I don't know—my best self.” The meeting started with a long embrace, followed by tears. They studied each other's faces. There was no doubt. Rachel

had inherited the dominant gene that one family friend refers to as the “Ellenstein bug eyes.” Standing before her was the father she never had because her mother didn’t meet the right guy.

Three weeks later, Rachel told Ellenstein what she knew she couldn’t risk telling him over the phone: “There’s more.” He had already mentally prepared for this moment. Smiling, he pulled out his phone and began adding the names Rachel dictated to him—12 at the time.

Soon the head count would stand at 19. But considering that stockpile of vials, there would undoubtedly be more sibs. Maybe dozens more. Run the most conservative numbers, and the projection is daunting: three sperm bank appointments a week, each specimen yields an average of 2 one-cc vials, 6 vials a week, 312 vials a year, 2,184 vials over 7 years; 1 vial = 1 insemination, average number of vials to produce a pregnancy = 6. Are you sitting down, Mr. Ellenstein? That’s 364 possible births.



Top row, left to right: Rachel White, Dexter Elliott, Griffin Kelly
Second row: Jeremy, Alana Shannon, Jamie

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He’s actually slumping more than sitting, which is the posture any 57-year-old would assume in a chair after driving for ten hours in L.A. traffic. It’s as if he’s cracked the Uber code by channeling all the tantric energy from his raging lingam to the steering wheel. The workload averages 1,000 miles a week, and on a good day he makes more than \$200 in fares, wear and tear on his Prius (and lumbar) be damned. When a guy is between jobs and finds out he’s paterfamilias to a small tribe, he does what it takes to make a buck. Ellenstein has stopped at a friend’s house in Westside Village to rehydrate and use a clean bathroom before knocking off for the day. He doesn’t look like a fertility god or, as he prefers to call himself, “the Sperminator.” Middle age covers him like moss on a rock. The pepper in his hair is long gone. It’s platinum now, and thinning fast. The four-day growth, white and scraggly, ages him further. As do the bags suspended beneath his eyes like tiny hammocks and the belly that fills out an untucked T-shirt. Here is the alpha male spent, grizzled, put out to pasture. Screw a dusty Stetson on his head and he could pass for the chuck wagon cook in an old RKO western.

Ellenstein's last steady job was two years ago, and it wasn't in front of the camera. By the '90s he had grown disillusioned with screen acting and had begun to direct and produce theater projects. His L.A. premiere of Sondheim and Weidman's *Assassins* at the Los Angeles Theatre Center, where it was extended several times, is still the longest-running production of that show ever mounted. He served for seven years at the Los Angeles Repertory Company as a producing director, then for 13 more as the artistic director at the William Inge Center for the Arts, a respected thespian outpost in Independence, Kansas (population 9,000). His last job ended after four months: interim artistic director at Gretna Theatre in Pennsylvania.

At the time, he was still married. His wife, Annette, had a ten-year-old daughter when they wed in 2009, making him both a stepdad and a husband. "Peter really adored Ava," says Ellenstein protégé Hannah Joyce-Hoven. "He gave her the kind of shiny baubles that her real dad couldn't—trips to L.A., where he introduced her to directors and actors, and trips to New York to see plays."

Ellenstein can no longer afford those luxuries. A man of his age and financial position should be staring into the abyss and trembling. Instead, he flashes a Buddha smile, all calm and serene, as if he bought Apple at \$22 and is set for life. He admits things could be better: "I'm broke, I don't know where I'm going to live, I don't have a job, I'm declaring bankruptcy, I'm getting a divorce, and I have 19 kids that I didn't know I had." Despite these hardships, he claims he's never been happier. "I did nothing to deserve this," he says of the fatherhood that has been thrust upon him. "I'm the luckiest person in the world."

Rachel White knew she was a donor child from the beginning. Her single mom had made no secret of it. The paternity search started in third grade. When she explains her motivation, it's the same Greek chorus recited by countless donor progeny: "I always wanted siblings. I always wanted to know the history of how I got here, where my grandparents came from, and what led me to be on this Earth." That might be pushing it, so she adds, "Just a photograph would be cool."

