

# Lifestyle

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TV • Advice • Entertainment

Section C

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Leandra, whose genetic father has an IQ of 200, works on an Apple computer at home

Special to The Miami News - JEFFREY SCALES

## TEST TUBE GENIUSES?

*After seven years  
are the Superbabies  
really super*



Adrienne and David Ramm with Leandra

Special to The Miami News - JEFFREY SCALES

### KATHARINE LOWRY

The Los Angeles Times Syndicate

No one pickets outside the Nobel sperm bank in Escondido, Calif., anymore. Its once-controversial deposits — the sperm of Nobel Prize winners and others possessing high IQs — now stir little more interest than the deposits of the Pacific Coast Savings bank next door.

Seven years ago, they did. The opening of the world's first unabashedly exclusive sperm bank — designed to pull humanity up by its DNA strands by creating better and brighter babies — was an anti-egalitarian shock heard 'round the world. Protesters raised the specter of Hitlerian master-race eugenics. Their outrage had intensified because Nobelist William Shockley, a vocal believer in the genetic inferiority of blacks, was revealed to be a repository donor.

The bank's founder — an aristocratic, handsome 81-year-old physicist named Robert Klark Graham who made millions on his invention of a shatterproof lens for glasses — had originally planned to use only Nobel Prize-winning donors.

"The problem," he says now, "is that Nobelists are generally so old that all the female recipients were turned off. Even on paper, women are drawn to younger men."

Today, the bulk of donors are instead well-regarded scientists who have made major contributions to their fields.

Graham remained unperturbed by all the uproar his idea initially caused. Well aware that no one agreed with Darwin either, at first, he went on about the repository's nonprofit business, confident that time would turn the tide of opinion his way.

It has, to a degree, thanks to the constantly escalating advances of modern medicine.

Artificial insemination, which now produces more than 20,000 babies a year, has become widely accepted. And in a world in which parents can learn so much so soon about their unborn child's genetic makeup that they can legally abort the pregnancy and try for a better genetic "mix" the next time, Graham's method of "intelligent selection," as he calls it, seems relatively benign.

Although the controversy surrounding his "genius" sperm bank has faded, Graham's brainchild has revolutionized the lives of a few once-childless parents. With some of the 41 babies produced by the sperm bank now out of the diaper stage, it's still too soon to tell the fate of Graham's ambitious — and, to many — troubling, dream: no less than the creation of what he calls a "secular savior," an individual who could yank our earthly spaceship of fools out of its self-destructive orbit before it's too late. Meanwhile, it is possible to see the early results of Graham's aim of producing brainy, productive, creative children, and to pose a few questions: Are these babies really smarter than the offspring of a typical bright couple? If they are, is it nature or nurture that makes them so? And, is brighter really better?

Graham himself concedes that environment

Please see GENIUSES, 2C

## GENIUSES, from 1C

does play a part, but only a small one. "The comforts of modern civilization have thwarted natural selection, allowing the less fit to survive, even thrive," he observes. An energetic man with a crisp, direct manner, he doesn't seem Hitlerian — though the general tone of his public statements coupled with his proclivity for offhand comments about "those people" and "peasants" suggest that he's at least an elitist. He claims he has approached black men to be donors, but that none have been receptive to the idea.

And there are ethical questions as well: Even with this comparatively innocuous form of eugenics, there is always a risk of abuse. If only on an individual level. Says child psychologist Lee Salk: "I'm not sure that any of these children will grow up to be geniuses — or even grow up to be happy. Parents so concerned with achievement and intellect could have a tendency to smother and indulge their child too much on the one hand, while pressuring them with exorbitant demands on the other."

But to the overjoyed parents of these current healthy hybrids, such questions are academic. Many of them are so thrilled, in fact, that they're planning a second baby. The repository's work has just begun.

**A**nne and Jeff Bradley (not their real names) are a San Diego couple in their early 30s. "At first, I wasn't going to tell Jeff about this interview, because he wouldn't like me doing it in person — and it's easier to ask forgiveness than permission," she says. "But I really wanted you to see how much Ashley looks like him."

Most repository couples refuse to be interviewed, and the husbands in particular seem intent on anonymity; even in the supposedly liberated '80s, they seem to associate infertility with impotence. But Jeff's reluctance, Anne explains, is more to do with preventing Ashley from knowing he's not her biological father.

Anne's 125 IQ is 25 points above average. Her husband's is about 40. And while they say they didn't care about creating a genius, they did want to increase the odds of having a bright, special child — a child in their own image. For a year, Anne tried and failed to get pregnant with the perm of a repository donor. Nothing happened, possibly be-



Adrienne Ramm shares a moment with daughter Leandra

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Unlike her olive-skinned, dark-haired parents, Leandra is extremely fair — an ivory-skinned blonde with aqua eyes. Physically, at least, she verifies Graham's proud, and scientifically suspect, claim that his donors tend to "breed true" — meaning that their characteristics will dominate in their offspring.

