

Family behind `Big Love' comes out from the shadows

by [Piet Levy](#)

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(RNS) Joe Darger sees his unconventional marriage as a loving commitment to family, one that makes him a better man and brings him closer to God.

Utah law, however, sees it as a crime.

That's because Darger, a 42-year-old construction management consultant who lives outside Salt Lake City, is married to three women -- Alina, 42, and 41-year-old twin sisters Vicki and Valerie.

They've followed the footsteps of their polygamous parents, and they're passing their independent fundamentalist Mormon faith down to their 24 children. Now they've gone public, passing on their story and trying to eliminate a stigma with a new book, "Love Times Three: Our True Story of a Polygamous Marriage."

"It's certainly taboo in society, mostly through ignorance and misunderstanding," Joe Darger said. "It's almost liberating to come out and say, `This is who I am.'"

The Dargers have traditionally kept their polygamous identities a secret. But they gradually began to open up, starting with a 2003 story featuring the sister wives (but not Joe) in a now-defunct fundamentalist Mormon magazine.

Making the rounds to publicize their hit HBO show "Big Love," producers Mark V.

Olsen and Will Scheffer said the story was an inspiration for their show's suburban polygamous Hendrickson family.

Polygamy has its roots in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (the Mormons). Mainstream Mormons officially renounced polygamy in 1890 as part of Utah's statehood bid, and polygamy is now a third-degree felony in Utah.

That's driven polygamous families like the Dargers into hiding, but some practice polygamy in plain sight.

The Dargers live in an 11-bedroom house in a suburban neighborhood and balance multiple businesses, including a cleaning service and an event rental operation. The kids have friends and go to school, and the family insists theirs is in many ways a normal family, just a very large one.

It's not easy. Money's often tight, privacy is hard to come by, and there's sometimes jealousy among the sister wives over how Joe shares his time. But the Dargers insist their unorthodox marriage has made them more considerate Christians.

"It's a family that rubs the rough edges off and keeps polishing you up as you go," said Val, Joe's wife since 2000.

"They were one of the first people to help me sort of get it," said the book's co-author, journalist Brooke Adams, who previously covered the full-time polygamy beat at The Salt Lake Tribune.

"I began to see from them it's about how you live your life every day. It's the spiritual practice of thinking of the best for the group, thinking of each other, being as lovingly supportive as you can, and not about what your own desires are."

When difficult times occurred -- including the death of Alina's baby girl Kyra from a

birth defect, or Vicki's difficult battle with post-partum depression and Val's current treatment for thyroid cancer -- the Dargers say they've pulled through because they had support from multiple partners.

"We knew a lot of people who had lost a child and ended up divorcing," said Alina, who along with Vicki, married Joe in 1990. "I wasn't really myself. The good thing about it was (Vicki and Val) could see that, and they could fill in those gaps ... and told Joe to take the time you need for you guys to keep that relationship stable. It was definitely a plus for me to feel that extra support."

Modern-day polygamy got a black eye when the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints hit the headlines after FLDS leader Warren Jeffs was arrested in 2006 on charges of sexual misconduct with children related to underage marriages. In 2007, Carolyn Jessop's book, "Escape," documented her escape from the FLDS, followed by the 2008 raid of the FLDS' Yearning for Zion Ranch in Texas on grounds of child abuse.

The Dargers wanted to put a different face on polygamy, but proceeded with caution. A Salt Lake Tribune story used pseudonyms for the family, and a "48 Hours" segment featured Vicki and Val, but didn't identify Alina, Joe, or the Darger name.

After some prayer, the Dargers felt ready to expose Joe, the kids and the family name in the book. "The best way to do this, to get credibility, is to be completely authentic and open," Joe said.

That decision has netted mixed reactions. Some of Joe's clients called to express support while others have been conspicuously quiet. Vicki's oldest child was the victim of cyberbullying, but she said some of the other kids feel liberated now that their lifestyle is out in the open.

The Utah attorney general's office hasn't responded to the Dargers' book, and the

Dargers say they face a real threat of prosecution for their lifestyle. Still, they insist it's a risk worth taking if it promotes tolerance and eventually inspires state legislators to decriminalize polygamy.

"Somebody has to do it," Joe Darger said. "Not every person who is a polygamist is Warren Jeffs. We want a different future for our children and an openness in our culture."