



Straight from the Heart



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Straight from the Heart

Writers:

Wendy Wagenheim, Rana Elmir, Jay Kaplan

Student Writing Assistant:

Charles Edmond

Editors:

Wendy Wagenheim, Rana Elmir

Designed by:

Craig Vestal, Portage Printing

The ACLU of Michigan is a non-profit, non-partisan, private organization working daily in the courts, legislature and communities to defend and preserve the individual rights and liberties as guaranteed by the Constitution.

Executive Director:

Kary L. Moss, Esq.

LGBT Project Staff Attorney:

Jay Kaplan, Esq.

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Preface

"Straight from the Heart" is a collection of stories told by heterosexual individuals about a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) friend, family member or colleague. Each story provides insight into the mutual respect, admiration, or love that they share and their understanding of the rejection, discrimination, or mistreatment that the LGBT community encounters. Each is an essential foot soldier in the struggle for fairness.

Ramsey Clark, former U.S. Attorney General, once said, "A right is not what someone gives you; it's what no one can take from you." In the history of this country, no right has ever been won by any group without the help and support of others. LGBT people are mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, nieces and nephews, aunts and uncles, co-workers and bosses, friends and neighbors. The LGBT community cannot stand alone in its quest for equality; nor does it need to.

Together, we must move public opinion, build alliances and increase political power. Only in this way, can we influence the elected officials who pass discriminatory laws and policies, the judges who interpret them, and the people of Michigan who elect both. We hope that "Straight from the Heart," not only educates and enlightens, but inspires you to be a foot soldier, as well.

Thank you to the many people in this book who were courageous enough to share their experiences. And thank you to the Arcus Foundation for providing the support and resources necessary to tell their stories.



Coming Out As A Family

Colette and David are middle-class, educated, religious Christians who live in Western Michigan. Like so many other families, they sat with their children as they watched the 2005 Super Bowl. Watching football on Sunday was common in their house and they all expected it to be just another game. What they hadn't anticipated was that their 16 year-old son, Ari, would take his mother aside to tell her that he is gay.

"Even when we were talking that day, I remember thinking: things are never going to be the same again in our family," Colette recalls. "In a sense, everyone had his or her own *coming out*. I'm so proud of my kids – how much they love each other."

"We've become so much more comfortable as a family," says Nate, Ari's older brother. "I can't believe how honest we are. We aren't afraid to talk about anything."

That shouldn't be surprising. Both Colette and David are licensed marriage and family therapists and David is an ordained minister. Sometimes, having a gay family member tears families apart, but Ari's admission brought this family closer together, though it hasn't been without several hardships.

Within a year, problems arose outside the immediate family. David had his ministerial license stripped by the West Michigan District of the Wesleyan Church for questioning the church's teaching on homosexuality. People that they had counseled for nearly 20 years began to drop out of therapy. Their greatest heartbreak, however, came unexpectedly when some of their family and friends estranged themselves from the family and accused them of bad parenting.

"I thought when people learned Ari is gay, they'd love him because he's Ari," Colette says. "They'd loved him for 16 years. They'd held him in their arms when he was first born. How could they reject him?" Ari is quick to reflect on the reasons why. "There's this label that overshadows things and the label becomes bigger than the person," he says.

It was then that Colette and David began to learn about the discrimination and bullying Ari had endured in school. For months, he had been terrorized and beaten by several students. The violence had been going on for the entire school year, while Ari said nothing. The most painful part was that "he'd been suffering alone," Colette says.

Inspired by what has happened to Ari, both David and Colette have been working to help others better understand the challenges of the LGBT community. David has started a new faith-based multidisciplinary counseling practice called the Community Wellness Association on the campus of Christ Community Church. Colette has put her efforts into advocacy for Triangle Foundation, a group that works to educate the public and effect policies about discrimination, hate crimes and harassment against gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender communities.

LGBT students are disproportionately harassed and threatened at school – enduring name calling, epithets, threats or actual violence. A large majority of students who experience harassment or assault at school do not report it to a teacher, principal or other staff person because they believe that school staff would not care or believe them, or that it would only make the situation worse.¹



Many Michigan public schools have policies that address harassment of students. However, most district policies do not include sexual orientation or gender identity in the characteristics for students who may be targeted for bullying. The Michigan State Board of Education provides a recommended model anti-bullying policy that recognizes harassment or bullying because of perceived or actual sexual orientation and gender identity or expression.

Helpless in the Waiting Room

Jillian moved to the United States from Jamaica in 1991 to attend school in Florida. Eventually, she moved to Michigan to be closer to her sisters and their families. As a single straight woman, miles away from her homeland, she has also found great support from her colleague, Kofi and Kofi's partner, Hattie. Although Jillian was aware of anti-gay animus and hostility in Jamaica, she did not expect to see the intensity of inequality in policies and treatment in the U.S.

