

Four Moms, Two Dads and More Than a Handful of Poodles

Lena Greene(LG) in conversation with Anja Dietmann(AD) and Tobias Peper(TP)

Lena Greene is an artist, animator and award-winning karaoke singer, based in New York City, originally from Los Angeles.

AD Lena, can you tell us the math? How did it happen that you have six parents?

LG It's pretty simple actually. I have two moms, Laurie and Wendy, lesbians, who wanted to have a baby. They asked their gay best friend Jerry to be the dad through artificial insemination. My biological mom Laurie got pregnant and I was born. My moms separated when I was three and are now both happily remarried to other ladies. Laurie is remarried with Debbie, and Wendy, who I call Mama Boo, is with Marianne. When I was in the womb my dad Jerry started dating Richard, who is my stepdad. I call him Tio, which means uncle in Spanish—he's from Mexico. One Lena, two moms, two stepmoms, one dad, one stepdad and one big family.

TP How old was your mom when she was pregnant? And when were you born?

LG I was born in 1991, I think my mom was 37 then. My parents are a bit older and that's why I don't have any siblings. The plan was that each of my moms would have a baby with my dad, so I would have a biological half sibling, but my moms were both in their late-30s after I was born. My other mom tried to get pregnant but she couldn't, and then my biological mom tried to get pregnant again, but she couldn't either.

TP And what was the legal situation back then?

LG None of my parents were legally married until 2008. In May 2008, there was a California Supreme Court case to legalize gay marriage. It passed, and my dads got married, and Mama Boo and Marianne got married. In November 2008, California voters overturned this ruling with Proposition 8. There was a very small six months window in California where gay marriage was legal. This then went to the US Supreme Court in 2010, was overturned in California, and my Mom and Debbie got married in 2013. Then gay marriage was finally legalized in 2015 in the whole country.

AD Is there a parent with whom you are more in touch, or do you have the same level of contact with all of them?

LG I am equally in touch with all of them. Before my moms split up when I was three, I was with my moms most, and I would see my dads once or twice a week, maybe sleep there once a week and have dinner there another night or something. When my moms split up, Laurie moved around the corner from Wendy. I just could run around the block and go see my mom and then go see Mama Boo. But then as I got older, I mostly stayed at Laurie's house. It was easier having one home base for all of my stuff, but then I would still see the other parents all the time.

AD Do you have a specific mom or a dad for specific themes, when you have a problem?

LG Yes, totally. They're all there for me in so many different ways. Mama Boo is a lawyer and she is very on my shit in a good way. When I have any questions about finances, I talk to her. I always send her the leases for my apartments, and she sends them back annotated with red lines. Whereas Laurie is super chill, always down to party, and likes to skinny dip. My dad is a lovable nerdy curmudgeon, always ready with the literary and film suggestions. Tio is a therapist and a great interior decorator (my dads took my advice when I was three and actually painted their house pink), Marianne shares my love of fluffy poodles (I have a new sister, Mimi the poodle), and Debbie has spiky hair and has recently taken up sailing. They're all totally unique individuals, and no matter what I need I can probably find it in one of them.

AD You said that you were raised with more than 20 poodles...

LG I think this happens a lot with gay and queer communities. The idea of a chosen family. Growing up I was always surrounded by my parents' friends, many of whom didn't have kids of their own. Mostly my moms' friends, all women. It's like I had a whole tribe of Jewish lesbian West L.A. aunties. Most of them lived in the neighborhood too. They call themselves "the girls in the hood". There's a really funny photo somewhere of eight of them from a trip they took to Israel, each coupled up on four camels, all wearing matching custom made "girls in the hood" visors. It was a common morning thing for one or two of them to like, take a little detour from walking their dogs to pop into my house while I was eating breakfast. I feel like my Thanksgivings are a good example of this. For most people, Thanksgiving is like, "Here I am with my siblings and my mom and dad, and maybe a few cousins are here too." But for me it was always me, 20 of the girls, and two of their kids who grew up down the block from me. There's also always nonstop drama and gossip.

TP When you were a child and went to school, did you realize or did your classmates make you realize that the situation in which you grew up was not the norm, so to speak?

LG I think I was really fortunate to have grown up in L.A., and go to elementary school in West Hollywood, a very liberal and gay bubble. I don't really remember thinking that I should be embarrassed about my parents. It was more that I know this aspect about me is so interesting, I don't want people to know this before they meet me, because I would rather be known for who I am. My character and my abilities. My quick wit and good rhyming skills. So, it was less "I'm embarrassed they'll make fun of me," but more that people will talk about me like, "Ah Lena, she's the girl with six gay parents. There she goes!" It just takes away my spotlight. To be honest, I was hesitant to do this interview for this same reason, my parents defining me, but hopefully my personality shines through.

