

*These seven children
have one thing
in common:
a father known only as
sperm donor 5027.*

An American Family

By Jonathan Eig

The LOBBY of the Marriott New York Financial Center is usually lousy with guys in suits, but on this Friday in September it's crawling with blonde-haired, brown-eyed, button-nosed little children. There's one, a four year-old on tiptoe, trying to reach a jellybean at the bottom of a big bowl. There go two more-two-year-old twins getting in an elevator with their mother. Here come a boy and a girl, both three, flying down the a lushly carpeted staircase on tiny feet as a second set of twins, age two and a half, rolls by in route to the gift shop, pushed by their mother in a big blue Graco stroller.

These are the children of sperm donor No. 5027, four boys and three girls ages two to four, meeting for the first time in a quasi-family reunion orchestrated by their five mother. Shari Belanger, the mother of three-year-old Lawrence, works as a resident assistant at a housing community for teen mothers in Pittfield, Massachusetts.

When Holly Greenfield, then pregnant with Sophia and Liam, learned that another woman had conceived a child with sperm donor 5027, she decided to contact her. She wanted a sense of what her own children would be like.

Holly Greenfield, mother of two-year-old twins Liam and Sofia, is a psychiatrist in Denver. Claire Stopher's twins, Matthew and Megan, are just a few months older than Liam and Sophia; they live on the West Coast, where Stopher is a health care practitioner. Stephanie Brand. Mother of three-year-old Elizabeth, is the chief executive of her own company in New Jersey. And Jennifer Black, a financial planner in Phoenix, is the mother of four-year-old Nathan. She also has a daughter, Erin, by another father. (At their request, the names and some identifying characteristics of Brand and Black have been changed.)

The mothers, who discovered one another's existence about two and a half years ago, have been exchanging photographs and e-mail ever since, comparing notes on the challenges of single parenting and on the uncannily common traits among their children: an easy way with strangers; a bubbly, strong laugh; a particular way of pursing their lips during periods of concentration. "Elizabeth is going to need braces, just like Nathan," Black tells Brand as they sit in the hotel, watching their brood. Belanger can't get over the eerily strong resemblance among their children. "This is pretty momentous," she says. "It really feels like we're all connected."

Linking them is a man, or at least the DNA of a man, these women have spent a lot of time gossiping about his blondeness and athletic ability, his assumed Ivy League background, his sociability, good health and talent for math, all characteristics that illuminated him in his donor profile and audiotape resume. But while these mothers freely admit to fantasizing about his physical presence, none hold any romantic illusions about the donor. Single women between 32 and 45, they'd grown tired of waiting

for the right man to come along but were determined that the right man would father their children. So they went shopping at one of the most prominent sperm bank in the country, California Cryobank, and found an item they liked: No. 5027. (That 5027 met the women's approval isn't too surprising. A spokeswoman at the sperm bank said female staffers have been known to rate prospective donors on their physical appearance—on a scale of 1 to 10—and as Belanger pointed out during the New York reunion, "Ours got an 8.5.")

If the children share key similarities, there are differences too. Three are being raised Jewish; four are being brought up Christian. Some are surrounded by relative wealth; others lead a more modest existence. But a familial bond clearly exists, a sense that this group of women and children is embarking on a lifetime of shared experiences. "For my kids this is a starting point," says Greenfield. "I'll say to my kids, "Do you remember when we went to New York and met all your half brothers and half sisters?" And that will become part of the family mythology."

For my kids, this is a starting point, says Greenfield. I'll say, "Do you remember when we went to New York and met all of your half brothers and half sisters?"

The business of sperm banking is built on two pillars: the anonymity it guarantees the donors, who bear no legal or financial responsibility for their offspring, and the control it affords unmarried women, who make up about 30 percent of the industry's clients and who are looking for healthy, no-strings-attached sperm. "It's cleaner this way," is how Brand explains her choice. Or as Black put it "When I go into a restaurant, I don't need to meet the chef" to enjoy an item off the menu.

But while donors are screened for medical conditions, the process relies heavily on the honor system when it comes to their reporting their backgrounds and achievements, and it is almost impossible for the sperm bank to prove that donors are telling the truth about who they are and where they come from.

