

'My Daddy's Name is Donor'

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Sperm donation and artificial insemination has become a billion-dollar industry in recent years and three summer flicks - *The Kids are All Right*, *Switch* and *The Back-up Plan* - feature women who conceived their children through anonymous donors. Three women discuss the increasingly popular and controversial method of conception: Wendy Kramer, founder of an online network where offspring and their sperm donors can connect; Elizabeth Marquardt, author of the study "My Daddy's Name is Donor" and Alana Stewart, who is trying to find her sperm donor father.

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MICHEL MARTIN, host:

This is TELL ME MORE from NPR News. I'm Michel Martin.

Coming up, I share my thoughts in my weekly Can I Just Tell You commentary. That's in just a few minutes.

But, first, we go Behind Closed Doors. That's the part of the program where we talk about things that often are not openly discussed. Today, though, we talk about something that is being talked about more openly more often. That is conception by means of sperm donation and artificial insemination. Not one, but three romantic comedies this summer have that as a theme.

First, there was Jennifer Lopez playing a commitment-phobic woman in "The Backup Plan." More recently, Annette Bening and Julianne Moore are featured as a lesbian couple whose kids seek out the man who donated the sperm that allowed them to become pregnant. That's in "The Kids Are All Right." And this week, Jennifer Aniston stars in "The Switch," playing an unmarried woman who gets pregnant using the sperm donated by a friend.

Given that 30- to 60,000 babies are born each year from sperm donation and it is now a billion dollar industry, it seems likely that more people will want to talk about what it means to become a parent in this way and to be conceived in this way. So to get that conversation going, we called Wendy Kramer. She had a son by a sperm donation in 1990. She later founded DonorSiblingRegistry.com -sorry, .org. She joined us from member station KGNU in Boulder, Colorado.

Also in the conversation is Elizabeth Marquardt. She's the author of the study, "My Daddy's Name is Donor" and editor of FamilyScholars.org.

Also with us, Alana Stewart. She's 24 years old. She was born by a sperm donation and she joins us to share her story. And I want to thank you all so much for joining us.

Ms. WENDY KRAMER (Founder, DonorSiblingRegistry.org): Thanks for having us.

Ms. ELIZABETH MARQUARDT (Author, "My Daddy's Name is Donor"; Editor, FamilyScholars.org):

Thank you so much.

Ms. ALANA STEWART: Thank you.

MARTIN: Alana, let's start with you. You have talked about on your blog that you grew up in a heterosexual household. You had a mother and a father figure, but you still felt you struggled with identity issues. Just talk a little bit about why you think this has something to do with the way you were conceived.

Ms. STEWART: Well, I feel like knowing my mother and experiencing all the pleasure of being biologically linked to her and everything we have in common has really emphasized what I do not have in common with my father figures.

MARTIN: Do you think that it would be different, though, I mean, divorce is so common in this country that you probably have friends whose parents are divorced?

Ms. STEWART: More than a few.

MARTIN: More than - yeah, so do you think that the issue has to do with that you felt this kind of lack of closeness with your stepdad? Or was this an issue with the person who was married to your mom at the time that you were born. Is it an issue with both men?

Ms. STEWART: I think both men are very comparative. The link that I had with my mother emphasized to them as well the disconnect that they had with me. And I just experienced a lack of investment on both of their parts. The psychological involvement and the engagement never quite manifested.

MARTIN: Elizabeth, can we bring you in? You brought a book in 2005 entitled "Between Two Worlds: The Inner Lives of Children of Divorce." And you've also studied the stories of children who are conceived via sperm donation. From your research, is Alana's story a common one?

Ms. MARQUARDT: It is. In our recent study that we released, "My Daddy's Name is Donor," two-thirds of young adults conceived in this way say my sperm donor is half of who I am. About half are disturbed about the circumstances of their conception. More than 40 percent are concerned that money was involved in their conception. Overall, compared to those who are raised by their biological parents, they're more likely to struggle with mental illness or substance abuse or depression.

MARTIN: But it is something to have to do with divorce being part of a scenario or...

Ms. MARQUARDT: Well, it is interesting. In our study of 485 adults who are conceived this way, their parents were more likely to divorce than, for example, those who were adopted. So family instability, whether it's divorce or, you know, you're conceived to a single mother and she maybe marries and goes through divorce. Family instability and family transitions were definitely more common among those conceived through sperm donation. I think it's very hard on a family to build a family this way.

