

Family Focus

Goshen, Idaho, is a tiny farming community where thirty homes surround an LDS Chapel, with farmland on all sides for as far as anyone can see. So what happens when one of its own high achieving young men, a BYU student on a drama scholarship, confronts homosexuality in his own life? How does the immediate family react? Where do they turn for support and understanding? What sort of response could be expected from the local LDS bishop, the ward members, the larger surrounding community when this same young man becomes ill with AIDS and eventually passes away?

Deloy and Jeanine Nelson

Through the years we had thought parenthood had made us wise, but now we know the real prize is to be teachable. You see, the Lord blessed us with a son who's gay. We began our marriage 42 years ago; a marriage sealed in the temple. We have seven children. Five sons and a daughter grew to adulthood while one son died early. Both of us are very active in the Church and hold recommends as do most of our children.

Doug was our third son. He also was very active in the Church while growing up. In fact, he was very popular with the girls and dated regularly, though never very long with the same girl. He achieved Eagle Scout and was a seminary graduate. He played the clarinet and the piano. After a very successful high school career in speech and theater he received a drama scholarship to BYU. He was cast in the lead of a major show there his freshman year, and learned that he was one of the first freshmen to have such a distinction.

Also during his first year at BYU Doug told us he was gay. For a time after his coming out, we were very troubled about his new life, especially when at age 24 he moved to California where he operated his own hair salon business and began his partnership with Peter.

Doug's spiritual status was a concern to us. Doug was never excommunicated from the Church although he was totally inactive for many years. Doug always moved his membership when he moved, and his last bishop told us he felt that showed it was meaningful to Doug and he was inclined to take no action against our son. Yet, we worried about Doug and at times this caused tension within our family.

We regret that period of time when there was estrangement between us.

Gradually, through intense prayer, as we struggled with our feelings and attitudes we had been taught, we received the answer that our job was not to judge nor even completely understand, but that we should just love Doug. We realized this was the same son we had always loved and decided to leave the matter in the Lord's hands. We became very close to his partner, and Doug and Peter spent wonderful vacations in Idaho in an atmosphere of love and support.

Eventually, Peter was found to have AIDS even though they had both been faithful to each other from the beginning of their partnership. The deadly virus apparently infected one of them before they met and it claimed Peter first, and sometime after his death, when Doug had found a new partner, Doug became ill with AIDS also. For several years before his death Doug was seriously ill, but had periods of remission. He was lovingly cared for by his new partner but we were far away and needed support. When the days were dark and our son's AIDS had overcome us with a grief beyond belief, we cried out for relief. Then our world was brightened by the gospel of love and we learned that we are not abandoned.

During the last three years of Doug's life, we met each month with gays, lesbians, and family members in Idaho and Utah who were focusing on healing family relationships with love. We learned we were not alone. We found others who were learning also. The young people, like our son, touched our hearts and souls with understanding. We felt the pain they felt, the desire to be loved and their fear of the unknown. It was like our own. We reached

out and they were there, with the love and compassion that they especially could understand and share. After attending these meetings for a time, we found our joy was complete, in that we knew our son and how he felt. We understood the pain he had and he understood our's. We were able to work together. We could talk the problems out. Usually we would have wonderful loving talks with him by phone after returning from the Reconciliation firesides.

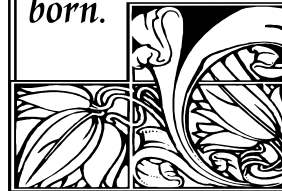
The spirit of the Gospel was the jewel of it all, for the Lord attended these family support activities. With every Gospel discussion, each testimony borne, our strength increased and buoyed up our own weak hearts so we, in turn, could give. We learned to love each other for who we are instead of trying to change each other, for conditional love cannot grow. Our family obtained the blessing of Reconciliation.

