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Book Excerpt: 'The Genius Factory'

June 13, 2005

Robert K. Graham was a millionaire who set out to create a sperm bank stocked solely with the sperm of Nobel laureates. During its 19 years, The Repository for Germinal Choice, also known as the genius sperm bank, sparked a great deal of controversy. Critics accused Graham of being a racist and a white supremacist for trying to create a race of "superkids."

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The sperm bank produced 215 children between 1980 and 1999. "Good Morning America" spoke to one of those children -- Leandra Ramm, who is now 20 years old and studying to be an opera singer in New York. She doesn't know who her biological father is, but knows he was a scientist who works at a university and has published major research in his field. She doesn't have any ethical complications about her unusual parentage. In fact, she refers to Robert Graham, who died in 1997, as her "grandfather."

You can read an excerpt about this controversial topic in "The Genius Factory: The Curious History of the Nobel Prize Sperm Bank," by David Plotz, below.

The Genetic Passion of Robert Graham

The Los Angeles Times headline beckoned like a bulletin from the future: "Sperm Bank Donors All Nobel Winners: Plan Seeks to Enrich Human Gene Pool." It was February 29, 1980, Leap Day -- that strange quasi-day seemed right for such an otherworldly story. The article began by describing the sperm bank as "the world's most exclusive..."

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men's club," then piled on the weirdness: a reclusive zillionaire ... a secret cadre of Nobel geniuses ... the women of Mensa ... a mysterious, ultramodern fertility technology ... a sinister experiment to improve the human race. It sounded like something out of a James Bond movie.

The article introduced America to Robert K. Graham -- a most unlikely sperm banker. The 74-year-old optometrist, who had made \$100 million by inventing shatterproof plastic eyeglasses, was on a mission to collect sperm from Nobel laureates. He was storing the prize seed in an underground bunker on his Escondido, Calif., estate, and he was distributing it only to women smart enough to qualify for the high-IQ society Mensa. Graham had given his sperm bank a name that had the thud of second-rate science fiction: "The Repository for Germinal Choice."

Graham told Times reporter Edwin Chen he had already enlisted three Nobel prize-winning scientists to "deliver" their sperm, and eventually he intended to canvass all the world's Nobel laureates. So far, Graham said, two dozen Mensa women had contacted him -- he had told the Mensa Bulletin about the bank a few months earlier -- and he had shipped frozen Nobel sperm to three of them.

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
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