

Donor 150 is my Dad - I have two mums instead

By BARRY WIGMORE

In many ways JoEllen Marsh is a typical American teenager. Aged 16 going on 26, she likes heavy metal and Lord Of The Rings.

She worships Brad Pitt but can't stand Britney Spears. She enjoys German classes and hates maths. She spends hours on the phone to her boyfriend and her friends. She's a friendly and likeable girl.

[Dawn of the GM babies?](#)

It's only when she starts talking about her two lesbian mothers, her sperm donor father, her 11-year-old sister Mollie who has a different donor-father, and the ten half-brothers and sisters she recently discovered that it becomes apparent that JoEllen's life and background are far from typical.

In fact, hers is an extraordinary 21st Century family that has turned convention on its head and jettisoned received wisdom on the best way to raise a child.

Last week JoEllen and her siblings made headlines across the world when it was revealed that, after a three-and-a-half year quest to find their father, he had suddenly come forward.

On the CV prepared for the benefit of potential recipients of his sperm bank in 1989, Donor 150 - the name he was given by the clinic - had described himself in glowing terms.

He was a 6ft, blue-eyed writer. He was a dancer, musician, fitness instructor and had a philosophy degree. As a consequence, he was a highly sought-after donor.

Today, however, there is little evidence that Donor 150 was ever such a prize specimen.

Jeffrey Harrison is a 50-year-old hippy living with his four dogs in a motorhome in Venice Beach, California. He has been charitably described by some as 'a free spirit', to others he is 'a drifter'.

He earns a modest living doing odd jobs now, but in the Eighties his principal profession seems to have involved selling his sperm. Jeffrey was a prolific donor.

Under new freedoms, and with the help of the website Donor Sibling Registry, 11 of his offspring, including JoEllen, have tracked each other down. All but one are girls - but there could be dozens more children.

Last week JoEllen and her 'co-parents' - Lucinda Marsh, her biological mother, and Lucinda's then partner, Deneen Mathews - gave an exclusive interview to The Mail on Sunday.

The most convenient meeting point for this unusual group was a hotel near their home in Erie, Pennsylvania, along the snow-locked shores of the Great Lakes.

This is conservative middle-America but the family talked frankly about their highly unconventional life as other guests walked by.

As well as JoEllen and her mothers, who split up when she was six months old, Mollie and Deneen's current lesbian partner were also present.

Lucinda, now 50, and Deneen, 42, met through friends in 1984 and began a relationship the following year.

Deneen was Lucinda's first lesbian partner.

They had been living together in Erie for three years when Lucinda decided she wanted to have a baby.

Deneen, a hospital nurse, wasn't so sure about such a huge commitment, but part of their agreement - at a time long before gay marriages became a part of society - was they would have children when Lucinda felt the time was right.

Artificial insemination using sperm from anonymous donors was then in its infancy, but it was accepted as safe.

After extensive research, Lucinda, a chiropractor, opted for a firm called California Cryobank. California had a more progressive attitude than many other states.

Despite the fact it was located hundreds of miles away, Lucinda felt comfortable there.

California Cryobank was also one of the few sperm banks that would release its products to individuals rather than doctors, and Lucinda wanted to self-inseminate at home.

Her earth-mother philosophy means conventional medicine and hospitals are anathema to her.

'To me conception is not a medical event,' she says today. 'It happens in a lot of different ways, but rarely in front of a doctor and a nurse.'

Donor 150 was an obvious choice for many women. They hoped their children would inherit his apparent intellect, athleticism and passion for the arts.

Lucinda says: 'I was so convinced that this was the donor I had to have that I waited three months until his next batch of sperm was available.

'He was in such demand that it had all been used, and you had to wait for a three-month incubation period for each new batch so that it could be tested to make sure it was safe.'

She even felt she could detect a spiritual quality in the anonymous donor.

As part of their file, all donors had to submit a handwritten sheet of answers to questions.

When asked what was important to him, Donor 150 wrote about his love for animals, children and yoga rather than wealth.

Lucinda showed the answers to a handwriting analyst. 'He told me this guy was definitely on a spiritual quest - that was his journey in this lifetime, to answer more of the questions about life rather than be just a success.'

JoEllen, who has studied the Donor 150 file and knows it by heart, says: 'The analyst said he was independent and would be a good choice because the child would be independent.'

But the process of conception in December 1989 was not without drama.

In accordance with Lucinda's wishes it didn't take place in front of a doctor, but it did involve a number of Federal Express employees - perhaps a little more closely than she would have liked.

At peak ovulation time there is a three-day window when the chances of conception are best.

Donor 150's frozen sperm therefore had a tight deadline in which to be sent across the United States.

