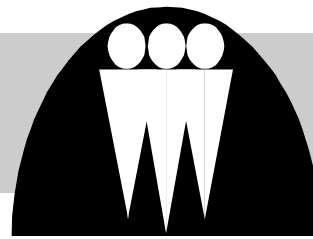


# Reunion

October 1994

The Family Fellowship Newsletter



Issue 2

Mildred and Gary Watts

Gary and I are fifth generation LDS. We both claim British ancestors who, after joining the Church, sacrificed all and came to the USA. They crossed the plains and settled mainly in Southern Idaho and Northern Utah. They have always been my heroes and heroines.

We were raised in conventional Mormon families with the Church always at the center of our lives. Our parents chose Logan, Utah as the place best suited for their careers and raising their families. My father, a family physician in Logan, removed Gary's appendix when he was thirteen years old and casually told him that I would be starting junior high that Fall and that he should "look me up!" That he did, and thus began a friendship and romance that has continued to grow and become more meaningful through the years. We celebrated our 32nd wedding anniversary in September!

Gary served a mission in New Zealand. We both graduated from Utah State University, and then Gary graduated from the University of Utah Medical School. He completed his internship and residency at UCLA's Harbor General Hospital in California. He also served two years in the Air Force. We have been blessed with six wonderful children that we love dearly. Gary has been in practice as a Radiologist and Nuclear Medicine Physician in Provo for the last nineteen years.

Our second child, and our first son, Craig, is gay. I hesitate to describe him as gay, because he is much, much more. Craig was a very delightful child. He has blessed our lives from the day he was born. He did well in school both academically and socially and was dubbed early on, I think by his second grade teacher, as "Mr. Perfect," and though he would disagree, we feel he has always lived up to this name. He was elected student body president of Provo High and graduated with high honors. He served an outstanding mission in Dallas, Texas, Thai speaking. He graduated from BYU in English with high honors and then received a Masters Degree in English from the University of Chicago. He is currently in Kyoto, Japan. He teaches at the University of Kyoto and is also studying Japanese. Craig is fluent in Japanese, Chinese, Thai, Laotian, and Cambodian languages, and is also a

*Craig has given  
our family a  
wonderful gift.*

wonderful writer. He is athletic and enjoys many sports. He is a person of great integrity, and has many friends. When you are with Craig, life is interesting and fun.

Craig told us of his sexual orientation in 1988. We were very shocked and surprised. He certainly did not fit our ingrained perception of a gay person. This apparent incongruity motivated us to study all we could about homosexuality. Gary brought home many articles written in the medical literature dealing with same sex orientation. We had to rethink all the things we had been taught and learned about homosexuality through the years, since they were incompatible with our knowledge of our son's inherent goodness. We met other gays and lesbians who were very much like Craig — thoughtful, kind, intelligent human beings. We learned about the broad spectrum of sexuality and individuality. We now regard sexuality as much like a fingerprint — everyone's is truly unique and deserving of respect. We learned that same-sex attraction is not something to fear. One by one, as our other five children learned of Craig's orientation, we watched them go

through a similar process, with the end result always being an outpouring of understanding and a feeling of love and compassion. Our family has shown a strength and closeness that I would have never dreamed possible. Having known

many families where this is not the case, we feel particularly blessed. We are truly grateful to our

children and their spouses for their love, support, and courage.


Our love for Craig led to a family commitment to do all we can to help people understand more about same-sex orientation. Not only do we share the scientific research that is coming forth, we also try to help people realize how much discrimination hurts, not only the homosexual person, but his family and friends as well. It has also opened our eyes to the world of "justified" discrimination that exists in many aspects of society. Elie Weisel, 1986 Nobel Peace Prize winner, has stated: "Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented." We share his view and have made a conscious decision, with Craig's

approval, to be open and public about his sexual orientation

In September of 1993, Gary and I attended a Family Fellowship retreat. We met other LDS parents like us who also have homosexual children. We learned that they felt as we do, that homosexual orientation is not a choice, and that our gay children are among the most kind, talented, and intellectual people in the world. These other parents also wanted to do something to make the world a safer, more understanding place for our children to live in. When we returned home, Gary and I talked with our children and decided to begin holding Family Fellowship meetings in Utah County. We have held three meetings to date, and each one has been very rewarding, bringing new families together. Our children are actively involved with Family Fellowship. They help us decide on formats for the meetings, patiently teach their computer illiterate parents, address envelopes, lick stamps, compose letters, and our eldest daughter even conducted our last meeting!

