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Gay Moms And Dads Can Bring The Family

By FELICIA R. LEE

Rosie O'Donnell, the former talk show host, actress, lesbian mom and a candid blogger, can certainly duck, weave and bob her way through a conversation. But she was caught off-guard by a reporter at a press event for "All Aboard! Rosie's Family Cruise," a new documentary about the first-ever cruise for gay families. Did she intend to raise her children to be gay?, the reporter asked.

"I was shocked," Ms. O'Donnell said recently, curled on the sofa of her cluttered Times Square office. "I



Tyler Hicks/The New York Times

Rosie O'Donnell aboard the Norwegian Dawn cruise ship.

said, 'I can't raise them to be gay any more than I can raise them to be tall.'"

"Maybe people will get a chance to see what they're afraid of," Ms. Donnell, 44, said of the 90-minute "All Aboard!," to be broadcast on HBO Thursday. "The illusion about gay people is that it's all about sex. What unites us on this cruise is not that we're gay, but that we're parents."

Ms. O'Donnell and her life partner, Kelli Carpenter O'Donnell, have four children, ages 3, 6, 8 and 10. During a family vacation, Ms. O'Donnell and Ms. Carpenter O'Donnell cooked up the cruise idea with a friend who had worked for a company specializing in gay cruises. As Ms. O'Donnell said, "You like to see your life mirrored."

And so there they were, in 2004, leaving New York City with more than 1,500 people — gay and straight — for a seven-day trip to the Caribbean. Ms. O'Donnell said what she wanted to do was simple: to provide a relaxing place where nobody would stare or ask stupid questions about two lesbians bringing up a family, or two gay men with a bunch of kids and not a woman in sight.

Mostly, the "Cruise" film director, Shari Cookson (whose credits include "Living Dolls: The Making of a Child Beauty Queen"), pointed the camera and let people tell their stories. The film lingers on scenes of people changing diapers, reading to their children, feeding their babies.

An uglier side of life intrudes when the ship docks in Nassau and is met by protestors with signs like "We don't welcome sissies in the Bahamas," and shouting, even at the cowering children.

"I was intrigued by the notion of

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In O'Donnell's 'All Aboard!' Gay Moms and Dads Bring the Whole Family

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family and the universality of family life," Ms. Cookson said. "I was wanted to be there when real life happens — those moments when people aren't aware of the camera."

Viewers see Shauna Raye and Liz Ward, a couple from Chicago with two children, who marry in a sunset ceremony in Key West, Fla.; the former N.F.L. defensive lineman Esera Tuaolo, who conducts a football clinic while chatting about shedding his life in the closet ("These kids know who I am, and I'm still a role model for them"); and Megan Jacoby, who talks about having two moms after her parents divorced and her mother began living with another woman. The cruise comes with a few specials, too, like seminars on adoption and discussion groups for teenagers in gay families.

"The hardest thing is to have to constantly defend your family," one girl says sitting in a group of other young people. A young mother in a deck chair says, "I've never felt so free" and begins to sob.

Ms. Jacoby says her mother told her that her sexual orientation would come to her in a dream. As a child, she tells the camera, she wanted to be a lesbian, but she dreamed that

she was kissing a boy — and was disappointed. In a later interview, Ms. Jacoby, now 21, a musical theater major at Emerson College in Boston, said the point of her anecdote was to confront issues like sexual orientation and teasing that dig at children of gay people.

"Some people told their kids not to play with me because my parents were lesbians," said Ms. Jacoby, a straight woman who grew up in Minneapolis and is estranged from her father. "This one kid told me I was going to hell because my parents were gay."

Near the end of the film, Charlie Paragian and Danny Sernekos, from New Jersey, are married at sea, surrounded by their five adopted children, ages 11, 9, 7, 7 and 4. The children look overcome with joy.

"It meant more to the kids than to us," Mr. Paragian said in an interview. "Their friends' parents are all married."

Ms. O'Donnell and her partner are listed as the film's executive producers, along with Sheila Nevins, who is in charge of documentary and family programming at HBO.

"I started to do this as a lark, getting away from all the pestilence and the poverty, the tinge of politics and sadness," Ms. Nevins said about HBO's usual film fare. "I didn't real-

ize that I would be moved by the predicament of these families and feel committed to the film going out there and making noise.

"This documentary is about tapping into a celebration of gay people and prejudice against gay families that is inherent in large parts of America. If anyone's going to bring this into someone's living room, it's Rosie. She is part of America's family."

Since the maiden voyage of the Norwegian Dawn, Ms. O'Donnell and Ms. Carpenter O'Donnell's business, R Family Vacations, has been busy. It booked about 2,200 passengers last year for a cruise from New York to Canada and Cape Cod, and this summer 2,600 are set for the sold-out cruise from Seattle to Alaska.

Now, Ms. O'Donnell said, about half the passengers are straight and half gay. Probably not too many are poor: cruises range from \$999 a person to \$5,000.

For Thursday night's broadcast, a group called Family Pride has organized house parties all across the country to watch "All Aboard!" said Jennifer Chrisler, the executive director of the Washington-based organization. It has 6,000 members and is an education and advocacy group on lesbian, gay and transgendered issues. Family Pride estimates that 6



Tyler Hicks/The New York Times

Kelli Carpenter O'Donnell and Rosie O'Donnell.

million children live in gay families.

"For those who don't actually know any gay families, they feel like they know Rosie from her show," Ms. Chrisler said.

As for Ms. O'Donnell, she said she had learned more about who she was the last few years, away from what she called "the drug" of celebrity that came with television. In 2002 she quit "The Rosie O'Donnell Show" to pursue other projects.

"The goal when I stopped was to pick my kids up from school every day," she said. "I go to the soccer games. I go to Target. We have the

biggest swing set in the neighborhood."

She is fiercely political in her mother mode, supporting gay marriage and viewing gay adoption as one answer for the thousands in foster care. She says she sees the Bush administration as actively homophobic. "The president feels totally entitled to shame 10 percent of the population," she said. "It's tragic."

The woman once called "the Queen of Nice" maintains a steady public presence from which to fire those political missives. Last year, she starred on Broadway as Golde in "Fiddler on the Roof," and for a while she was the editorial director of a magazine called Rosie, which failed. (That landed her in a lawsuit filed by her former business partners.) Last year, Ms. O'Donnell played a developmentally disabled girl in a Hallmark Hall of Fame film called "Riding the Bus with My Sister."

She has also established the For All Kids Foundation, which distributes money to children's charities across the country, and has a program called Rosie's Broadway Kids, which puts theater programs in poor New York City schools.

So certainly "All Aboard! Family Cruise" is part of that nexus of art and politics? "In the end, yes," she said. "In today's climate it is."