Eighteen is a magic number for the artificially conceived. It's the age when the offspring of "open" or "ID-release" donors can contact their sperm bank and file a request to meet their biological parent. The privacy of so-called anonymous sperm donors like Ellenstein used to be secure, but then the internet happened.

Frequently all that's needed to find an anonymous donor today is a computer and a donor number, which the sperm banks share with every customer. Rachel also logged onto the [23andMe](#) website to find DNA matches. One of them put her in touch with Alana Shannon, a 23-year-old L.A. City College student who pines to be a voice-over anime actress. The Donor Sibling Registry also made a match, flagging the two women for having the same donor number. Their genetic profiles, which indicated about 25 percent identical DNA (true of all half siblings), confirmed the shared bloodline.

Rachel's original DSR post, back in 2003, was the trial balloon. Fourteen years later, the genealogy thread gathered momentum. Rachel told Alana that her mother knew another single mom who'd purchased some Ellenstein vials. That woman's donor son, 26-year-old Noah Sayres, was a cryptocurrency-trading "techie" trying to fund a marijuana delivery startup in Santa Barbara. They met by chance: She and Noah played together at the same Mommy-and-Me classes as kids in L.A. It wasn't until later, when their mothers began exchanging birth stories on a park bench, that the donor number connection was made.

Alana also had some sibling news to spill. The DSR algorithm hadn't flagged two donor-number matches; it flagged three. She had a fraternal twin: Bridget, an assistant manager at a Westside sushi bar. They lived with their divorced mother in Silver Lake. Unlike Rachel, the Shannon twins

didn't discover they were donor kids until 14, when Alana approached her mother and pulled out this zinger: "Papi isn't our real dad, is he?" It was more of a statement than a question. The ectomorphic body type, the big eyes and small gestures, their intellectual curiosity and creativity—these were the genetic artifacts that haunted them and fueled late-night conversations about nature, nurture, and self-identity.

If there was a sperm donor, Alana wanted to meet him. Not to shed tears or to hit the psychic pay dirt that signals closure, but to understand who she is and what she might become. "I knew this wasn't a bad person after our first hug," she says, recounting her initial encounter with Ellenstein in a local coffee shop. "Human touch conveys everything—I felt safe."

Rachel, Noah, and the twins weren't alone. More DNA panels and donor numbers were syncing up. There was Dexter Elliott, a brilliant half sibling pursuing an astrophysics degree at the University of New Mexico, and 19-year-old Natalie Jones, a child psychology major at Arizona State University. There was Tyee Williams, a half sib studying environmental science in Ecuador, and Jeremy, a 29-year-old comedian based in Ventura who sometimes travels to Shanghai, where he works as an English tutor and SAT guru for Ivy League hopefuls.

The number got another bump with the Krone triplets: Brittany, an "environmental restoration science" major at UC Davis; Michael, a Navy man stationed in Guam ("the only Trump voter in the group," Alana discovered); and Courtney, a zoology major at UC Santa Barbara. The triplets didn't need a donor number or genome analysis. All it took was Brittany testing her own blood in high school biology class. Unable to explain the impossible deviation between the various family member blood types, Mrs. Krone confessed that all her children were donor-conceived.

Rachel Alexandra White—a woman who could speak spontaneously, eloquently, and at length on many subjects—only managed to utter a single word after hearing this sib roll call: "Wow."

"Then it was quiet for a year," says Alana. But more recently another member of this postmodern family has turned up every month.



Top row, left to right: Teresa Murtha, Adam Robert Sherman, Courtney Krone
Second row: Noah Sayres, Bridget Shannon, Jonathan Alex Rogers

JENNIFER ROBERTS

Peter Ellenstein wasn't ready for parenthood as a young man. He didn't think he had the patience for raising a toddler. Now, unwilling to settle for being a donor dad, he wants to be a real dad. He dismisses any talk of divine intervention or magical thinking. "I don't believe in a higher power; I believe in inputs and outputs," he says emphatically. Still, he acknowledges that something extraordinary has happened. "I put this stuff out into the universe, and now it's coming back to me."

