



Fathers' Day - Transcript

PROGRAM TRANSCRIPT: Monday, 29 May , 2006

CAROLINE JONES, PRESENTER: Hello, I'm Caroline Jones. Tonight, a story likely to provoke strong feelings and intense discussion. At its heart, the issue of family and concepts of fatherhood and paternal responsibility. It's an area where science and social change are combining to present new challenges. When Sydney man Paul Van Reyk set out to become a parent more than 20 years ago, his intention was to make a political statement and to embark on a social experiment. Against all expectations, Paul Van Reyk has ended up at the centre of a large family. But probably not the model of 'family' Peter Costello had in mind when he recommended "One child for Mum, one for Dad and one for the country." This is Paul Van Reyk's story.

MARY VAN REYK, DAUGHTER:
Cooking is a vital part of Daddy Paul's life. I've never remembered a time when he hasn't been working on some new recipe or ingredient that he's discovered that's just going to blow us all away. And he absolutely loves it. So, it's a really vital part of his life. And I think he enjoys catering because he loves getting people together for a big meal and a cook-up and that's basically what catering is to him.

RAJ WAKELING, SON: He'll usually do a big cook-up 'cause he's just famous for doing that for pretty much all the events he holds here. And as many of us that can make it will come along, all the extended family will come on down and kind of just spend the afternoon together, exchange gifts and, yeah, I guess just come together and just show our appreciation for him and for what he's done for us all.

PAUL VAN REYK: Father's Day, for me, is usually a lot of hard work because, mostly, it's Father's Day at my place and mostly it means "Dad's going to cook for all of us." I think when I was growing up, Father's Day wasn't that important, it was just something you had to kind of do. But now that I'm a dad, um, yeah, Father's Day is a pretty special time. It's a time when we're all kind of there.

DAVID VAN REYK, BROTHER: I'm Paul's brother. I'm married myself and I've got kids. I would describe the sort of big part of Paul's family as a hoot because it's different to a lot of other people's experience. So, there's the novelty of it. But, also, it's an enjoyable experience. My own nuclear family is quite conventional and quite simple. So there's that aspect, as well, knowing that there's sort of an intricacy about Paul's family.

MARY VAN REYK, DAUGHTER: I've always been aware that my family situation was different to everyone else's. I never had an idea of a set nuclear family. I always thought that everyone's family was their own unique mishmash.

RAJ WAKELING, SON: There's just so many different types of families out there that to have this definition of a 'nuclear family' of this perfect situation, this 'right way' of doing things is just - I think it's

laughable because there's so many other successful ways to raise a kid today.

PAUL VAN REYK: I don't think gay men are anti-kid. I don't think that they're gay because they don't like children or don't want to have children. I've never had a negative reaction from a gay man to my being a father, a parent. I've had jealousy, I've had surprise. I've had intrigue, curiosity. I've never had anybody go, "Ugh! How could you?" Never that response. Is it the sexuality that matters or is it the quality of the relationship with that child, you know? There are some pretty awful heterosexual fathers and we know that.

MARY VAN REYK, DAUGHTER: He has terrible taste in clothes as a drag queen. Really bad. At the Mardi Gras, the Dolly Parton float, he had this horrible brown-gold number and he had tried it on before but he'd forgotten, as Dolly Parton, he has assets and when he added those assets, he couldn't actually do up the back of the dress because it didn't fit them in.

PAUL VAN REYK: In a way, we are John Howard's worst nightmare. We have the values that he would, I think, espouse families ought to have, but we have nothing like the restrictive structure he wants to place on the idea of 'family'. My family were from Sri Lanka. In the late 1950s, Sri Lanka was becoming politically unstable. They decided to seek a new life and move to Australia in 1962. A few weeks after I arrived, I had my 10th birthday. I used to collect pictures of guys from TV. I wanted to hang around with the good-looking, strong guys at school. The coming-out process itself took a long time, took a couple of years, and certainly wasn't easy. I actually had a nervous breakdown over it and it was at that stage that I recognised that I had to do something about the fact that I was a gay

man. 'Cause otherwise I was going to, yes, spin out very, very badly. When I came out, one of my first things to do was to become a political activist in the gay movement. And I started organising a national conference. And being an outspoken kind of a person, I knew I would be, inevitably, on the media and I had to say to folks, "Hey, guess what? This is happening and any day now, you might see me as a gay man splashed across the papers, so you need to know I'm gay."