Jillian and Kofi met when they both worked for the Clinic for Child Studies at the Third Judicial Court, Jillian as a child psychiatric social worker and Kofi as a clinical psychologist. As professional colleagues, the women had a lot in common. Not long after the two became friends, it was natural that she would meet Hattie, and she admired their relationship. At the time, she did not fully understand the legal disparity between heterosexual and same-sex couples.

Jillian became very aware of the inequalities, however, when Hattie went to the hospital for a surgical procedure. Hattie and Kofi met with the medical team and Hattie specifically told the nurse, the physician's assistant and the surgeon that she wanted Kofi informed about how the surgery went – good or bad. It was not until Hattie was allowed to leave that she was asked if she had someone with her. She realized then no one had ever talked to Kofi.

While Hattie was alone in the recovery room, Kofi sat alone in the waiting room. "I watched as other people got attention that I needed, as well. A husband or wife would always be told what was going on," said Kofi. "This really devalued us as a couple – it's almost as if we're second class citizens. Domestic partnerships are good, but being married takes it to a different level," she added.

Jillian expects an experience between medical staff and a patient to be more compassionate in the U.S. “Where I came from, people can be killed by the police for being openly gay or lesbian or transgender. What I love about the United States is that all people are supposed to have a voice. Everybody should be treated fairly and deserve the same protections under the law.”



A.M.
P.M.

WERE YOU WERE OUT

TELEPHONED		PLEASE CALL	
CALLED TO SEE YOU		WILL CALL AGAIN	
WANTS TO SEE YOU		URGENT	
RETURNED YOUR CALL			

Message In Michigan, same-sex partners have no legal rights to visitation or to make medical decisions for each other in the event of incapacity – unlike spouses and next of kin. Same-sex couples can draft power of attorney or designation of patient advocate documents for health care, including who can visit in the hospital, to let their wishes be known. In spite of these documents, some hospitals have refused to follow the directives.

Two Mayors, One Goal: Diversity

From 1995-2008, Bob Porter served as a council member for the City of Ferndale. For several of those years, including his last, he served as mayor. During his tenure, the city saw its downtown revitalized, its home values skyrocket, and its reputation leap into "Michigan Cool Cities" status. Bob and the City Council thought progressively and welcomed diversity as they considered issues such as education, health care, transit, and regionalization.

As a community leader, Bob Porter is a strong ally and supporter of the LGBT community. He championed a Ferndale human rights ordinance that included sexual orientation and gender identity. He co-officiated a mass wedding ceremony of same-sex couples in front of city hall in support of gay marriage. And he gave his support to Craig Covey, one of the state's most prominent gay activists, a fellow council member and candidate for mayor.

Craig moved to Ferndale in 1989, buying a house for \$56,000 that needed "a little TLC." He fixed up his home, planted gardens, trimmed the bushes, became active in his community and talked up the town's potential to gay friends who then began to buy and spruce up their own homes and neighborhoods. Craig joined the Elks club, the town's Recreation Commission and a youth assistance board. He and other gay residents formed a neighborhood association that donated to the library, planted flowers as part of the city's Beautification Committee, and started a pub crawl to draw people into Ferndale's downtown area. The result of all of these activities was that the LGBT community came together with the straight community and property values in Ferndale began to rise.

Bob met Craig in 1998 when Craig first ran for a council seat against him, and lost. But through this, they got to know each other and with their mutual respect and concern for the community, became both friends and colleagues.

One year later, Craig ran a successful campaign for City Council, which included the support and votes of both LGBT and straight residents. His strong record on the Council and

his effectiveness as a leader led to his 2007 election as Ferndale's, and Michigan's, first openly gay mayor. Bob Porter says, "Sexual orientation is irrelevant here. It's about doing a good job and doing good for Ferndale."

Bob and Craig have more in common than just being called "Hizzoner." They both believe that same-sex couples are entitled to the same legal protections and benefits that heterosexual couples have in Michigan. As leaders of a community they have and will continue to make decisions based on the best interests of all people in their city and advocate for fair laws.

Only 16 cities in Michigan have passed local human rights ordinances that include civil rights protection for sexual orientation, gender identity or expression: Ann Arbor, Birmingham (housing only), Dearborn Heights, Village of Douglas, Detroit, East Lansing, Ferndale, Flint, Grand Ledge, Grand Rapids, Huntington Woods, Lansing, Saginaw (housing only), Township of Saugatuck, Saugatuck, Ypsilanti.

Same-sex couples are significantly less likely than married couples to own their homes: 63% of same-sex couples in Michigan own their home, compared to 89% of married couples.²



Part of the Family

Marlo grew up and went to high school in Dearborn. After three years at Henry Ford Community College where she majored in Psychology, she left school to work full-time. Now she can often be found at a swing-set or in front of *Sesame Street* as the nanny for a one-year old boy and four-year old girl.

At the end of the work day, chasing after two small children, Marlo is ready to be with her friends and considers herself a real "people person" who loves to network. Through a mutual friend, Marlo met Sam, a young Arab-American man and they instantly connected. They both grew up in Dearborn and went to the same high school. Though she remembers Sam from school, she had no idea he was gay.