MARTIN: Interesting. Why do you think that is? And you say it's more common divorce is more common with families who are built by sperm donation than it was through adoption.

Ms. MARQUARDT: Right.

MARTIN: And that's interesting. Why do you think that might be?

Ms. MARQUARDT: Well, there's various theories. One might be the biological asymmetry. When sperm donation is used, the mother's biologically related to the child and the social father is not, whereas an adoption, neither one is biologically related. I think it's also how we treat it. We have norms and institutions around adoption. We have names for things. People know what it is. Sperm donation is a lot more hush hush. The child is often not told the truth, whereas today it's pretty uncommon for adoptive parents not to tell their child the truth.

MARTIN: Wendy, tell us your story, if you would.

Ms. KRAMER: Yeah. My experience is a little bit different. And I think over the last 10 years we've got more than 28,000 people on our website, and that's parents, donor conceived people and donors. And I'm in a position where I'm lucky enough to know thousands of donor-conceived people. And I know that for some people it is very difficult and they do get a negative response, but for the majority of people that I know, that's not a part of their experience of being a donor child.

But anyway, to go back to your question, I was married and my ex-husband couldn't have children so we went the donor insemination route and my son, Ryan was born in 1990. And my husband and I split, there after, when my son was a year old. And when my son was two he came to me and said, so did my dad die or what? And that was the beginning of our conversation. And I told him at the age of two about, you know, the sperm and the egg, and I never wanted him to feel ashamed about any part of himself, certainly not about the methodology of his conception. And from then on, being a donor baby, you know, was something that he was actually, he felt very special and he was very proud. He would introduce himself at six years old by saying hi, I'm Ryan and I'm a donor baby.

MARTIN: Okay.

Ms. KRAMER: And he certainly doesn't do that anymore at age 20, but for him, you know, people go oh my god, what was it like when you found out you were donor-conceived? And he says what was it like when you found out you had blond hair? It just always been a part of him. And he always desired to know his biological father and if he had brothers and sisters out there. And that's why we started the Donor Sibling Registry in 2000, because he knew he did indeed, have half brothers and sisters out there and he desperately wanted to know them and he wanted to make himself available for his sperm donor, if he wanted to come forward and make himself known.

MARTIN: If you're just joining us, you're listening to TELL ME MORE from NPR News. We're talking about families that are formed by a sperm donation and artificial inception, and we're talking about the various experiences that people have. And with us are Alana Stewart, she was conceived by a sperm donation and she's telling us about her experiences. Elizabeth Marquardt is the author of the study, "My Daddy's Name is Donor," and she's editor of FamilyValues.org. Wendy Kramer is the mother of a son conceived by a sperm donation. She's the founder of DonorSiblingRegistry.com.

Well, Wendy, do you want to tell us some of the other stories about people who've been able to find family members, biological father, siblings - biological siblings through the registry and just what some of their stories are?

Ms. KRAMER: Yeah. It's really fabulous. We have - at the beginning when we started the Donor Sibling Registry, my son Ryan and I thought wow, imagine some day if we could have a brother or a sister meet, or a biological father meet his child. And now, literally, every single day, there's not a day that goes by that somebody does not match up with somebody else. So we have - I mean my own son now

knows of six half sisters and he's been able to meet his biological father, and he has two donor grandparents now, that he never imagined he would have.

So what we're doing is redefining family, and at the same time, expanding family; and at the same time, in these wonderful stories, we're sort of revealing some of the issues that donor families face - you know, with a very unregulated industry and there are some very, very serious problems within this industry. And first and foremost, anonymous sperm donation is not a good thing. We're huge proponents for ending anonymity and we want more accountability. We want sperm banks to track how many kids are born from each donor. We have family groupings of people born from the same donor, that number in the 20s, 50s, even over 100, and that can be extremely detrimental.

MARTIN: Elizabeth, I mean it strikes me that some of the risks are similar to what would be the case in families where the father is just missing, he's just absent - are not anonymous, they are known to the mother, but then they for whatever reason, after the child is born, just don't want to have anything to do with the child. And then there's that scenario.

