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PHOTO GALLERIES

A double dose of Father's Day in
Maplewood-South Orange

by Nyier Abdou/The Star-Ledger

Sunday June 15, 2008, 7:36 PM

Eddie Bennett was not a kid person. He didn't like the way kids took over his friends' lives. He didn't like the look of all that chasing and feeding and finding baby sitters. He was diaper-averse.



Jennifer Brown/The Star-Ledger

Simon Westfall-Kwong plays ring around the Rosie with daughter Maleia.

"I didn't even like kids slobbering on me," Bennett, 44, said with a sheepish smile minutes before his 3-year-old son, David, climbed on his lap to do just that, leaning in to gently rub noses. "What I had to overcome was my selfishness."

There are other things to overcome for this once-reluctant dad from South Orange. Bennett and his partner of 13 years, Christopher Bellis, are going through the process of adopting David, an energetic and inquisitive boy with cheeks that ball up as he smiles, and their 17-month-old daughter, Sherie, through the foster system.

Sherie -- Bennett calls her "Missy" with a Kentucky twang when he wants to get her attention -- is the mischief-maker.

"This one is going to be the death of me," he said, shaking his head.

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Jennifer Brown/The Star-Ledger

Simon Westfall-Kwong (left) and partner John Westfall-Kwong celebrate Father's Day in Maplewood with daughters Maleia, 2 (front) and Leilani, 7 months.

Father's Day, a new holiday for the couple, has left them feeling "kind of shell-shocked," Bellis said. The two bought each other Father's Day cards and spent a quiet family day at home.

Bennett and Bellis are among the growing number of same-sex parents in liberal suburban enclaves enjoying traditional family lifestyles. In South Orange and Maplewood, Essex County communities well known for being welcoming to gay and lesbian couples, same-sex parents can be found on the PTA, hawking potato salad at the neighborhood barbecue and worshipping at St. George's Episcopal Church in Maplewood. On its website, the church notes "Our parish is over 100 years old. Our thinking is not."

Many move to the twin communities from New York City, drawn by the diverse, inclusive spirit and small-town feel.

"It's what Manhattanites do when they have kids," said Robert Shaffron, 53, who commutes from Maplewood to his job at a Manhattan advertising agency.

Shaffron, who has two sons with John Davis, his partner of 21 years, was planning to celebrate Father's Day with a barbecue with Davis' family. But the traditional backyard standby had to be canceled after their house lost power in overnight storms.

The holiday meant a family outing at the South Orange home of Simon Westfall-Kwong and his partner, John Westfall-Kwong, also Manhattan transplants. The couple planned a trip to the zoo with their adopted daughters, Maleia, 2, and 7-month-old Leilani, followed by some family time with Simon's parents.

Simon, 37, a former fashion executive who switched to real estate when the couple moved to New Jersey, "has the sterner demeanor, but he's more the pushover," John, 43, said as his partner wicked away sweat from yet another game of ring-around-the-rosy.

"This is the best time to see them grow up," Simon said. "They grow so fast. Each day they do something different."

Maleia, a dramatic and disheveled girl in a pink print dress that matched Simon's polo shirt, likes to race her toy car around the wrap-around porch of her parents' stately and lovingly restored Queen Anne Victorian. Cherub-faced Leilani bounces quietly on John's knee. Though there are other gay-parented families in the neighborhood, the Westfall-Kwongs inevitably socialize with others based on play dates rather than sexual orientation.

"We rarely end up hanging out with other gay couples," John said. Being gay parents "feels like a non-issue," he said.

"Once you become a parent, the whole gay and lesbian thing goes away," Shaffron said. "It's all about the kids and raising them and keeping them from killing each other."

South Orange and Maplewood share a school district, and the children of same-sex couples are often in classes with children who have similar backgrounds. When Father's Day rolls around, they do the same things, just a little differently -- or maybe twice over. In David's preschool class, the teacher helped him make a keepsake box for "Daddy and Poppy," Bennett said.

On Mother's Day, Shaffron and Davis' 4-year-old son Jordan made them both cards. "He just said, 'Here, happy Mother's Day,'" Shaffron said. "I was thrilled to death."

2cents4u2
06/16/2008
11:05 a.m. ET

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As ordinary as same-sex parenting can be, it still can present challenges biological parents get to grow into.

"I remember the day they dropped David off," Bellis said. "He was more than 2 years old. He had a fully formed personality. I'm thinking to myself, 'What have we done?'"

"When you grow up gay, your presumption is that you are not going to be a parent," Shaffron said. "It's hard to turn that thinking around."

But kids in these communities will inevitably benefit, said Elaine Bennett, co-chair of Amicus/Amica, a fellowship organization at St. George's that works to advance gay issues.

"Our kids are going to grow up and be head and shoulders above many other kids when it comes to inclusiveness and understanding people who are different," Bennett said.

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COMMENTS (8)

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Posted by **scrumfussel** on [06/15/08 at 9:54PM](#)

Bravo to these couples, and Happy Father's Day! As an adopted child (now middle-aged), I know how unimportant blood ties can be. What matters most are these children having parents who offer attention, love, guidance, and lots and lots more love! It sounds as though these children have been placed in wonderful homes. Continued love and happiness, Messrs. Bellis & Bennett, and Messrs. Westfall-Kwong.

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Posted by **ripjersey** on [06/15/08 at 11:36PM](#)

They can't marry in NJ but they can adopt children?! I don't have a problem with gays, in fact I support them becaus ethey are two consenting adults doing heir own thing. More ower to them. But don't bring kids into it. I wonder how many mother/father people are on long waiting lists for kid only to be passed up by two dads. Sad. What a messed up world. And a girl with two men.....girls need a mother sorry, not a man who is feminine..it isn't enough.

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Posted by **ripjersey** on [06/15/08 at 11:38PM](#)

repost to fix mistakes

They can't marry in NJ but they can adopt children?! I don't have a problem with gays, in fact I support them because they are two consenting adults doing their own thing. More power to them. But don't bring kids into it. I wonder how many mother/father couples are on long waiting lists for kids only to be passed up by two dads. Sad. What a messed up world. And a girl with two men.....girls need a mother sorry, not a man who is feminine..it isn't enough.

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Posted by **noyou** on [06/16/08 at 3:12AM](#)

rip
there are plenty of kids that need homes. Those on the waiting lists you speak of are waiting for white children from the united states. i know more then a handful of children with same sex parents and they are doing just fine. as long as someone is willing to give a child a loving home who cares what their sexual orientation is.

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Posted by **RetreadNJ** on [06/16/08 at 10:03AM](#)

Ripjersey,
You say that "girls need a mother," but none of the research that has been done on kids raised by same-sex parents show any bad effects. Kids need loving families, and these families have a lot of love! I invite you to educate yourself before you make statements that aren't true. (Besides, if what you say is true, what about divorced or widowed fathers -- would you take their girls away from them or deny them rights that other parents have?). Get to know some of your neighbors who are gay or lesbian parents, and get to know

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