Sam was raised Muslim. He knew he was gay, but did not tell his family for fear of their disapproval. During his freshman year at Eastern Michigan University, Sam ran into his cousin at a local gay club in Detroit and knew that his sexual orientation might not be a secret for much longer. In fact, it wasn't. Sam's cousin, who is also gay, told his older brother about Sam. Sam's parents soon knew and refused to have any contact with him. He has not seen his parents in more than three years.

After Sam was told that he could no longer live at home, he needed a place to stay. Marlo's parents opened their home and allowed Sam to stay with them for a few months, until he could get settled on his own. They had first met Sam when Marlo invited him to join her family for Easter dinner. He continues to join them in their celebration of Christmas and Easter.

Sam understands what can happen to young people who "come out" to a family that is not tolerant of gays or lesbians. Ensuring that others in the LGBT community are aware of their rights and have a safety net is a primary concern in his life. Because of such personal insight, Sam now devotes his spare time as a volunteer for ACCESS, a human services organization that serves the Arab-American community, and Al Gamea, an organization that provides social support and education to metro Detroit gay and lesbian Arabs, including HIV prevention workshops and social events.

Sam relies on the love and support of his friends whom he considers his "other family." "Sam has had a difficult life, being rejected and disowned by his family," says Marlo. "But my family considers Sam part of us."

Marlo is supportive of Sam's work with Al Gamea and though she isn't gay or Arab, she helps promote the social and educational events among her other friends. "If a guy is interested in dating me, I let him know that my best friend is gay. If he can't handle that, we're not going to be going out." Sam's friendship is very special to her. "I'm so thankful that he came into my life."



There are an
estimated
251,000
gay, lesbian,
and bisexual
people
(single and
coupled)
currently
living in
Michigan.³

'Til Death Do Us Part...



Joanne considered her world to be much like anyone else of similar circumstance. She was a middle-aged conservative Christian who was in a long lasting marriage with a college professor — a man she loves who provided a good life for her and their three children, now grown and successful in their own right. But in November 2003, she felt as if a tsunami hit her life. It was then, at the age of 55, that her husband, John, told her that from his earliest memories, he wanted to be a girl and had begun to transition to being female.

Joanne felt panic and questioned if she could stay in her marriage. She was very aware of how others might react and, like many people, had been raised as a "pleaser." After much talking and praying, Joanne realized that she loved the person she married, that other people's opinions did not matter as much to her and that she was truly committed to their marriage. "This was the same person that I married . . . just packaged somewhat differently," Joanne recalls.

John did his own research, met with therapists, endocrinologists, the family physician and a Christian counselor. He was subsequently diagnosed with Gender Identity Disorder (GID) which means that, though born male, John's innate inner gender identity is female. Living in between the two worlds was increasingly painful for John.

The normal course of treatment for GID typically includes making many changes as one transitions to the opposite sex - legally changing one's name, undergoing hormone therapy, living and working full time in the new identity, undergoing medical and/or surgical procedures and treatments to reduce or eliminate secondary sex characteristics of one's birth sex, and finally, corrective genital surgery. Undergoing such an extreme change was not an easy decision to make.

But John became Julie Marie and they began to tell their friends and family together. Both Joanne and Julie felt enormous relief. "It is wonderful not to live in fear of what would happen if the secret came out," they both say. While their three children, close family members and many in the community gave them support, Julie's 16 year career as a professor and administrator at a Christian university began to unravel.

According to a Human Rights Campaign research poll, 78% of American voters believe it should be illegal to fire someone just because they are transgender.

In order to remain at the university, Julie was given an ultimatum to sign a new contract which included being stripped of responsibilities and duties that significantly reduced her salary and benefits, working from home to reduce or completely eliminate any in-person contact with faculty and students, forbidding any discussion of her GID with anyone associated with the university — including her brother and son who are employed by the university — and requiring that she report her progress with her therapist.

The terms of the contract were so restrictive - professionally, financially, and emotionally — that they felt no choice but to file a complaint against the university with the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. A settlement was reached within a year.

Julie is looking for new teaching positions with other colleges and both she and Joanne are speaking out more to educate others about transgender rights.

"Our hope is two-fold. One is to get the word out and help people begin to understand transgender issues. A lot of people are thinking about it and talking about it that weren't before... Our other goal is to be treated with justice and fairness and we think that has ultimately happened, too," they say.

Gender identity

is a person's internal sense of being a man or a woman.

Gender expression

is the way a person reveals his or her gender identity — clothing, mannerisms, voice, etc.

Transgender is a term used to describe a broad range of identities and experiences that fall outside of the traditional understanding of gender



Giving Victims A Voice

Melissa Pope grew up in Detroit and attended the University of Michigan. Educated at an early age about the sacrifices that previous generations have made in the struggle for equality for women and people of color, she has been a social activist for as long as she can remember. With this dedication to advocacy, it is no surprise that she has worked as a multicultural program associate at U of M, a legal assistant for the House of Representatives, the deputy director of the Cooley Law School Rochester campus at Oakland University and as an attorney at a legal aid program for survivors of domestic abuse. Today, she is the Director of Victim Services at Triangle Foundation.