TP It's interesting because it reminds me of so many children of celebrities who kind of changed their last name because they don't want to be associated with their parents for the same reason you said, they want to be known for themselves first, instead of their parents.

LG Totally right. My parents are the ones who have that interesting story to tell, not me. If it was me who was gay, fought for equality and started a family against the norms of the early '90s, sure. A lot of queer artists make work about the fact that they are queer, or other artists decide to highlight their difference, but for me I feel that it's not my story to tell in a sense. I always get asked about it, but it was never my struggle. I didn't come out in the '70s and I didn't deal with that oppression. Those weren't my battles.

TP But did your parents speak to you about their struggles, the whole gay rights movement that was going on?

LG We talked about it a little bit but not as much as you would think. I kind of grew up in a sheltered way. My family situation is interesting, but at the same time really boring. They are just normal parents who told me, "Do your math homework," or "eat your vegetables." It felt very normal. I almost wish it wasn't so normal, actually.

AD I imagine it as being really liberating, your mothers and your fathers sharing in raising you, so they could also find time on their own.



LG Yes, totally and that's something I think about too. Raising a child with so many parents is great because it gives the parents more freedom, and they can do what they wanna do. I couldn't imagine having a kid and raising it with just one partner. It sounds like so much work. I think, practically speaking, it just makes more sense to have a whole community raise a child. It's...I mean I felt so much love.

TP I wanted to ask, could you imagine it for yourself? Raising a child on your own with this form of community base?

LG I think it sounds great to do it as a community. Kids are expensive and take up all your time, why not share that lil joy bundle with a group of people you love? My friends and I, who are mostly broke artists, often joke about going in on a kid. I wonder if it's harder for my generation to imagine a secure financial future where we can afford to send a kid to college when most of us are still paying our own student debt, but like, what if we split a kid eight ways?

AD And are your parents sometimes jealous when you spend more time with the other part of your family?

LG Not obviously jealous. It's less that they get mad, it's more that they feel disappointed when I can't spend enough personal time with each of them. It's hard coming back to L.A. for a week at a time and sticking to the full itinerary of dinners, museum visits, and long walks on the beach.

AD How did it come to be that you studied art?

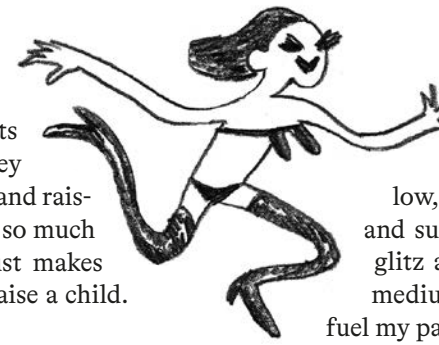
LG It's probably mostly my dad's influence. He loves art and he has a Master's in art history. He got me interested in art, and of course I was one of those kids who loved drawing as soon as I could hold a pencil. I'd always bring my little Rugrats sketchbook with me whenever we'd go out to eat and sit quietly in the corner and draw my dragons and Pokémon. Luckily, all of my parents were supportive and encouraged my artistic career. Up until I graduated high school I did a lot of theatre, which was definitely inspired by Laurie, who always wanted to be an actor.

AD But there was all the time acceptance from your parents, and support?

LG Yes, there was always a lot of support, which is really nice. I never felt pressure to be a lawyer or to be something else. As long as I was happy, could make a bit of money and could pay the rent.

TP We spoke earlier about queer people using their own identity for their own artistic work. Did you ever do something like that? Did you ever incorporate your story into a work of yours, or did you think about it?

LG I've thought about it. People are always saying I should make a show about it or write about my upbringing. There are definitely elements of how I was raised that inspire my work, but I don't know how directly my parent's sexual orientation comes up in this work. It's more the vibrant and colorful characters I was always surrounded by who influence my work, the personalities of my parents and their friends being a part of that. Growing up in the Hollywood bubble, I was surrounded by as much queer-ness as I was by Jewish humor and the entertainment industry. I was constantly exposed to so many *wacky* characters at such a young age: my bio-mom Laurie who still has a passion for the stage, the larger than life lesbian rabbi who gives no fucks, the overly performative acting coach who was always around. Queerness might be implicit or associated with some of these characteristics, but there are plenty of boring queer people too. The people I grew up around who inspire my work are amazing and interesting in so many ways and it's not because they're queer. Their sexuality is just another part of what makes them amazing. Another characteristic of my work that's associated with and owed to queer culture, but of course shouldn't be exclusively queer, is camp. There's a very faux glamorous aspect to my work—most of my characters, regardless of their gender, wear heels or thigh-highs, are larger than life and over-the-top.