All of our family spent time with Doug in California during the last months of his

life and when Doug passed away, we arranged a candid memorial service for our family and friends in the ward chapel just across the street from our home. Many of our ward members were there and heard about Doug's life, his homosexuality, and our love for him. As our son, Chris, said at the service, "Doug was the binding force in our family from the day he was born. Being in the middle he always encouraged his older brothers and was willing to help his little brothers and sister. When-

ever we did something special (as a family) he was the first one with the money or the work. Thank you, Doug, for being you. We love and miss you." 🙏

Doug was the binding force in our family from the day he was born.



A transcript of Doug's Memorial Service is available from the Family Fellowship catalog. It includes the lyrics of the songs performed, a life sketch about Doug, a talk given by Ron Schow, and closing remarks from the bishop. The Nelsons are now anxious to know of other families like their's with whom they can interact within Family Fellowship. They continue to attend monthly Gospel-focused firesides sponsored by Reconciliation.

Family Fellowship

Family Fellowship is a volunteer service organization, a diverse collection of Mormon families engaged in the cause of strengthening families with homosexual members. We share our witness that gay and lesbian Mormons can be great blessings in the lives of their families, and that families can be great blessings in the lives of their gay and lesbian members. We strive to become more understanding and appreciative of each other while staying out of society's debate over homosexuality. We seek to put behind us all attitudes which are anti-family, which threaten loving relationships, and which drive family members apart. All who can support these goals are welcome to contribute to this newsletter. However, the views expressed here belong only to the individuals who express them.



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A Mother's Perspective

Kathryn West Steffensen

My life seems divided into 20-year segments, each with a major focus.

Years 0-21 were devoted to "Growth and Personal Fulfillment." I grew up in a typical LDS family in Logan, Utah. I attended the University of Utah and managed to graduate with Honors while majoring in FUN. But I was very serious about Varsity Debating where I learned to study all sides of complicated issues.

The years 21-40 were devoted to "Marriage and Family." Five children arrived in short order, two on the same day. Soon I had family circles under my eyes. Motherhood gave me an even disposition, I was upset all the time. I took refuge in comic relief, writing and presenting humorous programs at various church and social gatherings.

From the age of 40-61 I was a "Working Mother," juggling my family responsibilities with the demands of a challenging profession. The hardest part of being a second-grade teacher is the necessity of being perfect by 7:45 every weekday morning. At least I knew that as I wrote on the chalkboard, my serious problems were behind me, all 28 of them.

Age 61-? Now I am in a new double decade and my focus is "Retirement and Reassessing my Assumptions." Several years ago my youngest son, who was 22 years old at the time, told his father and me that he was gay. This announcement sent a seismic shock wave through all the strata of my stereotypical assumptions. Large sections of my supporting foundations shifted, and my belief system buckled like the L.A. freeway system during the January quake. I had spent a lifetime absorbing our culture's homophobic explanations and responses to homosexuality and they were a part of my bedrock of beliefs. My ingrained beliefs about homosexuality did not match my very real personal experience with my beloved son.

My world turned upside down and I was reeling. None of the support systems I had called upon during other crises were available to me this time. Of course I prayed for understanding, but I still didn't understand. I felt abandoned and alone. I couldn't talk to anyone except my husband and son. I clung to the two things I was still sure of — my son's intrinsic worth and my conviction that I should be unwavering in my love and support for him.

Because I now identified with the last minority group that good people feel comfortable despising, every cruel comment from strangers, friends, and family pierced my very heart. I began erecting a protective wall of silence around myself. My heart literally ached. It was becoming harder to maintain my Funny Lady persona. I was slipping into emotional isolation and depression. Eventually I learned that I had coronary artery disease and required angioplasty. Convinced that I had to assume some personal responsibility for my heart disease, I decided to follow the regimen outlined in Dr. Dean Ornish's Program for Reversing Heart Disease. It requires modifying one's life physically, emotionally and spiritually. As you may guess, the physical was the easiest part. I could follow an exercise program and I could stay on the diet, which I simplified to this: "If it tastes good, spit it out." But "Opening my Heart" to others and to my source of spiritual strength has been much harder to do.

