



Minnesota Women's Press

Incidentally Single, Intentionally Mothers

FamilyAndFriendsFeature: Women are increasingly choosing to become parents without partners. Who are they, why are they choosing single motherhood, and what do they have to say about it?

by Michele St. Martin

Women in their 30s and 40s are increasingly choosing to become parents without partners, challenging stereotypes and conventions. Who are they, why are they choosing single motherhood, and what do they have to say about it?

Though Molly Pirjevec chose to be a single mother, it wasn't part of her original life plan. Pirjevec, a 52-year-old hospital foundation development officer from St. Paul, thought her future involved marriage and, she said half-jokingly, six sons. Life changed dramatically when Pirjevec's fiancé died suddenly and unexpectedly.

Making the choice

"I was paralyzed ... I grieved for years," Pirjevec said. She didn't think that she would find anyone as compatible as her late fiancé; in fact, she didn't even want to look. But Pirjevec never considered giving up motherhood, and adoption appealed to her. "I didn't have a need to be biologically related to my child," Pirjevec explained.

"I thought I would adopt one child, from South America," Pirjevec said. She learned from her agency, Children's Home Society and Family Service, that at the time, South American countries were not open to single parents. Because Pirjevec wanted a child as young as possible, her agency eventually steered her to China. Today she is mother to Mary Grace, 13, and Liza, 7, both adopted from China.

Like Pirjevec, LaDonna Hawkins (name changed to protect her children's privacy) always wanted to be a mother. "I took care of younger siblings and babysat for friends and family," said Hawkins, a 38-year-old engineer who lives in Minneapolis. "I just love children and I am told I am good with them."

Hawkins said she was considered "a freak" in her neighborhood because as a teenager, she was not interested in dating. "I had a plan," she said. "I wanted to be an engineer. And I wanted to be a mother. I knew that I did not want to suffer as my mama did and as my siblings and I did because of an absent husband and father."

Though Hawkins dated throughout college and grad school, she never fell in love. "I did give [men] a chance, but being alone just seemed natural to me. I like men, I enjoy spending time with them, but not enough to share a life with one. I just do not want to rely on a man for anything and [men] seemed to sense that about me. When people talk about their partners I know that is not for me."

Two years into her career, Hawkins bought a home and wanted to fill it with children. "I wanted children while I was young enough to enjoy them," she said. After looking briefly into adoption, Hawkins settled on donor insemination (DI).

"I wanted to parent a newborn, and I liked the idea of being pregnant and giving birth." Today, she is the mother of Danielle, 8, and Nathaniel, 3.

About 'choice moms'

Mikki Morrisette, author of "Choosing Single Motherhood" and founder of the [choicemoms.org](http://www.choicemoms.org) website, estimates that approximately 50,000 women each year become what she refers to as "choice moms": single women who proactively choose to become parents. Morrisette, herself a choice mom of two children, lives in Minneapolis. She knows at least 100 choice moms in the Twin Cities, though there are, Morrisette said, many more.

Morrisette described the "typical" choice mom as "a woman who makes at least \$40,000 per year-many make much more-and has a college degree, if not a postgraduate degree." She believes that about half of women who are choosing

to become single mothers wish they had a partner. Others, though, "are used to taking matters into their own hands," and want to become parents before they are "too old" to enjoy an active lifestyle with their kids. Those who are considering insemination with a known or unknown donor hear their biological clock ticking. "We tend to be pretty self-sufficient women who can do things pretty well on our own," Morrissette said.

"One interesting trend I'm starting to see is women in their late 20s who have decided [to be choice moms]," Morrissette said. "It used to be women in their 30s and older."

LaDonna's story

When Hawkins told her mother she was planning to have a child through donor insemination (DI), she was shocked by the other woman's reaction. "My mama was a single mother. My daddy was in and out of our lives, and he left for good when I was 6. My younger sister had a child out of wedlock and Mama was nothing but supportive. I thought she'd support me too.

"When she said, 'No!' I thought mama was worried that having a family would affect my engineering career. I told her I could handle it. She said, 'Child, don't you think I know how strong you are? It's not havin' babies I'm opposed to, it's this anonymous thing. Children need to know where they come from. You're a good-looking woman. Why can't you find some man to have a baby with?'

"My mama said that even if I weren't married or in a long-term relationship, I should get pregnant 'by accident.' She said, 'At least then your child will know who he is and where he comes from.' Mama worried about how my child would deal with not knowing who his father was."

Hawkins saw it differently. "I cannot imagine using someone for the purpose of getting pregnant. What an insult to him and how hard for my child. My father's neglect and then desertion caused a hurt so deep I never got over it," she said.

"I wanted my child surrounded only by love. I grew up in a community of single mothers. I knew I could do it."

Though other family members, including the sister she'd supported when she became unexpectedly pregnant, called her 'selfish,' and suggested she adopt "a needy child," Hawkins was determined to do things her own way.

