

By Sarah Lebovitz

Role Models

The interviews compiled seem to indicate that some women did have positive role models in choosing alternatives to taking their husbands last names, while other women had negative role models that led them toward alternatives. Many also expressed that they wanted to be positive role models for their children as well as their own peers.

A more positive experience comes from Jill Tiefenthaler:

Well my step-mother had a similar situation as I did, where she had her son, she wasn't married when she had her son, and gave him her name as well. Like a mirror image situation, and then she met my father - 10, 12 years later - she decided to keep her name as well. She liked her name. She also was from Gloucester. Family name, you know, a fairly well-known family around town. She like that name and just decided to keep it. She would be the closest. It's probably why I mirrored my decision off of, I'd say.

Many women shared stories similar to this one, whether they were influenced by people closer to them, like parents or friends, or by celebrities. Whoever it was, they realized that it was becoming more societally acceptable to keep some part of their own personal history and choose alternative routes to traditional naming practices. However, not all the women were influenced in this more positive way. Some were surrounded by women who did not change their last names, but were not particularly influenced them, like Joyce Norton-McCormick.

I can't think of any role models. I guess when you're in higher ed, all of the women, the few women that were in economics, my professors, some of my undergrad professors. But all of the three or four women at the PhD department at Duke all had their own had kept their names. Many of them had multiple marriages, so it gets complicated...but I wouldn't say there was anyone I looked to and said, 'I want to do that because they did it' in a role model kind of way."

Jesse Yancey-Siegal shared her story of being influenced by a queer parenting book, and how this helped her and her partner decide how to go about deciding on a last name for their child.

So we weren't sure what do do, but I actually kind of, I am the birth mom, I decided we had to go with my wife's last name. They were talking about different last naming practices, hyphenating, changing names, and they basically made this argument that the worst possible thing you can do is give the kid the birth parent's name. Because being a biological parent is already socially recognized, and so if the other mother is neither biological parent nor as the same name, these two things we automatically have broader social recognition around, they will have neither, right? I found that really compelling.

A few of the women interviewed had more negative role models. Rather than being positively influenced by a person in their lives, they were negatively effected, which strongly influenced their reasons for keeping their father's last name (which was perceived as their own last name due to personal history) rather than adopting the last name of their husband. One such story comes from Jennifer Wolfe-Smith.

Well I guess that my role model was my mom. When she married, she changed her last name and then when she divorced she changed her last name, and then she re-married and changed her last name, and I thought that was ridiculous. What I saw is that it was a lot of work and it changes your identity, and who you are. So it kept changing, and I didn't it was a good idea, and who I was was Renee Yoelin and I didn't really change that.

However, it seemed more often that women were interested in being positive role models to those people around them, whether related or not. Women are more and more often finding alternatives to simply having their husbands' last names, and these decisions are creating a ripple effect through society. Young girls and older women are both influenced by these people, which is creating a newer generation of women who don't feel as though they are being forced to lose their identities through patronymic practices. Indeed, it seems as though more and more mothers are strongly influencing their daughters. Renee Dyer has such a story about her daughters.

Well, at first I would've never thought this would've made a difference to anybody but me, but I think now being a mom of the girls, they ask, they ask "Why did you do that?" And not in a bad way, they just wanna know. And since I told them and they understand they kind of think it's really a cool thing, and I could see like, I can see the wheels turning when they think of things and they're still young, my oldest is twelve but I think she'll re-think their name choice when she does and if she does marry, and I think then she might want to maintain a certain level of her own identity involved as well. So at least for my own three children I do think it's made them realize, "ok I can be a mom, I can be a wife, um I can do all these things and I can still be me."

Mary Pechauer may not have influenced a child, but she still influenced another person who could in turn influence yet another person.

Well, I influenced my sister; I don't know if it has made a statement to anybody else but I feel better about it, I just really didn't want to change my name.

All of these women were influenced by feminism in some way, whether through positive or negative role models, and are in turn role models to those around them who are unsure on how to maintain their own identities. Our culture is constantly changing, and in turn, naming practices too are changing. Hyphenated last names are becoming more and more popular, combining last names into one singular last name is becoming less irregular, and women keeping their own names is becoming a larger trend. Women are no longer content to let their family histories disappear, or are reaching new compromises with their partners to ensure that both sides of the family are given their equal due. These women are shaping new options for later generations.