"As a straight woman and a person of color, I understand that my rights are a direct result of the women's movement and the civil rights movement. As minorities, it is clear that these movements would never have been successful without the strength of allies," Melissa acknowledges.

She says she has always been sensitive to diversity, and as a law student, she was very aware that her gay or lesbian fellow students were fearful of being "outed" in the legal community. When she went to work at the Cooley Law School Rochester campus, she became actively involved in SAFE (Students and Faculty for Equality), a program that provided door plaques and buttons to indicate that it was "safe" for an LGBT person to talk to the bearer of such a symbol.

Melissa knows there are thousands of rights that she enjoys as a straight person that LGBT individuals are denied. But the most glaring injustice is the omission of sexual orientation and gender identity or expression as protected categories in state and federal hate crime laws. As an attorney at an LGBT organization, Melissa hears

the reports of hate crime victims and faces the frustration of knowing that the crimes committed may go unpunished.



Neither federal nor state hate crime laws include the categories of sexual orientation and gender identity as recognized bias crimes, despite the many incidents of violence, including murder, because of sexual orientation and gender identity or expression.

One story that stood out for her involved a crime against a gay couple who

Incidents involving violence or violent threats against gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender people are on the rise, according to a 2008 report released by the Triangle Foundation in conjunction with the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs.

came home to find their house burnt to the ground and "fag" written across the cement. Despite the clear motivation for this heinous crime, the police could not investigate it as a hate crime because neither federal nor state law allows it.

She was told by an FBI agent that an African American man who had been the victim of vandalism was "lucky" that the vandals had used racial slurs, next to the anti-gay slurs, because that was the only way the crime could be investigated as a hate crime.

Some of the reports are far more disturbing. The story of two transgender women who were brutally attacked often comes to mind, she says, when asked whether hate violence really exists. "The two women were followed home by two assailants who beat them while shouting every anti-LGBT thing you can think of. The injuries, many permanent, have dramatically changed their lives. One of the women's parenting time has been challenged because her status as a transgender woman puts her at risk for violence. Adding to the hardship they now endure on a daily basis is the knowledge that their attackers are still at large."

In another case, a man was approached outside of a gay club in Detroit. After being called a "fag," he was shot in the face. The perpetrator was sentenced to six to twelve years for assault, but not charged with a hate crime. The gay man is still recovering after being in a coma for eight months.



At the end of the day, Melissa goes home to her husband and 17 year-old stepson knowing that the LGBT community has a long way to go before achieving equal rights. But she believes that "future generations will study the LGBT movement with the same astonishment that the current generation has when looking back on the civil rights movement. One day, someone will ask me what I did to help. I want to be able to share stories of actions that I took to make this a better place for them."



Acceptance by Friends, Rejection at Work

The Reverend Harry T. Cook has been a rector of a suburban Detroit Episcopal church since 1987. Besides being a respected member of the clergy, he is a popular lecturer and widely published author, journalist and former religion editor and columnist on ethics and public policy for the *Detroit Free Press*. But what he considers even more important is that he is a friend to Char.

Reverend Cook met Char in 1994 when he coached his daughter, Sarah's, soccer team and Char's daughter, Jessica, was her teammate. Char and her partner of 28 years, Gloria, attended every practice and every game. He wished that all of the parents would have been as supportive and positive as Char and Gloria.

During that same time, the girls became best friends. Shortly after, Char and Gloria began attending Harry's parish and Gloria became president of the Parish Counsel. "Char and Gloria and Jessica — they are our family," says Rev. Cook. "We are more than neighbors and friends. There is an incredible trust between us."

Char was a working mother and served honorably on the Detroit Police Department. Her sexual orientation was known to her co-workers and, as a result, she was often the target of verbal abuse, ridicule and harassment. After 15 years on the force, Char felt her only option was to retire and received stress-related disability status.



Not ready for retirement, Char began working as a security officer at a private Catholic school that was aware of her relationship with Gloria. In spite of excellent employment evaluations, a great relationship with students and parents, and 10 years at the school, the administration suddenly discharged her after she published *Badge 3483*, a book about her life as a lesbian and her work on the Detroit Police force.

Char turned to her friend and pastor, Rev. Cook. “I was shocked when Char called me,” he says. “I couldn’t understand it.” As a respected member of the religious community and her friend, he immediately offered his assistance in hopes of resolving the situation by enlisting the support of a colleague and close friend who was a Catholic Bishop. Unfortunately, the school administration refused to reconsider its decision, even though Char had given them a draft of the book for their review and obtained their approval.

“This was my family, my home,” said Char. “I had so much support from both the students and their parents, but there was nothing they could do to get the school to change their mind.”