My fictional characters often have delusions of grandeur, and this is more a tenet in the genre of camp than a characteristic of the queer people I grew up around. My characters are stuck down below, looking upwards at some unattainable idea of fame and success, but take pride in their own performance of glitz and glamour. I've always felt animation is the best medium to express hyperbole. All of this probably helped fuel my passion for karaoke too—I love the idea of pretending to be these larger than life and often out-of-reach characters.

AD Did you move to New York because there was too much pressure in L.A.?

LG I moved to New York for a couple of reasons. I've always felt a connection to New York, my biological mom and dad grew up there, and I still have a lot of extended family out there. Also, there's a lot of pressure in L.A. to see my parents all the time. I'd still be a giant baby if I spent all my time between six parents' homes. I also think it's easier, or more fun, to write about L.A. culture from further away. Everything can be abstracted and exaggerated in my unreliable memories of it, which I like. TP Does that also have something to do with distancing yourself from the story of your parents and becoming independent?

LG I guess so. Everyone loves the story of my parents so much, maybe it's good to get some distance from it. TP I was interested in another thing you wrote to us previously, in an email before this interview, some psychology textbook you were mentioned in?

LG Ah yes, I haven't seen it in a long time, but when I was born having gay parents was pretty rare. There's a psychology textbook that talks about different ways of parenting, with a chapter about lesbian moms, and I guess it was published in 1991 or 1992. There's a photo of my two moms holding me as an infant, which shows that I am alive and that I am able to breath and that it is in fact possible. [Laughter]

TP Was it the only time your parents shared their story publicly?

LG There were no other reveals, just the textbook.

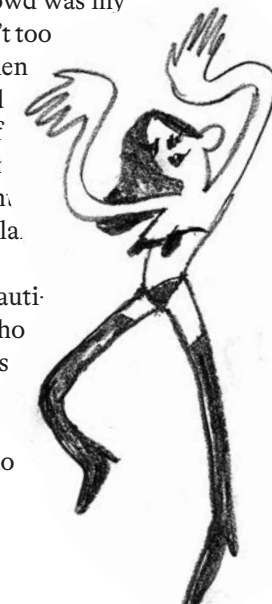
TP To me it's really, really wonderful how little of an issue it is to you, or ever was, and maybe it has something to do with the fact that in your life neither you nor your parents made a big deal out of it. It was just your reality.

LG They just wanted me to have a normal childhood. I think they knew, "This is crazy, this child has so many parents, how do we make a normal childhood possible."

AD Was there ever a time where you wished just to have two parents, where you felt like, "that's too much at the moment"?

LG I think there were a couple of times, looking back on it. In high school I was really bad at soccer. I was always on the bench, they never put me in. For the first couple of games my parents, all six of them, would come and be so loud. I would say, "If you want to come to my plays, come to my plays, but soccer is not my thing." It was great growing up with so much support but that was definitely one of those times when I was embarrassed, because there was too much support and too many parents when I was just sitting on the bench. A third of the crowd was my parents at those soccer games. There weren't too many other times I felt embarrassed, but when my parents came for school stuff, they would take up the whole table, it was just a lot of bodies for me, physically taking up so much space. Most other kids just had one parent sitting there, but for me it was the whole class. AD To me it sounds beautiful.

LG Definitely beautiful. I think it's also beautiful from my close friends' perspectives who I went to school with in L.A. My friends loved my parents, I think they thought they were cooler than I thought they were. That was really helpful, to have close friends who loved my family.



TP You mentioned before that it has become significantly easier for gay couples to have a child and build a family and I was wondering if this situation today also would somehow prevent things that used to be really, really essential in the community? Like building up a chosen family, building a community and raising children within that community, like you were? Maybe today rainbow families are more oriented towards a standard heteronormative setup again?

LG Oh, because you think everyone could start doing it?

TP Basically, because there is not that urgent necessity anymore to build a community for certain people with a privilege.

LG Yeah, that's a really good point I haven't thought of. It was harder for gay couples to adopt back then, but instead of going to a sperm bank, my moms decided to have one of their friends be the dad. I wonder if that was because gay parenting was so new back then and they wanted me to have a *normal* upbringing with a father figure, or if it was just that they didn't mind the idea of a family with three parents. I'm not sure if this is what you're implying, but I wonder if gay couples today aspire to a more heteronormative family structure (with just two parents) because there are fewer legal and social obstacles in the way of doing that, while there was a time in the past when gay culture could only exist on the fringes, and so it was necessary or desirable to imagine entirely new social and family structures. I'm not sure where my parents fall on that spectrum of wanting or needing to assimilate to norms and wanting or needing to reimagine the idea of what a family should look like. But I am sure they made all these decisions based on what they thought would be best for me. There was definitely something nice about having this big community

of parents to raise me, and definitely something the world can learn from this story. To all the other straight people, gay people, whatever people, and gaybies out there: have kids with your friends, all of them.

