

# Gay & Lesbian



Fathers know best Walter Jennings (right) and Santo Rizzuto are proud dads

## The new nuclear family

Arthur Tam talks with same-sex families living in Hong Kong to find out what makes the city surprisingly alluring for raising kids

**H**ong Kong might not be the first destination that comes to mind for same-sex couples to raise a family but, as it turns out, there are some who find it quite appealing – despite the fact that their same-sex marriage isn't recognised by the government. Here are a few folks that know that being a family is more than just a simple legal document.

### The daddies

“One of Ethan's schoolmates said 'it must be good having two dads because if one dad goes on a business trip, you'll have the other one',” chuckles Walter Jennings, father of eight-year-old Ethan. Jennings and his husband of 21 years, Santo Rizzuto, adopted their son Ethan when he was just nine months old back in New York City, where same-sex adoptions are legal. Though same-sex adoption is not recognised in Hong Kong, both Jennings and Rizzuto are recognised as Ethan's legal parents. Unlike marriage, legal adoption is recognised universally, which means that while Walter and Santo are no longer seen as each other's husband, they are equally fathers to Ethan.

Their son is enrolled at the Hong Kong Academy – a prestigious liberal arts school in Hong Kong. “The school really values diversity. In fact we got one of the few spots left at that school. I always joke with my friend who thinks we get preferential treatment,” says Jennings. When Ethan isn't at school, he's busy playing football, going on play dates, trading football cards and, of course, playing with his dads' iPad. Fundamentally, it's your typical white picket fence family living in Hong Kong – an American dad, an Australian dad and an adopted Chinese son that can speak Italian better than he can Mandarin. According to Rizzuto and Jennings, the only difference that Ethan is going to have

from being raised by two gay dads is that 'he is going to grow up with really good taste'.

### The mummies

Fenella Fownes and Karen Andrews are distinguished as 'mama' and 'mummy' by their four-year-old twins Kallum and Ella. The couple married in Canada but decided to make Hong Kong their home, even though it would mean forfeiting their marital rights. “[Kallum and Ella]

see different cultures and different people. I felt like if they were raised in Canada, they wouldn't have the same opportunities like they would in Hong Kong,” says Fownes. For Andrews, the advantages are not only cultural. “If our kids were back in Canada they would be in a regular public school. But here, we can afford to put them in a private school,” Andrews says. “In general, people place a lot of attention on education here and we find Hong Kong to be safer as well. Also we can afford to hire someone to help take care of our home, which allows time for us to be with our kids as opposed to putting them

in daycare.” For these mums, Hong Kong provides a healthy and accepting environment for raising their kids with an additional support network of friends and co-workers. But, unfortunately, their situation isn't ideal. Andrews is the birth-mother and has legal rights over Kallum and Ella, but Fownes is nothing in the eyes of Hong Kong law. With their marriage void and without any legal methods to file for parental rights, Fownes is left waiting for progress.

### The single mum

For Laura\*, the adoption process in Hong Kong was coupled with a bit of fear. She had to tiptoe around the fact that she is a lesbian. “I never particularly lied but I made conversations genderless when asked about it,” she says. “I had it in the back of my head that if they did find out, it might put things in jeopardy... I don't want the social welfare department to know just in case I want to adopt a second child.” Fear aside, Laura knew she was always destined for motherhood. She explains that Hong Kong provides an organised adoption process with a committed staff of social workers that make sure the children are matched with the best possible parents. “To the surprise of many, there are a lot of children in Hong Kong that are in institutions and foster care that need a home,” she says.

In 2011, Laura adopted her son Alex\* in Hong Kong when he was three years old. She is out to her friends and colleagues, and, fortunately, they have been accepting. “I find that more people are surprised that I adopted a child from Hong Kong, rather than me being a single lesbian mother,” says Laura. She hopes there are more events like Pink Season's Out in the Open, where other same-sex couples can come together, so their kids will realise that there are other children raised in similarly non-traditional families. So do we. \*names have been changed.

“**The only difference being raised by two gay dads is that our son is going to grow up with really good taste**”

Merry mums Fenella Fownes (left) and Karen Andrews are known as 'mama' and 'mummy'