Michigan civil rights laws do not prohibit sexual orientation discrimination at the workplace. As a result, Char and hundreds of other LGBT employees have no legal recourse. In Michigan, as well as in 29 other states, employers can fire or refuse to hire someone because of his or her sexual orientation. Thirty-eight states can do so based on one’s gender identity.

No. _____												
NAME _____												
WEEK ENDING _____												
DATE	TIME	IN	OUT	IN	OUT	IN	OUT	IN	OUT	IN	OUT	TOTAL HOURS
											TOTAL HOURS SHOWN IS CORRECT	
											Signature _____	
											Weekly Totals _____	
											RF121	

Federal and Michigan civil rights laws do not prohibit employment discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity or expression. In general, it is legal to fire an LGBT person simply because of their gender identity or sexual orientation.



A Mother's Quest for Tolerance

Asandi is a heterosexual, 37 year-old woman who, as a single-mom, is successfully raising her daughter and running two businesses. With a degree in business management, she has a consulting firm that helps small non-profit organizations with event management, fund development and grant writing. An enterprising entrepreneur, Asandi has also developed her own line of natural skin and hair products.

She is a busy woman who is also very involved in her daughter's life. When her daughter, Briana, was in the fourth grade, Asandi met Kimya, an openly gay single mom and Kimya's daughter, Abini.

Like Asandi, Kimya is also a busy woman. She has a Master's degree in social work, writes for a community newspaper, and is so actively involved in social justice issues in the LGBT community that she received the Spirit of Detroit Award from the Detroit City Council.

The two women became friends when they worked together on a parent volunteer committee and have developed a "sisterhood connection," according to Asandi. She appreciates Kimya's wisdom, views her as a role model for parenting, and has seen the positive influence that Kimya's daughter, Abini, has had on her daughter, Briana. Asandi says that Abini is a great kid — respectful, polite, fun-loving, and a hard working student.

Asandi has seen her friend go through a lot of tough times, including Kimya's painful experience of losing a job because of her sexual orientation. But Asandi was particularly disheartened by what she saw Kimya and Abini encounter within the school environment that she had always known to be community and family oriented.

Some parents excluded Abini from activities outside of school if they thought Kimya would be directly involved and they would not allow their children to play at Asandi's house after school. Sleepovers, a highly anticipated event for pre-teens, were out of the question for Abini. Being able to reciprocate invitations, which for most people is natural and even expected, became difficult and potentially embarrassing.

Asandi saw what was happening to her friends, Kimya and Abini. But she has always believed that sexual orientation discrimination is as wrong as race, age or gender discrimination. "There is no justification for it and in most cases it's based on people's

ignorance. We tend to fear what we do not know or understand," Asandi says.

Asandi never chose to argue with the offensive comments she heard from other parents, but she did confront them by openly sharing her opinion that someone's sexuality should have no bearing. "It's absurd to think that a person's sexual orientation is a litmus test for determining their professional qualifications, integrity and/or prospective contribution to a corporation or school organization. We all deserve to have our rights and civil liberties protected regardless of who we are attracted to, or intimate with. I know that I am no better than Kimya because I'm heterosexual."

Same-sex parents have fewer financial resources to support their children than married parents. The median household income of same-sex couples with children is \$48,900, or 25% lower than that of married parents (\$65,000). The average household income of same-sex couples with children is \$58,578, significantly less than \$77,447 for married parents.⁴



According to Census 2000, approximately 18% of same-sex couples in Michigan are raising children under the age of 18.

Friends...In Sickness and in Health



Catherine, a 56 year-old woman, discovered she had cancer in 2002. Though she was forced to undergo three surgeries, she was lucky enough to avoid chemo and radiation. She was also fortunate to have a common cancer covered by the health insurance policy included in her husband's work benefits. Beyond the obvious scare of facing cancer, she encountered no long term problems as she recovered from surgery.

Catherine met Peg and Pat, an openly lesbian couple, more than a decade ago when their sons entered elementary school in Ann Arbor. Their acquaintance blossomed into a close friendship when Catherine was diagnosed with cancer. "Some people backed away, but Peg and Pat were there for me." Peg and Pat's support helped Catherine gain the emotional strength she needed to beat cancer.

Shortly after, Peg was also diagnosed with cancer. However, she faced even more challenges than Catherine. The uncertainty of her continued health insurance coverage was even further complicated by additional and multiple conditions from long term effects of the cancer. Additionally, due to risk of infection, she was forced to stop gardening, an activity that gave her pleasure and helped take her mind off her illness.

These days, it's Catherine and her husband Frank who offer support to Peg and Pat as Peg struggles with her own cancer and

its aftermath. Because Peg's immune system is vulnerable to infection and communicable diseases, her doctors have advised her not to work for two years and she has been forced to leave her job at the University of Michigan Hospital Child Care Center.

This was a necessary, but costly decision. In addition to the obvious life and death concerns that face cancer victims, Peg is at risk of losing her health insurance coverage because of the recent Michigan Supreme Court ruling that the 2004 marriage amendment, which banned gay marriage, prohibits public employers from offering domestic partnership health insurance.