What these five women have done over the past two and a half years, most significantly on this crisp weekend in New York City, is crack that systems anonymity. They are beginning to create a uniquely twenty-first-century American family, brought together not by name, shared memories or the bloodlines of their ancestors but by the sperm of a man they know everything about, and nothing about.

In 1997, Stephanie Barns gave birth to a daughter she named Elizabeth Anne. The little girl has straight blonde hair (her mother is a brunette); big brown eyes; creamy skin and crapple cheeks; a cute, knobby little chin and the button

nose that must come from the donor. In fact, Brand believes her daughter has many of her father's physical and psychological characteristics. "No matter where you put her, no matter how you raised her, she would be a social creature," says Brand, 41, an aggressive businesswoman who lives in a lavishly furnished home in the exurbs of New Jersey. "I'm a social creature too, but from what I've heard about this guy, I think that comes from him."

Brand was delighted with Elizabeth and in 1998 she decided she wanted another child with the same donor. But when she contacted Cryobank, No. 5027 was "retired", and samples of his sperm had sold out.

As it happened, another woman also was seeking to acquire more of his sperm. So with Cryobank acting as intermediary, the two teamed up and asked him to come out of retirement for \$2,500; 5027 agreed. But Brand failed to get pregnant on the second try. (Officials at the sperm bank would not identify the second woman; she is not a part of the group that met in New York.)

Brand offered, through Cryobank, to pay him for another sample; this time 5027 declined.

At that point, she did what any enterprising American would do. She took out a classified ad in a quarterly newsletter published by Single Mothers by Choice, a support group with 4,000 members, saying that she was interested in buying sperm from anyone who might have extra vials of 5027. (A woman can buy as much sperm as she wants at about \$200 per vial and have it frozen at a cost of \$150 per vial. For another \$250 a year, the sperm bank will store the samples in a freezer.)

In Denver, Holly Greenfield, who was pregnant with 5027's twins, had seen the ad. She thought that she had some vials of his sperm in the freezer at the Cryobank. She later discovered that, in fact, she had used all her sperm, but she decided to call Brand anyway; she wanted to know what her future would be like. It turned out the two women had a good deal in common. Both were successful professionals. Neither was in a serious relationship with a man. And both were surprised at how maternal they had suddenly begun to feel.

"I had never particularly wanted children until I got into my thirties. Then all of a sudden I had this craving," says Greenfield. She was 42 and had recently broken up with a boyfriend when she made up her mind to undergo artificial insemination; she settled on 5027 because he seemed sociable. "I happen to believe that personality is very much inherit-

ed,” says Greenfield, now 45, as Liam and Sofia whoop joyfully in the background. “I chose the donor partially on personality. He seemed outgoing, friendly.” A few months after the twins were born, she sent Brand some pictures. “My children looked just like (Elizabeth),” she says. “It was amazing.”

Meanwhile, across the country, other connections were being made. In Arizona in the late 1997, Jennifer Black had put her name on a sibling registry also sponsored by Single Mothers by Choice, saying she was open to contact with other mothers who’d conceived children by 5027. She thought it might be good for Nathan to know he has half brothers and half sisters, and that it was also important to know whether there were half siblings who might serve as organ donors if Nathan, God forbid, were ever in need.

Black, a wisecracking, 45-year-old financial planner at a prestigious firm in Phoenix (“I want to be described as thin, please.”), picked 5027 foremost for his physical attributes. She already had blond, fair-skinned Erin, who was born seven years ago through good old-fashioned sex, and she thought—correctly, it turned out—that 5027 might produce a child that resembled her daughter.

Stopher, a gentle, religious woman, was stunned when the pastor of her church told her she had sinned by bringing children into the world without

The women began corresponding, and two years ago, when Belanger and her son, Lawrence, moved from California to western Massachusetts, they stopped in Phoenix to visit their recently discovered relatives. It quickly became clear the two women were about as different as they could be. Yet they shared an overwhelming common ground. “Here was someone,” says Black, “with a biological link, who shared the same interest in my child: his mannerisms, his looks, the way he acts.”

Black—who had seen Brand’s ad and was already in e-mail contact with her—introduced her to Belanger. Brand, in turn, introduced Greenfield to Black and Belanger.

