



Sue West (left) and Michelle Thompson with toddler Rose, Grace and Riley.

Photography **Simon Schluter**

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Mother's Day is a particularly meaningful time in these three Melbourne households, writes Suzy Zail.

**"Look at what we've made"**

**Sue West and Michelle Thompson have had three children with a sperm donor**

**Mother's Day is a two-day event in the West-Thompson household in Mill Park.** On the second Saturday in May, six-year-old Grace, four-year-old Riley and one-year-old Rose will fuss over their "mama". She will get breakfast in bed (poached eggs on toast) and uninterrupted time to read the newspaper. "Mummy's" turn is on Sunday. She prefers a sleep-in and her eggs scrambled.

"Ever since she could talk, Grace would tell people she had two mums. She thought she was lucky," says Sue West. But West knew it had nothing to do with luck. "Deciding to have children was a very deliberate, considered process," she says of her decision to have children with Michelle Thompson, her partner of 12 years. "I had these two stories going on in my head," she says, "One was that I'd have children; the other that, as a lesbian, I couldn't."

West became a foster-carer at the age of 20, providing monthly respite to a single mother in need of support. By the time she was 30 and in a relationship with Thompson, it wasn't a question of whether the couple would have children. The question was how to make it happen.

"There were so many considerations: whether we wanted an unknown donor or a biological father known to the child, what role he would play in our child's life, what roles we wanted to play." In the end, the couple agreed that West would carry their first child. She was ready to take a break from community development work, whereas Thompson, a youth-worker trainee, had gone back to further her studies. The couple found a donor, →

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Kerryn Longmuir with members of her family: "Looking after kids was what I was put on this earth to do."

a gay schoolteacher in his mid-40s who didn't want to have children, but wanted to help other gay couples conceive. Unable to access IVF facilities in Victoria, West inseminated herself. Twelve months, and 11 failed attempts later, the donor re-tested and discovered that he was infertile. West and Thompson travelled to Albury, where, under New South Wales legislation, they could access donor sperm from a fertility service. They tried for six months but again failed to fall pregnant.

They took a break, and then, in late 1998, met Mike\*. The single, 34-year-old health professional had donated sperm to a sperm bank, but had since discovered his sperm could only be used by heterosexual women. He thought the system unjust and decided to donate to a gay couple.

"He was an articulate, reflective, gentle guy wanting to do his bit, to challenge what he believed was an unjust situation," says West. They drafted an agreement – Mike was to be known to the child, but would not have an active parenting role – and the inseminations began. Two months later, West was pregnant. She was thrilled. Her family, though, were not as enthusiastic. "They didn't think it was the right thing to do. There's no resolving it, except that they want the best for me and my life, even though they don't agree with my choices."

The couple's first child, Grace, was born on August 4, 2000. Thompson cut the cord. West stayed home full-time to care for Grace. "It was far better than anything I'd ever imagined, and far worse, all rolled into one," West admits. "The sleep deprivation and being a stay-at-home mum was challenging, but there was so much I loved about being a mother. I could just sit for hours and stare at the baby."

West had her second child, Riley West-Thompson, two years later. Then in 2004, Thompson, then 36, wanted to have a baby too. Mike agreed to give West and Thompson their third child, Rose. This time, West cut the cord and Thompson stayed home to breastfeed.

"We love all of our children the same. I wasn't home full-time with Rose, in that early very-connected-relationship way, but over time, as Rose became more outward in the world and less attached physically to Michelle, our relationship evolved," says West. So too did the mothers' roles. West is the one who sets boundaries, resolves conflicts and manages behaviour. Thompson is the patient mum, the bedtime mum, the one who drops the kids at school. Both share the day-to day running of the house. Having kids has meant the women have less time together, but "it's allowed us to see each other at our most vulnerable and at our strongest". Mike sees the children a few times a year, more of a benevolent uncle than father figure. West hopes her children will be resilient. She worries about them facing the discrimination she has faced: doctors questioning her authority to seek treatment for Rose because she wasn't her biological mother; schools who would only talk to her about Grace's progress; a maternal health nurse who couldn't look her in the face.

