

Designer children bred to be geniuses; It's no surprise to Mr and Mrs Ramm that their three kids are gifted beyond belief. After all, they were conceived with sperm donated by some of the most talented men in the world.

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They must be one of the most remarkable families in the world. Leandra Ramm, 15, crashes through the door of her family's New York home, chattering excitedly about the exceptional concert performance she gave at school that morning. Anyone who listened to her sing would be in no doubt that she has the talent to become a world-class opera star.

Her younger sister, Courtney, 11, is already at home practising ballet. Dressed in a pale-pink leotard, she is displaying poise and grace as her long legs and slender frame make the movements seem effortless. She is showing great potential as a dancer.

Their mother, Adrienne, a ballet dancer and pianist, accompanies Courtney on the piano, giving words of encouragement and praise. David, their father, a computer systems programmer, plays quietly in the corner with eight-year-old Logan.

Logan is a special child with an exceptional IQ, but developmental problems have left him unable to speak. He communicates via a portable electronic keyboard that produces a synthesised voice.

The fact that one family can have three such brilliant offspring is, in the Ramm's case, not a coincidence. For these children were conceived with sperm from the Repository for Germinal Choice - better known as the Nobel sperm bank after a Nobel Peace Prize-winner contributed.

Dr Robert Graham, a multimillionaire, founded the clinic 20 years ago. An optometrist who invented shatterproof spectacle lenses, Dr Graham's mission was to use his \$140 million fortune to 'help and improve' mankind.

He realised that many of the men he had grown up admiring, who possessed considerable intellect, did not have children. To remedy what he saw as the loss of this valuable genetic inheritance, he decided to create a sperm bank drawn from the brightest and most talented members of the world's population.

He claims his intention was never to create a master race. He countered his critics by saying that if just one of the children grew up to discover a cure for cancer or produce a life-saving invention then the whole venture would have been worthwhile. Graham died two years ago at the age of 90, by which time more than 230 children had been born. He tried to assess the children's progress by sending a questionnaire to all parents who had used the sperm bank in the early 1990s, but many declined to answer, so it is impossible to say how many 'geniuses' have been created.

Dr Graham regarded Leandra Ramm as one of his success stories. She was one of the first children to be born and the doctor proudly displayed a picture of her on his office wall.

At nine months old, Leandra could walk and talk - most babies of that age are still crawling and struggling with their first words. By the time she was 18 months old, Leandra was playing the piano. As she has grown and her amazing musical talent has emerged, she seems to be fulfilling Dr Graham's dream.

However, the Ramms say it was never their intention to produce a family of geniuses. They claim they were simply desperate for children, as David is infertile. After seven years of marriage, Adrienne, now 49, and David, now 58, heard about the unusual sperm bank. 'From the start I felt it was right,' says Adrienne. 'I called and the lady who picked up the phone understood the frustration we felt - she gave me hope that it could happen. She then put me through to Robert Graham. I believed this was the man who could help us. It wasn't a business built for money; his first concern was to help couples who were unable to conceive. We only had to make a donation of \$1,000.

'Dr Graham sent us a list of donors. They were anonymous, with only a brief description of the men's achievements, interests and basic physical characteristics, like eye and hair colour. All were men who had made a real contribution to society and served humanity.'

Critics of the clinic argue that deliberately choosing 'genius' sperm smacks of eugenics - the creation of a super-bright master race.

But Adrienne insists, 'We never planned to have a "genius" as a donor. I chose the Repository because everyone I spoke to there made it feel right. I just wanted an intelligent and active person -- the sort of person my husband is. We would have had an intelligent child if it had been his genes.'

Leandra was conceived with the sperm of a leading scientist. 'He was described as a pleasant, easy-going man interested in music, gardening and skiing. He had blond hair and blue eyes and was of north-western European extraction,' says Adrienne. 'We liked the sound of him because of his easy-going personality, which is like David's. He was also interested in music, something that's important to me, and the science background made him seem like a good all-rounder.'

Adrienne and David were lucky - Leandra was conceived on their first attempt. She was born on 27 July 1984. Three years later the Ramms contacted the clinic again. The donor used for Leandra had already contributed to ten successful pregnancies - the maximum number allowed by the clinic - so they chose a different man.

