

OUR FAMILY ALBUM

Maureen Coley and Kate Bishop

Sayville, Suffolk County

Maureen and Kate have lived together for 13 years and they have two children. Maureen gave birth to 4-year-old Dylan and Kate gave birth to 7-year-old Olivia. Both women adopted each other's biological child.

There are several biological relatives in Maureen and Kate's immediate family, including Maureen's three sisters, her brother and her parents. Kate's sister and two brothers are also part of the family, as is her father. Dottie and Anita are a lesbian couple who are Olivia's godparents and also part of their family.

For Maureen, the key elements of a family are love, care and taking responsibility for each other. She says that her family has much in common with the family next door. However, health care coverage is a serious concern for Maureen and Kate because not all employers provide benefits to the domestic partners of their employees. Decisions regarding who works, when they work and where they work depend upon the availability of domestic partner as well as family health care benefits.



Maureen Coley and Kate Bishop

Dana Wagemaker and Ann Casey

Niskayuna, Schenectady County

Dana and Ann have been together for 14 years and always knew they wanted children. Now they have four children – 5-year-old Emily and infant triplets Andres, Catharine and Sarah. While they are delighted with the additions to their family, Ann and Dana face many complexities and challenges managing their household.

With the recent loss of Dana’s job and a reduction in Ann’s work hours, the couple has been struggling to make ends meet and provide health insurance coverage for their children. They have run into a number of roadblocks because they are not always considered a family by social service institutions. Ann summed up their difficult situation by saying, “I’m frustrated with the system. We need a little bit of help to get over this hump or to be treated equally to married couples.”

In addition to their children, Dana and Ann have biological family members who are important to them. Dana’s family includes her mother, brother, sister-in-law, nephews, nieces, aunts and “tons” of cousins. Ann has found that having children brought her closer to her biological family, which consists of her mother, father, brother, sister-in-law and nephew. Both Dana and Ann view family in the broad sense including friends and members of the LGBT community.

Tina Donovan

Long Island City, Queens

Tina is a 61-year-old transgendered woman. She has lived almost half her life as a woman, which has caused her to be rejected by most of her biological family. Tina has one aunt, her mother's sister, who is her closest family member and primary support. "She is more than an aunt. She is a friend. She and her children accept me as Tina with no questions asked and unconditional love."

After losing her job as a nursing assistant in the 1970's, Tina went to work in gay bars in order to earn a living. Not having enough financial resources for medical care, Tina relied on SSI to avoid becoming homeless. Today, she lives in public housing and is actively involved with several organizations that serve the LGBT community in Queens.

Tina worries about growing older alone and not having a caregiver. But she credits her involvement with the LGBT community for decreasing her isolation and fears.



Tina Donovan

Mary Keane

Yonkers, Westchester County

Mary is self-employed as a health care and social services consultant. A few years ago, she decided to renovate a big old house and become a foster care mother. Now, Mary's family living in her house includes three foster children and one sibling, and she couldn't be happier that she decided to take this path.

"We are a family because we take care of each other and look out for each other. We do things together and really try to listen when someone needs support," she explains. Mary thinks she has gotten the absolute best kids from the foster care system and she knows that they are all very appreciative of their chosen family.

Mary's family members are: 20-year-old Angela and 19-year-old Aileen, who celebrated their two-year anniversary with Mary in August; 16-year-old Arelis, who is Aileen's biological sister; 21-year-old Gina, who is Angela's biological sister and also lives with them; and Richie, Mary's brother.



Mary Keane (center)

Michael DeSalvo and Nicholas Orth

Syracuse, Onondaga County

Michael and Nick have been a family for 12 years. For 10 of those years they have been providing care in their home for isolated and needy people who are ill, many of whom are in their final struggle with AIDS. They call the care and support they give “hospitality” instead of hospice care, and those for whom they care are their “guests.” Both men had been active in the Catholic Worker Movement, founded by Dorothy Day, when they met. It is that movement which is the basis and inspiration for their work. They call their home the Friends of Dorothy House in honor of Dorothy Day and because “Friend of Dorothy” is also code for “gay.”

