

A Family Story A Profile of Akilah Monifa and Ruth Bolden¹

When Akilah Monifa and Ruth Bolden decided they wanted to have a child, they didn't realize the full extent of hurdles they would face. Living in California, a state with relatively positive LGBT-parenting laws, and specifically in the Bay Area, which is known to have a selection of services for gay and lesbian families, they thought they were well-situated. Initially, they decided to use donor insemination and began researching fertility clinics to find one that would meet their needs. Calling fertility clinics that primarily served lesbians, they soon discovered that most did not carry sperm from donors of color. The apologetic tone of the responses was no comfort to the two African American women who were frustrated that the clinics were clearly not seeking to serve them.

Akilah and Ruth began calling out-of-state clinics throughout the country. Common responses to their explanation that they were two women seeking to have a child were, "We serve families," "This is a Christian-based organization," and "We don't serve your kind." They also continued to experience difficulty in finding places that had a range of sperm donors of color. When they asked if a sperm bank might have sperm from a Jewish person of color (Ruth is Jewish), they were asked, "Why would you want that?!" Akilah describes fertility clinics as, "akin to country clubs," with various mechanisms for selecting their clientele. After much effort, they eventually found a place that met their needs. Unfortunately, Ruth was unable to carry her pregnancies to full term. Akilah and Ruth then decided to pursue adoption.



L-R: Isabella Bolden Monifa and her mothers Akila Monifa and Ruth Bolden.

The couple enrolled in an adoption class and joined a support group. They decided they would like an open adoption where the family maintains contact with the birth mother and the child has the option of having a relationship with her. They also wanted a child of African descent. Again they began the process of researching agencies and again they were turned away with statements like, "We have never worked with gays or lesbians, so we are probably not the best agency for you." Some agencies said that Ruth, who is biracial and light-skinned, should pass as white because it would increase the couple's likelihood of being chosen. Eventually they found an agency that had both worked with African American couples and with gay and lesbian couples, but it soon became clear that even this was not enough. The agency had not previously

worked with African American gay or lesbian couples which Akilah says, "Was probably the reason they were not able to make a match." She believes this was reflected in the way they talked to African American birth mothers and whether they would regularly ask if they would be willing to have a gay or lesbian adoptive couple.



Fortunately, the next agency they worked with in New York took a different approach. When an African American birth mother said she would like her child to be raised by a single woman, it took only one question for the birth mother to say that she would consider a lesbian couple. She looked over and approved Akilah and Ruth's application. In January 2001, four years after deciding they would like to raise a child, Akilah and Ruth became proud parents of a baby girl, Isabella Bolden Monifa.

Reflecting on the process, Akilah notes the multiple subtle ways in which assumption of parents' heterosexuality pervades society. One recurrent problem is that forms ask parents or prospective parents to fill out "mother" and "father." "It is so easy to change forms to say 'parent' and 'parent,' and this would be inclusive of anyone who is acting as a parent, like a grandparent," Akilah says. They have experienced this problem with fertility clinics, adoption agencies, social service agencies, hospitals, and even California birth certificates. This is despite the fact that California is one of a few states that allows simultaneous joint adoption by gay and lesbian parents. She also marvels at how the fact that Isabella has two mothers seems to make curious people feel free to ask completely inappropriate questions, even in front of Isabella. "Which one of you is the mother?" ("Both of us.") is often followed by, "Who is the real mother?" ("Both of us.") and then even, "Who gave birth to her?" or, "Did you adopt her?"

Akilah knows her daughter will face challenges because of her race and because she has two mothers. But the fact society has changed its attitude toward those who are adopted and those who are gay—both of which were seen as shameful secrets—makes Akilah feel more optimistic about the future. In the meantime, she and Ruth strive to do their best: they love Isabella, talk honestly to her, tell Isabella her adoption story, and teach her that it's not a big deal to say, "I have two mommies."

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ⁱ Source: Cahill, S., Ellen, M., & Tobias, S. (2002). *Family Policy: Issues Affecting Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Families*. New York: The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute. Available at <http://www.thetaskforce.org/library/familypolicy.htm>