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## The Godparents Council by Michael-David Sasson and Kirsten Cross

Our oldest daughter, when she was seven or eight, had a plan.

She was going to marry a boy from Pact Camp and have children when she was 35 years old. They would move into the home of whoever's parents died first and make sure they had a good balance of treats and growing food. Later, after looking up having kids in the dictionary, she decided she didn't want to have kids after all. The dictionary told her it was a lot of hard work.

Having kids is a lot of hard work (albeit with incredibly satisfying rewards). No one or two adults should have to do it alone. Raising children of color in a racist country requires even more resourcefulness and can carry particular challenges for adoptive parents who are white.

A significant piece of our family's response to these challenges has been the creation of a group we call our daughters' "Godparents' Council." This idea grew in part out of ways we would have liked to help our friends parent their young children. Before we ever decided to become parents, Kirsten—with Michael-David cheerfully tagging along—had tried to provide ongoing, loving support to her friends' children. This was difficult to maintain: people moved, or could not quite believe that we were really interested in being a significant part of their kids' lives. Michael-David—with Kirsten's support—had also tried to recruit "co-parents," with a vision of five or so adults sharing a household and childcare responsibilities for two or three children. While many were intrigued, none were willing to commit.

When our first daughter joined our family, in the midst of all of our joy and celebration, we knew we'd need at least as much support as we'd been willing to offer others if we were going to be successful raising our girl to be a strong and proud African-American woman. The advice we'd received from a number of adult friends who were either of African descent, and/or grew up in transracial families touched by adoption, made it seem possible. We wanted to formalize our relationships with

these trusted friends so we could count on a certain amount of support for us as parents and for our children. Thus the Godparents Council was born.

Turns out asking people to take on this role is accepted as very serious and kind of flattering, which we hadn't expected. Some people we asked were already very close to at least one of us. Others were more of a stretch—people we had worked with and admired but hadn't spent as much time with socially. But all were people we hoped would be role models in different ways for our daughters. Conscious that our families of origin are almost entirely white, we wanted to do what we could so that our daughters wouldn't be the only people of color in our family moving forward. In part, we wanted to increase our chances that if/when our kids needed to talk to adults who looked more like them than us about how difficult life was being parented by white folks, they'd be likely to go to people who had their backs and ours. We initially recruited eight people to form the Godparents' Council (out of the ten people we approached). When our second daughter joined our family, two more people agreed to join the Council.

To become a member of the Godparents' Council, everyone had to agree to two things: 1) if both of us should die or become incapacitated, they would make sure our daughter(s) did not end up back in the foster care system; and 2) at least until the youngest was eighteen, they would attend an annual godparents' dinner where they would get to know each other and become known as family to our daughters. Beyond that, we asked people to define for themselves how they wanted to be connected to our daughter(s).

For some people, particularly the few who don't live near us, this mostly means the annual get-togethers or intermittent phone calls from us asking for advice or from them with birthday greetings. During a particularly difficult time, some godparents stepped up to essentially co-parent with us. Others have given us an extended sense of family—including intermittent or annual shared holiday celebrations and Sunday brunches. These occasions provide our family with even more extended family, role models for our girls, and

people we deeply love (and who love us and our girls in return).

Shortly after each child joined our family, we hosted a "welcome party." The "welcome party" was an opportunity to introduce the godparents to each other, to our families of origin, and to our broader community of friends and neighbors. At each welcome party, one of the godmothers sang the new daughter her own special song as she had done for each of her grandchildren when they joined her family. While we had hopes that creating the Council would expand our family to include all of the godparents, we've been overwhelmed by the extent to which in different ways each of the godparents has included not only our daughters but us as well as part of their family. Sometimes, god-cousins have acknowledged us as welcome and appreciated family in front of their home congregation when we've visited their church community. In some instances, there has even been temporary estrangement from extended members of our new family. Who could ask for more true family dynamics than that?

Each of the godparents is a person who we trust with our daughters' lives and care. We should be clear that not all the godparents are Black (nor are all the godparents that aren't Black, white), but it was important to us that some of these new family be racial role models for our daughters. Many of our godparents live in multiracial families themselves and having four godparents in loving and committed gay and lesbian relationships makes it much easier to interrupt the homophobia our girls hear at school. Having godparents who are younger than we are, as well as some who are our parents' age, also brings its own gifts.

At the first couple godparents' dinners, it did take a fair amount of work on our part to initiate conversations and help weave connections among the various individuals and couples. At the last dinner, whenever we both disappeared into the kitchen to handle something foodor child-related, we were overjoyed to hear good-natured laughter shared across and around the dinner table in the next room. Life in our family won't always be easy, but our house feels more like home in moments like these—full of people we love and who love us and our daughters. We've been reminded that we are lovable, and with all the guidance and comfort their godparents bring them, our daughters can grow up believing that they are too.

**Kirsten Cross** grew up in a mostly lily-white community outside San Francisco, an experience which has taken years of anti-racism work to address. She currently works with Corporate Accountability International, fighting global corporate atrocities when she's not hanging out with Michael-David, her girls, their godparents, and other friends. **Michael-David Sasson** hails from Detroit. He roots for Kirsten in her battles against corporate domination, loves to cook and eat, and recently ran a half-marathon with his daughters.

<sup>1</sup> She gave us permission to share this story. For what it's worth, the marriage is off too – at least for now.

<sup>2</sup> We were shameless in asking for commitments for childcare and other help at the welcome party – even having one of the godparents (a former union organizer) pitch people to sign commitment cards we had printed up for the occasion. We continue to be amazed at how much easier it is to ask for and receive the help we need than it was to try and offer help. People it seems are basically good and yearn to be useful and in loving relationship to others.