I was invited to participate in an interview for the Salt Lake Tribune. A reporter wanted to do a feature article on Mothers of gay sons for the Mother's Day issue. I hesitated to do this, not because I was embarrassed about Craig's orientation, but nervous that I might be quoted out of context, or perhaps make a comment that I would regret later. I also knew that this would be a 'coming out' to many friends and acquaintances that we had not had the opportunity to talk with personally. I was visiting with one of my daughters, telling her my concerns — when she just suddenly and enthusiastically cried, "Oh, Mom — go for it." So I did. The article was not written exactly as I would have liked it to be, but it opened many doors for us.

Gary and I have met so many wonderful people through Family Fellowship. The parents we have met are active LDS people and are an inspiration to us. The gays and lesbians we have met are wonderful, spiritual, intellectual and talented. Beyond all this we always have a wonderful time talking, eating, singing, laughing, and crying together.

Craig has given our family a wonderful gift. It has helped us become more aware, tolerant, sympathetic, and supportive of diversity. We have experienced the pains of discrimination. As a result, we are a closer family, and as individuals we are striving to be more Christ-like people. 

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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Gerry Johnston

Where were you when you heard that the spacecraft *Challenger* had exploded? If you're over forty, you'll remember where you were when you heard that President Kennedy had been shot. And if you're a parent like me, you have emblazoned on your memory the time and place where and when you found out that your child is gay.

For me, "the news" came in a letter, eleven pages long. Not just an ordinary letter — Gordon was always verbose — this one contained one sentence that was to rock my comfortable world: "Like the mother in the movie, *An Early Frost*, you too, have a son who is gay." My reaction, I know now, was not unusual. I was stunned, overwhelmed, sprayed on the ceiling, disbelieving and yet having to believe, feeling totally incapable of dealing with this unreal reality. My universe seemed to be crumbling around me.

My support system consisted of my daughter and a sister, both with very large shoulders, and a bishop who cared about me and my sense of anguish. Mostly, what I longed for was to find some other mother. There *had* to be a mother somewhere who had survived this kind of news and who knew how to help me, too, to survive and hopefully to understand. I have never been a person to sit on the edge of my bed wringing my hands. I knew from experience that I had to be pro-active, and so I started my feet in motion — reading, finding a helpful, encouraging therapist, searching for support in some likely and some unlikely places. Eventually I found two "other mothers," and I felt like I could begin breathing again.

Eight months after Gordon came out to me, I took advantage of the opportunity for some great publicity, and so the support group *People Who Care* was born. Since that August, 1986, people who are parents, families or friends of gays and lesbians have met monthly. I've made so many good friends, shared so many warm feelings, but most of all I've become educated.

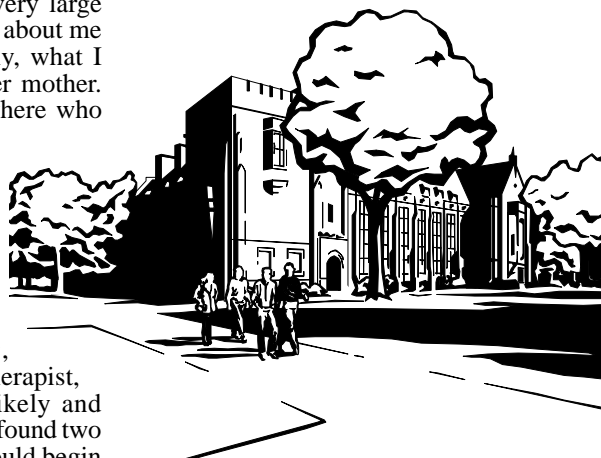
I went through university with my children; later I went through real estate school. I took a university course in my current career field. But the learning that has come to me as I faced the issues surrounding having a gay family member has been more intense and more life-shaping than all of the others combined. Here are a few of the "subjects" I've taken and passed.

I have learned to separate my vision of my child from his vision of himself. The most important wish I could have for Gordon, and for all of my four children and my nine grandchildren, is that they carve out a fulfilling life, that they set and reach good

goals, and that they enjoy the journey. I am not the creator of their future. They will answer to the Lord for the quality of their deeds. I will answer for the quality of my mothering.

