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"We have a very close relationship," says Leon of Lourdes (in June).



CARLOS LEON

RAISING LOURDES

Madonna's ex talks about co-parenting their daughter ("no egos involved") and the controversy over the singer's marriage ("a lot of it is lies")

Now that his daughter Lourdes, with ex-girlfriend Madonna, is 11, Carlos Leon is heavily steeped in tween girl life. He'll reluctantly talk about boys ("I've said if the guy doesn't open the door for you, drop him") but finds that more often the topic is clothes. "She's into shopping, fashion, anything girly," says Leon, 42, a Manhattan fitness trainer and actor who sees "Lola" as often as he can and talks with her daily. "She's my princess. I spoil her with love—and American Apparel and Urban Outfitters."

In recent weeks, however, he's watched Lourdes, whom he says is "such a happy kid," cope with seeing her mom's marriage to Guy Ritchie questioned in the press. "She's aware of it and that's difficult," says Leon. "I just give her more love. Her mother is there for her, and Guy is there for her." He won't speculate about that couple's rumored troubles

beyond saying, "People have marital problems all the time." But addressing allegations that Madonna, whom he calls a "good friend," had an affair with Yankee slugger Alex Rodriguez, he is firm: "I don't know what's going on."

Leon, who dated Madonna for 3½ years, ending in 1997, has been seeing a Danish clothing designer for six months. "All this hoopla is new to her," he says. Leon himself has grown used to the fuss and gone on with his own pursuits: acting (he's shooting an indie flick in Boston) and gym design. Through his new business Leon Fitness, he helped design the workout center in the Crescent Club, a new condo in Long Island City slated to open later this year, and he plans to open his own gym next year. Meanwhile, he keeps his schedule wide open for time with his only child. Like him, Lourdes is into fitness—she loves gymnastics—and like her mom, he says, she can sing. "Every time I see her, it's a different stage. Every moment with her is an amazing one."



Leon with Madonna in 1997.

By Rennie Dyball. Michelle Tan in New York City