Dr. Ornish says, "... increasing scientific evidence is demonstrating that isolation and suppression of feelings often lead to illness, whereas intimacy and social support can be healing. The techniques Dr. Ornish advocates include: participating in support groups, development of communication skills, learning forgiveness, developing feelings of trust, practicing altruism (helping others), sincere and habitual prayer, and regular meditation.

Clearly it was necessary for me to change my focus from myself to others. I felt compelled to reach out to other people with similar challenges and attempt to lighten their burdens.

I took a new attitude to the monthly meetings of People Who Care, a Salt Lake City support group. Instead of planning to get strong enough so as not to need the group any more, I resolved to commit myself to remaining in the group as a resource person for those who were grappling with the first painful throes of their dilemmas.

My primary concern has always been about the people in my spiritual community, and that is why I am hopeful about the good that Family Fellowship can do. It would have been so helpful to me if I had known there were people available to confidentially listen to my concerns. Echoing the Biblical text, I want to "bind up the broken hearted," and perhaps in the process my own heart will begin to heal. 🙏

Family Relationships

Claire Malmstrom

Having our eldest daughter run off with the hippies in the 60's perhaps was good in that we felt like nothing else in our future would faze us as parents. However, if I could live those years of estrangement over again, I would be more loving and understanding, more open to new ideas, and a more supportive parent.

With that introduction to our family, let me tell you about our youngest daughter Lynette, a beautiful, loving, caring, compassionate, brilliant young lady, who was always a leader in both school and church activities; popular with all her classmates, and never too busy to visit my elderly mother, my handicapped sister, or to bake her special oatmeal cookies for her dad. The favorite aunt of her two nieces and two nephews, she took them swimming, skating, had sleep-overs with videos and pizza, and bought them neat things that parents sometimes cannot afford. More important, she showered them with love. As a student, she excelled in her grades, graduating in the top percentage of her class. As a graduate student at the "U" she was given the "Faculty award for outstanding achievement and promise in the field of social work," and was also voted "The outstanding practicum student of the year" in 1987 when she finished her MSW.

She did this while holding down a full time job, working and paying for her education by herself.

Is it any wonder we adore this daughter, a very successful therapist with a booming private practice?

At a family Sunday dinner a few years ago, she told us she was gay. It was no big deal! We proceeded with our dessert and went on with our life. The only tears I shed were for the children I knew she would not have because she dearly loved children. She would have been a terrific mother.

Do we have any difficulty accepting her sexual orientation? No way! We are proud of her. She is an exceptional woman and I feel privileged to be her mother. We support her in all her endeavors. I try to involve myself in the gay community in order to more fully understand and educate myself so that someday maybe I can help to initiate change in the world, to hopefully bring about understanding, appreciation and love, rather than hate, towards our homosexual children.

We have been told that we are very

different from most parents presented with their children's homosexuality, in that we did not have a struggle with this issue. I do not know why this is except that I am blessed with this overwhelming love for my children. In fact, if I were ever to ask myself "Why me Lord?" it would be "Why me Lord, to be blessed with such a wonderful daughter?"

Some day, in the future, I will tell you about our gay son. 🙏

Lynette Malmstrom

My mother is a remarkable woman. Every once in a while a situation or event crystallizes that reality for me. Such is the case with her response to my "coming out."

Sunday dinner ... I'd thought about, planned, dreaded and anticipated this conversation for years. My brother, Dave, knew my intention and nervously choked on his food every time I began to speak. We were running out of main course and I feared I would lose my nerve. So, with a short preface, I told my parents, "I'm gay."

