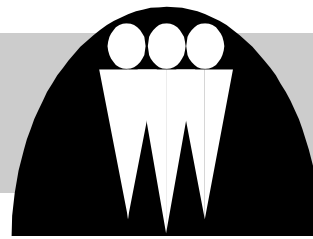


Reunion

Winter 1995

The Family Fellowship Newsletter



Issue 7

Joan Atkinson

Family Focus

When I was just a young girl, I knew that I wanted to have a large family. I loved children; my biggest single goal was to be a mother. When I was ten years old, my family joined the LDS Church. I learned to pray, to serve others, and most important, to love unconditionally. When I was married and my children starting coming, I truly enjoyed each wonderful spirit. I was very busy with scouts, Primary, PTA, Little League, Relief Society, and church activities in general. We had seven children of our own, plus several foster children, and one beautiful Indian daughter from the Indian placement program. We enjoyed family home evenings, held family prayers, honored temple commitments, and filled church callings.

One day I got a call from my oldest son's school. The principal said that Dale was acting out of character. Our son had never given us any real problems, so we were shocked to find out that Dale had just tried to kill himself on the way to school that morning, by jumping in front of a car. On the advice of the school and our bishop, we sent our son to a 24-hour lockup evaluation center. When we went to pick him up, we were told by the staff that he was "gay." Knowingly, I said "Yes, he has always been a happy child." The counselor then explained what gay meant. I was in a state of shock. I had heard about homosexuals, but my son was a wonderful boy, how could this be?

We brought Dale home, but he left again that same day. At age 16 he no longer wanted to live with us, saying that he could not measure up. We didn't know where he went, we couldn't find him. He had entered another world, one that we had no clues to. We began to study, read, and pray. We wanted knowledge about homosexuality. Dale contacted us several months later, and we began to converse over the phone. He still did not trust us enough to tell us where he was.

I went to the temple in prayer and fasting to find an answer as to how we could help our son. In the celestial room, as I sat in a chair pleading with the Lord, a voice came loud and clear: "Just love your children." I began to argue, and again the voice came: "Love your children." I knew then that this was my answer. Over the next

two years I truly loved my son unconditionally. We were close again as a family. He was welcome in our home and his friends were welcome too.

Dale moved up to Auburn, California, where he attended school and worked as a Nurse Assistant. On January 18, 1990, he called me at work (I am a teacher). He said "Mom, I want to come home." I said "Of course. Are you coming for the weekend, or for the summer?" He said "No Mom, I am coming home to die. I have AIDS." Once again I was in shock. "AIDS." I had heard about that somewhere on the news. I could not remember, my heart was beating so fast, tears were streaming down my face. "My son, my son, of course come home."

He came home the next week with his friend Dan. But we later learned that if he left the

Sacramento area, his insurance would be invalid, so he could not stay. We drove up as a family to help him move from his ranch house to a tiny apartment in Sacramento, where he could be near the hospital. He kissed each of his horses and animals goodbye as I stood watching from the window. When I had dreamed of being a mother, I never knew what heartache would lie ahead. I began my weekly trek back and forth from L.A. to Sacramento.

He came home again in May to celebrate his 25th birthday. His nephews and nieces all adored him and he loved them so. Dale was very thin and had to walk with a cane. He looked tired, my heart ached as I watched him. I knew that this would be his last trip home. Soon after, his remaining health failed him rapidly. He lost the ability to speak and was

completely bedfast. I could pick up his small frame and rock him as I did so often as he was growing up. I would sing church songs to him, and I saw peace in his eyes. I told him about his funeral plans and he picked his songs. I never felt so alone in all my life. I knew God was there, I could feel his love, but my whole being cried out "Why?"

On Friday, July 13, as I was holding him, with his favorite church songs playing in the background, I talked him through this life and into the next. As Dale gasped his last breath, a peace came over me. I felt two strong arms around me, the love of my Heavenly Father. I flew home early in the morning to finalize the arrangements for the funeral. As a family, we pulled together in love and unison.

My heart still aches for my son. But I am thankful for the journey; I have learned so many important things. I learned that we must always be thankful for life and the beauty it offers us. I learned that I must reach out with love and understanding to others who are in need, and I must teach others to love unconditionally, to truly see the spirit of God in each person. Each person is like a great novel, and if we are sometimes turned off by the cover, we may fail to open the cover and see the special beauty that lies within.

Parents, "Just love your children." 🙏



A Parent's Prayer Joan Atkinson

I will not worry, fret or be unhappy over you. I will not be anxious concerning you. I will not be afraid for you. I will not give up on you. I will not blame you, criticize you or condemn you.

I will remember first, last and always that you are God's child, that you have His Spirit in you. I will trust that Spirit to take care of you, to be a light to your path, to provide for your needs. I will think of you always enfolded in His protective care.

I will be patient with you. I will have confidence in you. I will stand by you in faith and bless you in my prayers, knowing that you are growing, knowing that you are finding your own way.

I have only good feelings in my heart toward you, for I am willing to let you live your life as you see fit. Your way may not be my way, but I will trust the Spirit of God in you to show you the way to your highest good.