"I worry the kids will get picked on," she says. "All children get picked on for something. This is what it might be for Grace, Riley and Rose ... and maybe not."

It's four o'clock. Rose has woken from her nap, her face flushed from sleep. Thompson scoops her up and ducks out to collect Grace from school. They are home minutes later, Grace dragging a schoolbag behind her. West beams. "Sometimes we just look at these kids, sit back and say 'Look at what we've made.'"



## “I don’t do it for the pat on the back”

Kerryn Longmuir has fostered more than 150 children

### Kerryn Longmuir’s home in Melbourne’s suburban

north-east could easily be mistaken for a play centre. The faded garden that wraps around the white weatherboard house is buried beneath coloured toys. An aqua clamshell sandpit, a red climbing frame, a blue trampoline and a green and yellow swing-set cover the lawn.

Inside the 90-year-old home, the floor is littered with toy trains, dress-ups and soft toys. A video game casts a glow across the television room. Building blocks spill from plastic tubs. Bookshelves sag with boardgames.

Kerryn Longmuir’s four youngest children are all squeezed into the sandpit, talking over each other as they dig holes and shovel sand into dump trucks. Kerryn smiles.

“I love the sound of children at play. The louder, the better.” And the more the merrier. Kerryn, a part-time florist and her husband, Stephen, a floor-tiler, have had more than 150 foster children share their home. Some for one night, others for months.

Kerryn Longmuir, 54, was a 20-year-old nurse when she married 21-year-old Stephen. One year later their first child, Tracey, was born. Matt was born two years later, a gentle, smiling child. He was intellectually disabled. After considering the risk factors, the Longmuirs decided not to try for a third. But, Longmuir explains, “I always wanted more children. Looking after kids is what I was put on this earth to do. So when I saw the Berry Street caravan at the Eltham fair in 1982, with its banner asking, ‘Have you got room in your life for a child?’ my answer was, yes.”

Natalie was the Longmuirs’ first foster child, delivered when her pregnant mother moved into an unmarried mother’s home. “She was three-and-a-half when she came to us and still wearing nappies and on the bottle. And she had worms.” Natalie shared a room with Tracey, sleeping in a trundle bed at Tracey’s feet. By the time she went back to her mum she was toilet trained, drinking from a cup, and worm-free. “I thought, this is easy,” Longmuir recalls.

Two months later, Theresa and Rebecca arrived from

Allambie children’s home. The toddlers were wards of the state, sisters removed from a physically abusive household.

“I thought love and kisses fixed everything. It doesn’t,” says Longmuir. “You can’t repair some damage, but you can help, by giving these children what they need: consistency, routine and attention.” It took time. Longmuir had to learn to quell her mothering instinct to wrap the kids in a hug. “They’d tense up with physical contact. Or worse, scream or cry. They needed to know I wasn’t going to hurt them. They had to learn to trust again.”

Longmuir admits her foster-children’s behaviour has been challenging at times. If anything, opening their house to a diverse and sometimes demanding group of children taught the Longmuirs’ children to appreciate diversity and practise tolerance.

“As soon as they’re through my door, these kids are part of this family,” she says. “I treat them all the same and love them all the same. Some you attach to very easily, other kids you have to work at, but you still love them. You give them the best you can while they’re here.”

Once Theresa and Rebecca had grown up, Longmuir put herself on the Department of Human Service’s after-hours list, accepting short-term (up to two weeks), long-term (up to two years) and reception care cases (children brought straight from court during a dispute). “I’ll get a call at two in the morning: ‘Kerryn, can you take four children overnight?’ I have spare beds, a fold-down couch, bassinette, portable cots and a trundle bed. If they are empty, I never say no.”

It has been easier with “pre-adopts”, two-day-old babies on their way to finding adoptive homes. “They didn’t come to us abused or hungry. Introducing a five-month-old to a loving home, to people that can’t have kids – and so badly want them – is fantastic.” And what gifts can she expect this Mother’s Day? “The usual,” she laughs. “A cold cup of tea, a box of biscuits without the biscuits, flowers pulled from the garden. It’s not about the gifts. It’s about being with the kids. I don’t do it for the pat on the back.” →



Helen Aldersey and her grand-daughter, Crystal, trying on clothes and make-up.

