



A DAD'S  
STORY

# From Sperm Donor to Part of the Family

LOS ANGELES ARTIST MICHAEL RUBINO WANTED TO HELP OTHER PEOPLE START FAMILIES— BUT HE WOUND UP WITH ONE OF HIS OWN

By NICOLE WEISENSEE EGAN and TIARE DUNLAP

When Michael Rubino decided to become a sperm donor back in the 1990s, his plan was to make other people's dreams of having a family come true—not his own. Then married to a woman who couldn't conceive, Rubino figured he could help other couples have children, even if he couldn't have them himself. "I thought, 'Maybe I'll get lucky and meet some kids in the future,'" says Rubino, now 57, and an artist in Los Angeles. "I'd take them out for lunch and that would be the extent of it."

He had no idea. Thanks to the Donor Sibling Registry—a nonprofit that unites children born

**Family Man**  
"I think it's important for Jake to have a father figure," says Karen (at home with her son and Rubino). Jake, who has met several of his half siblings, says he and his father have much in common. "I get a lot of my personality from him," he says.

through the use of donated sperm or eggs with their donors and any half siblings—he has so far met 18 children he helped conceive. "I fell in love with them all right away," says Rubino, who has their photos lined up on a shelf in his living room-studio. "They're all amazing to me." Even more amazing: Since 2004 Rubino has been helping raise one of them, Jake Strassberg, now 19, with Jake's mom, Karen Strassberg.

"Mike's case is unusual in terms of the level of involvement he wants to have with these kids," says registry founder Wendy Kramer. "He's made himself available to establish strong ties with his offspring and redefine family as we all know it." Rubino began building his unique family in May

## The Rubino Bunch

Rubino is in touch with his 18 known offspring, including the 14 below. “I’m fascinated by every kid. They’re all amazing in their own way.”



Leah Rubino McGhee



Aaron Rubino McGhee



Avery Hope



Danielle Tomkins



Isabel DuBois



Nathan Mayes



Precious Gepford



Rachel Mayes



Keevyn Baden-Winterwood



Charley Robinette



Thomas Casuccio



Nicholas Casuccio



Shane Digan



Xander Somogyi



**A Gift of Art**  
Rubino paints a portrait of his children after he gets to know them. The one of him with a young Jake hangs in the family’s L.A. home.

2003 when he signed up for the registry after seeing an *Oprah* episode about it. Previously known on the site only as Donor 929, about a year and a half later he got a message on the registry from Raechel McGhee, the mother of two of his offspring (Leah, 15, and Aaron, 19), thanking him and inviting him to make contact. “I was shocked and excited,” says Rubino, who had been divorced since 1996. “It was a great feeling.” McGhee put him in touch with Karen and Jake, then 6, who lived in San Diego. After exchanging several e-mails, Karen decided to meet Rubino in person, driving to his L.A.-area home in late 2004. “I didn’t want Jake to have any false hopes, so I told him Mike was just a friend,” says Karen, now 58 and a paralegal. “But they hit it off right away.” Rubino, who was smitten, says, “Jake was a little chatterbox. I fell in love with him instantly. He was just this fantastic kid who loved dinosaurs and UFOs.”

They began seeing each other every other weekend, and several months later Karen—who has never been married—decided it was time to tell Jake that Rubino was his biological father. “I wanted him to have a father figure,” she says. “I didn’t have one growing up, so it was very important to me.” When Kar-

en’s mother, who had helped care for Jake, died in March 2009, Rubino started playing a larger role in childcare with Karen, taking Jake to spend the summers with him in L.A.—quality time that brought the two even closer. “Jake and I are very similar,” Rubino says. “We have a little bit of sarcasm in our humor and the same demeanor and outlook on life.”

**‘I fell in love with Jake instantly. He was just this fantastic kid’**

—MICHAEL RUBINO

that I can’t.” Jake, a senior in high school, agrees. “There’s never really any arguments on how I should be parented,” he says. “They even give me the same allowance.”

Rubino also keeps in touch with Jake’s half siblings through regular texts, e-mails and social media, and he plans to attend at least one or two of their high school graduations this spring. Jake, who graduates June 8, hopes to attend a local college and live close to home, something Rubino is happy about. “They’re all great kids,” he says, “every one of them is brilliant in their own way. I’m really lucky. My life is so much fuller than it was before.” ●

GRID: CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: COURTESY MIKE RUBINO; COURTESY DANIELLE TOMKINS; COURTESY NATHAN MAYES; ELLEN FONTENOT; EUGENIA UHL; COURTESY MIKE RUBINO; COURTESY XANDER SOMOGYI; COURTESY SHANE DIGAN; COURTESY MIKE RUBINO (2); COURTESY ISABEL DUBOIS; COURTESY PRECIOUS GEPFORD; COURTESY MIKE RUBINO; COURTESY ISABEL DUBOIS; COURTESY LEAH RUBINO; COURTESY AARON RUBINO; COURTESY MIKE RUBINO