



Reckon So Productions

in association with Rhino Films and Arcade Edit

presents

# THANK YOU FOR COMING

A documentary film by Sara Lamm

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## **LOGLINE**

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Documentary filmmaker Sara Lamm discovered as an adult that she was conceived via sperm donor; it's taken eleven years, twelve DNA tests, five ancestry databases, one potential half sister, and 900 sixth-cousins to (maybe) find her biological father. THANK YOU FOR COMING is a genealogical detective story and a funny, bittersweet meditation on love, loss, friendship, and family.

## **SYNOPSIS**

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Documentary filmmaker Sara Lamm discovered as an adult that she was conceived via sperm donor. She's spent years looking for her biological father—chasing non-existent medical records, trolling the archives of the doctor who ran the fertility clinic, and tracking down class photographs from the medical school; it's been eleven years since she learned the truth and she doesn't have many leads.

Sara joins an online registry for donor conceived people and meets Jennifer, who was conceived at the same clinic, in the same year. The two women discover a number of similarities (height, seasonal allergies, a penchant for psychics) and decide to take a DNA test to see if they're half-sisters. When they meet in Hawaii to determine the results, Sara brings her camera and for nearly two years after, documents their shared hunt for information.

Jennifer spends hours every day on the computer, toggling between DNA and ancestry databases, while Sara seeks out the edges of her family story--traveling up the coast of California to visit her non-biological, bird-watching father and across the country to her home state of North Carolina—where she makes a personal request of an elderly aunt, visits her mother's graveside, and asks her mother's longtime boyfriend what he knew about the donor.

THANK YOU FOR COMING makes unexpected connections between the wild roots of a banyan tree, the lonesome shadow of a kite, and the comedic potential of a turkey baster. It's both a genealogical detective story and a funny, poetic meditation on love, loss, friendship, and family.

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

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I was 29 years old when my dad delivered the belated and rather shocking news that he was not my biological father. Or, rather, his exact words, still relatively unfathomable, were that he “may” not be my biological father.

The facts as he unspooled them that strange evening are as follows: in the early 1970s, having been diagnosed with Hodgkin’s Disease, he embarked on a course of chemotherapy and radiation, the cumulative effects of which rendered him, at least temporarily, infertile. My parents consulted the local experts in North Carolina where they lived and were quickly presented with a solution -- artificial insemination with donor sperm. In Fall of 1973, my mother visited the clinic at the University of North Carolina Memorial Hospital. By August of 1974, she held me in her arms.

My father seemed to remember that the donor was a medical student, hand-picked by the doctor in charge, that he was supposedly of the same height and build of my dad, that he had been screened for major genetic conditions. And here is the weird part, although I have since learned that it was not an unusual practice at the time—the doctor mixed the sperm of the donor with the sperm of my father before inserting it into the body of my mother. Whether this was scientific practice or psychological gesture the doctor didn’t say. What the doctor did say though was this: No one ever needs to know about the donor. Do not tell your family. Do not tell your friends. Do not ever tell the child.

But 11 years ago, my father did tell me. After the first furious dash into research--getting my mother’s medical records, tracking down class pictures of the medical students, joining the online database [DonorSiblingRegistry.org](http://DonorSiblingRegistry.org) (The DSR, as we ‘donor conceived’ call it) -- I hit a wall. Any record of the donor had been destroyed, or so the hospital claimed. I didn’t seem to have the time or energy to do any more.

Enter Jennifer Kasprzycki. In Spring, 2014, Jennifer contacted me through the DSR. She too had been conceived via sperm donor at UNC Hospitals. We had both just turned 40—she was born three months before I was, and, it turned out, we were both almost 6 feet tall, had similar coloring, and suffered the same kind of seasonal allergies. Jennifer asked me if I’d be willing to take a DNA test—maybe we were half-sisters? And so I began my investigation anew, this time with the intention of documenting it all in a film.

