

Deborah Wald '87

Children and family rights are her personal and professional passions

Deborah Wald didn't plan on devoting her career to gay and lesbian rights. But children have a way of changing things.

Wald was happily working in San Francisco as a public defender a decade ago when she and her partner decided to have a baby (they're now the parents of two boys). As they went through the second-parent adoption process, Wald realized she wanted to enter this burgeoning area of law. Today, her solo practice is 50 percent criminal defense and 50 percent something she calls "lesbian and gay family-building."

"My practice is very child-centered," says Wald, who also handles cases pro bono for the National Center for Lesbian Rights. "It's very much focused on expanding the rights of lesbians and gays to be parents."

Indeed, Wald pioneered a process under the Uniform Parentage Act for establishing two women as parents of a child before birth, so that adoption wasn't necessary. "It was the first time we know of that two women were declared the legal and natural parents of a child before birth," she says. As a result, in



1999 she was named a "Lawyer of the Year" by *California Lawyer* magazine.

Her work takes her near and far. Last year, she successfully challenged a Mississippi court's decision to award custody of a newborn to a father with a history of domestic violence; the mother had been ruled unfit because she'd had a lesbian affair. These days, Wald is frequently in Italy, trying to get the courts there to provide legal rights to lesbian parents of a newborn in intensive care. It's deeply rewarding and makes for a busy life. After all, she notes, "I'm also raising two small kids." ■