DAVID VAN REYK, BROTHER: I think, coming from the background that they did, they were quite distressed, initially. I guess their fear was for things like Paul would be punished in some ways - like, in terms of, like, I guess, going to hell or something like that.

PAUL VAN REYK: As a gay activist, I'd always campaigned against the traditional, conservative, patriarchal family. It seemed wrong to me that gay men and lesbian women were excluded from having children. When I was at university, I had a friend called Diane, who was straight. Years later, when she wanted to have a child, she asked if I would be the father. I didn't want to have a child. I had no thoughts of having children. But here was a very close friend of mine who wanted a child and she wanted it with me. It would seem a natural thing to say, "Sure, why not?" When I got married to Diane, it wasn't to form any sort of relationship. And we weren't going to live together or raise a child together. It was to give the child legal protection.

MARGARET BAIL, FAMILY FRIEND: If you're going to be announcing that you have a child, people are going to ask questions. So I think it made it, in some ways, easier and put a kind of so-called 'normal' framework around a slightly different arrangement.

PAUL VAN REYK: And I remember very clearly the minute Mary was born, looking down at this child. Diane held her once, said, "Paul, I'm going to sleep. You look after her." And I then sat with Mary for the first hours of her life.

MARY VAN REYK, DAUGHTER: I can't remember not knowing that Paul was my biological dad. Our relationship is... I can't describe it. Our relationship is...it's been - it changes over the years. Like, when I was little, you know, he was... he got to spoil me a lot. Take me overseas and when I came to the city, it would be a big event.

PAUL VAN REYK: Mary grew up with her mother, Diane. But I've always had a lot of contact with Mary. Over the years, she's stayed with me often and we've formed a very strong bond. I think the relationship I have with Mary is a combination of father and uncle and friend. I think it's a very warm relationship. I absolutely adore her and I'd walk a mile of hot coals for her. I find it surprising the times that I get jealous when other people have her time and I don't. We enjoy a lot of the same kind of music. We enjoy the same kinds of movies. We...I think we communicate really well together. I have a son called Raj. He's my second child. He loves being on stage. He's a real rock god. Raj's situation was different to Mary's. While Mary's mother was straight, Raj was brought up by a lesbian couple who were friends of mine.

RAJ WAKELING, SON: They were a couple and they raised me together as two mothers. And I was probably one of the earliest children to be raised in that situation.

MARY VAN REYK, DAUGHTER: Raj is the brother who's closest to me in age. We're only a few months apart. So we're kind of

the big bosses of the siblings. And Raj is like a really great friend.

RAJ WAKELING, SON: The band's called Drop Drive. And we play a kind of mixture of heavy styles. Like, a bit of metal, a bit of hardcore, a bit of punk rock. I'm the singer of the band and for me, there's no question, that's just what I have to do in a band. It's just my calling. Paul and Mary are probably the most diehard Drop Drive fans there are, actually. They came to all our early gigs and they've always been really, really supportive, which has been great.

PAUL VAN REYK: Look, I'm a performer myself. I've had a stint of acting, I've had a stint of singing, publicly. And I get thrilled by seeing a son of mine also doing this kind of performance.

RAJ WAKELING, SON: My mothers can't be in the story for a couple of reasons. One being that I do have a younger brother. He's still in high school and, as was the case for me, it's just not easy to be open about that. You leave yourself wide open to all sorts of criticism and aggression and bullying. When I was at school, I knew that I had to keep the situation private from my friends. I knew that I couldn't really talk about it openly with them. Once they realised what I meant, it would probably just be met with anger and aggression. And I was made aware of that, by my parents, early on and they did warn me to watch what I said and to keep a certain level of secretism. Just to keep it private. I guess all any child really wants, growing up, is love and care and understanding. And I think that can be provided from anyone that is close to you and spends that much time with you and that takes on that responsibility of being a parent.