"We weren't at all obsessed with having some kind of genius baby," Adrienne declares. But as she ticks off Leandra's many junior achievements, she's clearly proud that her daughter is so gifted: "From birth, she held up her neck by herself and was walking and running at 9 months. Before 2 she talked in sentences; now she's learning the alphabet and numbers."

There is no way to know yet how close her IQ will come to the 200 IQ of her genetic father, but her future appears to be a bright

since the parents of designer babies typically provide them with an ideal learning environment, from educational toys to progressive nursery schools.

And for two of her three years, Leandra has been enrolled in a special toddler program that teaches music, dance and tumbling. David, a former tennis instructor, is pleased that she seems to be as athletic as she is artistic.

"At first, I did feel inadequate and weird about the idea of using a donor. But Adrienne really wanted a baby, and that was fine by me. The only tough part is that since Leandra is so incredibly bright, she's constantly exploring and challenging and into everything, which can be exhausting."

"But it's the price you pay," he says with a shrug, "for having such a bright baby."

like his namesake, her son may grow up to be a visionary poet and artist.

Some early press reports portrayed Doron as something of a Nobel savage, running riot through Los Angeles restaurants, toppling busboys as if they were bowling pins. Today, understandably, Blake is reluctant to talk to the press, but feels that she should — as a public service to other childless singles and couples. "I was too lax on setting limits with him at first," she concedes. "I don't feel I'm permissive anymore, but I am flexible. When something is really crucial, I draw the line, but I'll compromise on less important things."

"I want him to think independently," she explains, and he clearly does — in fact, he even thinks ahead, making oral contracts with himself. "First I'm gonna finish my drawing," he had

Nothing happened, possibly because frozen sperm, which the repository uses, is 40 percent less likely to "take" than fresh sperm.

In the meantime, that same donor had started dating a one-time assistant to Graham (she has since left to start her own sperm-bank operation). "Since the chance of conceiving with live sperm is so much greater," Anne says, "it seemed foolish not to try a more direct approach" — an approach that was undertaken unbeknownst to Graham and others at the repository. The donor booked a motel room and produced a sperm sample. Then, to preserve decorum and anonymity, he left before Anne arrived. With the woman's help, Anne injected herself with the more viable sperm.

It added up to Ashley, a baby more beautiful than cute even at 16 months. Raven-haired and strong-browed, she brings to mind a miniature Elizabeth McGovern.

Jeff tells stories illustrating Ashley's amazing sense of direction, her long-term memory and her powers of association. Speaking about the generally negative reaction people have about tampering with reproductive fate, Jeff is genuinely bewildered. "Why is it OK for people to choose the best house, the best schools, the best surgeon, the best car, but not try to have the best baby possible?"

Anne says that she and Jeff never think of Ashley as anything other than entirely theirs. "It still seems like such a miracle," she says. "I still thank God — and Dr. Graham — every night."

Three-year-old Leandra Ramm looks nothing like her parents. David and Adrienne Ramm, a New York City couple, were six years into their marriage when Adrienne, then 33, learned that David was infertile.

"I was totally devastated," she says. "I'm from a big happy family and couldn't imagine not having one."

her future appears to be a bright one.

Happy to show off for company, Leandra trundles into the den to the Apple computer. Frowning with concentration, she punches the keys and numbers required to make a perfect score on Hide and Seek and Sesame Street games. Though not quite three, she has already started rudimentary reading.

Graham says such babies are hardly exceptions. Almost all the repository's babies reach developmental milestones much earlier than most toddlers. Their dexterity, he adds, is such that many of them walk before the age of 1; they also talk and utter complete sentences long before Dr. Spock says they should. Whether this is due to heredity or environment is another matter, skeptics point out,

Afton Blake, the repository's sole single parent (officially, only couples are accepted), didn't have to clear her decision with a spouse. As she approached 40, Blake was increasingly pessimistic about marriage and romantic relationships but had no similar reservations about motherhood.

According to all his preliminary tests, her son, Doron, is "highly gifted;" his early test results approach his donor's 200 mark. Whether that is accurate or not, he is obviously advanced for his age — except, his mother says, emotionally. Though barely five, his grasp of math is that of a second- or third-grader. Just for fun, he likes to multiply in his head, and the abstract paintings along one wall fuel his mother's hope that,

gonna finish my drawing," he had bellowed the day before over the phone, "then I'm gonna have my dinner, then I'm gonna brush Tyrone (their shaggy dog) then I'm gonna watch TV, and then I'm gonna go to bed!"

Does Doron wonder why he doesn't have a father? Not yet, Blake says, though she intends to explain it to him later. "Once he understands the natural way, I'll tell him how he's different."

Raising a child alone is tough, she admits, and gifted kids are notoriously difficult. "They're incredibly strong-willed and inquisitive and active — they even sleep less than normal children. Sometimes," she says half-jokingly, "I envy these sweet, quiet, accommodating children."

"Except they turn into sweet, quiet, accommodating adults."

sweepstakes "Santa" is coming to your store.