Belanger, a former “fantastic fundamentalist” who had 150 pen pals in junior high school, some of whom she’s in touch with even today, adored the idea of building family relationships with Lawrence’s half siblings. She decided to go the sperm donor route in 1996, when the man she had been dating told her he was not interested in marrying her or having children. “I save myself from getting jerk genes,” she laughs now. Three years after Lawrence was born, she is still breast feeding him and has no intention of stopping anytime soon. She has been so candid with him about his origins that sometimes when the boy plays with trains he sends one train chugging toward “the store” and the other toward “the insemination donor.” Lawrence’s hair is darker and his nose is a little straighter than that of his half siblings, but the cheeks, eyes

and chin are the same.

Last to join the group was Claire Stopher. Around the time Brand was advertising for more sperm, Stopher, a health care practitioner who lives in a town on the West Coast (she asked that its name not be published), was giving birth to twins she named Matthew and Megan. At about six months, Matthew developed asthma; then Megan, around the time of her first birthday, developed such a painful form of constipation that her pediatrician thought she might be suffering from seizures. Stopher, at 31 a single mother of two sick babies, was a nervous wreck.

Claire Stopher, mother of twins Matthew and Megan, says that although she had longed to be a mother, she started “sweating bullets” at the thought of raising twins alone. “I had no idea there was anyone else in the world who wanted to do this.”

She asked officials at Cryobank to contact the donor to see if anything in his history might be causing this. But before Cryobank could respond, someone at the Single Mothers by Choice registry, with which she too had signed up, told her about Belanger and Brand. She called Bellanger immediately, who assured her that all the children of 5027 were healthy,

two-and-a-half-year-olds. As with the other four families, the twins strongly favor their half siblings. Donor 5027 must have some powerful genes.

Of the five women, Stopher has had the rockiest time of it. Her pregnancy was touch and go, with her on bed rest for the last four months of her term. She is younger and not as well established as Brand, Greenfield and Black. And she is the only one of the five to face crushing criticism for deciding to become a single mother.

“I don’t really believe in sex outside of marriage,” says Stopher, a gentle, religious woman, “so I didn’t think it would be appropriate to do it the other way.” She was stunned, then, when her pastor told her she had sinned in bringing children into the world without a father. She felt ostracized from a community she’d counted on to comfort amid the turmoil of raising twins alone. “I was sweating bullets,” she says. “I had no idea there was anybody else in the world who wanted to do this. I never thought I’d find a doctor. I thought she’d tell me I was crazy and throw me out of her office.”

Learning about the other mothers and hearing their stories restored confidence in herself and her decision, and it calmed a fear that had nagged her since Matthew and Megan were born. “One of my concerns,” she says, “was that there would be ten children in my state by the same donor, and they would be running into each other.”

What Stopher didn't take into account is that Matthew and Megan may indeed have many more half brothers and sisters. California Cryobank will not disclose how many times 5027 donated sperm or how many times vials of semen were sold. Furthermore, records at California Cryobank on how many children were conceived from 5027 are likely to be inconclusive, as fewer than 50 percent of their clients bother to report their results to the sperm bank.

Women have been practicing artificial insemination in this country since the early twentieth century, though it became a popular option among single women only about twenty years ago. Officials at Cryobank estimate they deliver around a thousand sperm samples a month to single women. Say that one in ten of those samples results in pregnancy. That's roughly a hundred births a month to single women from just one bank. Insemination can be performed by a gynecologist, a fertility specialist or the woman herself, at home in her own bed. Semen is inserted into the vagina, cervix or uterus, either with a syringe or catheter, one or two times a month. Given that many women try this multiple times before becoming pregnant, the artificial insemination process can cost more than \$10,000.

About 150 sperm banks operate in the U.S., and nearly 90 percent of the market is controlled by the twenty largest banks. The biggest ones tend to set up shop near major college campuses, where they can find large numbers of educated young men with a rich sperm count and poor cash flow. The standard donor's fee is \$50 per ejaculation. That, says Charles Sims, a clinical pathologist who in 1977 founded California Cryobank with Cappy Rothman, a urologist, is adequate incentive. But its not so much money, Sims says, that men are tempted to lie about their achievements in order to be accepted.