Though no longer able to work, her family's health insurance is covered by the University's domestic partnership benefits program through her partner Pat, also an employee of the University of Michigan Hospital. Because of her pre-existing health condition, it is highly unlikely, if not cost-prohibitive, for her to obtain health insurance on her own. In addition, Medicaid assistance is not available because of the requirement that Pat's income be included in determining eligibility.

Two women, friends in sickness and in health, have faced such similar life and death situations. But what they faced after their diagnoses was entirely different. While Catherine is secure in the knowledge that her medical bills will be paid, she is angry that her friend is at risk. She doesn't believe that Michigan voters intended to deny access to health care. "The proponents of the Marriage Amendment said this was about marriage. They never said that it was about taking health coverage away from Michigan families who need it. This is wrong."



In November, 2004, Michigan voters passed an amendment to the state constitution that banned the legal recognition of marriage or other "similar

union[s]" for same-sex couples. As a result, public entities, such as cities, schools, and universities, have revisited whether they would continue to offer domestic partnership benefits to their employees. The ACLU has been working with public employers to develop alternative criteria so that no family loses their health insurance.

CELEBRATING TOGETHER, FRIENDSHIPS VALUED

Carole, a 50 year-old social worker, lives in Ann Arbor with her husband and two teen-age daughters. She grew up in what she describes as a traditional Jewish home in St. Paul, Minnesota and credits her exceptionally close relationship with her grandmother as the reason she chose to work with the elderly. For thirteen years, Carole was on staff at the University of Michigan Turner Geriatric Center, but, ten years ago, she felt pulled in a different direction, this time because of another strong connection – her two girls.

Carole refocused her skills by beginning a new organization – Raising Strong and Confident Daughters – to help mothers and their daughters develop in a healthy and nurturing culture.

She believes that her children are growing up to be self-assured and to value the importance of loving someone, male or female, for who they are, whatever their sexual orientation. Learning this value is, in large part, a result of her family's decade-old relationship with her friends, Craig and A.T.

"I value Craig and A.T. in so many ways as a couple who equally value friendship, community and family. What they model in their relationship is what I want my daughters to see in a loving and committed partnership," says Carole. "Craig has both the privilege and hard work of caring for elderly parents. A.T. has, from day one, stepped in to help and support him."

Several years ago, Carole's daughter was writing a 4th grade report on Elizabeth Blackwell, America's first woman physician. In 1857, no hospital or medical facility would hire Dr. Blackwell because of her gender. Carole couldn't help but think about the similarities between that form of discrimination and the challenges that Craig and A.T. face because of their sexual orientation.

The two families have spent many celebrations together, including birthdays, land blessing ceremonies and seasonal celebrations. Carole describes them as "loving and really fun."

When A.T. and Craig decided to marry, they knew that the state would not recognize this most important decision. But they were willing to take a stand and committed to each other in a Quaker marriage ceremony.

"The greatest celebration of all was their commitment ceremony. I will never forget that day," says Carole. "The sky was an amazing shade of blue, we sat looking out over gorgeous fields, and the music and sense of community was in the air. I was grateful to be part of the celebration and for my family to be able to stand with A.T. and Craig, even if the law doesn't recognize them. I hope we move toward changing these restrictions so folks everywhere will not have to live divided lives."



In 2000, there were 15,368 same-sex couples living in Michigan. By 2005, the number of same-sex couples increased to more than 22,000. This increase likely reflects same-sex couples' growing willingness to disclose their partnerships on government surveys.⁶

Same-sex relationships are not legally recognized, nor legally protected in Michigan.⁵



IDENTICAL TWINS, SEPARATE LIVES

In an old Polaroid color photo, Ron wears blue, Adam wears red – the only way to tell them apart. As children, they walked hand-in-hand. As they grew, they shared many of the same experiences, interests, perceptions, values and beliefs.

As identical twins, Adam assumed that their lives would mirror each other. Now 45 years old, Adam says he has never thought of Ron as anyone other than his best friend and kindred spirit.

But as they entered adolescence and into adulthood, differences between the two of them emerged. While they generally talked about everything and anything, certain subjects seemed to be taboo, specifically dating, relationships or sex. Adam was bothered by this, but perceived Ron's disinterest as a function of self-centeredness and an inability to make the compromises that partnerships require. They argued more.

For years, friends voiced their suspicions that Ron might be gay. But Adam remained convinced that since they were identical twins, that could just not be possible. To Adam, being gay would be at such odds with their parents' goal that their boys would have "conventional families." After their mother's death, Adam even asked Ron to swear on her memory that he was not gay.

Four years ago, during a visit together, an argument ensued about Adam living alone, never committing to a meaningful relationship or marrying. The argument grew in intensity and Adam recalls screaming, "It's either because you're gay, or because you're incredibly selfish! I know you're not gay, so it must be that you're incredibly selfish."