Almost as extraordinary to him is that most of his offspring are willing to make a place in their lives for a long-lost biological father. Several have established a tight bond with the "social dads," as they're known, who have raised them to adulthood. For them, Ellenstein will never be a paternal substitute. But for many of the others—the ones reared by single, lesbian, or divorced moms, or who are estranged from their social dads and yearning for a father figure—his presence has been celebrated. "I feel an incredible responsibility to all these people," he says earnestly. "This was what was lacking in my life. It's the perfect thing to have come along."

He begins making plans to meet many of them for the first time at a donor child get-together in March. Thirteen of the 19 siblings are showing up in L.A. that week, and Ellenstein has micromanaged the event like a manic cruise director. There's a conversation cheat sheet, which features thumbnail sketches of the siblings. A six-day "Clan Schedule" has been blasted out, too. Highlights include attending a March for Our Lives rally and snapping selfies on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

One thing is glossed over on the schedule: the "video interviews." In addition to letting me tag along with him for a week, Ellenstein has signed a contract with two television producers who are pitching his life story around town as a docuseries. A family friend with industry connections served as the conduit. "I realize that this may be my chance to actually make some real money for once," he texted the friend, "and I don't want to miss it."

Michael Maloy, a television veteran with executive producer credits that include reality TV fodder (*Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*) and award-winning documentaries (*9/11*), pulled the trigger on the project after the first lunch meeting. “I’m interested in human drama,” says Maloy. “This puts in sharp focus how our definition of family is changing and explores what it means to be a father or a sibling.” Not that he’s uninterested in the usual reality TV strife: “At what point does Peter tap out and say, ‘I can’t handle this’? Nobody has the bandwidth for such a large flock. This is a hero’s journey.”

Maloy’s coproducer, Brian Weidling, says that after he read Rachel’s wistful text, the project was immediately front-lined. In fact, there’s already been talk of shooting an episode in Israel so some of the sibs can channel their new inner Jew. “This is the überfamily,” Weidling gushes, switching into pitch mode. “Peter starts with one donor kid, and ends up with 20. By the end of the third season, we should be in the mid-30s.”

Cynics will dismiss this as a hustle: the failed actor, gone to seed and on the skids, flogging his paternity in order to sell the Netflix hit that will get him off the odometer treadmill and back on his feet. But they haven’t heard a jaded and bitter donor kid call Ellenstein “Dad,” first with sarcasm and just for laughs, but later with sincerity and tenderness. For Rachel, however, the connection was immediate. “We have similar personalities. I feel very close to him,” she says of her new biological father. “He’s funny, and has great taste in movies and books. He’s a very special dude.”

Even with cameras and lights hovering, there’s genuine emotion when the Sperminator meets his out-of-town kids for the first time. There’s always a bear hug. When they break the clench, his eyes are red, and a euphoric expression illuminates his face. This isn’t just hitting a mark and delivering some lines. If Ellenstein could act like that during an audition, he wouldn’t have been typecast as Boy #2.

Like their sperm-donor dad, most of the sibs are also comfortable in front of a camera. Which is fortunate because much of this six-day meet-and-greet is likely to be recorded. About 20 hours of the video coverage will be edited down to a six-minute “sizzle reel” that will serve as the proof-of-concept trailer during pitch meetings with programming execs. The working title is *All Peter’s Children*, but the sibs have other ideas: *The Peter Principle*, *Who’s Your Daddy?*, *Cryo Baby*, *Motility Mob*, and *Who Knew? Another Jew*. One that didn’t make the cut: *Desperate Diblings*. Among those who are donor-conceived, the cheeky portmanteau, a melding of *donor* and *sibling*, inspires love or hate, the same way that cilantro, camping, and the Kia Soul do.

The only thing nonnegotiable when hammering out contracts was pay scale. “Peter wants everyone to get the same fee,” Weidling says. That translates to between \$2,000 and \$3,000 per episode for the first two seasons. Not exactly Kardashian money, but it beats driving an Uber. And if the docuseries makes it to season three, Weidling says, the cast can make “some real dough.”

The expectant father is visibly nervous as he drives to LAX to pick up Jamie, a cyber-security expert in Michigan who has flown in from Detroit to join the sibling convention. Trailing the Sperminator through the airport like a paparazzo on deadline is a videographer toting a chunky DSLR attached to a Steadicam. When a text arrives, Ellenstein stops in his tracks, causing the lens to bump into his shoulder. Studying the message, he announces jubilantly, “Jamie is finally deplaning!”

