

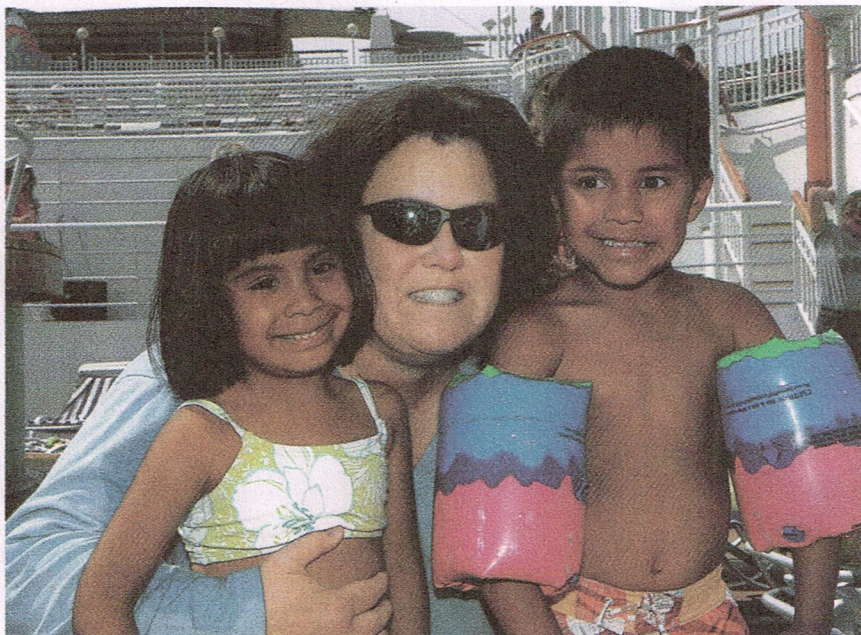
ROSIE'S LOVE BOAT

So much for debauchery. O'Donnell's gay cruise ship champions family values.

IT'S ALMOST LUNCHTIME, and a decidedly unglamorous Rosie O'Donnell is loading her tray with scrambled eggs at the R Family Cruise ship's buffet when 73-year-old Alice Aguado and her sister, Camille Bruno, spot her. "Rosie, you just woke up?" Bruno hollers. O'Donnell sits with the Long Islanders and, to their amazement, scarfs cafeteria grub with them for nearly an hour. Aguado gushes to O'Donnell, "I have four kids, but I only dream about you." "Well," O'Donnell tells her, "you should probably see a shrink about that." Though the seniors are travelling with the first gay family cruise line, they're both straight—they're here because they're Rosie fans. But now they fear being called out as intruders by the 2,200 passengers, including 600 children. O'Donnell sets the straights straight about gay families. "Talk to them," she urges, "sit with them, ask them questions. They don't mind."

This mid-July cruise is run by O'Donnell's partner, Kelli O'Donnell (they have four kids), and their close friend Gregg Kaminsky. But it was Rosie herself who dreamed up the concept of a cruise for gay and lesbian families. Kaminsky had booked her to perform on another gay party cruise ship. When it stopped in the gay town of Provincetown, Mass., O'Donnell's eyes were opened to a phenomenon she never knew existed—gay family vacations. "Rosie's been gay her whole life but there are many parts of gay life that she'd never experienced," says Kaminsky. She realized she wanted to take her children along on a gay cruise, but she couldn't. "None of the gay charter cruises welcomed kids," Kaminsky says.

The resulting cruise line fills a neglected niche market. This is the ninth cruise taken by Steven and David Garetto-Barnett from California, but their first with R Family. A couple for 13 years, they say this is the first time they've felt comfortable with their fellow passengers. They don't smoke, drink or use drugs, so the stereotypical hard-partying gay lifestyle never meshed with them—



especially since they adopted two children three years ago. "Having kids means having to assimilate," Steven says. "It's about field trips, other parents and birthday parties. There's a bigger world that I have to be a part of." When the ship docks in Halifax, its first port before stops in Boston, Provincetown and Martha's Vineyard, Steven and David are among the 10 couples who go ashore to get married. Their son and daughter are there for the ceremony.

Also along for the cruise are two New Yorkers, Liz and Brenda (not their real names), closeted lesbians who met in the military. Now over 50, they're having trouble adopting because of their age and sexual orientation. Brenda has applied as a single parent, but Liz says the worst part has been hiding their best qualification for parenthood—a 13-year committed relationship. "To think that people wouldn't allow a child to have the opportunity to take up what we offer—love, comfort, financial stability—because we're gay," she says.

During O'Donnell's nightly shows aboard

Other gay cruises wouldn't take kids, so O'Donnell launched her own

the Norwegian Dawn, a luxury cruise ship chartered from the Norwegian Cruise Line, she claims her ambition is to be the next Bob Barker, famous for "giving away free crap." Awarding

an iPod to an audience member, the comedian screams in a terrifyingly aggressive voice that mixes toddler tantrum and bull-dyke rage: "Be excited! Be excited!" The winner, a woman sporting a mullet, pumps her fist like she's at a monster truck rally.

For the families, who indulge in such un-gay activities as doing the hokey-pokey around the pool, this cruise is an opportunity to show their children that their life isn't so unusual. Singer Melissa Etheridge makes that point in a surprise appearance onstage. "It's so great for the kids," she says, her trademark long locks snipped into a skull-hugging short crop. "See, we aren't the strangest people on the block. We come in all different colours, shapes and sizes." With that, she launches into Janis Joplin's *Piece of My Heart*. The whole family goes nuts. **M**