BRONWYN LEECE, FRIEND: I'd always wanted to have children. I always imagined

that I would have a few children. I'd hit 35 and wasn't in a relationship and obviously hadn't had a child. So, rather than face the situation then, I worked overseas for a couple of years as a volunteer in India doing HIV education. When I returned, some more time passed and I reached 40 and realised that I couldn't postpone it any longer and that I needed to face the situation of having a child on my own. I knew that the process wouldn't be simple and it wouldn't be quick. I needed to look around and see about going to a donor insemination clinic. It was just like going to a doctor's surgery, really, and spoke to the doctor and he discussed what my options were as a single woman. Some of the sperm donors had actually stipulated at the time of their donation that they had a preference to not give their sperm to single women or to lesbian couples. As I looked into the process and thought more about it, it was important to me that I find a donor who would be known to my child.

PAUL VAN REYK: I'd known Bronwyn for a couple of years through health work and also her interest in India and Sri Lanka. And we'd grown to be quite good friends. I visited her when she was in India, for example. Bronwyn's a very strong woman. A very capable woman. She was a really good friend. A friend who I thought would make a damn good mother. And who ought to have the child that she wanted. And that's what that was about. It wasn't about making a point about single mothers.

BRONWYN LEECE, FRIEND: I was overwhelmed by his offer. It was so generous, and so unexpected.

PAUL VAN REYK: Donating is simply the act of a male, in some way, making his sperm available to a woman who wants to have a child. Oh, it's hilarious. I mean, donating can be very, very funny. Um, I

would not be the first donor who has looked at how much sperm he has managed to ejaculate and thought, "That ain't going to be enough." So, I donated to Bronwyn and she has a child called Arlo.

BRONWYN LEECE, FRIEND: After my son Arlo was born, Paul and Mary came to the hospital the next day to see him. It's really because of Paul's generosity that I've been able to have Arlo and that has been a wonderful gift. It's been immensely generous and an unimaginable experience, I think, for me until I had Arlo. He's brought a huge amount of joy into my life and I know into the lives of a lot of other people as well.

JENNI MILLBANK, SYDNEY UNI, LAW FACULTY: I guess what's unusual about Paul Van Reyk is that he was donating to single women and lesbian families 20 and 25 years ago. So he was really at the forefront of a movement where same sex families now are much more common than they were then. And parenting aspirations were much less culturally acceptable for lesbians and gay men then than they are now.

PAUL VAN REYK: With Bronwyn, the agreement was similar to that with Raj's mum. She was basically going to be the full-time carer, the provider, the financial support. I was there as the father figure.

BRONWYN LEECE, FRIEND: He was very clear that it was not going to be a financial commitment of any kind, and I certainly wasn't seeking that. I was seeking a donor and that was the extent of it.

JENNI MILLBANK, SYDNEY UNI, LAW FACULTY: To date, the family court has held that sperm donors are not parents. But there have been a couple of judges in some cases who've suggested that they would quite like to find that known donors are

parents under the act. And they've suggested that they have the power to do so, regardless of what the State law is. So, if you did have a decision that a sperm donor was a parent, um, I think you would have room for a great deal more conflict, because someone who wasn't intended to be a parent would then be able to make decisions about health, welfare, where the children lived and so on. And that is usually not the basis upon which, um, the...the...parents have agreed to form a family together.

PAUL VAN REYK: I can understand that some donors might want formal agreements with the mothers to cover future problems, like, maybe maintenance payments. But I've never worried about that. I basically trust the verbal agreements I've got with the mothers. But if I was ever asked, I'd accept my responsibility. I chose to have the kids and I should be prepared to act accordingly. I'm quite open and comfortable with the fact that I have a better deal than a live-in parent. I don't have the anxiety, I don't have the workload. I don't have the terror, the pain. Any of that. And that's fine. My parents have always known about Mary. They knew from the start that I was having a child with Diane and that we'd got married, and for all of Mary's life, they have been her grandparents.

MARY VAN REYK, DAUGHTER: I did know my grandmother. I used to stay at her house a fair bit when I was younger, which was a bit funny because I couldn't mention Raj or any of the other kids, so that was... I remember Dad explaining that to me. You know, I thought it was a bit exciting because I was a little kid, you know, having secrets, you know. Yeah, I think it was on Fathers Day, Dad told them all.

PAUL VAN REYK: My parents only knew that I had Mary as my child. But a couple of

years ago I told them that I, in fact, had five other children. All up, I have six children with five mothers.

MARGARET BAIL, FAMILY FRIEND: When he decided that it was time that he let them know about the other children, everyone was quite nervous and wondered how they'd take it.