I have learned to respect and value diversity. As a human resources director, I like the feeling of helping to create diversity in my company. As a human being, I like the feeling that, in my little corner of the world, diversity is being talked about and perhaps homophobia is diminishing in some small way.

I have learned that personal growth feels good and that it's contagious. I've learned that reactions when parents first learn "the news" is as varied and individual as the population is wide. I've watched parents and siblings learn and grow as they confront the confusion, lack of understanding, anger, guilt, and the sense of loss they may be feeling. I've seen them able, then, to reach out and provide quality support to others, spreading the strength and learning they have acquired.



I have learned that stereotypes must fall. I didn't plan to be in the arena where I am now, knowing and caring about so many quality gay people. But I did plan to always love my son, and since that is unchangeable, the stereotypes had to be faced and ultimately discarded. I've learned to value my son's decisions, which include his selection of a life partner. I had to decide how I would feel in advance of meeting Gaston, and my confidence in Gordon's ability to select good friends was justified.

I have learned to enjoy the process of becoming educated. The books I've read, the videos I've collected and movies I've seen, the conversations I've participated in, all these and more have broadened my horizons and made me a better person. I like who I am now better than who I was before — a person who was blind to the issues of diversity and respect for gay people, living in my own little corner of the world with blinders on, not aware of all the qualities that made my first son such a fine man.

Class is still in session.

Bishop Merlyn Clarke

It has always seemed natural to relate to my children, even within the context of parenting, as adults long before they were adults, and to extend to them respect and agency. The result, I believe, has been a relationship with my children in which we could talk, not just about their problems in a condescending way, but about issues which spanned the spectrum of concerns, public and private, in a philosophical and intellectual way. I mention this because it is relevant to ground work which inadvertently was done years before Adam declared his homosexuality, beginning as early as his early teenage years. These conversations were the result of Adam's interest, and our discussions focused on the scientific aspects of homosexuality, as well as the religious implications. I recall that we concluded that there were many unanswered questions, that it was a life-style that was difficult and probably not desirable, but that if someone were homosexual, this should not be a reason to judge them.

One cannot witness the development of a child and be aware of extraordinary capacity without experiencing feelings of awe, love, identification, and pride of kinship. I experienced all these with respect to Adam. As he grew and matured and his abilities developed, my bonds with him became very strong. Part of his development included characteristics which occasioned in my mind questions as to possible homosexuality. I confess to having hoped that these thoughts were groundless. But at least I had begun the process of making the psychological adjustment that might someday be necessary. The important fact was that there was a great deal to Adam as a person. He was my son. I loved him for all that he was.

Early in Adam's youth, I expressed the hope that none of my children would have to deal with homosexuality. Because of this, he experienced years of agony as a teenager. He postponed until age sixteen telling me of his inclinations. This was regrettable. On the other hand, I had assured him that I would never reject a homosexual child. And there had never been any talk of homosexuality as being inherently evil, devilish, or the result of sexual practices such as engaging in masturbation or viewing pornography. Nor had I ever suggested that people with homosexual inclinations could or should "repent" from this aspect of their nature.

For me there was and has been only one choice. While I may mourn for the heartbreak and frustration that Adam may have to experience; nevertheless, this is part of the mortal experience of which we all, regardless of our natures, must partake in our own peculiar ways. I could never question or deny to Adam his individuality.

Moreover, since declaring himself, Adam has exhibited a calmness, a serenity, and a purposefulness and sense of direction and self-esteem which he had never exhibited before. These are good things. I fail to understand how an insistence that he is somehow incomplete or in need of fundamental correction would be a legitimate course of action. It could only produce self-doubt, self-hatred, and alienation from self and family. Along with this, I also accept the fact that Adam must define, largely within himself, how to express his homosexuality. The unfortunate and difficult part is that he, and others of his nature, must primarily do this without strong cultural precedent or relevant viable guidelines.