It was supposed to be with Lucinda by 6pm but when it didn't arrive on time, she checked the tracking number and found the package was still in Indianapolis, 600 miles away.

Panicking, she called FedEx, but was told it would not get there until 6pm the following day.

'That's no good to me,' said Lucinda, who was then forced to explain the delicate and time-sensitive nature of the problem.

FedEx put the package on a plane and it arrived at 10pm, with Deneen racing to a depot to pick it up.

'It came packed in dry-ice as a FedEx rush-job,' laughs JoEllen.

The insemination was successful. The pregnancy was straightforward but the home delivery was long. JoEllen was a big baby, weighing 9lb 6oz.

However, only six months after JoEllen's birth, Lucinda and Deneen broke up. It was an amicable split, they say today, and they shared the same home for another year.

Their characters were just too different for the relationship to work but, like many divorced heterosexual couples, they were determined to share JoEllen's upbringing in a fair and sensible way, with their child splitting her time between their homes.

JoEllen says she had an idyllic, if occasionally confusing, childhood.

For example, when she called 'Mum', both women would answer. She solved that problem herself as a toddler by calling Lucinda 'Mum' and Deneen 'Neen'.

She realised early on that her parentage was different to other children's and that she was in an unconventional set-up.

Her parents saw no reason to keep their arrangement private and discussed it with anyone who asked.

JoEllen recalls: 'My mums were asked a lot of questions about me. I picked up on that as a toddler. When I asked them, they told me, 'You have a donor, not a dad.'

As if having two mothers and a test-tube father with a number for a name were not unusual enough, JoEllen was taught at home until she was 11.

It was not because of any fear that she would be mocked or bullied by other children but simply because Lucinda and Deneen had the time and felt they could do a better job.

They also ensured that JoEllen mixed with other youngsters through clubs, church and sports.

Lucinda says: 'JoEllen was around a lot of lesbian couples but she was also around my family which, apart from me, is pretty conventional.'

Indeed, in some respects JoEllen could not have been a more typical little girl. 'When she played house she always had it set up as a conventional family with a mum, dad and kid,' recalls Lucinda.

'I used to wonder, 'Where did that come from?' It must be in the genes.'

JoEllen adds: 'I remember having conversations with other children of lesbian couples when we were all about nine years old, and we were saying, 'Well, do you think you want to be a lesbian?' And the answer was always, 'No, I don't think I want to be one.'

Did she miss a father figure? Perhaps a little, she admits, and it could well have made even more difference had she been a boy.

But she thinks her mothers would have realised this and made more effort to find a father-figure for her.

'I always had my grandfather or my uncle to bowl with or one of my mums,' says JoEllen. 'It was no big deal.'

Mollie, though, was keener on acquiring a father.

She was conceived in the same way as JoEllen, but Lucinda chose a different father -Donor 733 -from California Cryobank.

'At one point, she asked me if I would get married so she could have a dad,' recalls Lucinda. 'I told her, 'I love you honey, but I'm sorry, no.'

Today Mollie says she is happy with her situation. When JoEllen finally went to school, she was concerned her family history might lead to problems with other children.

'I didn't go telling people I have lesbian mums and a sperm-donor dad, but my background was never a secret,' she says. 'I was always cautious at first because I didn't know what people would think.'

'As I grew to know more about myself and to understand things, then it didn't really make a difference. At school I didn't find any of the kids' questions intrusive. Some were pretty much to the point, but I am quite an open person. What you see is what you get.'

JoEllen has had a boyfriend for three months and often discusses boys with her mother.

Although JoEllen's relationship is going well, Lucinda does not want her to settle down yet.

'She says, 'Don't get tied down to one boy too soon,' laughs JoEllen.

Throughout her childhood, however, one question always lurked in the back of JoEllen's mind: Who was her father?

'I just felt that one day I'd like to know,' she says. And she wasn't the only curious member of the family.

'My mother June was always wondering about JoEllen's father,' says Lucinda.

'She would notice different traits in JoEllen and say, 'This must be from her other side because none of us have this. I wonder what her other grandmother is like.'

It was June who made the breakthrough. A committed Christian who never allowed her disapproval of Lucinda's lifestyle to interfere with her love for her family, she saw an item on the Oprah Winfrey show about the Donor Sibling Registry, then spotted a paragraph in a newspaper giving the website address.

'JoEllen might like to look at that,' she told Lucinda.

The Donor Sibling Registry is run by Wendy Kramer, whose own son was conceived thanks to donated sperm.

It helps people conceived as a result of artificial insemination or egg donation to contact half-siblings.

Anyone registered on the site can find a half-sibling by matching parent-donors.

JoEllen registered her name and Mollie's in the summer of 2003 and gave all the details she knew about Donor 150.