Once they are, donors are generally encouraged to give a sample two or three times a week—with a cap at 850 donations—and under Cryobank rules, they have to abstain from sex and masturbation for at least 48 hours before donation to ensure an ample supply of zzz lively and abundant sperm. The semen samples come in one-inch plastic vials, each labeled with the donor's number, which are packed in liquid nitrogen, ready for shipping.

For safety standards and quality of product, California Cryobank is considered among the best sperm banks in the country. Sims says his company rejects 95 percent of all would-be-donors, usually because their sperm and health histories don't pass muster. Cryobank asks applicants for copies of their Social Security card, driver's license and proof of their enrollment in or graduation from college. The men fill out questionnaires, are interviewed face-to-face and undergo blood and semen tests and urinalysis. But many sperm banks,

Cryobank included, do not conduct IQ tests, do not ask to see medical records and do not require donors to sign affidavits. The best way to catch a liar, Sims says, is through extensive interviewing. "We've had some experience where we felt we were being misled," he says, "but by and large, we've found the donors are being honest."

Yet sperm banks do make mistakes. In Virginia, Cecil Jacobson, the doctor that introduced the amniocentesis in the U.S., was sentenced to five years in prison after he used his own sperm to impregnate as many as 75 patients at his sperm bank. In New York, a sperm bank was sued after it mistakenly gave the wrong semen sample to a woman who thought she was getting her husband's sperm. And California Cryobank is currently facing a suit from a mother who claims on her case, they have found that 276 does not have unlimited right to privacy and can be forced to testify. In this issue, lawyers for Cryobank and 276 are considering an appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court.

It won't be long, says Johnson's lawyer. Walter Koontz, before simple and inexpensive genetic test can reveal in enormous detail how a child is likely to turn out. But until that day, he says, this business is still the Wild West. Brittany's condition developed unusually early; it could be years before other children of 276 discover they have the disease.

Because of the pending litigation, Sims won't comment on the Johnson case, though he notes that the medical screening process at Cryobank is much more thorough than what most parents undergo in traditional pregnancies. But he still reminds women considering the process to be realistic. "It's the quest for the perfect child," he says. "We're in that field, but people have to realize there's no such thing as a genetically perfect individual."

Getting seven children under the age four to cooperate for a group photo is an enormous production...

as well as a study in parental bribery tactics. When Stopher uses M&M's to entice one of her children to sit still, Black ribs her for resorting to desperate measures. It was Black, however, who lured her daughter, Erin, to the studio by saying "This is where Britney Spears has her picture taken..."

All over the room, images shaped on the phone are being focused and refocused. Some of the mothers expected Stopher to be older and more intense, some expected Brand to be more stuffy, everyone thought Greenfield was wry thoughtful, just as she sounded. And once again, as the little ones line up for pictures dressed in their best, the mothers can't help but marvel at how much they look alike. Nathan and Elizabeth are the same size and shape. Elizabeth and Lawrence have the very same smile. Lawrence and Sophia

have the same nose and lips. Sofia and Matthew, from the eyes down, could be twins. Matthew and Liam seem to stare at each other as if gazing in a mirror. Liam and Megan hold their hands in their laps in almost exactly the same way.

Despite their mother's pronounced economic, religious and geographical differences, the idea of building a communal extended family appeals to them. They can picture their kids as teenagers, taking vacations as a group, crashing at one another's apartments, getting together for holidays. For now, if the women seem to be supremely deferential to one another, it's probably because nobody wants to blow that imagined future.

The younger children do not yet understand that everyone has a father, but not everyone has a daddy. Down the road, their mothers will address this subject, discussions that will continue beyond childhood. When their children are old enough to start dating, for instance, they'll get a birds-'n'-bees talk with a twist: Before you sleep with anyone, check the person's bloodlines for ties to donor 5027.

They know there may also come a day when their children want to meet the sperm donor. Some of the parents seem to look forward to it; others dread it. Cryobank donors can indicate whether they're willing to meet their children when they turn eighteen, but 5027 has not expressed his opinion on this matter. Either way, they suspect it won't be hard for the kids to track him down.