And so in a peculiar sort of way, Adam's homosexuality has brought to my consciousness a need for a deeper faith: a faith that God is understanding, non-condemning, and apparently a being of greater depth than our modern day revelations, as interpreted, might suggest. I do not feel this requires a rejection of revealed truths. It does mean that I am less certain about the finality of the truths revealed. I am humbled by the expanse of what we do not know, and am less arrogant in the things we profess to know. And until more revealed truth and knowledge is shed on the subject of homosexuality, we can feel secure by remaining close as a family, succoring each other in our various needs, and drawing upon the institutional Church when and if we need to. 🕯

Adam Clarke

Harvesting the August crop of potatoes with Dad in his garden was always a golden experience for me; usually the last thing done between a summer of constant weeding and the beginning of school in the fall, unearthing spuds carried with it an aura of warm closure — a relaxing experience which seemed to have less to do with work, but more to do with a son spending time with his father, talking about life. These moments were particularly meaningful to me, because my father and I could really talk about anything, a luxury I knew most other adolescents didn't have. It was just because of that arrangement that I wasn't shocked when my father asked me, in the middle of our annual potato harvest, whether or not I knew any homosexuals. I chuckled a bit, finished pitching the last potato plant's yield into the wheel-barrel, and turned to his grinning, sod-soiled face against the late-summer sunset: "No," I replied honestly.

A lengthy discussion followed, hardly the first of its kind. Dad trusted my sense of moral judgement, so he wasn't afraid to be forthright when it came to the realities of lust, love, and all things sexual — even when

speaking of officially sinful sex crimes, such as fornication and homosexuality. He described sex as a beautiful act shared between lovers, not the sterile, function-oriented act I had understood it to be. He portrayed sexual desire as a very basic element of our humanity, something to celebrate with moderation, but never fear, even when that desire was directed toward someone of the same sex. He wouldn't know until several years later that his words were of particular comfort to me.

Dad came right out several times and asked if I was a homosexual, and each time I assured him that I was not, because I never thought I was. Homosexuals were evil men whose perversion had taken them beyond what heterosexuality could do to bring them sexual gratification; or, they were mentally unstable pedophiliacs who had never experienced mental sexual maturation and so lacked attraction to the opposite sex. I was therefore not a homosexual — case closed. Unfortunately, being unable to link my inclinations to a socio-psychological label did not save me the grief of knowing that they were not normal.

Coming out to my father was undoubtedly one of the most important moments in my life — and yet the most traumatic. I had always been dependent upon him for personal verification, and because of how close we were, I could not, by definition, be anything he didn't know about. I couldn't even describe myself as gay until he would. In fact, I didn't actually tell him; I had been rendered physically speechless by the gravity of what he was about to find out, so I forced him to guess at what I was trying to tell him. In spite of all his assurances, the event was catastrophic and exhilarating at the same time. I knew he didn't want this for me, just as I myself had rejected it for seven years. But I also knew that he accepted and loved me regardless; I could therefore accept and love myself. I began the rest of my life that night; gone were the fruitless attempts at self-therapy, the endless hours of seemingly unanswered prayers, the perpetual feelings of unworthiness, self-hatred, and hopelessness.

It has been about a year and a half now since Dad found out; my mother would find out four months later, followed shortly by my four brothers and sisters. I don't know how many can say that their parents were the first to know of their homosexuality. Because I'm a far cry from what the stereotype predicts, those who I am close to find it easier to accept me. Yet despite the relative ease with which my family received my announcement, I can't say that they've embraced this part of me. I acknowledge and enjoy the celebrations of my siblings' heterosexuality, such as marriage, but I observe no such enthusiasm for my own romantic engagements. I do not yet feel comfortable sharing this important aspect of my life with my family, even my father. But the day will come when I too will proudly present my loved ones with the man I will eventually choose to live with throughout eternity. 🕯

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.

## Regarding Gays and Lesbians

- Kathryn Steffensen, Salt Lake City
- Gerry Johnston, Salt Lake City
- Claire Malmstrom, Lehi

A broadcast on radio station KRCL FM in July featured three of our Family Fellowship participants who appeared on the program to publicize the support group *People Who Care*. Kathryn Steffensen, Gerry Johnston, and Claire Malmstrom were interviewed by program host Becky Moss. Each told about their experiences with a gay child. The program aired in two succeeding broadcasts at 12:30 P.M. on Wednesday afternoon.

Miss Moss reports that favorable comments are still coming in to the station, more response than any other program featured in several years. Due to this response, the programs will be rebroadcast again in November. Tentative dates are November 23 and 30. This weekly radio program is called *Regarding Gays and Lesbians*. It reports the latest happenings in the homosexual community. Some of the subjects might not be "Mormon oriented," but you may want to tune in to understand more of the problems our gay children face.

