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## A True Family, Mother of All Choices

by Linda Chiaramonte



“When I decided to have a child, the lesbian community was afraid that this would make the movement weaker. But becoming a mother was the most radical thing I've done in my life.”

These are the words of Debra Chasnoff, a strong and positive woman, with a wide smile, an American activist and director, an out lesbian, Oscar winner in '91. In more than 30 years, through her documentaries, she made movement history. She was a pioneer in dealing with themes such as gay parenting through film, in times when this was still a taboo, and she was the protagonist of a small revolution in 1996 when she sensitized teachers in many elementary schools to talk to kids about sexual orientation, to dismantle stereotypes and prejudices. A forceful optimist, Chasnoff was the guest of “Some Prefer Cake,” the Bologna lesbian film festival that took place over the past few days.

“I had been out about six years when I made my first film and I realized that documentary could play a critical role for social movements too” - she says -. “My first documentary, *Choosing Children*, is from 1984, a delicate moment for the lesbian and gay civil rights movement. In those years it was considered impossible to become mothers, but lesbians are, of course, women and if they wish they have to be allowed the opportunity. The film challenged all of this, showing that we could have rights to reproduction and choice like every woman.”

From within the movement Chasnoff documented its improvements and achievements: “In the last few years a lot has changed,” she continues, “it is not unusual anymore to think about having kids. When we did the movie, in the US there were no laws that protected us from discrimination in the work place, while now we've come a long way and are fighting for marriage equality. And today the majority of people believe that gays and lesbians should be able to marry, while back then it wasn't even a fantasy.”

In this direction there was a big reversal: “Thirty years ago” - she admits – “none

of us talked about marriage, many of us were against it because it represented a legacy of patriarchy. We must not forget that the lesbian movement was born from feminism and in that era we rejected everything. Later, the way many of us thought about marriage rights changed, it became fundamental to attain recognition of the same civil rights as others. I was very skeptical too, considered it more as a political act, than as a romantic decision.”

Chasnoff’s State, California, is one of the most liberal in the US. “In *One Wedding and a Revolution*” - she explains – “I documented the decision of San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom in 2004 to grant marriage licenses to same-sex couples. Thousands of people got married in a few days, but soon this achievement was taken to court and canceled. Four years later, in 2008, this right became legal again for a few months. It was then that Nancy became my wife. But then the courts ruled against that right later on. Soon these marriage rights will be discussed at the Supreme Court of the United States. We are waiting to find out what will happen, if our marriage will be valid or not\* .

I cannot think of a group in history that had so many ups and downs like us, it is cruel and unfair, but it's part of a process of change that is going on. Today four American States have legalized marriage and this is a sign that things are slowly changing.”† And she adds: “Being gay or lesbian means having, like heterosexuals, sexual and romantic desires, but towards your own gender. Many of us want a family, we want to have children. A few months after our marriage Nancy and I felt different, I was surprised, all of a sudden it felt like we belonged. We felt part of our culture as never before. We had a strong feeling of acknowledgement from our families, the State and the community. And we gained important legal and civil rights. For our kids it was like feeling that we were a legitimate family.”



In this long and complicated obstacle course, the director says that the current American President played a positive role for the movement. Chasnoff is vocal about President Obama’s support for the gay rights movement. “He was the first president to do this” - she underlines. “Now, for the first time in history, [marriage equality] is part of the Democratic Party platform. Obama changed the law that made it illegal for gays and lesbians to be in the army—so now we can go to war too”, she says laughing, bringing into question the military system, not the results. “The president made clear his opinion about civil unions and his opposition against discrimination in many federal departments,” she goes on. “He also

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\* While the original article states that we are waiting to waiting to hear if our marriage is valid or not, what is true (and what Debra said in her interview) is that we are waiting to hear if the ban on same sex marriage equality in California will be lifted.

† This number changed after the November 2012 elections.

nominated several openly gay people to his administration. He did very well—as much as a president can do—of course there is still space for improvement, but my opinion of him is very positive.” Dick Cheney, the ultraconservative vice president of Bush's administration, has an out lesbian daughter who helped the movement while Bush was in office. “Her sexual orientation was in the public discourse and she became a mother.” Chasnoff recalls. “Her father was often plied with questions about this and he answered that he felt like any other grandfather, happy to have a grandchild. It was interesting to see a man from the Republican Party say this publicly.”

The life and documentaries of Debra Chasnoff often converged. She doesn't know Italy very well, but from the audience reaction to the gay parenting film she understood many things, even if she doesn't want to generalize: “I was very surprised, after the screening of *Choosing Children*, to discover that only a small part of the audience thinks that it is possible to choose to have children. I consider your country to be culturally and socially sophisticated, in comparison for example to many areas in the US, but at the same time it is clear that Italy still experiences strong repression. It seems that making this decision [to parent] isn't possible because of the presence of the Vatican, of the Pope and the Catholic religion. I am quite surprised that in such a culture the Church still has so much power over the sense of possibility that people have. It's hard for me to understand. Italy seemed to me very different from other European countries, like Spain and France, but I'm sure that things will change for you too.”

Chasnoff created the 1996 documentary *It's Elementary*, a milestone in the LGBT movement that she revisited ten years later to see the impact that it produced on the children of the first documentary, in their perception of homosexuality. “I began to work on it when Noah [her son] started elementary school, I thought it was wrong that he should enter a school system that didn't say a word about the kind of family he came from. I thought that he wouldn't be safe at school. Homophobia and bullying are big problems, there is a lot of hostility toward homosexuals, but children [aren't born] thinking that way, they're taught to think that way. The movement must fight this and the most efficient way to reach new generations is through school.”

Chasnoff understands that there are still many battles to fight. “I see that today young people live their sexuality in a more fluid way and they are more at ease in coming out, often because they have the support of their families.” Debra Chasnoff's next project will cover themes of poverty and education.