Silence. Ron did not respond. Then Ron's entire body began to shake and heave, tears streamed down his cheeks. He didn't have to say it. Adam knew, but also knew that he loved him, he always loved him, he was his best friend and would always be.

It was the beginning of many emotional and revelatory discussions. Ron told Adam that he had not acted on his homosexuality until after both of their parents had died. All of those years, Ron had been alone, never discussing his sexual orientation with anyone in the world.

That night, Adam remembers questioning whether they were still soul mates. Lying awake in bed with his wife, he mourned the relationship he thought was lost. "I grieved because I knew that Ron would never have a family like mine, a source of so much happiness. The thought of Ron's being alone for all of those years, trapped into silence by his respect for Mom and Dad's values and their idealization of the traditional nuclear family, deeply saddened me. I was also scared, because I simply did not know what effect Ron's homosexuality would have on our relationship."

In fact, Ron's coming out has turned out to be the best thing that has ever happened to their relationship. Adam no longer pushes Ron to be something he's not. They rarely fight, and when they do, their spats are like summer squalls that quickly pass. They no longer have secrets. Ron can respond to Adam's curiosity about his life as a gay man. Laughing, Adam also asked his brother, "You had a crush on my college roommate?"

Ron is more extroverted and comfortable with himself and others. He is now in a committed relationship. His long held fear of being rejected by his family proved unfounded. "Our other two brothers, cousins, aunts and uncles love Ron for who he is. He's an amazing uncle, and his nieces and nephew (ages 10, 8 and 5) know he is gay, know what that means, and couldn't care less," says Adam.

For Adam, so many mysteries have been solved and their past has come into sharper focus. He says, "Ron is still Ron, still my best buddy in the world. We're still identical in almost all respects, but we are also unique. I've learned that his homosexuality does not define him anymore than my heterosexuality defines me. It is just one part of who he is. But we are now more fully realized, more at peace and happier."





Learning to Give Back

Donna is a twenty-something, college educated woman who grew up in Detroit. She has been in a long-term relationship with her boyfriend of ten years, is active in her church, and loves photography. She works hard and, in fact, manages both a full-time and part-time job. Yet, she finds time to have fun and to give back to the community.

Donna once worked at a national retail chain that generously opened its store after hours for events to benefit non-profit organizations. Employees were available to help with sales, but it also gave them a chance to learn about organizations that they otherwise might never have heard of.

While at one of these events, Donna met Curtis and Willie from a non-profit advocacy and support services organization for LGBT African-Americans named KICK. She was helping them as they looked around and said it was “an instant friendship.” What made this employee/customer contact different from most is that Donna, Curtis and Willie decided to get together again. Her friendship with the two men led to volunteer work with KICK where she eventually joined the Board of Directors. She’s not just attending events anymore, she’s now helping to plan them and raise funds for the organization. She never really thought about joining an organization or “a cause that I didn’t see as my own,” Donna says. “I certainly didn’t think I was capable of getting involved at this level, but Curtis and Willie saw more in me than I saw in myself,” she adds.

In Michigan, married and same-sex couples with children under 18 in the home have, on average, 2 children.⁷

Donna has learned a lot about the challenges that non-profit organizations face and she's learned even more about her friends as leaders in the community. Curtis, an HIV/AIDS services agency worker and Willie, a special education teacher for more than 20 years, are both dedicated activists. In addition to KICK, Curtis served as one of the chairs for the national LGBT activist conference that was held in Detroit. Both men view their volunteer time as mentors and father figures to gay youth as an important part of their lives. Curtis and Willie would very much like to raise a family together.

Donna says her friendship with Curtis and Willie has been good for her boyfriend and family, especially her two young siblings. "It's been eye-opening in a good way – they're really learning about tolerance and understanding in a great way."

The men knew they had the support of their families, as well, when they came to their commitment ceremony at their church. But they also know that in Michigan their relationship is not legally recognized. Despite their commitment to each other and the community, they will not be afforded the more than 1,100 state and federal rights and protections provided by legal marriage.

Donna admires the love that Curtis and Willie have for one another and believes that they should have the same rights as heterosexual couples do. "They should be treated fairly and equally under the law. It's the right thing to do."

Though Michigan's adoption laws do not specifically prohibit same-sex couples from adopting children, most Michigan judges have interpreted the law as limiting joint adoptions to married couples. As a result, gay couples are denied the ability to jointly adopt.⁸

Roughly 1.6% of Michigan's adopted children live with a lesbian or gay parent.⁹





College Roommates, Navigating Life

Before going to the University of Michigan, Peri attended a suburban high school recognized by Newsweek magazine as one of the top public schools in the nation. She was a great student, had a wide circle of friends, was very active in several school activities and held a part-time job at an ice cream parlor. She is a kid that any parent would be proud of. Peri values every person she comes into contact with, which was why she felt it was so important that, as a straight student, she add the high school's Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) to her already busy schedule.

