

Rachel & Jess's Story



How did you meet?

Jess: Rachel and I met while living in Denver. After having lived a few blocks apart and even sharing a mutual friend, it was Tinder that brought us together. Our first date was at 7am because we were both really busy that week and couldn't find another agreeable time. Rachel was late to the coffee shop...

Rachel: I was only 7 minutes late and I had biked!

Jess: ...and she brought a green smoothie, which she took out of her bag because she was nervous and started sipping on it. I was like, *what is happening?* Later in the conversation, I asked Rachel if she cooked much and she said she usually made something big at the start of the week, like a lasagna, and made it last the rest of the week. I said she was a "real mom-on-the-go," which she took as a compliment.

Rachel: I have no excuse for the green smoothie, but I stand by my frozen lasagna. Anyway, the next week Jess took off on the AIDS Life Cycle bike ride (500 miles from San Francisco to L.A.). I asked her to send a picture (of herself, obviously), and she sent one of the San Francisco bridge. I was like, *what is happening?*

How did you decide to create a family?

Jess: Early in our relationship, it was a topic of conversation as neither of us wanted to partner with someone who didn't want kids - something we found out we both did. It was our desire to have kids that also caused us to consider a move closer to family (Rachel's in Michigan or mine in Virginia - the latter which ultimately won out).

Did you explore different ways of bringing your family into being? How did you choose?

Jess: Rachel was 32 and I was 28 when we met, so the assumption was that Rachel would carry - something that she also felt a stronger urge to do than me. We were (and are!) open to the idea of adoption, but we weren't married when we were ready to start the process - a prerequisite for adoption. After looking at a few cryobanks nationally, we decided to go with Fairfax Cryobank outside of DC.

Rachel: I remember the night we paid the membership fees, lying in bed with the computer between us, ready to pick our donor. This is going to sound superficial,

because it is: we couldn't find a guy that we both agreed was attractive, so we gave up that night. A few weeks later, we found one. I was impressed by the picture and Jess spent hours pouring over his medical history and listening to interviews. Who has the time?

Jess: I do.

Rachel: We got 7 vials from this gentleman (they were buy-6-get-one-free, which, who knew that was a thing?). Because storage was free at the bank in Fairfax, we kept the vials there until we were ready to try. I remember the first month driving there and back (a 4-hour round trip), I strapped the tank in the passenger side seatbelt (precious cargo!)

What was your experience of conception, pregnancy and birth?

Rachel: Even though I was technically a G-word (geriatric) age, I felt really confident I'd get pregnant easily, like on the first try. At the time, Jess was thinking she'd carry our second kid and we needed to split the loads of sperm.

Jess: I've repeatedly asked her not to call them "loads."

Rachel: Anyway, I thought the max number of...vials...I'd use would be three. Then we'd still have four left for Jess.

Jess: we didn't know if it would be possible to get more vials from the same dude - they don't promise you anything at the cryobank, and, in fact, they cut off donations from specific donors after a certain amount of donor births.

Rachel: Well, the first time didn't take, nor the second, nor the third. We ran tests, some of which I'm forgetting now - though I do remember them shooting dye into my fallopian tubes and watching it on a screen (not as painful for me as they warned!), and I remember my doctor saying that the dye could help "get out the cobwebs". Who knew that was a thing? Each drive to Fairfax got less and less novel - I stressed the whole time there and back about using up Jess's vials, along with the now-growing fear that I couldn't get pregnant.

Jess: I tried to assure Rachel that it would all work out! She did get into a really negative space over the course of those months.

Rachel: After the sixth time, I wasn't even surprised when I saw the "negative" sign on the pregnancy test. And let me say something here that I wouldn't have never though would be true of me: internalized homophobia. I began to have these sneaking thoughts that maybe I wasn't getting pregnant because we weren't supposed to have kids - that we couldn't do it "naturally," and this was my body's way of rejecting it.

Jess: nevermind that many straight couples need loads of interventions to get pregnant.

Rachel: did you just say “loads?!” Aaanyway. I knew I had a problem on my hands, and that outside of what was happening with my body, something was going on with my mind. So, I vowed that before I tried our seventh and maybe final try, at least with this particular donor, I’d change the script in my head. I made a positive affirmation tape of me saying nice things to myself, which I listened to daily leading up to the 7th IUI. I also wrote these on little notecards, and looked at them whenever I started doubting myself.

Jess: I read them sometimes too. I was so glad she had something in addition to my attempts at reassurance.

Rachel: two weeks after the insemination, we were on a trip with Jess’s and my parents - the six of us - to Charleston, NC. I had taken a pregnancy test that Saturday and it was negative, but I was determined to have a good time on vacation anyway. I decided on Sunday to take another one in the morning - it was Mother’s Day and also my birthday - May 13, 2018. It was one of those shitty little tests the size of your pinky finger that are hard to read.