The movie gave me an excuse to seek out the edges of my family story. What I haven’t mention yet is that I am an only child, my parents separated when I was 11 months old, and my mother died of breast cancer when I was 10; at some point “Looking For The Donor” began to bump insistently into other issues—What happened between my mother and father? What does ‘being a family’ mean in the age of divorce? Am I hoping that finding the donor will heal the grief left by my mother’s death? And P.S., what’s so important about biological relationships anyway? I ask all these questions with my two kids hovering...somehow they make the answers seem all the more important.

This film captures my psychological terrain and Jennifer’s exhaustive research. She spends hours every day on the computer, toggling back and forth between online DNA databases and genealogy websites, in the hope of finding her (possibly our) donor. Her relentless detective work,

using what's called "Adoption Methodology," involves matching genomes with far-flung cousins, finding DNA sequences in common using chromosome browsers, building these cousins' family trees with public records and comparing these trees to one another—slowly but surely building a paternal ancestry line.

I'll skip the spoilers, but add that it gives me great pleasure the way that Jennifer's story and mine have been woven together—from the fact that our mothers walked the same hospital halls on their way to conceive us, to the fact that she became my fearless guide and inspiration as I muddled through a wild family adventure.

The ostensible plot of THANK YOU FOR COMING is driven by the question "Can I Find The Donor"—it's a treasure hunt of sorts; but the deeper question that drives the project is more like "What Can Be Known About That Which (Maybe) Cannot Be Known?" I set out with the idea that I'd either find my biological father or I wouldn't—but somehow the search itself would be healing. And, because of the film, I've connected with multiple online and real life communities of people in my same donor-conceived boat. We support one another in ways I couldn't have predicted when I began. The movie isn't an overt political statement against anonymous donors, although many in these communities wish the practice would be disavowed; still, my hope is that the film allows viewers to consider more concretely that the donor-conceived child grows into a donor-conceived adult with very real thoughts and feelings.

At any rate, it's a decidedly personal story—a journey into layers of the past in an attempt to find meaning within my own complex family system, which includes not just the donor parentage but the effects of divorce, death, and secrets. It all sounds rather serious when written here—grief, loss, and loneliness as major themes—but there's also, in major doses: hope, friendship, honesty, the pleasure of detective work, and a hearty appreciation of the strange twists and turns that occur in each and every mysterious human life. In the end, I think I've managed to replace the void left by the phrase 'anonymous donor' with something else—swapping communication for silence and relationships for absence—now there's a film where before was only a Great Big Genetic Question Mark.

## SOME HISTORY

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The first documented pregnancy via donor sperm is said to have occurred at Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia in 1884. According to reports that later appeared in the American journal 'Medical World', Dr. William Pancoast, presented with an "azoospermic" husband and his eager wife, anesthetized the woman under the guise of performing a routine examination and instead inseminated her with the sperm of the medical student deemed "most attractive" by his peers. This procedure was performed without the husband or wife knowing about it and only upon news of the woman's pregnancy did the doctor reveal his methods to the father-to-be. The husband, by all accounts, was quite pleased, and asked that the physician never tell his wife by what manner she became pregnant.

And so it began. News of the historic insemination, when it was finally reported some 25 years later, provoked heated debate, and for nearly 60 years after, whenever artificial insemination was publicized in medical journals, the public outrage was definitive; religious institutions, world parliaments and courts throughout the United States decried the procedure, citing the "illegitimacy" of a donor-conceived child, who was clearly born, they said, out of wedlock.

The laws began to change, though, in the mid-1960s, and by the time I was conceived at the University of North Carolina in 1973, many (but not all) states stipulated that if a "wife was artificially inseminated with donor semen under a physician's supervision, and with her husband's consent, the law would treat the husband as if he were the natural father of the DI child." The statutes passed also made it clear that the donor who provided a doctor or clinic with sperm would "not be considered the legal father of any child conceived by that sperm." The door was open. My parents were some of the first people to walk through.

It was the beginning of the modern fertility industry—and in many ways it felt like the Wild West: sperm was still delivered fresh, not frozen; no one kept track of how many children were born from each donor; and genetic screenings were minimal. In the 1970s, most parents simply placed their trust in the pioneering, often charismatic, doctors, who selected the 'best donors' for their clients and prescribed, "Do not ever tell the children."