## “These kids have been robbed of their childhood”

Helen Aldersey is a full-time mother to her grandchildren



### There is an undercurrent of sadness in the Aldersey

house each Mother's Day. A dull insistence that something, or someone, is missing. Helen Aldersey will spend Mother's Day with her grandchildren. She hopes, this year, the children's mother, Rose, will join them.

Aldersey has been playing mum to her daughter's children since 1991 when Rose, whose life had been punctuated by drug and alcohol dependency and mental illness, was first “committed”. Rose was in and out of hospital and Aldersey was on-call 24 hours a day.

The only way to help her daughter was to make sure Rose's kids were safe. In 2000, Aldersey obtained a court order granting her permanent care of the children. Ten-year old Zac and his seven year-old sister, Crystal moved into Nanna's house full-time and “Nanna Helen” became “Nanna-mum”.

“It was bittersweet,” Aldersey recalls. “I felt relief that Zac and Crystal's education, wellbeing and security was assured, but overwhelmingly sad at the same time.”

In 2002, Rose had a third child, a little boy who lives with his mother in a housing commission block in Elsternwick. He is not subject to a permanent care order like his siblings, though he spends 80 per cent of his time in Aldersey's Bentleigh home. The formal dining room, pristine behind gleaming, glass doors, is Aldersey's adult space. The rest of the house – and Aldersey's life – is dedicated to the children.

“If you're going to do this, you have to go all the way. You have to be fair dinkum about it,” Aldersey explains, referring to the bedrooms crammed with toys, the attic full of school reports, the walls papered with artwork, and a kitchen bench

buried beneath birthday party invitations. There's a secret garden too, peppered with gnomes, fairies, a wise old owl and a family of plaster rabbits. Aldersey shifts their positions weekly and, arming the children with torches, sends them into the garden at night to hunt for the creatures.

Aldersey's own mother died of cancer when she was seven. She survived the next 11 years at boarding school by creating her own make-believe world. “There isn't enough fantasy in the world. And laughter. In many respects, these kids have been robbed of their childhood. Laughter is a wonderful cure,” Aldersey says. Smiling, the silver-haired 62-year-old grabs a toy dog from the TV cabinet. She flicks a switch and the mechanised mutt breaks into a soft-shoe shuffle to the strains of Gene Kelly's *Singing in the Rain*. Aldersey howls with laughter. “That's me,” she sings, twirling around the room, “always singing in the rain.”

Aldersey got married for the second time three years ago – to Richard, a deacon in the Anglican Church. “He mustn't have been in his right mind to take me on,” Aldersey laughs.

Aldersey's days are book-ended by sending the kids off to school in the morning, and settling them off to sleep at night. In between there are costumes to sew, parties to plan and

cakes to bake for the school Mother's Day stall. While Crystal and Zac were at St Catherine's Primary School their nanna turned up every day to run the school tuckshop. Aldersey also had a stint coaching the under-nines footy team, threatening the lazier players with a “nanna-kiss” if they didn't lift their game. Money was scarce, so on weekends Aldersey would play a game with the kids.

“I'd open the street directory, and the kids would point to a patch of green. It was usually a park or a playground, and that's where we'd spend the day. It was an adventure.”

Caring for the children didn't take over from leisure time. Any downtime Aldersey had was already given over to voluntary work – a stint caring for cancer patients at Bethlehem Hospital, work with a drug and alcohol dependency unit, shopping for her elderly aunts and caring for her sick father. “I was brought up to do the right thing.”

Aldersey doesn't pretend it is easy. The kids visit their mum regularly but there have been times nanna-mum has had to step in and remove the children. Protecting her cubs has put Aldersey in conflict with her own daughter. “It's a crazy world they're in, and an unfair one. It's right and just that my grandchildren want to live with their mum, but it's up to me to explain why they can't,” she says.

Aldersey does what she has to do. “I love my daughter to bits, but I have to do right by the children. It's hard and sometimes very painful,” she says, “but taking the easy option is not the way to go.” (m)

Some names in this story have been changed.

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