The sizzle-reel protagonist then realizes that he was clean-shaven when he last Skyped with the sibs. He worries: What if this new son doesn’t recognize his bearded dad? But Jamie picks his biological father out of the crowd immediately, their bug eyes locking like magnets on a fridge. As

with Rachel, the family resemblance is obvious. Unlike her, though, Jamie is noticeably shy. To cut the tension Ellenstein turns to him and asks with the straightest of faces, “So what’s been happening the past 27 years?” Jamie laughs, relaxes, and the small talk starts to flow.

Variations on this scene will play out several more times over the next 24 hours. The one that makes the reel’s final cut is the arrival of Griffin Kelly, who was raised by four lesbian moms and studied film production. Fresh off a flight from Seattle, she mugs for the camera with Alana. The 12-inch height gap between the two triggers improvised silliness. Other sibs converge for a group hug as Ellenstein, standing by a baggage carousel, beams.

During the ride home later in a rented Dodge minivan, the dopamine levels are spiking. The sibs, all of them in their twenties, play the roles of restless and bratty kids. Cornball comments like “Are we there yet?” and “I have to go to the bathroom” are met with the timeworn and hollow threat from behind the wheel: “Don’t make me come back there!” Ellenstein and Alana, who are both fluent in the ’60s folk canon, sing a few verses of “Lemon Tree,” a cappella. Everyone else in the minivan groans.



California Cryobank communications director Scott Brown at the company's Sawtelle facility, where Ellenstein sold his sperm for three years

JENNIFER ROBERTS

The hoary cliché is that it’s easier to get into Harvard than to become a sperm donor. “Less than one percent” is the undocumented statistic the industry touts as its donor acceptance rate. Considering the industry’s high cost of recruitment and screening—at least \$2,000 per candidate—that’s likely an exaggeration. On the other hand, Harvard University doesn’t demand semen, blood, and urine samples, or subject its applicants to genetic and physical exams. Not to mention a medical history dating back several generations.

What the “Big Three” sperm banks—California Cryobank, Fairfax Cryobank, and Xytex Cryo International—*don’t* ask for during the application process is much in the way of introspection. Yale University sociologist Rene Almeling insists that’s a problem. “Egg agencies require every single woman who is a donor to sit down with a psychologist and think about how she’s going to feel about having biological children out in the world,” she tells me. “Sperm banks don’t require that kind of consultation. They say, ‘Come in, masturbate, and we’ll pay you.’ They’re doing a

disservice to the sperm donors who don't think about having 20 or 30 offspring, the kids who may want to contact them when they turn 18."

Elizabeth Prescott didn't think about that either. She's the girlfriend who suggested that Ellenstein become a sperm donor. As someone who sold her blood platelets, she was already riding the human-tissue gravy train. When a friend told her that a man could generate even more cash selling his sperm, she proposed a business plan that portrayed Ellenstein as both humanitarian and entrepreneur. "I was thinking that it could be such a blessing to couples who can't have children—and you could make money," says Prescott, who's divorced and never had kids. She and Ellenstein had discussed having children of their own, but like many plans young couples make, it didn't happen. When I ask what her reaction was after she discovered that her former boyfriend had fathered so many offspring, she says, "I went home and had a good cry."

The timing was ideal for tapping into the lucrative sperm-donor market. Visits to private medical practices for infertility consultations had jumped from 600,000 in 1968 to more than 900,000 in 1972. By 1983 infertility had become a pandemic, with consultations reaching more than 2 million. And the numbers kept rising. Failure to conceive is often framed as a female problem, but half of all infertility cases are attributed to "male factors"—hormonal imbalance, spermatic duct blockage, retrograde ejaculation, radiation exposure, obesity, drug abuse, genetic infertility...

Ellenstein sold his services to California Cryobank, an industry pioneer in Sawtelle that recruited from nearby UCLA. After three years, the inventory was topped off with enough Donor No. 305 vials, and he was "fired." So he began peddling his wares as Donor No. 217 at Procreative Technologies Inc., a smaller operation located on USC's Health Sciences Campus, earning \$75 a shot, compared to CCB's \$45.