"I have no desire to meet him," says Brand, "But I know my child, and I have no doubt she will definitely find out who he is."

"I got the sense that he didn't want to be found," says Black, who listened to 5027's audiotape. "Didn't he sound he was wound a little tight?"

"If he doesn't want any involvement with them," says Stopher, "I would be scared my kids would be crushed by that."

After the photo shoot, five taxis ferry sixteen people uptown to a restaurant called Serendipity 3, a fantasyland for kids where hot dogs and ice cream are served and the décor evokes an old-time soda fountain. Many a Manhattan child has had a birthday party here, and yet when the group arrives in the restaurant's family-packed, thunderously loud vestibule, a pimply-faced maitre d' won't sit everyone until Claire Stopher gets rid of her double-decker Graco stroller.

"But this is a restaurant for children," says an incredulous male member of the group.

"This is not a children's restaurant," the maitre d' corrects him. Haggard-looking parents waiting to be seated begin to follow the exchange with interest. "We've got seven kids, five mothers, three grandparent; we've come from all over the county. We've got a reservation," another man says.

"Sorry," says the maitre d', sounding not at all sorry. "We don't have room for the stroller."

"Do we have to put up with this?" asks Black. Outside on the sidewalk, a quick circus results in everyone heading around the corner to John's Pizzeria. But before this unusual family decamps, Black says, "That maitre d' is a jerk. Does anyone mind if I go back in and tell him off?" Be our guest, the mothers say, and in she goes. Though no one can quite make out her words, Black's tone is crystal clear, and she emerges from Serendipity 3 grinning.

What kind of man donates his sperm to women he hopes never to meet? Is it just about the cash, or is ego involved? I thought getting an answer from 5027 would be relatively simple. The donor named the college town in which he had been raised. He said his parents were professors, his father of law and his mother a disciplinarian of humanities. He added that his father was an accomplished musician and that his mother was a published author. Donor 5027 also said he belonged to the Sigma Alpha Mu fraternity.

From the description of himself (key details of which I've omitted to protect his identity), the mothers who chose him seem to have assumed, and then passed on as fact that, 5027 is a graduate of Harvard or Massachusetts Institute of Technology. It's precisely the kind of detail that excites a sperm-buying woman; in fact, Cryobank, which has a branch office in Cambridge, Massachusetts, says it gets most of its donors from those schools. I thought I would call the frat houses at the two colleges and ask if anyone remembered a fellow from the class of '93 who was on the swim team and tennis team.

But Harvard doesn't have fraternities, and M.I.T. doesn't have a chapter of Sigma Alpha Mu. What's more, Sigma Alpha Mu is generally considered a Jewish fraternity; the donor said he was Catholic. Strike one. And when I phoned the schools in the donor's hometown, none of the spokesmen for those schools could recall any faculty members fitting the descriptions 5027 gave of his parents.

There is no reason to believe the donor lied in filling out his profile. Perhaps his parents have retired or moved. At the very least, however, clues in his file suggest he is somewhat less than the Ivy League ideal. For example, he said he scored 660 on the verbal section of his SAT and 690 on the math section. Nut in adding up his total, he came up with 1550. It seems that someone at Cryobank crossed out his answer and wrote the correct figure-1350-in its place. Two lines down, he appears to have had some trouble spelling achievement.

In the summer of 1992, he says, he worked as a camp counselor. In the second half 1993, apparently after graduating from college, he held an internship in which he performed "customer service" and "word processing." The donor also submitted a ten-minute audio recording in which he repeated most of the information in his written profile. "Hello, my donor

number is 5027. I am six –one, I have a medium build...” He speaks in a monotone and sounds a bit embarrassed. He says his favorite class was Western Civilization and his favorite recently read book was *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*.

He goes on to say he’s just taken a job as a highschool history teacher. When asked for an adjective that best described himself, he chose *easygoing*. Asked what, if anything, he might do to improve himself, he hesitated, then said: “I think maybe I could, um, move more faster perhaps in some ways.”

His grammar and his insights were not necessarily those of an intellectual, but there are plenty of possible explanations for that too. Maybe he was less than thrilled about the process involved in donating sperm. Also, he was only 23 or 24-years old-still very young.