## People Who Care August 24, 1994

- Gerry Johnston, Salt Lake City

August 24 was the annual *People Who Care* summer party. It was held at Gerry Johnston's apartment club house. Refreshments were catered and an enjoyable evening was had by the 25 people attending.

## Families from Family Fellowship at the Affirmation Conference September 16-18, 1994

- Ron & Adonna Schow, Pocatello

Several families from Family Fellowship went to Las Vegas to participate in the Affirmation conference held there on September 16-18. These families were warmly received and felt rewarded for being there.

Marv and Geneva Peterson were invited to present a workshop on Saturday morning which was well received and well attended. They spoke of their strong commitment to the gospel but also their support for their son Michael and his partner Derek who also attended the conference. Gary and Mildred Watts and their son, Craig, also were present. Mildred was surprised at one point to recognize the son of a family who they lived next to in California years ago. Mildred had been his Targeteer teacher in Primary and when she walked up and gave him a big hug he was really surprised. Soon he was sitting between Gary and Mildred and remained there through the remainder of that meeting.

Many of the gay and lesbian Mormons

there expressed appreciation for having the parents show an interest in their situation. The Atkinsons and the Nelsons from California also were there and seemed pleased to solidify their connections with Family Fellowship.

Ron and Adonna Schow were the keynote speakers on Sunday morning and among other things spoke about the purposes of Family Fellowship and encouraged Affirmation members to refer their parents to our Newsletter and other activities.

## Legacy Foundation's Reconciliation

- Janie Bennett, Orem
- Tyler Yates, Lehi

For many gay Mormons, our sexual orientation and our spiritual values create a conflict that seems impossible to resolve. This conflict, fueled by misunderstanding and prejudice, causes many of us to feel unwanted by God, the Church, and our families. Feeling unable to resolve this dilemma, we face confusion, shame and alienation from our spiritual nature. Often we are distanced from those we love, particularly family members.

The focus of the Legacy Foundation's Reconciliation Program is to heal these spiritual wounds in order to develop greater love among ourselves, our families and our religious community. We strive to build bridges between our spirituality and our sexuality by fostering respect for our capacity to love and for our spiritual background. Through a series of guided discussions that address common questions and concerns, participants have a resource in resolving their own dilemmas, and at the same time can join in fellowship with others who also seek reconciliation. Drawing inspiration from LDS scriptures, Church history, and personal experience, this program can help gay Mormons regain a sense of spiritual worth and connection with God.

For more information, please contact The Legacy Foundation at 373-0515.

## Forum Fireside October 16, 1994

- Gary & Mildred Watts, Provo

Lynette Malmstrom, LCSW, will speak and moderate a panel consisting of a gay man, a lesbian woman, parents, a spouse and siblings of gay men at the University of Utah's Graduate School of Social Work, October 16. They will discuss numerous topics including feelings of isolation; how "coming out" affects

For more information about  
Family Fellowship write to:  
P.O. Box 9451  
Salt Lake City, UT 84109  
Phone: (801) 272-3806

## Tabernacle Choir Broadcast August 14, 1994

## Music and the Spoken Word



## Building Bridges

Too often, our rather limited view of the world overshadows the richness that can come from making connections with those who are different from us, and learning to love with a heart free of bias.

The late Marvin J. Ashton once said, "Perhaps the greatest charity comes when we are kind to each other, when we don't judge or categorize someone else, when we simply give each other the benefit of the doubt ... And when the virtue of charity becomes implanted in your heart, you are never the same again."

The more we know of others — their beliefs, their backgrounds, their hopes, and their dreams — the more we are inclined to accept them, to show concern, to respond with charity rather than animosity or ignorance. There simply is no better way to break down barriers than by getting to know those with whom we might otherwise be uncomfortable.

relationships in the family and community; defining individuals beyond same-sex attraction; self esteem and self acceptance.

## Volunteers Who Wish to Help Family Fellowship

Several folks have contacted Family Fellowship wondering what they can do to help. We continue to feel the most helpful thing you can do right now is to make a family history of your experiences with gay and lesbian family members. This could be an in depth account of the type published in our booklet series (such as the Nelson Memorial booklet) or a shorter account which could be included in the newsletter. For more information, please call Claire Malmstrom at (801) 768-9112.