No weeping, no gnashing of teeth. Good signs! Then, what had I expected? The one constant truth I know about my parents is that they love their children. Yet sharing this particular information feels risky. It is outside of the norm of societal rules and it is emotionally, religiously, and politically explosive. So why even have this conversation? I've heard it said, "I'd rather be hated for who I am, than be loved for who I am not." I believed my family would have to know this part of me if they were ever to understand my choices and direction. I trusted their belief in me.

Dad looked surprised ... "It never occurred to me ... (pause) ... but you know it doesn't change the way we feel about you." Mom took my hand ... "I'd wondered. You know we love you dear ... (pause) ... Everyone ready for dessert?"

I drove home pondering our interaction and wondering what fallout might lie ahead. Within the hour, mom called to reassure me that everything was fine, again expressing her love. Then she said, "My only regret is that you probably won't have children and I

think you'd be a terrific parent. Have you considered adoption?"

The crystallizing moment! Mom really "got it." She truly, profoundly understood that my emotional and sexual orientation does not alter the essence of who I am. It does not diminish my spirituality nor my character. Many discussions followed. I am grateful for my parents' willingness to grapple with our reality so respectfully which has helped me to move beyond my own fears.

My mother values her family and her religion. Her priorities are clear and she sees no need to abandon one for the other. In an attempt to better understand the gay and lesbian community and to demonstrate her support for her children, she served on the Board of Directors for the Utah Stone-wall Center. Her time, energy and her financial donations demonstrate her commitment to a variety of gay and lesbian concerns. She also remains active in her church and has no difficulty reconciling what appear to be conflicting loyalties. She remains true to herself. Her life is not dictated by other people's expectations of what she should believe.

It amazes me that my mother doesn't know what an exceptional person she is, but I do. I count her among the greatest blessings in my life. 🙏

Coming Out to Grandma



*I went alone, two hours in my sister's car
Not without a sense of duty.*

*A house so solid, lived in, at once familiar
Date bread and milk.*

*The old photos she pulled from drawers and walls
To bring to the table.*

*Her twilight world relayed to me in
Patches of tragedy, and shining humor.*

*And I have come to tell her who I am.
I am a family tragedy.*

*The crevassed blue veins in her hand
Holding Kleenex, the big ring.*

*Tears only whispered across to me like prayers
For our whole surrounding patchwork*

*Warm eyes brimming
Quilting into the crocheted gloaming.*

CRAIG WATTS

Family Service

The entries below list some ways that families and family members are reaching out to each other, sharing their experiences, and holding their families together. This space is provided for anyone to report on and advertise activities that share the goal of strengthening Mormon families dealing with this issue, regardless of what organization the activity may be sponsored by.

Parent Retreat

November 13-14, 1993

— Fred & Wanda Karford, Idaho Falls

This past November several of our Idaho Families sponsored a two day parents retreat and explored a format which we think may be used for other parents in the future. It was held at our home in Idaho Falls. Nineteen persons enjoyed homemade dining, discussion, informal talks and, of course, fellowship.

The two days were spent sharing experiences. Deloy and Jeanine Nelson, Wayne and Arlene Cooper and Ron and Adonna Schow joined with us in hosting this event and in relating their experiences over the years. Parents first need understanding and fellowship, later they are able to help and comfort others. Everyone had a chance to have their say and discuss their feelings.

Gary and Mildred Watts who came from Provo for the event remarked that, "The retreat helped us see that our first concern was with our LDS youth and families. While we will continue to support P-FLAG, People Who Care, etc., our first concern became the uniting of our LDS Families. We made a commitment to be very public and open with our expressions. This has provided us with a number of opportunities that simply would not have been there otherwise."

We hope to hold more of these in the future.

Forum Fireside

January 10, April 10 and July 10, 1994

— Gary & Mildred Watts, Provo

The first official Fireside of the Family Fellowship in Utah County was held in our home on January 10th. There were 38 people present. Gary shared our family's experiences in coping with our son's same-sex orientation and several others shared their experience.