The registry has built-in safeguards. Anyone can browse its information but users have to register to make contact with anyone, and then only through a filtering process on the website.

At this stage, the identity of Donor 150 remained unknown.

For two years, JoEllen heard nothing. Then, one morning, she received a letter from Long Island, New York.

'Hey, we have the same dad,' wrote Danielle Pagano, now 17. The two girls were excited but took things slowly, at first just exchanging emails. Then in October 2005, JoEllen phoned Danielle.

'We had been building up to it and then the right moment just came along,' says JoEllen.

'It was weird. I mean as far as I knew, here I was, a teenager, talking to my sister from a donor father for the first time in my life, and no one else in the world had ever done this.'

That first conversation lasted 90 minutes. Since then the girls have chatted on the phone almost every day. 'The longest was seven-and-a-half hours,' says JoEllen. 'Our parents had to change their phone plans to get unlimited long-distance!'

Then, 18 months ago, the teenagers met for the first time at Penn Station in New York.

'That was weird too. Our mums were saying, 'Go on, give each other a hug.'

We decided to get away because it was awkward enough without our parents being involved.

We went into a waiting room and sat there staring at each other for ages, then we started talking about how strange it all was.'

Every meeting between the girls since then has started at Penn Station.

And in the past two years, more and more of Donor 150's children, aged between 12 and 22, have linked up.

JoEllen has met six of them. They are scattered across the United States - Colorado, Florida, New York and Pennsylvania - and they mostly keep in touch via the internet. So far, the others prefer to remain anonymous.

'We do look alike,' says JoEllen. 'It's really remarkable how much of our dad we all have in us. We are all long and lean, and have the same shaped face and distinctive forehead. There are some major character traits we all share.'

Like most of the other siblings, JoEllen has her father's blue eyes that change colour in different lights. Her mother's eyes are brown.

JoEllen and the others move with an easy, athletic grace, while her mother admits to being a plodder.

Lucinda says: 'When the siblings are with their mothers, they look like them. But when they are together you easily see the similarities. They are all extremely talented, both musically and in drama.'

JoEllen says: 'Danielle and I even sound alike. We've had fun fooling boys on the phone. They haven't realised they're talking to different people.'

Just a week ago, JoEllen was in a bowling alley with her boyfriend when Danielle called her.

'Call Wendy Kramer now,' ordered Danielle. 'She has important information about our dad.'

JoEllen found a quiet corner and made the call.

'We have been in contact with your donor,' said Ms Kramer. 'I have talked to him for half-an-hour on the phone and he seems a very nice, laid-back man.'

Kramer would not tell JoEllen any more because of laws restricting information which can be given to children, but she soon told Lucinda the full story.

Harrison, in fact, had been weighing up whether to come forward for nearly two years after reading an article in the New York Times revealing how JoEllen and Danielle had been in contact with each other and expressed a desire to find their father.

Moved by their story, he confirmed his identity to the Donor Sibling Registry earlier this month as 'a kind of Valentine's Day present' to his kids.

A few days ago JoEllen called him. 'Hello,' she said, 'I'm your daughter.'

It was a tentative, brief exploratory conversation and JoEllen is reluctant to go into details about what was said.

But when Danielle contacted Harrison, his first words were reportedly: 'Holy moly!'

'It's all very recent and those of us who've been in contact are all having our own reactions, which is to be expected,' says JoEllen.

'We are just waiting to see where it goes from here.

'I really don't know what to think, there are so many emotions. It's overwhelming, just amazing. It can only be a good thing. Everything happens when it's supposed to and I feel that if he is brave enough to come forward with so many of us, then I definitely want some form of contact with him.'

In her mind JoEllen had no idea what he would look like. 'I've seen photos of him now and keep a running tally of all the characteristics I share with his other children.'

Given Harrison's current circumstances, it seems the graphologist 18 years ago was remarkably prescient in discerning that 'success' was unimportant to him.

But this doesn't matter to JoEllen, Lucinda and Deneen. 'I did get annoyed when one paper called him a drifter,' says JoEllen. 'I prefer hippy. He seems a very free spirit to me and I like that.'

Says Deneen: 'Whatever he said, whoever he was or is, he helped create this wonderful young lady who is a source of pride and joy to us all.'

Now Mollie is looking for her father, Donor 733. Lucinda knows he has not been as prolific as Donor 150 and differences between the girls are obvious. 'I'm the bull in the china shop,' grins Mollie.

Despite the pessimistic predictions of many when this bold experiment in social engineering began, in JoEllen's case at least, it seems to be working remarkably well.

Asked if there is anything she would change, or if she has any regrets about the way things have worked out, Lucinda, thinks long and hard.

'No,' she finally says, 'I am delighted with it all. All of us -the mums, the siblings, the donor dad - we are a family now.'