Hawkins became pregnant on the first try with sperm from an unknown donor she chose after selecting certain criteria and reading his profile. She miscarried twice before carrying her daughter Danielle to term. After her first miscarriage, her mother came around. "She said, 'If you hurt, I hurt.' She brought the rest of the family around too."

There had been some awkwardness at work. "People did not know what to say to me," Hawkins said. "Everyone knew I was single with no boyfriend. They weren't sure whether they should congratulate me. But I [told] people that the pregnancy was planned and that I was very excited." A co-worker named Amy invited Hawkins to have lunch with a group of her single mother friends. "I did not know Amy very well and I said no," Hawkins recalled.

Life with baby was rocky. "Dani never slept more than two hours for the first three months," Hawkins said. "When she was awake, she fussed and cried continually. My mama told me that she had never known such a hard baby." At six months, Danielle began to sleep more and became a much happier baby. Hawkins decided the time was right to add another baby to the family.

She miscarried again. Extensive testing held no answers. "I decided to try again. After all, I had done it [successfully] once." Hawkins passed the "danger mark" of the first trimester. She was seven months pregnant when the baby stopped kicking. A few days later her second daughter was stillborn.

"The grief was unbearable," Hawkins remembered. "If not for Dani, I do not know that I could have survived." During a leave of absence from work she received a note in the mail from Amy, the woman who had invited her to the single mothers' lunch. "It was such a compassionate note, and she extended another invitation," Hawkins said. "I decided to take her up on it."

That was the beginning of a support network that, Hawkins said, "saved my life. Most of my single friends fell by the wayside during my pregnancy with Dani. These women ... understood me. They wrapped Dani and I in a warm embrace. If one of us is sick or has a need, the others help out. It is a new kind of family. We all love each others' children. It makes my life so much easier, and the emotional support is wonderful."

When Hawkins emerged from the "dark cloud" of grief and still wanted a sibling for Danielle, her family encouraged her to adopt. When she decided to try one more pregnancy, her new friends supported her. "I did not even tell my family I was pregnant again until they guessed," Hawkins said.

When baby Nathaniel was christened, Hawkins' single moms' group was there. Amy, a mother of two through adoption, was the godmother.

"My family was complete," Hawkins said. "And Nathaniel was just as cranky a baby as his sister had been! This time I had the support I needed to get through it.

"I went through so much to have my family that you might think I would be grateful and happy all the time," Hawkins said. "It would be a lie to say that our lives are smooth sailing. Danielle has had serious questions and worry about not having a daddy. Nathaniel had some physical problems that required surgery and physical therapy.

"Sometimes I am exhausted because of work and kids," Hawkins said. "If it were not for my single moms' group, I would have no social life. "I thought I was a strong woman before but parenting has tested me in ways I never dreamed of. I am even stronger than I knew! But we are thriving. Tired, sometimes hair-challenged, sometimes with a lawn that needs mowing or sidewalk unshoveled. And we are very happy."

Molly's story

Molly Pirjevec grew up on the Iron Range and in the Twin Cities suburbs, the oldest of six children in a close-knit Catholic family. "I always wanted to be a mother," she said.

After she grieved the death of her fiancé, Pirjevec decided to adopt a child. "One child," she said. And then her father was diagnosed with terminal cancer and she postponed her plans to adopt. Before he died, "my dad told my mom, 'Molly has put her plans on hold for us. You help her. Help her adopt,'" Pirjevec said. "Without that help ..."

The adoption agency talked about the need for prospective parents to market themselves if they wanted to adopt newborns domestically. "We were told to have a family picture taken, send it to everyone we knew, every clergy member, even if we didn't go to church, letting them know we wanted to adopt," Pirjevec said. The prospect dismayed her. When the agency told her that adoptions from China had re-opened, she jumped at the prospect.

"I remember my grandma said, 'What will you do if they give you a child that something's wrong with?'" I told grandma, of course I'd keep her. After all, my dad had polio, and she didn't give him away.

Pirjevec's mother, who had never traveled outside the U.S., made the trip with her. The trip to China was challenging. Pirjevec's new daughter, whom she named Mary Grace, was not the problem; it was Pirjevec herself. "I felt run down at first," she said. "Every day I was getting more and more tired." It turned out that a pin used to heal Pirjevec's broken wrist a year prior had caused a systemic infection and gangrene. "I nearly died. It was six months before I realized what a close call I had had."

Once she got home, Pirjevec said, "I thought, 'I can do this again.' I had never thought past the first child." For awhile she had foster children. After her second foster child, Pirjevec decided to go back to China.

By this time she had surrounded herself with a support system composed larger of women, most single, with children from China. When she went back to China, Mary Grace stayed with Pirjevec's friend, Diane, a single mother with three girls who was also Mary Grace's daycare provider. "I was ready for shopping, long walks with my baby, all the bonding time I'd missed out of with Mary Grace [because of Pirjevec's illness]," she said. But this time, she was handed a tiny baby who was profoundly grieving and totally withdrawn. The baby Pirjevec named Elizabeth and called Liza was 11 months old and weighed just 14 pounds. "I thought, 'There's something wrong,' and I told my friend Diane over the phone, 'Diane, there's something wrong with her. What am I going to do?'"