Any manual labor, no matter how peculiar, quickly becomes routine. Ellenstein learned that after the first month on the job. He would drive to the sperm bank in his Mazda pickup and enter through the back door. After some water cooler conversation with the staff, he'd head to a private space labeled "Collection Room," though employees more commonly referred to it as the "blue room" or the "masturbatorium." Ellenstein would wash his hands (to avoid sample contamination) and fantasize about the centerfold in a dog-eared copy of Playboy. After ejaculating into a sterile cup, he'd cap the specimen and print his donor number on the cup.

When female customers asked about Donor No. 305 or Donor No. 217, the nurses spoke of Ellenstein in glowing physical terms that ranged from "handsome" to "dreamy." The rest of the details can be found on his 1992 CCB "Donor Profile," a 26-page self-reported document. Ellenstein was six-foot, 160 pounds, with blue eyes, "medium" complexion, and brown hair. Blood type: B+. Occupation: "Director/Producer." The extended family history, covering heart disease to depression, was clean. One of the most important data points was buried on page four, under the heading "Fertility History." Semen: "Very Potent."

That wasn't résumé padding. In January 1987 Ellenstein's sperm count clocked in at 120 million per milliliter. Consider that in 1940 the mean sperm count concentration for men in their reproductive years was a robust 113 million per milliliter. By 1990, that number had plunged to 66 million. In other words, the Sperminator was almost twice as potent as the average breeder on the street or, as one male infertility expert once said, "This guy's sperm count is so high that it would even get *me* pregnant."

So how many more Ellenstein offspring might there be? A 2011 piece in *The New York Times* focused on one man who sired 150 kids. That number has since ballooned to about 200, a story reminiscent of Vince Vaughn's *Delivery Man*. An extreme outlier? Sure. But groups that approach

100 sibs do surface occasionally, and the Donor Sibling Registry has documented more than 20 groups composed of 75 or more siblings.

Ostensibly there's a cap that the sperm banks place on the number of children conceived by a donor. In 1993 the American Society for Reproductive Medicine practice guidelines limited that number to ten births. The purpose was to make the possibility of "inadvertent consanguinity"—donor offspring, unaware they are half sibs, meeting and having children together—statistically impossible. Tell that to Ellenstein. Three of the sibs had unknowingly met as children in L.A., and Rachel works less than a mile from where the Shannon twins live.

California Cryobank claims that ten donor children was the cap that it observed during Ellenstein's tenure. Perhaps to explain the increasing number of large half-sib groups clogging the Donor Sibling Registry, the company has since upped its "offspring limit," stating on its website, "The maximum goal is 25-30 family units worldwide per donor."

In 1997, three years after Ellenstein's retirement from the sperm trade, California Cryobank purchased Procreative Technologies. Records indicate PTI had known that Ellenstein was a former California Cryobank donor and approved his application anyway, despite the potential glut of Donor No. 305 sperm already sold and available. As for the PTI stock it bought, CCB states this on its website: "While we did not continue to sell their donors, we did retain some patient and donor files." Last December Ellenstein requested a tally of his donor kids. The details were murky, indicating four reported pregnancies: three CCB clients (twins confirmed with one client; the other two pregnancies have an "unknown outcome") and one PTI birth confirmation. These numbers didn't compute. After a subsequent request, the tally dipped to three.

"The sperm banks will tell you a different cap number depending on who answers the phone," says Wendy Kramer, the mother of a donor child and the founder of the Donor Sibling Registry. "It's all smoke and mirrors to hide the fact that they have no idea how many children are born from any one donor." The accounting is complicated further by the fact that California Cryobank, Fairfax, and Xytex sell their vials to hundreds of independent fertility clinics around the country that may or may not report confirmed births back to their suppliers.

To remedy this problem, Kramer sent a citizen petition to the FDA in January 2017 that the federal agency says is still under review. Among other things, the document recommends tracking all recipients, donors, and births; uploading that information to an accessible data bank; and requiring donors to regularly update their family medical history. It also seeks to limit the number of offspring per donor to ten family units (just like the U.K. and New Zealand). Kramer says that sales dictate offspring caps and nothing will change until the government steps in.