Ms. MARQUARDT: There is that scenario. And what happens is, if that's happening to you everyone says that's horrible. What a bum. He left you? He left your mom? You get social sympathy for the loss and you probably, at least, still know something about the guy. Even if your mom doesn't want to talk about him, your aunt or your grandmother or somebody can say yeah, this is what he was like and this is what he looked like and you probably have his name. This is a lot more than most other offspring have.

MARTIN: And also there's the law. I mean there's the law, that if you are known as the father of a child, that there is a - you do have some way...

Ms. MARQUARDT: If you get a woman pregnant in a one night stand...

MARTIN: Right.

Ms. MARQUARDT: ...you are going to be accountable for 18 years for child support, and they will hunt you down and dock it from your paycheck if necessary. This is how we treat one class of children. We say these children deserve the rights and protection of legal fathers. And then we have another class of children who we treat precisely the opposite.

MARTIN: I see your point. Alana, have you been able to find your biological father?

Ms. STEWART: Just to illustrate to you how important it is, I have been on Donor Sibling Registry for the last four years. The last two years I've been writing and scheming for a screenplay. I've written a screenplay and I'm trying to market that. It's the only I know how to find my father is to make this big huge PR campaign with everything I know about him in the movie, to try to evoke anyone and everyone I can to figure out who this guy is. And the consequence is I don't speak to my stepfather. I barely speak to my mother. It's really, for me to search out my biological father, is an offense to my parents.

MARTIN: They're mad at you because they want...

Ms. STEWART: They don't understand at all.

MARTIN: How do they feel, if you don't mind my asking you?

Ms. STEWART: They don't think that my father should matter. They are totally perplexed as to why it would be important.

MARTIN: Why do you think it does matter so much? You feel like a part of you is missing?

Ms. STEWART: Oh, yeah, big time. Every time you go to someone's house and you see how your friend's fathers treat them, it's painful.

MARTIN: What if you meet him and he's not welcoming of the connection?

Ms. STEWART: I'm prepared for that. That'd be a bummer. But I'd deal with it.

MARTIN: Can I ask you, Wendy if you had thought about all this at the time when you were pursuing a sperm donation, do you think you would still have done it?

Ms. KRAMER: That's a really good question. Back then, and even now, parents and donors both, are not adequately educated or counseled about what they're about to do. And myself and a lot of donor parents that I know, a lot of donors that I know, really wish that we had the opportunity to understand what this meant for our children. And back when I was inseminated, I wanted to be pregnant. I was single-focused and I thought, whatever happens, I'll figure it out later.

And now this is why we put so much work into trying to get the donors and the parents at the front door before they jump into this and have them going into it fully educated and fully counseled about the needs of the offspring and what they're about to do. For a donor, it's not just about a donation. It's about a lifetime of having children, sometimes 100 children out there that someday might want to know who they are. And for parents, it's about creating children with no connection to one half of their genetic identity.

MARTIN: Alana, could you - I think it was Elizabeth, said that sometimes when kids who are conceived as you were, raise feelings about that. People will say that's just, you know, how you got here and you should be grateful for that gift of life. Has that ever been said to you and how do you respond to that?

Ms. STEWART: Oh, it's like the first thing people say. The way I react is, I say, life is a predicament and then I try to launch into my whole spiel and it usually takes a long time. I have friends that have known me since I was 12 years old and I'm still arguing with them about trying to establish that this is a loss and they don't understand it to be a loss. It's isolating. It's extremely isolating, because every time you try to open up about your dad people don't - they don't get it at all.

MARTIN: Well, thank you so much for - all of you for joining us.

Ms. STEWART: Yeah.

MARTIN: Alana Stewart, you just heard her, she joined us from NPR, New York. We were also joined by Elizabeth Marquardt; she joined us from Evanston, Illinois. She's the author of the study "My Daddy's Name is Donor." Also with us, Wendy Kramer, she joined us from member station KGNU in Boulder. She's currently working on what will be the largest study on sperm donors and sperm donor offspring to date, and she's the founder of Donor Sibling Registry.com.

Thank you all so much for speaking us.

Ms. MARQUARDT: Thanks for having us.

Ms. STEWART: Thank you.

Ms. KRAMER: Thank you so much.

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