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BIG TIME BABY

JR 371 Feature Writing Class

COLLEGE STUDENTS AS SPERM AND EGG DONORS

BY AMANDA HAMPTON

Simon Hughes (not his real name) was scrolling through Instagram when he saw the ad: California Cryobank in Cambridge wanted him to *Become a Sperm Donor!* Why not apply, he figured—he could use the extra cash, and it seemed like easy money.

It's no secret that college students like Simon are always looking for creative ways to pay their sizeable bills. With ads from cryobanks and egg donation programs cropping up across their feeds and listicles with titles like "32 Flexible Ways to Make Money in College" and "17+ Easy Ways for College Students to Make Money Quickly" singing the praises of egg and sperm donation as a money-making enterprise, it's no wonder that so many students want to become donors.

Layla Liata (not her real name), a student at a Boston-area college, is preparing to travel across the country to undergo an egg retrieval procedure, an endeavor that will leave her \$10,000 richer. However, it's important for college students considering the process of egg donation to understand that it's not as easy as sending out an application, making an appointment, and collecting a check.

"It's been a lot. I see why they pay as much as they do, because it is really demanding," Liata notes. She applied through the agency Elevate in 2019, and waited two years to be matched with a couple. Since September, she's been constantly on-call, waiting to be summoned to frequent and last-minute appointments, including ultrasounds, blood-tests, and genetic screenings, and self-administering hormone injections.

Throughout the process, Liata has been in contact with the intended parents, or IPs. "They wrote me a letter and I got to see photos of them. They told me they were inspired by my passion for design and the arts, but it was more about them, how they met and why they wanted to have children. It was really, really special," she says.



Other than this anecdote, Liata has little insight into why her extensive profile, which exists within a database she likens to a dating website, caught the eye of the couple receiving her eggs. "I mean, the woman is white and brunette, so maybe she thought I looked like her when she was younger," she says.

Katherine Bernardo, who works at the Northeast Assisted Fertility Group, corroborates this theory. "The most important factors are physical resemblance to the recipients and overall attractiveness. Good health and family medical history is a given," she explains.

Even for those who appear to be perfect candidates, the selection process is very competitive, meaning many college students hoping to receive payouts similar to Liata's are in for a bit of a rude awakening. "All day long, I look at donor questionnaires that come in, and I respond to very few," Bernardo says.

Katherine Price (not her real name), a Boston college student who also applied to Elevate after hearing about it through a friend, said she was intrigued by the prospect of helping families and having some money to spare once she graduates. She filled out the detailed questionnaire, which included questions like, "Where do you see yourself in five years?" and "What are some traits that your friends would say you have?" along with more generic lines of inquiry regarding family history, health, and habits.

Less than 24 hours later, Price received a blanket email informing her that her application would not be taken further. Many agencies are being more selective than usual due to the current pandemic, and Price thinks this may be why her application was rejected. "I think they don't really want to bring people on, because there's also probably so many more people applying now that so many people have lost their jobs and are looking for ways to make money from home," she says.

Hughes was eventually rejected from the sperm bank he applied to, following an interview that asked about his smoking and drinking habits. "They told me they couldn't say anything about why they couldn't accept me," he says. Applying to be a sperm donor is just as competitive as applying to be a donor, and pays considerably less, which is justified given the ease of the process.

Liata's donation process, while fulfilling, has been anything but easy, and won't end as soon as she flies back to Boston. After her donation, Liata will wait to find out whether the



pregnancy was successful. If it was, she will be notified when the baby is born. After that, it's up to the parents to decide when or if to contact her again. Then, once the child is old enough, they will be able to contact Liata through the agency if they so desire.

Liata's relationship to the intended parents isn't necessarily the norm. "In our program, most matches are mutually anonymous. That is, the recipients see your photograph and have a lot of generic information about you, but they don't know your first and last name, they never meet you, they never speak to you, and you don't really know anything about you at all except that they're patients at whatever clinic they're donating at," says Bernardo. "However, we can make the relationship whatever the two parties want it to be."

Liata and the intended parents made sure to define the parameters of their relationship early on. "I told them from the start that I wanted a semi-open or open relationship, just because if I found out my parents used an egg donor, I would maybe want to someday find out who that person was," she says. She also points out that anonymity has been rendered next-to-impossible in the digital age, especially with services like [ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com) and [23andme](https://www.23andme.com).

Matthew Truesdale, a recent college graduate whose mother used a sperm donor from California Cryobank to conceive, has first-hand experience with this. He and his family had been in contact with other families who had used the same donor, but he wasn't particularly interested in meeting his biological father. "He obviously wasn't really a dad at all—he didn't raise me and had no connection to my mother, so I was kind of ambivalent," he explains.



However, in an algorithm-driven twist of fate, Truesdale's biological father was unwittingly revealed to him by that merciless wealth of knowledge—Facebook. "Some of my other half-siblings went to meet him and Facebook went: here, you might be interested in these photos!" Truesdale recalls.

For college students whose primary motivations for becoming egg or sperm donors lie in the material realm, these kinds of future implications are certainly worth considering. Truesdale says that for his mother, finding a donor who wasn't motivated by monetary gain was a major priority.

"Ideally, I guess, everybody who is donating would be doing it purely out of the goodness of their heart, but I understand that's not always going to be the case. I think there's a net benefit to it, and I think the people who go out and do it for money are at least going to have the potential to make someone very happy," he says.

"Most donors have a combination of altruistic and monetary motives. These are perfectly legitimate," says Bernardo.

Price has a unique perspective on this subject, coming from a family where both her stepsisters were conceived through a natural sperm donation. "Even if you are doing it for financial purposes, it's still altruistic. You can make the same amount of money being a stripper or a drug dealer, but you're choosing to donate your eggs to someone so they can start a family."

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Explaining her own motivations, Liata says, "I can't say I don't care about the money, because I wouldn't do it if I wasn't getting paid. But I do think it's a very personally fulfilling and exciting experience, especially since I don't know if I ever want kids of my own, to be able to give that to someone who can't have it. Plus, I think it's cool that there's going to be a little procreation replicated of me out there in the universe somewhere."

Whether college students who apply to be egg or sperm donors are motivated by philanthropic or self-serving reasons, the end result is the same: they get to pay the bills, and someone who couldn't conceive gets to have a child. Bernardo provides some parting wisdom: "Just learn about the process as much as possible before applying. It requires responsibility and commitment, but is very rewarding."

As is usually the case, what may be advertised as a way to make a quick buck requires effort and persistence, and students should be aware of all the trials and reverberating effects that come with having a biological hand in a new life.