When I ask CCB communications director Scott Brown why there's no government oversight of the multibillion-dollar industry, he says, "It's easy to say that government should step in, but we really don't know what that means. From my perspective, an individual selecting a sperm bank should be responsible for doing their due diligence on that sperm bank and its policies."

Yale's Rene Almeling says it all comes down to marketing. While researching her book, *Sex Cells: The Medical Market for Eggs and Sperm*, she spoke off the record with the kind of insiders familiar with pushing gamete vials like pricey designer goods. "Sperm banks are in the market to sell the dream of a family to their clients," says the author. "I've been told that if they started posting the estimate of children born per donor, it would be a huge turnoff for those clients."

Trace Peter Ellenstein's procreative gifts to their source, and you find yourself in the Mar Vista of another era. His course was determined early on by his father, Robert, who appeared in more than a dozen feature films (including *Star Trek IV: The Voyage*

Home) and landed numerous supporting TV parts, several of them preserved in classics like *Get Smart*, *Mission: Impossible*, and *Columbo*. His most famous role was Licht, the villainous henchman in the Hitchcock thriller *North by Northwest*. He and his wife, Lois, hosted comedians, actors, directors, and other artists in nocturnal gatherings that were equal parts Algonquin Round Table, pajama party, and Friars Club Roast at their Purdue Avenue ranch house. Stars like Leonard Nimoy, Ed Asner, and Peter Falk would drop in periodically. Debates on politics, literature, and theater would run deep into the night. “I hated going to bed because I was afraid I would miss something, and I almost always did,” says Ellenstein, who’s one of three children. “All my life, I’ve been trying to re-create that tight-knit family I grew up with through my theater companies.”

His father gave him just one piece of show-biz advice: “If you want to make it as an actor, be in a hit movie. And if you can’t be in a hit movie, then work with a famous director.” But after 18 years of calls and auditions, his son managed to scrounge only a few phantom parts in disposable comedies. Although the odds of this docuseries becoming a hit are beyond long, Ellenstein is giddy. Not just because he has finally landed that elusive leading man role, but because he’s also been given the one thing that he says he’s been searching for since his Mar Vista days: a family.

While being mic’d up for an afternoon sizzle-reel shoot, his eyes dart around the set, soaking it all in, like a kid on his first trip to Dodger Stadium. As soon as the camera’s red light blinks on, Ellenstein slips into character. He’s articulate, charming, sympathetic, and does his retakes like a pro. It’s good stuff, but the reel needs a hook. When the executives hear that Jeremy does stand-up, they decide on a “*Seinfeld* intro.” Ellenstein calls in a favor from a friend to get his son a middling time slot in the *Rebels of Comedy*, a popular Thursday night showcase at the Federal Bar in NoHo.

Dressed in black jeans and a Red Hot Chili Peppers T-shirt, Jeremy comes on and does eight minutes while Ellenstein and five siblings look on. It’s predictable and inoffensive material about living with roommates, his failure to be a “snappy dresser,” and why he despises dog photos. Then, about four minutes in, he launches into the bit that Maloy and Weidling have been waiting for. “Is it all right if I get real with you here?” he says, with the two cameras humming. “I got some big news a couple months back: My mom sat me down and...said, ‘Jeremy, you’re a donor child.’” At first the crowd thinks it’s another gag, but as he gets deeper into the material, the pacing picks up and so does the laughter. The routine works because it’s personal and honest.

He ends the bit by saying what Peter Ellenstein and the siblings have been thinking ever since they found one another: “It’s a scary thing to meet these people. I want them to have the best impression of me. I want them to think that I’m cool and smart and interesting and compassionate.... It’s scary to make yourself vulnerable and invest in a new relationship, to live or die on somebody’s approval. Then I realized: That’s stand-up.”

Ellenstein’s rental is five minutes away on a run-down block. It’s better than a trailer park, but not by a wide margin. Scattered around the bungalow are a handful of relics from a previous life when money wasn’t scarce: a flat-screen TV, an Eames shell chair, a Dyson vacuum by the door. Cluttered, dark, and smelling faintly of cheap takeout, it’s not so much a home as it is a place to brood.

