

The Boston Globe

May 16, 1985

Gay Couple Express Anger, Grief And Hope; Media, Politics Blamed In Loss Of Boys

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Stuffed animals adorn the boys' single beds. Boxed building blocks sit under a living room TV and in the spare bedroom closet. Outside, in a bricked side yard, two toy trucks sit under a recently trimmed hedge.

Eight days have passed since the state Department of Social Services (DSS) removed two brothers, 22 months and 3 1/2 years old, from the Roxbury home of two gay men, Donald Babets, 36, and David Jean, 32, the boys' foster parents for two weeks. In that time, the openly gay couple say they have reacted as any parents would to their children being taken away - with grief, with anger and with the one hope the children will be returned.

"The boys were like our own children . . . We want our children back," Babets said Tuesday during a Globe interview with the two men.

Both blamed their plight on the media, especially The Globe for breaking the story, and on what they described as homophobic politicians who "freaked" at learning that DSS had placed the children in the household of two gay males. Babets said they agreed to be interviewed because "right now, the only impression people have of us is that we are homosexuals and child molesters. The first is right, the second wrong. There is a lot more to us than being gay."

Since the boys were taken, said Babets, "We worry about them. We know they're in another foster home, but that's all we know." DSS officials said they changed their placement of the children because of the potentially damaging effects of publicity.eir best interest."

The case has generated national publicity, affected social workers who routinely place foster children in households of singles and raised questions involving foster care around the country.

Babets and Jean say the experience has left them emotionally drained and embittered. They said that after being reviewed for 11 months and spending six weeks in foster-parent training before being approved by the department's second in command, "DSS owes us something."

"They should have stood up and defended their placement," says Babets. "They abandoned us and left us shaking in the breeze."

"I feel angry at DSS, their changing their position," Jean says as he prepares dinner. "The removal had only to do with politics. I'd like to see DSS stand up and say, 'We approve of that family. It's a good family and those kids should be put right back in that house.'"

A departmental grievance and appeal filed by Babets and Jean is scheduled to be heard next Monday.

The two men said they have lived together for the last nine years in a stable, monogamous relationship. "Our relationship isn't perfect," says Jean. "We have our ups and downs like anybody else. But as a couple, there are things we want to do and having children is one of them."

"Down the road, we had it in our minds to adopt a child, and we thought that being foster parents might be a way of proving ourselves," Babets said. "But right now, we're thinking about protecting our positions as foster parents."

Why would gay males want to share their lives with children not even theirs - children who may be from homes where they have been physically and verbally abused? As Babets acknowledges, "You're not dealing with little kids from Wellesley dressed in Izod T-shirts and \$75 sneakers."

But he says that some lesbians and gay men are parents. "A lot of them have been married and they have their own children, or they choose to be foster parents or adopt."

Jean, a Massachusetts native who graduated in 1979 from Framingham State College, says he wants "to share with children the positive experiences I had growing up."

As foster parents, the men said they bought the children toys, beds and clothing. They said they also paid day-care expenses of \$200 a week out of their own pockets. The foster care program pays \$7 a day.

The men, both working professionals, have owned their own house for five years. The hedges are sculptured, red and white azaleas are in bloom, and spinach, peas, onions and carrots have sprouted from a meticulously kept vegetable garden.

Inside, half of the papered wall separating living and dining rooms has been bared to studs. Before the children were taken, Jean and Babets had activated plans to expand household space for their two young charges. The work has stopped.

Babets, who is 5 feet 11 and weighs about 170, says he has lost "between 10 and 15 pounds" in the last week. Jean, who is trimmer and an inch shorter, says he has lost heart.

"This wasn't something we woke up with one morning and said, 'Let's be foster parents,' " he says.

It was a matter the couple gave great thought, first asking a friend a year or so ago to find out DSS views about gay people, they say. The response: "No problem." Last May, they entered the six-week training program consisting of weekly four-hour sessions. Six weeks of home study began two weeks after course completion.

"Our social worker came twice a week, spending three and four hours each time meeting with us individually and together," says Babets, "asking questions from a 39-page questionnaire: How did you resolve your last argument, what was it like for you growing up, problems with peers and siblings, why we wanted to be foster parents. The same in-depth study is given everybody."

After six weeks, the social worker recommended them for placement. Generally, such a recommendation is accepted and activated at the district level, but "because we are gay, it needed central office approval," Babets said. "It came back from downtown approved, but we were shelved, told we weren't going to be used. DSS said it wanted us only to accept an adolescent gay-identified foster child. We found out that the local office never had had one go through it. We said, 'You can't do this.' "

Jean, a professional nutritionist who currently is business manager at the Crittenton Hastings House and Clinic in Brighton, says, "I loved putting my profession into practice for the children's meals." He describes himself as "quiet, private, introspective."

"I enjoy my home," he says.

Babets is more outgoing, gregarious, easy to enlist in political and social causes.

Both men were raised Catholic, but Jean, the music director at Roxbury's First Church (Unitarian), does not consider himself a practicing Catholic. Babets, a Sunday School teacher at his local parish, says that "sometimes David attends Mass with me, and I go with him to special events at his church. Our church life is interchangeable."

They stressed the irony of DSS actions in placing the children in a home approved by both the district and the central office, then withdrawing the children the minute the media learned of the placement.

"When the children came to us, they had just been taken from their mother," says Jean. "They were in trauma, they had been crying, they didn't know what was going on. Separation from their biological mother was traumatic. They were scared, angry, confused."

"The children were supposed to leave us at some point ready to return to their mother, full of excitement and hope," said Babets. "Because of that first Globe story and subsequent actions of the Dukakis administration, they left the way they came - angry, scared, confused and crying."

The last Sunday the boys were with the foster parents, Jean and Babets took them to the New England Aquarium. Babets, who shows his emotions more easily than his partner, stares at the door to the bedroom the boys shared. "Don't Forget Me" aquarium stickers are pasted on the door.