PAUL VAN REYK: And I said, "And, Dad, I've got a special present for you." And I reached into my pocket and I brought out the pictures of all the other kids and I just put them across the table and I said, "These are your other grandchildren." Oh, man. And he just beamed, he just absolutely beamed. He was stunned, but just kept grinning.

MARY VAN REYK, DAUGHTER: Yeah, I think they were quite surprised because, you know, Daddy Paul being gay, they thought, you know, I was a bit of a one-off but having another five was pretty unbelievable.

BRONWYN LEECE, FAMILY FRIEND: I've got quite a small biological family and a larger family of friends. It's been a real bonus for Arlo and I to be swept up into this much larger sense of community and part of a big, extended family who we see fairly regularly.

PAUL VAN REYK: Gee, when I first started with Mary I had no knowledge that here at 53 I was going to end up with this complex series of relationships with a number of kids and mothers and their partners and whatever. About a year and a half ago I had a call from another lesbian friend of mine saying, "Oh, look, would you consider donating?" And I started asking the other mums, because I figured I have to ask them now, would it be OK. And they said, "Oh, it's up to you. Do what you like." I asked Mary and she said, "No."

MARY VAN REYK, DAUGHTER: And I told him that I didn't want to have any more brothers or sisters because I felt like that I was, it sounds funny, but that I was getting too old to have any more brothers or sisters.

PAUL VAN REYK: I said, "What do you mean 'no'?" She said, "I cannot handle the thought that you...that I would be 21 and you would have a baby. So, please, no." Um, and I accepted that and said no. I absolutely understood that I have to make these choices now in relation to people who get more impacted by the choices that I make.

MARY VAN REYK, DAUGHTER: Donoring isn't just about the parents and the donor. It's also about the other people who are in the family and how...because we're such a close family and we do see each other all the time, how bringing a new person into it is going to affect everyone else in the relationship.

RAJ WAKELING, SON: We kind of wonder if it's going to get a bit hard to keep track of all these kids at some stage. Ah, yeah I mean, we laugh about it, but at the end of the day we are family and we definitely want to maintain those close bonds.

PAUL VAN REYK: I think people may make assumptions that the children of lesbians and gay men are either, inevitably, are going to be forced to be gay and lesbians themselves. My two eldest kids, Mary and Raj, are heterosexual. Do I care? Not in the least. Whoever they love is who they love.

MARY VAN REYK, DAUGHTER: I'm heterosexual and I have a very nice boyfriend.

RAJ WAKELING, SON: Some people might assume that because I have lesbian

mothers and a gay dad that I would turn out to be gay, but the truth of the matter is, I'm heterosexual. And I'm 100% confident in that.

PAUL VAN REYK: After I had made the first donations to Raj's mum, I was approached by other lesbians who knew that I was prepared to donate. It's possible that I have other children out there because I have donated to other lesbians where part of the deal was that I would not know if they did conceive a child. It's possible that I could have up to another six children somewhere. So, I would have a dozen children all up.

MARY VAN REYK, DAUGHTER: If my dad has donated other children that we don't know about, I'd really like to know them because I always like having more brothers and sisters. And I think that they should have the right to know that we're around and that they have not just a dad but brothers and sisters as well. I always freak out Raj because we have another sister, well, I know for sure that we have one sister that we've never met, and I always tease him and say that he has to be careful who he kisses in a dance party or a club because it could be his sister.

PAUL VAN REYK: I'd love to meet the other kids. Absolutely. Having seen the ones that I have seen grow up, I'd be delighted to see who these other six were. And to see what part of me and my family stream, my genes, are there.

MARGARET BAIL, FAMILY FRIEND: Well, my sexist opinion is that blokes like to have kids and they see it as a sign of their own sort of machismo, or whatever it is, to have as many kids as possible, so...you know, people like to take pride in maybe 30, 40 kids. I think Paul probably dreams of the

day when he's sitting with an ever larger extended family around him.

PAUL VAN REYK: I think my kids are going to be very scared of me as an old man. I keep threatening them that like King Lear I'm going to spend two months of every year with them in turn. Look, I think I'm going to be incredibly lucky to have kids as I grow older. I don't fear growing older and being alone or isolated. I have a very rich set of relationships that'll support me.