In the living room, the siblings perform a postmortem on Jeremy’s set. With no camera crew around, the family cuts loose. “I have a weak bladder. I thought I was going to pee myself,” says Alana excitedly. Bridget chimes in, sounding lukewarm: “You were a lot funnier than I expected you to be.” Jeremy is touched by the sib support at the club. “I felt super vulnerable and I am super grateful,” he says in his nebbishy offstage voice. “This is the nicest you guys have ever been to me.” When the sibs find out that he cut some donor jokes, they prod him to share one: “I feel so

much better about my sexual history now. Like, I don't have to feel embarrassed or guilty—my dad didn't even have sex with my mom.” Ellenstein laughs the hardest.



In March at LAX, Ellenstein meets biological son Jamie for the first time

JENNIFER ROBERTS

Not everyone in Ellenstein's circle of trust thinks this is a joke. Some of his childhood friends have reservations about endorsing this radical social experiment. “I have a 15-year-old kid, so I have an idea of what parenthood involves, and it certainly isn't meeting people in their twenties,” says Howard Cott, a longtime friend and U.S. Government Accountability Office analyst. “When I first heard about this, I thought, ‘Well, this is really weird and creepy.’” Backtracking a bit, he adds, “I'm happy that these kids found each other and have a functional dad who's not a serial killer.”

Steve Freeman, a television writer who has known Ellenstein since grade school, offers a more brutal assessment: “It's like Peter's handing out cigars whenever a new sibling pops up. Everybody in our group is a little tired of it. He's not their dad. He never changed a diaper. He wasn't there when they got dumped at homecoming or got beat up after school. I find this behavior patently annoying.” Freeman actually wrote a script in the '80s titled *The Donor* based on Ellenstein's life, when his friend was at the height of his sperm-merchant glory. The plot involves a virus that renders all men impotent. “Only one man on Earth avoids contracting the virus: Peter,” Freeman explains. “So the burden falls on him to save the human race.” Freeman chuckles at the irony of life imitating screenwriting whenever another sibling emerges: “Peter has actually become the character that I lampooned in the script. He thinks that he's Jesus Christ, the father of us all.”

Ellenstein's sister, Jan, and brother, David, are circumspect, too. David, for instance, wants no part of the docuseries. “I'm skeptical, and I will be protective of my family,” he warns. “I'm worried about exploitation and [the docuseries] becoming something that he and others are looking to make money from.” David has met five of the siblings and has seen his brother's “elation, genuine excitement, and love” for them in person, but he still worries. “I've heard that

several of them have unstable backgrounds and potential psychological problems. What happens if someone brings a lawsuit against him?”

While a couple of the siblings do have mental health issues (one was diagnosed with bipolar II disorder; another was born with agenesis of the corpus callosum, the neurological defect that Dustin Hoffman’s character grappled with in *Rain Man*), none of the parents have any complaints. That doesn’t ease David’s concern. “Dad’s side of the family had some craziness,” he says, the anxiety in his voice palpable. “Some people were certifiable; there were two kids who were not psychologically well their entire lives.”

Donors, and the sperm banks they sell their services to, do sometimes end up in court. In a recent high-profile case, it was revealed that James Aggeles had lied on his profile at the Xytex sperm bank in Athens, Georgia. On his application form, he claimed to be studying for his Ph.D. in neuroscience engineering. He said he was in good health and had a 160 IQ. In reality, he was a 39-year-old college dropout with a rap sheet, schizophrenia, and bipolar disorder. His sperm donations had resulted in at least 36 births between 2000 and 2014. Some client families are suing Xytex, alleging that employees continued to sell Aggeles’s sperm vials after his fraudulent credentials became known.

None of the bloodline madness that David Ellenstein noted was in his brother’s donor profile, but during a texting session with me, the Sperminator casually mentions that on his mother’s side of the family, “My great-grandmother killed my great-grandfather.” Asked how she committed this homicide, he replies: “Various stories. Boiling lye while he napped.” His explanation for her behavior: “Mentally ill.”