“We have always lived socially conscious lives around certain issues,” they say. “With terminally ill people, our approach is to make every day great, live one day at a time and try to make each day a great day for our guest. We try to make it feel like grandma’s house. The difference between our care and most health care providers is that our guests don’t have to pay anything. Our commitment isn’t around money, but it is around our guests’ care and helping them with their lives.” Michael and Nick’s work was recognized with a National Caregiver Recognition Award from the Family AIDS Network.

Michael owns a beauty salon and adjusts his work schedule to meet the guests’ needs. Income from the salon contributes to maintenance of the house. Nick is a trained chef and skilled carpenter who has devoted himself full-time to caregiving. They are able to support their charitable work through minimal fundraising and donations from others.

“We’re a couple whose family changes frequently,” they say. “Our family includes our guests and their friends and families. They become a part of our household – gay people, straight people, families and children.” According to Michael and Nick, a family is made up of “all different colors, ages, faiths, love and support. The commitment to be there.”



Michael DeSalvo and Nicholas Orth

Marvin L. Henchbarger and Laurie Dean Hogan

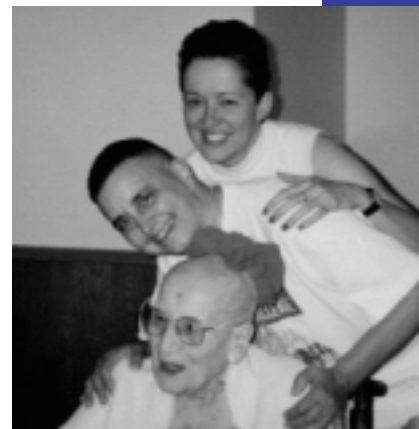
Niagara, Niagara County and Buffalo, Erie County

Laurie and Marvin are two lesbians who are lifetime romantic partners. They live in different locations and both work for nonprofit agencies. Marvin finds it ironic that the primary responsibility for caring for immediate family members often falls on LGBT people, even when they are not accepted by all members of the family.

Marvin lives with her 78-year-old mother in the Town of Niagara. She has a brother whose family (wife and three children) lives 10 minutes away and a sister in California. Although they are not close, her siblings are supportive of Marvin and Laurie. Another close family member, but not by blood, is Marvin's 95-year-old Aunty Emma, who lived across the street since Marvin was 6 months old. Aunty Emma lives in a nursing home in Batavia and Marvin and Laurie visit her frequently.

Laurie describes her core family as consisting of Marvin, her children (a son, 13, and a daughter, 11), her 92-year-old grandmother who lives in the area, and her mother, along with Marvin's mother and Aunty Emma. Laurie includes her father, brother and sister in her close family, but does not depend on them in the same way as her core family.

In describing what makes them a family, Laurie says love, mutual dependence, commitment to their life together and each being crucial to the other's heart, love and spirit. Marvin says love, mutual need, history, similarity of values and a "deep thankfulness that Laurie is willing to put up with me!" Between them, Marvin and Laurie have an assortment of pets that help to bring their families together. They also have many close friends, but do not consider them to be part of their core family.



*Marvin L. Henchbarger and
Laurie Dean Hogan*

Glen Francis

Brooklyn

Glen grew up in Trinidad and Tobago with a very close-knit, extended family. Looking back, he sees that his family knew he was a gay man before he knew himself and he is grateful that his mother advised him not to get married but to go abroad, further his education and see the world. He came to New York to pursue an advanced degree in business.



Glen Francis

Most of Glen’s biological family members are still in Trinidad and he maintains a close relationship with his four brothers and three sisters. When Glen moved to New York, he lived with his best friend’s family, which became his surrogate family. “Like a true family, they provided me with everything I needed – a home, hot meals and friendship.” Glen’s best friend also came to New York and they still maintain a very close friendship. Glen considers his friend’s family, children and other siblings part of his family too.

Glen works as a program coordinator for GRIOT Circle, a program that provides social service and support programs for older LGBT people of color.



Ally W. Howell

Pittsford, Monroe County

Ally is an attorney-editor who is transgendered. She and her spouse Donna have been married for 13 years and remain in love and committed to each other totally. Donna used to work as a reporter for weekly newspapers and now she teaches. They have a son Jeremiah who is 7 years old, two cats, two dogs and several fish in their family. Ally also has two grown sons by a previous marriage who do not talk to her anymore.