Today no one knows exactly how many US children are born each year with the aid of donor sperm, but the New York Times estimates between 30-60,000, and concedes that, because there are no mandatory reporting systems in place, the number could be much higher. The cryobanks are thriving; they cite growing infertility among straight couples, increasing ranks of "Single Mothers By Choice," and legal gay marriage as the reasons why. Log on to their websites and it's "just like Zappos," as one California Cryobank representative said. A prospective parent can pick her donor's height, hair color, eye color, college major and religion; she can pay extra money for a donor willing to be contacted when the child turns 18; and she can even shop via a different metric—choosing her donor based on what celebrity he most resembles. Parents read essays written by the donor and see a full medical history from several generations of his family. And, since the mental health experts now recommend that donor conceived children be told early, with as much detail as possible, about their unique parentage, all of this comes as part of a dossier that will eventually pass into the hands of the offspring themselves.

Meanwhile, in recent years, there have been news programs, films, and radio shows about the lives of these children as they grow into young adults. All of them testify to the fact that these

stories capture the public imagination and that the family dramas, ethical dilemmas, and identity questions they raise are in our culture to stay. Most of these projects feature donor-conceived teens or 20-somethings, thanks to the surge in donor conception circa the 1990s; but this documentary looks at these issues from the point of view of someone conceived in what might be called the “first wave.”

Along the way, it connects two distinct historical periods—the early days of an important medical practice that has now become widespread, and the mindboggling technological advances the donor conceived have at their disposal in 2017. No one could have predicted when I was born in 1974 that forty years later, home paternity tests would be on the shelves of every corner drug store and half-siblings would be able to find each other--then Facetime--via their laptop computers. Even more astounding is that websites like [ancestrydna.com](http://ancestrydna.com) and [23andme.com](http://23andme.com) have completely changed the game; and, the larger the DNA databases grow, the more likely that genetic genealogy will render the concept of an “anonymous” donation obsolete.

## **ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS**

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**Sara Lamm** // Director/Producer/Writer

Sara Lamm is a writer, performer, and documentary filmmaker whose most recent film *BIRTH STORY: INA MAY GASKIN AND THE FARM MIDWIVES*, co-directed with Mary Wigmore, won the Audience Award at the 2012 Los Angeles Film Festival, was released theatrically in the US, and screened in community venues all over the world (including at the McMurdo Station in Antarctica.) Her 2007 film *DR. BRONNER'S MAGIC SOAPBOX* was also released theatrically and had its television premiere on The Sundance Channel. In addition, her work has appeared at MASS-MOCA, The American Visionary Art Museum, and on NPR. For five years she produced and performed in *DOG & PONY*, a monthly NYC variety show featuring comedic multi-media performance.

**Kim Bica** // Producer

Kim Bica is an Emmy-and-Cannes-Award-winning editor with experience in documentary and commercial editing. She has edited advertising campaigns, films, and music videos for notable directors such as David LaChapelle, (*The Sundance short KRUMPED*); Martin Scorsese (*Members Project for American Express*); Dayton/Faris (AICP Award for best editing on NBA spot); and Errol Morris (*The Nobel Peace Laureate Series*, and as a contributing editor on the 2013 Donald Rumsfeld documentary, *THE UNKNOWN KNOWN*). She is co-founder/co-owner of Arcade Edit, a full service editorial company, which offers creative editorial and finishing, including graphics, design, illustration, and visual effects.