Following the first meeting, a steering committee was formed which decided on quarterly forum type meetings which are to emphasize education and human interest aspects of same-sex orientation.

The second Forum Fireside was held on

April 10th and was attended by 95 people including several bishops and former bishops as well as four active or former stake presidents. Three gay men recounted their experiences with same-sex orientation as well as a mother of a gay son and the former wife of a gay man. Wanda Karford also spoke at the meeting and explained our mission of unconditional love and family solidarity. The meeting was productive and well-received by all who attended.

The third Forum Fireside was held at the Utah Valley Regional Medical Center on July 10th, with 125 in attendance. Duane Jeffery, a professor of zoology at BYU, spoke about the nature of sexual development. Also, a short video called "Straight from the Heart" was shown, which proved to be touching as well as educational. Our next Forum is scheduled for October 16th in Salt Lake City.

Reconciliation Fireside*

February 27, 1994

— Richard & Renee Van Wagoner, Ogden

This day marked the first Reconciliation Fireside in Ogden. It was held at our home with 22 people present. There were quite a few parents and six or seven young people. We started with a potluck supper, then began the meeting.

Prayers were offered, hymns were sung, a lesson was presented by Renee. The lesson was about "loving our neighbor" and "who is our neighbor?" Following the lesson, people were given an opportunity to talk about — well, actually, anything.

Our Ogden group is continuing to meet on the third Sunday of each month. To parents, to friends and to our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters, thanks for sharing your lives with us.

Utah Parent Socials

February, May and June 1994

— Marv & Geneva Peterson, Farmington
— Kathryn & Robb Steffensen, Salt Lake
— Keith & Marolyn Frogley, Salt Lake

Several of us have hosted Family Potluck Socials recently in and around Salt Lake. The February social was held in Farmington with a special invitation to parents of the Salt Lake

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Reconciliation group. A pot luck meal was served and a Gospel discussion Reconciliation style was held with over 40 present. The May social was held in a mountain cabin with six couples present. Two other socials were held in June in our Salt Lake City homes with about 20 attending each one. In each of these we enjoyed sharing with each other our common family experiences that relate to same-sex orientation.

Idaho Parent Social

April 25, 1994

— Grant & Evelyn Johnson, Idaho Falls

Nearly everyone goes through a similar evolution of attitudes toward homosexuality. Gays themselves "come out of the closet" to family and friends; then their families and friends run through a gamut of feelings wondering how they shall relate to the gay person and to the rest of the world.

How wonderful it is to find others who have gone through this same experience. We participated in such an experience recently at the home of Fred and Wanda Karford with eight couples present. Most were from Idaho Falls but two couples came from Pocatello. After a pot luck meal, each set of parents described their gay son and their experiences. One interesting comment made by nearly all parents was that their gay sons had been unusually thoughtful, considerate and obedient sons as they were growing up. Three of the men present were former bishops.

The Indigo Group

— Susan Fullmer, Provo
— Mirae Grant, Provo

The Indigo Group is a peer support group for spouses, ex-spouses and straight partners of gays and lesbians. Often the spouse has no one to turn to who can truly relate with their situation. In our meetings we see healing and understanding take place as we come together and discuss our common issues. Our group welcomes inquiries from anyone with questions regarding marriages between homosexuals and heterosexuals.

We meet every Monday night at a home in Provo. For further information please call Susan or Mirae at 373-5003.

*Reconciliation Firesides focus on scripture study and spiritual healing of individuals and families. Reconciliation meetings are held in Salt Lake, Idaho Falls, Pocatello, Ogden, Logan and Provo. Meeting times and places are available upon request.

Individuals or families are invited to contribute histories of their experience with same-sex orientation as it affected members within the family. We welcome brief accounts like the ones contained in this issue of Reunion. These may be anonymous. Also, we are beginning to create a large set of such histories that will someday be available as a collection detailing the various experiences of our Mormon families.