Jess: we had stopped shelling out for the more expensive ones that actually give a clear line.

Rachel: It didn’t look positive or negative - it was just a blur of lines - but it was different than what I’d seen before. So, we snuck out of the house quickly, saying that we were getting orange juice for breakfast, and went to the grocery store. I remember being nervous and telling the cashier that it was my birthday, like that was some sort of explanation for getting a pregnancy test.

Jess: She refused to just buy the pregnancy test - like we were teenagers or something. She was being really weird about it. Anyway! We took it back to the house and took the test - it was a big ole smiley face. We were able to share the good new with our folks, who were super excited.

Rachel: Jess’s mom cried (it would be her first grandchild) and my mom said, “Didn’t you have a drink last night?”...but was also excited.

Jess: Wow, we just spent a lot of time talking about just getting to the point where you were pregnant.

Rachel: yeah, let’s not belabor this (lol) any longer. I’ll share the rest of our journey of pregnancy and delivery in the next iteration of these stories (we’re hoping a book! Any publishers out there interested??)

Were providers LGBTQIA friendly?

Jess: We had a mix of experiences that made us feel both isolated, excluded and immensely supported. Our doula was absolutely incredible - a true ally from day one and very concerned about doing whatever she could to make us both

feel like we were seen and treated the way that we wanted to be. Some providers seemed a little over-eager about the fact that they got the "treat" of working with a queer couple, tripping over themselves to talk about their gay friends. I do think their intentions were rooted in making us feel welcomed and appreciated.

Rachel: We did have a couple negative experiences. Early in our pregnancy, while on a tour of the birthing and post-partum recovery rooms at VCU, we had a nurse giving the tour who was very adamant in using only hetero-language, and she'd glance our way each time she spoke about the responsibilities of a "father." We happened to know another straight couple on the tour, who asked if we wanted them to say anything. Hello, allies! We ended up talking to another staff member ourselves after the tour.

Jess: oh yeah, and a birthing educator sent us a packet on mother/father roles in the birth process to everyone enrolled before the class started. That is obviously not malicious, but it sucks when you're the parent who already isn't biologically related to the child. Any language that is further "othering" can start to take a toll.

Rachel: Can I just butt in to share a couple helpful terms for providers, or just people in general? Birthing parent, non-birthing parent. Works for all genders! Also, NEVER call a donor "the father." If you consider jacking off in a nondescript office building for money "fatherhood," I cannot help you. Aaaanyway!

Jess: Our overall experience leads me to believe that the birthing world needs much more proactive education about the LGBTQ+ community and the ways they can become more inclusive and affirming in their practices.

Did gender identity or gender performance affect your experience of being pregnant or supporting your pregnant partner?

Rachel: I tend to dress slightly feminine and sometimes androgynously, and I was very uncomfortable with lots of the clothing options for pregnant people. Much of it is plunging necklines and they always seem to want to tie a bow around you.

Jess: If I were to get pregnant, I can't imagine where I would go to get my button-down shirts tailored.

Tell us about your experience of parenting so far.

Jess: Our baby is 16 months old and she is a handful. We're writing this during the days of coronavirus, so we're both working from home, handing her off in shifts because we lost our childcare. It's a lot, period, but she's also a lot of fun.

Rachel: This may be an unpopular sentiment, but having a kid has made my life easier. Logistically, maybe not. But I feel more at ease with her in the world. It

took a lot for her to make it here but I feel certain she's in the right place. And so are we!

Jess: I'll remind you of her making your life easier the next time she's throwing a fit. :)

What do you wish you'd know at the beginning of thinking about or trying to grow your family?

Rachel: I wish I'd learned more about my own anatomy/the reproductive system more prior to this journey - I could have been more informed in conversations with providers. Beyond that, I wish I would have just cut myself some more slack and not blamed myself for every time I didn't get pregnant. That shit wears on you!

Jess: I wish I had known more people that had gone through it that we could talk to. We had a couple friends in Denver who we reached out to, but having local people to talk about local logistics would have been nice.

What message or thoughts do you have for other queer couples/people in the beginning phases of this journey?

Rachel: You're doing great! Besides that, reach out to other queer couples who have been through the process - if you don't know any, find them online!

Advocate for yourself - let people know when you don't feel seen or understand something. If you're pregnant and can budget for a doula, I HIGHLY recommend.

Jess: Be confident in your plan - don't second-guess yourself until it's clear you need to change course. There are other people who have been where you are, so reach out! You've got this.