**Stephen Nemeth** // Executive Producer

Stephen Nemeth formed and heads up Rhino Films, the independent film company that originated as a division of iconoclastic record label Rhino Records. He has produced and executive produced dozens of films. His producer credits include *THE SESSIONS* (Sundance 2012 Audience Award, 2013 Academy Award nomination for Helen Hunt), *C.O.G.* (Sundance 2013), *FEAR AND LOATHING IN LAS VEGAS*, *WHY DO FOOLS FALL IN LOVE*, *RADIO FREE ALBEMUTH*, and the recently released Bill "Spaceman" Lee biopic, *SPACEMAN*. He is in pre-production on the New York Times' bestselling book *CONFESSIONS OF AN ECONOMIC HIT MAN* and the adaptation of Hunter S. Thompson's *THE CURSE OF LONO*. Nemeth's documentary credits include *DOGTOWN AND Z BOYS* (Sundance 2001 Audience Award), *WARDANCE* (2008 Academy Award nomination), *FUEL* (Sundance 2008 Audience Award), *PUMP, FLOW* (Sundance 2008), *PICK UP THE MIC* (Toronto 2005), *CLIMATE REFUGEES* (Sundance 2010), *ROBERT WILLIAMS MR. BITCHIN'*, *RIDE WITH LARRY*, *UNDER THE BOARDWALK: THE MONOPOLY STORY*, *EDUCATION, INC.* and *PATRIOCRACY*. He is a member of the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences and on the board of numerous non-profit organizations including Friends of the Earth, Children Uniting Nations and the International Documentary Association and is on the dean's board of the UC Santa Cruz's School for the Arts. He is both an American and British citizen.

**Susan Metzger // Editor**

An Atlanta native, Susan Metzger moved to Los Angeles in 2003 earning an MFA from USC and establishing herself as a documentary film editor. She began her career assisting for Academy-Award winning documentary editor Kate Amend on such films as JIMMY CARTER: MAN FROM PLAINS, THERE WAS ONCE..., and BIRTH STORY: INA MAY GASKIN AND THE FARM MIDWIVES. Susan has edited a range of short content--from cheeky environmental webisodes for Darryl Hannah, to interviews with golf caddies in Scotland, to an experimental film about a poet in grief. She most recently edited the feature documentary RIGHT FOOTED.

**Craig Wedren and Jherek Bischoff // Composers**

Craig Wedren is a composer, songwriter and singer. He began his career fronting avant-rock pioneers *Shudder To Think*. He has scored an array of feature films including HOW TO BE A LATIN LOVER, THE SCHOOL OF ROCK, WET HOT AMERICAN SUMMER, BY THE PEOPLE: THE ELECTION OF BARACK OBAMA, LAUREL CANYON, RODGER DODGER, HIGH ART, and AFTERNOON DELIGHT. Craig also created the music for television shows including HUNG, THE UNITED STATES OF TARA, RENO 911!, FRESH OFF THE BOAT, and GLOW. His latest album ADULT DESIRE will be out Summer 2017, along with an accompanying narrative VR video series, the followup to his first-of-it's-kind 2011 release, 'Wand'.

Jherek Bischoff is a Los Angeles-based composer, arranger, producer and multi-instrumentalist. He has performed in venues from Radio City Music Hall and Carnegie Hall to Royal Albert Hall; collaborated with the likes of Kronos Quartet and David Byrne; and his music and commissions have been performed by renowned symphonies and ensembles around the globe. His critically-acclaimed album CISTERN was released in 2016 in conjunction with a live performance in Times Square. Bischoff is currently serving as the music director for Robert Wilson's new production, THE SANDMAN.

**Keith Ochwat // Distribution Producer**

Keith Ochwat has produced three nationally broadcast PBS films. In addition to his production work, Keith has developed and executed successful film audience engagement campaigns; for his most recent project, AGE OF CHAMPIONS, he spearheaded a 20-state theatrical tour and grassroots screening campaign reaching over 3,000 communities. Keith established partnerships with advocacy groups like AARP and the Alzheimer's Association and companies like Aetna Health to propel the film into the public eye, and generated over \$1.5 million.

**Bria Little // Distribution Producer**

Bria Little has worked on a number of documentary films, as an associate producer, associate editor, and researcher. She helped execute the successful kickstarter campaigns for BIRTH STORY: INA MAY GASKIN AND THE FARM MIDWIVES, as well as for the upcoming FEMINISTS: WHAT WERE THEY THINKING? She worked as Outreach Coordinator for Sara Terry's film, FOLK, and has screened films for the Sundance Documentary Fund. Bria co-helms the production company Lure Films in her day-to-day, where she produces and consults on social media strategy and graphic design elements of marketing campaigns.

## CREDITS

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