

## **Still Your Son, Daughter Parents, their gay offspring surmount fears**

Mary Ellen Lopata

Published in the *Democrat and Chronicle*, Rochester, NY, Monday, March 18, 1996

“Mom, Dad, you’d better sit down. I have something to tell you. I’m gay.” Thousands of parents in Monroe County have heard those words, or might hear them, if their gay son or daughter were courageous enough – trusted them enough – to tell them.

*The Twilight of the Golds*, a play by Jonathan Tolins recently produced by the Jewish Community Theater, raises the question, “What would you do if you knew that your unborn child would be gay? Would you consider aborting the child?” Science cannot yet predict a homosexual orientation, so today this is a hypothetical question, but it might not be in the future.

When parents learn a son or daughter is gay, they must answer that question: “What would you do?” Some parents do decide to disown their gay child. Families are torn apart. Many parents respond in more constructive ways to this news about their child.

My own response when our son, Jim, came out to us 12 years ago, was to cry. I cried for weeks. I call this the tears-and-fears response and it is initially perceived as negative by both the gay child and the parent.

I now understand that the tears reflect a real sense of grieving – grieving my lost expectations for my child. The tears also reflect fears.

Real fears: AIDS, gay-bashing and discrimination. Only nine states have laws protecting gay people against discrimination and New York is not one of them. Imaginary fears: concern that somehow Jim would be different than

before I knew. He isn’t. And fear that we both would be judged and rejected by family, friends, and church. We weren’t. Happily, this last fear was all in my imagination.

### **Group Offers Help**

Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, P-FLAG, meets the last Sunday of each month from 2:30 to 4:30 pm at the Friends (Quaker) Meeting House, 84-86 Scio St, Rochester, NY.

[Revised 11/01 for new location]

Call 234-0156 for information.

P-FLAG is an international organization that promotes the health and well-being of gay, lesbian, and bisexual persons, their families and friends through support, education, advocacy and dialogue.

### **Tips for Parents of Gays**

If you learn your son or daughter is gay, here are some steps you should take:

- Listen to your child. Coming out to you is a major act of trust.
- Find support.
- Read *Not That You Know* by Betty Fairchild and Nancy Hayward
- Separate your issues. If there are other family problems, don’t lump them all into this bin.
- Recognize your feelings and try to get to the root of them; if necessary, seek counseling.
- Be patient with yourself. This is a lifetime of conditioning you’re battling.

When I finally left my own closet, all of our family and very close friends were completely supportive. For some of them, knowing Jim was the beginning of breaking down their stereotypes of gay people.

With a lot of love, care, communication and education, my tears and fears grew into understanding, support and finally into a happy, healthy family relationship.

This did not happen overnight, nor was it painless. I needed support from other parents who traveled this road before me. Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays exists to offer just such support in a safe, confidential environment. Anyone, gay or non-gay, with a sincere concern or question about homosexuality and the coming out process is welcome.

What if you are the gay son or lesbian daughter? Like it or not, you have some responsibility in helping your parents understand.

Their first reaction, like mine, might seem negative, but try to remember how you felt when you first realized you were different, and suspected you might be gay. Parents grew up in the same society you did, bombarded with negative messages about gay people.

You know more about homosexuality than they do. They need your expertise and your patience. Parents may get to a point of acceptance and say, "It's OK. I love you. I just don't want to talk about it." But, if this important part of you is ignored, how healthy is the family relationship?

Think of it as climbing a mountain of myths, misinformation, stereotypes, discrimination and just plain bad news. You know the path. You

need to be the leader, forging ahead, urging Mom and Dad to catch up.

Sometimes you'll have to wait patiently while they catch their breaths at a cozy little cave that's out of the wind. They might want to stay there a long time because it's so nice and seemingly comfortable, but you need to keep nudging them along. It will be hard work for all of you, and it may take a very long time. Don't give up.

In ascending the mountain, that shadowy valley of tears and fears is left behind. From the summit, your parents will see the richness and the diversity of all creation, including you, their very special son or daughter. They'll be glad you were born just as you are.

*At the date of publication, Lopata was on the board of P-FLAG Rochester. She and her husband, Casey, had been active members for six years, and were speakers at colleges, churches and other organizations.*