My search for the donor gone dry, I phoned Sims at Cryobank, who agreed to forward the man a letter on my behalf. In it, requested an interview and promised to protect his identity. I also wrote him to that his sperm had been used to conceive seven children. But when bank officials tried to forward the letter, they were told by someone at that address that the man in question no longer lived there. When donors sign on, they pledge to keep the sperm bank apprised of their moves. If a child becomes sick and a parent needs a more detailed medical history, it is important to know where the donor can be found. But 5027 left no forwarding address.

The final group activity for the weekend is a Sunday afternoon ride on the Staten Island Ferry. The sun is shining, the Manhattan sky a perfect baby blue. The children assemble on the side of the boat facing east, gazing out at the passing tug-boats, airplanes, helicopters and barges. The mothers sit behind them on wooden benches, laughing still marveling at the family of children arrayed before them. “My son and Liam could be twins.” Says Stopher. “This is so much more pleasant than getting together with my family,” adds Greenfield. “When you compare us to most single moms,” says Black, “we’re in pretty good shape.”

“It’s true,” replies Greenfield. “I’m in the play group. All the women do is bitch about their husbands. The guys sit around watching TV with the kids and think that’s a contribution. My life is so simple compared to that.”

“I know a single mom that talks to her imaginary husband,” laughs Stopher. “She says, ‘Hey, hon, the baby’s crying, will you get up?’”

“Yet for all the jolly man-bashing, a couple of women say they couldn’t help but notice how their children had gravitated toward the man who had spent time with the group in New York. Saturday night, when the children were getting tired, Lawrence had climbed into one man’s arms and began stroking the stubble on his chin. Nathan, riding on another man’s shoulders for a piggyback ride, began chanting “Daddy

goes, daddy goes.” And this afternoon, Black’s daughter, Erin, listens to the women talk, then yells, “Hey! You need to marry somebody, people! I want a daddy! I want a daddy!”

For a moment everyone seems to stop breathing. Earlier, Black had discussed this topic at length. As a parent, she said, she wants to give her children everything, including a father. But she said she quickly learned that you can never give a child everything; you can only give everything you have. Today, however, she offers Erin a decidedly less philosophical rationale.

“What if I were to say I’d give you the full Powerpuff Girls bedroom?” Says Black. “The Powerpuff Girls inflatable pillow, the Powerpuff makeup, the Powerpuff bathrobe, the pajamas, the body glitter-or a daddy? Which one would you choose?”

Erin thinks it over. “The Powerpuff room,” she says. The daddy crisis has been averted once again.

As for daddy himself, he has waned as a topic these past three days as the women have become acquainted with one another’s families. When I tell them I am beginning to think 5027 might not have been the Ivy League student they imagined, they don’t really care. “If I found out he wasn’t really good at math, I don’t think I would blink,” says Belanger. It would be another story, she says, if she learned his family history included an undisclosed disease. But why worry over that, at least this moment, when the children seem so happy and healthy. It seems that 5027 is gradually being replaced in the mother’s mind by this darling swarm of cells on the ferry, giggling hysterically as Megan’s floppy hat sails off her head and over the rail.

The children ask when they will see their new relatives again, and the parents make plans to stay in touch. “I’d like my kids to have an extended family, or at least the option,” says Greenfield. “But I have no idea what they’re going to want. They might like it, or they might say, ‘God, why did you ever get together with those people?’”

When these children turn eighteen, they can ask Cryobank to approach their father. But even if 5027 declines to be identified to them, who is to say the law won’t compel the bank to name him? This very thing is happening in adoption, as a handful of states throw open previously sealed birth records to adult adoptees searching for their biological parents’ identities.

The first big wave of sperm-donor children is coming of age right about now; what happens when large numbers of them begin researching for fathers who thought they would remain forever anonymous? In a system as porous as the sperm bank business, it’s plausible that there’s more than one Donor 276 out there. In five or ten years, will we be reading about men who have fathered a hundred children?

For now, three-year-old Lawrence Belanger plays with trains and sends a toy engine off in search of the “insemination donor.” The odds are decent that the train will reach its destination.