O n the last day of the family get-together, Ellenstein and 12 of his offspring meet for a photo shoot at Brian Weidling’s home, a midcentury-modern gem in Brentwood that has served as both crash pad and party venue for the sibs this week. Between the popping sound of the strobe light, the subjects strike poses on the living room sofa. Hamming it up, Ellenstein lies across the laps of several of the people that he helped bring into this world—a snapshot for his wallet.

After the shoot, he steps into another room and, nursing a beer, tallies the week’s highlights: watching Rachel play a gig at a club (“she had some decent stage presence”), brunch at the Griddle Cafe in Hollywood (“I looked at all of them in the booth and saw myself, which is perfect for me because I’m such a narcissist”), sightseeing on the Venice Boardwalk. “But this was my favorite memory: lying down on top of them on the couch,” he says, getting slightly weepy. “It was like the old trust exercise, being held up by these kids that came out of my loins—it was great.”

The raucous laughter in the other room bleeds through the door. “I feel closer to all of them,” Ellenstein says. “We have more connective tissue between us now.” I ask what that feels like. He gets googly-eyed and says, “Joy.” Despite all the DNA matches and cameras that hover like military drones, he still can’t quite believe it’s true. “There’s 12 of my children in this house, none of whom I knew six months ago,” he says through suppressed giggles. “It’s pretty fucking weird.”

He compares the last day of this visit to the closing of a successful play: people coming together for an intense experience and then leaving to return to their own families. He stresses, however, that this isn’t closing night. In fact, he was recently in contact with some playwrights about turning his life story into a stage production. He’s already blocked out the first scene: “Two actors, sitting onstage under tight spots. They take turns reading lines from Rachel’s message aloud.” He pauses for dramatic effect. “Then the siblings appear, and the group gets larger...and larger.”

Several weeks later, the Ellenstein group chat lights up. Sidney Weisberg-Sweetman, the youngest member of the family, surfaces in Van Nuys. The connection was made through 23andMe. Ellenstein composes the birth announcement within seconds of the news breaking: “No. 20. My new baby boy.” He’s vegan-kosher, likes *Dr. Who*, runs cross-country for his high school team, and has two moms.

The Sperminator is ecstatic. Not just because this is No. 20, but because Sidney was born in 2000—six years after Ellenstein’s last deposit. Like most donors, he thought that the sale of his sperm had stopped soon after his retirement. Sidney’s emergence changes the progeny calculus. “I have no doubt there are a lot more out there,” he says. “I can’t imagine the number is under 50.” He stops to reconsider, then adds, “But how many of them know, and of those, how many want to find me or the sibs?”

It doesn’t take long for another sib to appear: Melanie Sulkin, a 27-year-old resolution attorney who practices law in Denver. “We have our lawyer,” Ellenstein texts. “Now we just need a doctor, banker, mechanic, electrician....” The next one, though, turns out to be a copywriter in Encino, a 26-year-old woman named Laine Hammer.

That makes 22 or 23, depending on the scorekeeping rules. Of the four remaining siblings identified, one doesn’t want to connect, one is on the fence, one doesn’t know yet, and one is MIA. So far, Ellenstein has met 18 of the sibs in person and has spent “quality time” with each. He’s driven from Texas with Margaret, taken Noah to a San Francisco Giants game, thrown a bon voyage party for Jeremy at a karaoke bar before one of his Shanghai tutoring junkets, and gone with several of the sibs to a play that his brother directed. There was also a trip to France to meet another member of the clan: Mikayla. The social dad who raised her from birth, Gary Sibner, was willing to meet his daughter’s sperm donor, but wary. “You may not come from my body,” Sibner tells Mikayla frequently, “but you come from my heart.”

Ellenstein has even introduced his mother to his new sons and daughters. Asked if she considers these young people to be her grandchildren, 91-year-old Lois Ellenstein perks up and says, “How could I not?”

She’s right. Strip away the \$25 DNA kits and digital cryo-vats, the masturbatorium and fancy algorithms that allow a bunch of strangers to lock onto one another like ships beeping sonar in the night. What remains is the essence of humanity—the urge that compels us to know our history and record it, whether that means telling creation stories around a cave fire or sharing 60-second home movies on Instagram. This is a primal drive, something hardwired into our souls. It’s sacred, too. Nothing resonates more than family. Nothing. Just ask the Sperminator.

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