

IRIS FILMS: Documenting The Lives of Lesbians

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Iris Films is a feminist film distribution and production collective, currently comprised of three lesbians. We have recently completed a 16mm documentary film on lesbian mothers and child custody, "In The Best Interests Of The Children." This article is a record of our process of making that film, which is presented as a reflection of our politics and feelings as lesbian filmmakers.

Iris Films was begun in the spring of 1975 out of the desire to produce and distribute films that spoke to women in a way that the products of Hollywood do not. We saw ourselves as part of the movement of women to regain, define, and create our own culture.

In the fall of 1975 we were actively looking for films by other women to distribute, and were deciding to begin our own first production, a film defending the right of lesbian mothers to maintain custody of their children. We began interviewing dozens of lesbian mothers with cassette recorder, not only hearing their stories, but also sharing our own experiences as lesbians. One of the three of us is also a mother, and the other two of us are very committed to children as an integral part of our movement and community.

Our original plan was to make something that would appeal directly to those people who have the most power over a lesbian in a child custody situation: the judges, the probation officers, the attorneys, the social workers. As we talked more and more with different lesbian mothers and heard their stories, that conception began to change. We realized, with them, that what they had to say was important for the general public, for other lesbians and their children, and for the women's movement to hear. We began to broaden our image of the film and of who the audience would be, and to consider what compromises we would and would not make in order to make our statements. We knew that a film for judges and probation officers would have to be very low key and very liberal and that we would have to present very "acceptable" lesbians (in terms of their image, lifestyle, and statements)—the more middle class, and accepting of American, white, capitalist values, the better. We decided most adamantly that we didn't want to do that with the women that we had met who had become our friends. We found (not surprisingly) that the women who had the strongest statements to make about being lesbian mothers were not those who would be the most palatable to the "upholders of justice" in this country, since these women understood their oppression as lesbians to include the "upholders." They were not saying, "We just want to be

like everyone else, so please be good to us." They were saying, "We're happy, and we're healthy, and we're proud, and we're tired of being fucked over."

What we finally came up with—in rethinking, retalking, reworking our ideas in the months before we actually started shooting—was something in between the most radical film we could make, and one that the patriarchal powers could watch and learn from. We knew that we were in a position to take more risks than any lesbian mother facing a judge in a custody trial, and yet, if the film was to serve any useful propagandistic purpose for educating judges and the homophobic general public, we had to be making statements that such an audience could relate to. What we ended up with were a variety of women, situations, and statements that show how lesbian mothers are both the same as, and different from other mothers.

Once we had completed our initial interviews, we chose eight women and their children to be in the film. We made these choices based on a number of considerations. We wanted to show a cross-section of women based on class and race, on lifestyle, and on the numbers and ages of their children. We wanted the film to show that we were not speaking of only one particular type of lesbian, when we spoke of a lesbian's right to keep her children. So we chose from as broad a spectrum as we could, keeping in mind the specific experiences that each woman could speak to in the film.

The three of us had been working together as a collective, and we wanted to continue working that way once we began production on the film. Two of us were experienced filmmakers, and the third, although having no film experience, was very good at interviewing people. We were committed to the idea of sharing skills in our work, and because of this, we decided that each of us would be in charge of an area where she felt the most expertise (the three areas were camera, sound recording, and directing/interviewing), but that all of us would have an opportunity to work at each of these. We found that having a well-thought-out common vision of what we wanted the film to be, made it possible for us to do this. We had other women working on the film with us (usually helping with lighting or camera assistance), but none of them were involved in the collective process. They would commit themselves to working on the film on a day-to-day basis, as it fit into their schedules.

As feminists, we found our priority was to deal with the feelings of the women and children we were filming, rather than doing whatever necessary to get what we

wanted on film. We would never push to get a shot when we felt there was resistance, or if it seemed too disruptive. This, and the mothers' understanding about the need for this film, made them very cooperative and adaptable to our needs. Although it was an unfamiliar situation for most of them, and there was some nervousness, the general feeling when we turned on the cameras was relaxed and open.