This time the donor was a gold-medal-winning athlete with brown hair. 'Athletic ability seemed like something that would be a great benefit,' says Adrienne. 'We never worried about physical characteristics. We thought it was more important to look at the descriptions of other qualities, like a talent for sport or music.'

Courtney was born on 17 August 1988 and soon showed that she, too, had incredible gifts. 'By 15 months, Courtney could already sing songs,' says Adrienne. 'I have always played the piano, so they were exposed to music as babies. Both girls loved to play music. I never forced them - they just showed an interest and I encouraged them.'

Both also had IQs of 145 at the age of ten - which puts them in the top 1% of the population. As well as being an exceptional singer, Leandra has mastered the flute and piano, while Courtney is tall and slim - the perfect frame for a dancer. She also plays the oboe and piano.

'We never push them,' stresses Adrienne. 'We don't believe in that, but we found they naturally wanted to pursue their talents.'

The sisters have been awarded scholarships for gifted children at one of the famous Rudolf Steiner schools, which is an hour's journey from their home, and almost every night the girls have music or dance classes. One night, Leandra finished singing in a concert at 10pm, was up until midnight practising her solo for the following day, and had to be at school by 9am for her next performance.

The pair display a maturity and drive that makes them seem older than their years. They are both highly motivated and want to work hard at their various lessons and classes, but their hectic routine leaves them both - and Adrienne, who escorts them around - tired out.

The children's rare talents set them apart from their peers. Even at their school, with its programme for gifted children, they shine.

At school assembly, Leandra sits nervously in the front row waiting for her turn to sing. Her performance is excellent and the teachers rush to congratulate her. Although she insists, 'I like school,' she doesn't look comfortable with children her own age. Rather than giggling and chatting about music and boys, she prefers to talk about her studies. She admits she has little time to waste on watching television and gossiping to friends on the phone.

Leandra recently decided to concentrate solely on opera, as doing all the other activities - flute, drama and piano - was too exhausting. Over the years she has been to several schools. She admits that, 'At one school a girl made me so miserable I wanted to leave.' She doesn't want to go into details but you can't help feeling she could be an easy target for bullies.

Courtney arrives home tired. She was in a concert with her sister the previous evening, but she longs to impress and runs to change into her ballet outfit for photographs to be taken. She's not showing off, she just loves to perform in front of people. She continually asks her mother to play the piano for her so she can display her moves. But later that evening, her exhaustion shows when she becomes angry and upset at not being able to find one of her ballet shoes. It's obvious that it's not the Ramms driving the children hard, but the children pushing themselves.

In fact, Adrienne and David seem in awe of their children's talents, but instead of basking in their praise, the sisters criticise themselves and try to explain how they could improve.

Logan was born on 1 November, 1991. Adrienne and David decided to use sperm from the same donor that was used for Courtney. 'No one can really explain why Logan is unable to speak,' says Adrienne. 'He is incredibly perceptive and we are doing all we can to find a way for him to achieve his full potential.'

There is no doubt in David's mind that he is the children's father. 'We're the ones who love, care for and encourage them. That's what matters, not where the sperm came from,' he explains.

'We've told the children ever since they were tiny that they were an act of love and creation,' Adrienne says. 'We tell them we needed a little help from science and explain that Daddy planted the seed, but not in the same way most parents have their children.'

Even if they wanted to, the children will never be able to trace their biological fathers. 'It was anonymous. They are not told whether children have been born and we were not given any of their names. The girls understand and never question it,' says Adrienne. 'We don't envisage that this will become a problem in the future.'

The Repository for Germinal Choice closed following Dr Graham's death and all the frozen sperm has been discarded. His critics maintain that his aim to produce geniuses was morally suspect and ill-conceived.

In 1970 Dr Graham said, 'The heart of this simple but elevating principle is, the more intelligent you are the more children you should have. Its wide realisation could bring stability and benefit to all mankind.'

The Ramms are reluctant to be drawn on the subject of eugenics. They simply repeat that they are thankful to Dr Graham. 'He was a good man,' says Adrienne. 'He gave us our family.'

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