"I was committed to GSA because it was a community of people who cared about taking action among our peers. The reason I initially joined was more related to the cause than the people – I had always been shocked by intolerance towards LGBT people and strongly believe that it is my generation's role to bring in a new era, that this is a natural continuation of the civil rights movement," Peri says.



Peri met Cayden at school and worked with him on the GSA. Both leaders in the group, Cayden served as president and Peri served as both secretary and treasurer. It was during this time that Cayden began slowly transitioning from female to male. As Cayden made the changes necessary to present himself as a young man, including changing his name and appearance, his decision affected many people on many different levels. Not surprisingly, Peri offered both her friendship and support to Cayden.

Cayden's parents had a much more difficult time accepting who he was becoming. They refused to call him by his new name (still calling him by his given name, Katherine) or help him explore options for medical intervention. Peri recalls, however, "They did encourage him to see a therapist and accepted the fact that he wouldn't change unless he wanted to." Since leaving for college, Cayden's conflicts with his parents have subsided, but he also does not spend much time with his family, and instead has created strong relationships with friends who serve as his safety net.

Peri and Cayden have been roommates at the University of Michigan since they began college. But even in a large university setting, Cayden faces particular challenges as he is surrounded by a majority of people who are completely unfamiliar with transgender identities. First living in the dormitory, he had to deal with the questions and confusion of many students and staff regarding his use of the male bathroom facilities. "Though Cayden is transitioning to a male, he is still more physically representative of a woman than a man," says Peri. "While he's concerned about being threatened or harassed, he experiences equal discomfort in male and female restrooms."

Though Cayden still encounters some verbal insults and derogatory remarks regarding his gender expression in Ann Arbor, he feels relatively safe within the school confines. Like many others, he tries not to walk alone at night from the library, and makes it a point to attend social gatherings with friends like Peri, who are familiar and supportive of his situation. He recognizes that even in a college community like Ann Arbor, ignorance and fear about what it means to be transgender persists.

"My close relationship with Cayden allows me to appreciate how difficult it is for Cayden to navigate life as a transgender person – clarifying your identity is a tricky thing," notes Peri. "All of us, regardless of orientation, are uncertain at times and question our identities and our direction. It pains me to see Cayden deal with those questions under so much public scrutiny, but in doing so he's taught me a lot about bravery."



There are approximately 60 GSAs in Michigan's schools. Federal law protects the right of students to organize non-curricular clubs that can meet at school. However, where there is community opposition, some school districts are known to create roadblocks by requiring a more difficult application process, placing restrictions on a group's name, limiting use of bulletin boards and/or meeting announcements on the public address system, or excluding group pictures in the yearbook.

One Teacher's Passion, Many Lives Changed



When she was twelve, Gail's family moved to Oak Park, Michigan from the Washington D.C. area when her father got a job with Ford Motor Company. Quiet and shy, she did not become one of the "popular" kids. Often a target for bullying, her junior high school years were difficult.

Gail's experiences laid the foundation for a passion to help others be proud of their differences. She was drawn to a career of teaching English as a second language and became an advocate for her students by starting a diversity club for 5th through 8th graders at the middle school where she taught. She called it STARS (Students Taking a Right Stand) which became a place where students could safely address differences, celebrate diversity, and learn how they are more alike than different. Students were able to talk about mental illness, disabilities, socio-economic differences, weight issues, gender inequities, and sexual orientation.

Throughout her life, Gail has been keenly aware of stereotypes, stigma, prejudice, and social injustices. Seeing what STARS did for the middle school students, she championed the establishment of a Gay Straight Alliance at the high school in her district. The school instituted "No Name Calling Week," a program sponsored by GLSEN (Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network) to "create safer schools by making bullying, harassment, and name-calling unacceptable through public education campaigns that motivate youth to change their behavior."



Gail is now retired, but her advocacy continues. She is active with the Jewish Gay Network of Michigan and the State of Michigan's Sexual Minority Youth Work Group. She knows all too well that harassment, threats of violence, slurs, insults, and derogative jokes are a daily struggle for people in the LGBT community.

As a diversity activist, she believes that all human beings inherently deserve dignity and equality. As Gail told her students, "It is incumbent upon all of us to respect, honor and understand all of our differences, whether they be our skin color, our religion, our size, our ability level, our gender, or our sexual orientation."

The most common types of bullying, name calling and harassment are based on appearance, actual or perceived sexual orientation, and gender expression. Nearly three-quarters of students are harassed due to appearance. One-third are harassed solely because they were or were thought to be lesbian, gay or bisexual. ¹⁰



Endnotes

- ¹ GLSEN School Climate Report: "From Teasing to Torment." 2005.
- ² Williams Institute UCLA School of Law. Census Study. September 2007.
- ³ Williams.
- ⁴ Williams.
- ⁵ MCL 551.1.
- ⁶ Williams.
- ⁷ Williams.
- ⁸ MCL 710.24.
- ⁹ Williams.
- ¹⁰ GLSEN School Climate Report



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**2966 Woodward Ave.
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