"Diane responded, 'Well, you can't give her back. Don't worry, if you need a [wheelchair] ramp, we'll build a ramp.' It wasn't necessary; once Liza stopped grieving, she "was a different child," said Pirjevec. Though both Mary Grace and Liza have had physical problems, both girls are healthy and thriving.

"The things I worried about—things like forgetting the baby in the car or not waking up if they cried—never happened," Pirjevec said. "But I did find, with Mary Grace, that at the end of a weekend, I would feel like I would lose my mind. That's when I found Diane. She suggested we get together on Sundays and do something with the girls. It really helped."

When asked what she does for herself, Pirjevec responded, "I'm bad at that. But I had 38 years for me! I'm just starting to learn to take time for myself. I cherish the half hour to hour I have every night after they go to bed."

Like Hawkins, Pirjevec has found the support of other single mothers invaluable. "I was sitting at the Dragon Boat festival, surrounded by people who, except for adoption, would never have been my friends and I thought, I would lay down my life for any of you," Pirjevec said.

"People who don't know us tell me how lucky they [Mary Grace and Liza] are. I am the lucky one. Someone else could have given them more. "They have brought given me such a richer, more diverse life than I would have had," Pirjevec said. "I came home from China a changed person, in love with the culture."

When she adopted Mary Grace, Pirjevec signed a pledge to make sure her daughter knew about China. It's a

commitment she takes seriously. Along with leading Mary Grace's Girl Scout Troop, she is active with the Chinese American Association of Minnesota's dance theatre, where Liza is a student. Pirjevec helps raise money and sews costumes.

"One reason I wanted to adopt from China was that the birth parents have no recourse, they could never get them back. Today I feel nothing but love and gratitude [for the birth parents]. I wish I could show them the girls, that they could see how beautiful and happy they are, and that I could tell them how much I appreciate what they did."

Resources

Books

Choosing Single Motherhood: the Thinking Woman's Guide by Mikki Morrissette

Single Mothers by Choice by Jane Mattes

Knock Yourself Up by Louise Sloan

The Single Woman's Guide to a Happy Pregnancy by Mari Gallion

Websites

www.adoptivefamilies.com The comprehensive online version of Adoptive Families magazine

www.choicemoms.com Morrissette's comprehensive site that offers a blog, podcasts, and ways to connect

Donor Insemination

For comprehensive information about donors and sperm banks, go to www.donorsperm.com

Minnesota adoption agencies

For a list of Minnesota adoption agencies, go to www.mnadopt.org/PrivateAgencies.htm

For information about Minnesota's Waiting Children, go to www.mnadopt.org or call 612-861-7115 or 866-303-MARN (6276)

ABC's of single adoption

There are no formal limits on the age of a woman in a domestic adoption. In an open adoption (generally involving an infant or young child), the birthmother chooses who will parent her child; single mothers tend to be seen as at a disadvantage because they "compete" with married parents. "That doesn't mean it never happens," said Maxine Walton, social work supervisor with Children's Home Society and Family Service (CHSFS), the state's largest private adoption agency.

In other sorts of domestic adoptions—for example, adoptions that begin with foster care—marital status is generally not an issue. Programs through the Minnesota's Waiting Child program have the added advantage of little to no cost, and in some cases ongoing subsidies are offered.

In the case of international adoption, single women have fewer options than in recent years. "Options for single women really diminished when China closed its doors to singles last year," Walton noted.

China was the largest "sending" country in international adoption. In recent years, a number of countries friendly to single adoption, such as Guatemala and Vietnam, have halted all adoptions due to findings of corruption. Others have restricted their criteria to exclude single people. Today, Russia and Ethiopia are the only major international programs open to CHSFS clients, Walton said. Other adoption agencies work with additional countries.

Donor insemination for not-so-dummies

When Mikki Morrissette decided to become a mother, she used a known donor—an old friend who was willing to donate sperm so that she could build a family. "I was comfortable with that, and he wanted to do this for me," she said. It was a plus that she would have access to his medical history, too.

While sperm banks today do have some information, in varying degrees, about the men who donate, it is less than a woman using a known donor would have, Morrissette said. She cautions women to carefully check out sperm banks. "There are about 24 in the country," she said. "Some doctors use one of the top two, but women have the right to choose" [which sperm bank they work with].

One way for women to take control is to choose from all the donors available. For one-stop shopping, Morrissette recommends spermcenter.com, which carries donor profiles from 25 sperm banks. Women make a number of choices in categories such as the donor's as race, ethnicity, education, blood type, whether they are willing to meet the child when she is an adult. It also offers helpful information about individual sperm bank's costs and policies.

Related Links

Content © 2008 Minnesota Women's Press, Inc.
Software © 1998-2008 **1up! Software**, All Rights Reserved