



Baxter, Meredith (b. 1947)

by Linda Rapp

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Meredith Baxter in 1990.
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Actress Meredith Baxter is best known for her starring role in the ABC situation comedy *Family Ties*, which ran from 1982 to 1989. Her credits also include other series and movies made for both the big and small screens. Since coming out in 2009 she has become a spokesperson for glbtq rights.

Both of Baxter's parents were in the entertainment industry. Her father, Tom Baxter, was a radio announcer, and her mother, Whitney Blake, was a television actress. Meredith Ann Baxter, the youngest of their three children, was born in South Pasadena, California on June 21, 1947.

Baxter's parents' marriage ended in divorce some five years later, but Blake soon remarried. Her second husband, Jack Fields, a producer, encouraged his stepdaughter's interest in acting. Baxter's studies in preparation for a career included classes in theater and voice at the Interlochen (Michigan) Arts Academy Summer Camp.

Soon after graduating from Hollywood High School, however, Baxter married Robert Bush, a costumer. The couple had two children, but the marriage foundered, and they divorced in 1969.

Subsequently, Fields urged Baxter to return to her aspirations as an actor and helped her land small parts on television shows and in movies. These led to larger roles, including one in Phil Karlson's 1972 horror film, *Ben*.

In the same year Baxter was cast in her first starring role on a television series, the CBS sitcom *Bridget Loves Bernie*, on which she played a Catholic schoolteacher in love with a Jewish cab driver, played by David Birney. Much of the comedy ensued from the cultural differences between their two families.

The show was a hit with viewers, who made it number five in the Nielsen ratings, but conservative groups objected to the positive depiction of an interfaith couple. Apparently because of the volume of hate mail, network executives canceled the show after one season. No other series with such a high ranking has ever been dropped.

Bridget and Bernie may have been consigned to sitcom history, but Baxter and Birney embarked on a romance and were wed in 1974. The couple had three children.

Baxter, who adopted the surname Baxter-Birney after her marriage, did not immediately land a recurring role on a new series but worked consistently as a guest star and had prominent parts in numerous made-for-television movies, including *The Stranger Who Looks Like Me* (ABC, 1974), in which her mother also appeared.

Baxter won a regular role on the acclaimed ABC drama series *Family* (1976-1980), playing a law student who was also the divorced mother of a young child—once again, a rather daring character for the time. For her work she was nominated for Emmy Awards for Best Supporting Actress in a Drama in 1978 and

1979.

Baxter returned to situation comedy in 1982 with a starring role in the NBC series *Family Ties*. Opening with favorable if not impressive ratings, the show rose to the number five position when the network moved it into a desirable time-slot after the most popular program, *The Cosby Show*, in 1984. For the next three years it held the number two ranking.

Baxter's role on *Family Ties* remains the one with which she is most identified. She portrayed Elyse Keaton, who, like her husband (played by Michael Gross), was an erstwhile hippie and Peace Corps volunteer who had settled into suburban Midwestern family life but had not abandoned progressive ideals.

The couple's three children—especially their son (played by Michael J. Fox), an ardent Republican—had distinctly different views. While the divergent outlooks within the family led to comedic conflict, the love and unity that they shared always prevailed.

Baxter's character—a bright career woman with an abiding commitment to liberal values, but also a nurturing mother respectful of the individuality of her children—was much beloved by audiences.

Family Ties ended its run in 1989, and in the same year Baxter and Birney divorced, at which time she reverted to her original surname. The marriage had not been a happy one, and Baxter had sought solace in alcohol. She entered a 12-step program in 1990 and has been sober ever since.

Even while working on *Family Ties* Baxter continued appearing in television movies, generally in roles far removed from her well-known persona as "supermom" Elyse Keaton.

These projects included *Kate's Secret* (NBC, 1985), in which she portrayed a bulimic socialite, and *Winnie* (NBC, 1988), in which she played a mentally challenged woman trying to find her way in society after being institutionalized for many years.

Baxter won another Emmy nomination for the CBS television movie *A Woman Scorned: The Betty Broderick Story* (1989), in which she played a woman who had murdered her ex-husband and his younger and prettier new wife. The film was based on an actual case. Baxter also starred in a sequel, *Her Final Fury: Betty Broderick, The Last Chapter* (1992), about Broderick's second trial—the first having ended in a hung jury—and eventual sentence to an extensive term in prison.