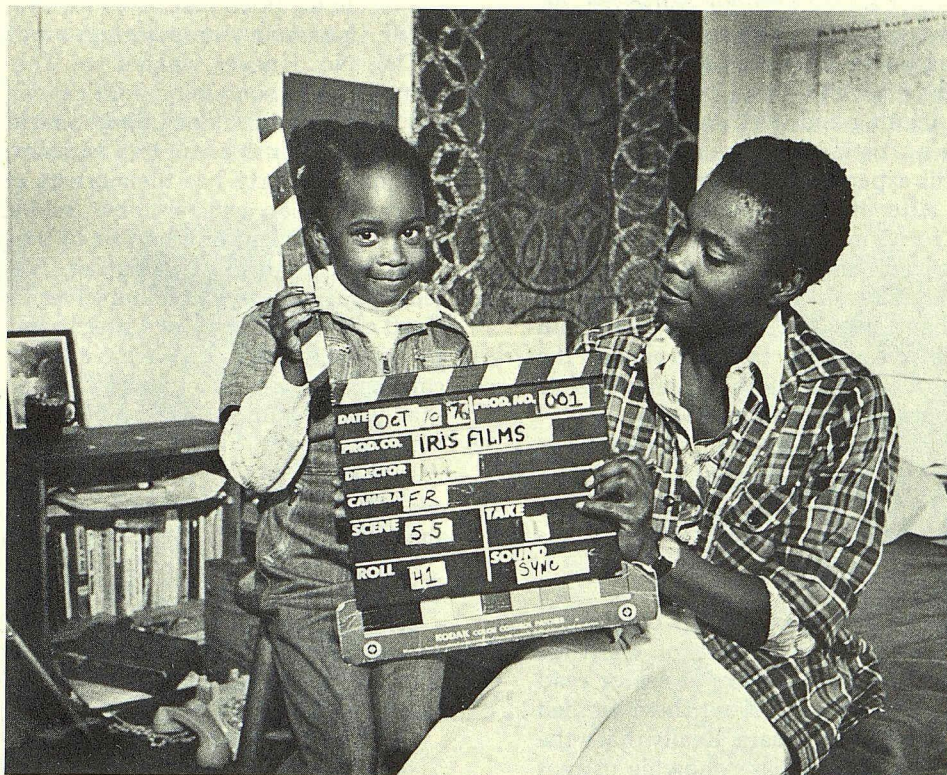
We decided sometime in September that, in addition to filming the children with their mothers, we would like to get the children talking with each other about their common experience. We arranged this with the children of three of the mothers from northern California, plus two other children whose mothers were not in the film. There was a lot of energy and excitement from the children, because the focus was on them and what *they* had to say, and because they could talk with peers about their mothers, and could share their feelings and experiences without fear of being put down. Filming the children by themselves added a new perspective to the film, both in terms of what they had to say, and the openness with which they said it.

We spent the months from November, 1976, to May, 1977, editing and fundraising, and when we finally got the necessary money (primarily from three small foundations, from a concert in Los Angeles, and from individual donations), we completed the final steps of recording the music, filming pick-up shots and still photos, making the titles, and doing the final cutting, mixing, timing, and lab work. We have produced a film that we hope will be an effective political tool for

lesbians to use, within their communities for fund and consciousness-raising, for the general public (we are trying to get the film on public television), and for use in educating the powers involved in custody cases in the courts.

As lesbian filmmakers, we see ourselves as cultural workers. We see film primarily as a political tool, and secondarily as an art form. We do recognize, however, the importance of giving our work a strong, vibrant, and positive esthetic, as the most effective way of getting our message across to the audience. A shoddy esthetic does not change people; it bores them and turns them off. In this respect, we see it as our responsibility to create films that are artistically as well as politically compelling.

We plan to continue working as a collective, both for our distribution and for our production work. Our challenge to ourselves is to make filmmaking much more available to women who have never had access to the power of the media, and yet who have important statements to make about their lives and about the society we live in. This includes third world women, working class and poor women, especially those who are lesbians, as women who are traditionally denied training or jobs where they could learn and utilize filmmaking skills. We do not believe that doing this kind of cultural work will *make* the revolution, but we do believe that it is an important aspect for inspiring and organizing women towards the goal of making radical changes in our social, political, and economic structures.



Production photo from *In The Best Interests of The Children*. Photo courtesy Iris Films.

Iris Films' 16mm, 52 minute, color documentary on Lesbian mothers, "In The Best Interests Of The Children," is available for sale or rental. For information write to Iris Films, Box 26463, Los Angeles, California, 90026, (213) 483-5793.

Francis Reid is a thirty-three year old feminist filmmaker and organizer. Some of her work has included organizing *The Feminist Eye*—a conference for women in media, and founding Iris Films.