In 1993 Baxter starred in the CBS Schoolbreak Special program *Other Mothers*, playing one of the lesbian parents of a teen-age son.

"This has to be considered bold programming," wrote Matt Roush of *USA Today*, "for even daring to tackle the subject at a time when a Virginia judge can separate a child from his biological mother for the sole reason of her lesbianism." He further declared it "especially canny to cast Baxter" as one of the lesbian mothers since she was so firmly identified in viewers' minds with the ideal American mother, Elyse Keaton.

In 1993 Baxter also had her first love affair with a woman, although, as she told Blaine Zuckerman of *People Weekly*, "no lights went off for me" regarding her sexual identity, and the romance was brief.

In a 1994 television movie, *My Breast*, Baxter played a survivor of breast cancer, and some five years later she became one herself. Thanks to early detection she was successfully treated. Soon thereafter, she founded a company making skincare products, Meredith Baxter Simple Works, a portion of the profits from which she donates to breast cancer research.

Baxter married for the third time in 1995, but her union with screenwriter Michael Blodgett ended in divorce in 2000.

Some two years later, Baxter began a significant relationship with a woman and at last came to terms with her lesbianism. In the interview with Zuckerman she compared the moment of recognition to the first time that she put on eyeglasses: "I almost started to cry. . . . I just didn't know that that was the way things looked."

Baxter came out to her family and friends, who were all supportive. Among those she told was her mother's widower, screenwriter Allan Manings, who, when she revealed that she was "dating women," merely replied, "Huh. So am I."

After his death in 2010 Baxter discovered that he had obtained an online ministry certificate in hopes that he might some day serve as the officiant at her wedding.

In 2005 Baxter entered into a committed relationship with Nancy Locke, a building contractor, whom she introduced not only to her own family but also to some people in the entertainment industry, notably the cast members from *Family Ties*, who held a reunion dinner in 2008. All of them responded favorably, but Baxter remained reluctant to acknowledge her lesbianism publicly, fearful that it might cost her opportunities to work.

In April 2009 Baxter and Locke attended the Dinah Shore women's golf tournament, an annual event that attracts massive numbers of lesbian fans. Baxter told Tracy E. Gilchrist of *The Advocate* that friends helped them "slide in" essentially unnoticed because her "goal was to stay under the radar" since she "wasn't prepared for anything at the time."

Later that year the couple took a Caribbean cruise on the lesbian-centered Sweet line. Baxter was moved by a call from stand-up comedian Suzanne Westenhoefer, who was on the voyage as an entertainer, for everyone who was not out to come out, both for the good of the community and for their own peace of mind.

Although inspired to take action, Baxter also found her hand somewhat forced: before the ship even returned to New Orleans, word of the couple's presence on the cruise was spreading.

She did not want to be outed by the tabloid press and was, with the help of her business manager and a publicist, able to come out on her own terms in a dignified manner through an article in *People Weekly* and an interview with Matt Lauer of the *Today* show in December 2009.

Baxter admitted to some trepidation about coming out, but that was quickly succeeded by a feeling of relief. "If somebody's gonna say something, I don't care," she declared to Zuckerman. "For the first time, I'm where I want to be."

Baxter has since found her voice as a spokesperson for glbtq rights, appearing on a panel at the 2010 Outfest film festival and at events for the Human Rights Campaign.

Baxter hopes to be able to use her connection with television fans to advance glbtq rights and to give heart to people considering coming out.

"The message I get is that I'm America's mom. And because research seems to show that people who have someone who is gay in their family—or a friend or just know someone in the community who is gay—they seem to have a more open attitude about gay and lesbian issues," she stated to Gilchrist. "So I can say I'm still that mom. I am still the same person. I'm nonthreatening. I'm very friendly, I'm

accessible, and if they can say, 'OK, well, she's a lesbian, maybe that's not such a scary thing. And if she can come out and say that without too much fear, then maybe I can do that.'"

On December 8, 2013, Baxter and Locke were married in an intimate ceremony in Los Angeles. The couple exchanged handwritten vows as close friends and family members--including Baxter's five children--looked on.

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