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.



Board of Directors

CHAIR

MILDRED & GARY WATTS - PROVO: 801-374-1447

VICE CHAIR

RON & ADONNA SCHOW - POCATELLO: 208-233-8958

SECRETARY

JANIE BENNETT - UT

NON-PROFIT STATUS

MORGAN SMITH - UT

TREASURER

KEITH FROGLEY - SLC: 801-227-6720

PARENTS CONFERENCE

MARV & GENEVA PETERSON -
FARMINGTON: 801-451-7955

FORMER BOARD MEMBERS

WANDA & FRED KARFORD - ID FALLS: 208-523-3786
KATHRYN STEFFENSEN - SLC: 801-485-1833

Advisory

DUANE & KAYE JEFFERY - UT
GERRY JOHNSTON - UT
LYNETTE MALMSTROM - UT
MARYBETH RAYNES - UT
WAYNE & SANDRA SCHOW - ID

Publications

MARK MALCOLM - UT

Newsletter Staff

TYLER YATES - UT
RICKY LOYND - UT
GRANT & EVELYN JOHNSON - ID
CLAIRE MALMSTROM - UT

Regional Family Affiliates

JOAN & BILL ATKINSON - LOS ANGELES: 310-378-3938
MAC AND DIANA NIELSEN - SAN DIEGO: 619-470-7184
RENÉE & RICHARD VAN WAGONER -
OGDEN: 801-393-0395

Additional Family Affiliates

MAX & JANET BERRYESSA - UT
BEN BLAIR - UT
WAYNE & ARLENE COOPER - ID
STEPHEN & ALLISON DUNN - UT
KRIS KELLOGG - UT
JEANINE & DELOY NELSON - ID
TRACIE & BOB RADFORD - ID
STEVE AND SUG WRIGHT - UT

A Husband's Story

Jimmie Miller

When my friend Claire asked me to write this article, I wasn't particularly interested at first. I write financial advice and travel articles every month for a local paper. I've written speeches and articles for years. I've written more reports for my job than I want to remember. But this article is different; I really want to reach you with what I have to say, because I think it is important. I want people to learn the lessons I learned the hard way.

Going through puberty in Junior High, I began to notice the other guys, instead of the girls. I was a shy kid, and never did anything more than notice, and never told anyone. When I was 17, and a senior in High School, I finally did something — I joined the Mormon Church, hoping it would help keep me from being homosexual. At 18, I told someone for the first time that I thought I was gay. He, my bishop, told me I was not gay and that I should go on a mission and then get married.

I went on the mission. I came home, got engaged but broke it off. Then I went to BYU where I got engaged and unengaged twice more. I went to a BYU psychologist, and for the second time in my life, reached out to someone about what I was feeling. I was told not to worry about it and to get married, which I did. I didn't tell my wife how I felt. Why should I? My bishop said I wasn't gay.

Sex with a woman was horrible, but I did it. I tried being romantic, tried perseverance, tried everything my inexperienced mind could come up with. It was still horrible, and I realized it would never change, but by then my wife was pregnant. I decided that the cure would come if I threw myself into the church and my family.

I joined the Air Force and worked hard in the church. In fairly quick succession we had another child, then another. My career in the Air Force progressed well. At home, I was the ideal father and husband. In the church, I never turned down a calling or assignment. In 18 years, I never missed more than five months total where I didn't reach 100 percent home teaching. I was a member of the Elder's Quorum Presidency, a Gospel Doctrine Teacher, Scout Leader, District Counselor, Bishop's Counselor, Temple Worker, Bishop, and High Councilman.

This took me up to the age of 33. That last year was difficult; the gay part of me was getting stronger, not weaker. I couldn't figure out why God would call me to all these positions if I was the type of person who didn't know how to work hard enough to have a change brought about in his life. Then I was offered a chance to move back to Utah, which I jumped at, hoping that being back in Zion would bring the cure.

At work, I had a sergeant who I just knew was gay. Of course, I never said anything to him, but I felt his struggle with his orientation. As to my own feelings, after a couple of years

back in Utah, I was beginning to lose control. I had lived in an unnatural relationship with my wife for twelve years, and nothing seemed to slow down my growing feelings of helplessness. I tried keeping busy with my growing family, working above-and-beyond in my career, and simultaneously serving as a high councilman in a BYU stake, a scout committee chairman, a Blazer Leader, and a home teacher in my home ward. Still, I spoke to no one.

Then, my boss called me one night. My sergeant had just killed himself; he couldn't take it anymore. His wife asked me to speak at his funeral, which I did. I also told my wife about the secret I had hid for so many years. Through her tears, she asked me what I was going to do. I didn't know, I needed time to figure things out.

My wife left, taking our kids with her back to live near her parents. The church was no longer interested in my service, and the Air Force soon followed suit. I was devastated.



My wife's life was made sadder and more difficult, my children were separated from their father, and both the Air Force and the church lost a hardworking man with a great deal to contribute.

That's my story, and a sad one. It happened largely because I was given some very bad advice by people who were more concerned with following policy than with helping me. At the end of it all, the church's final piece of advice to me was to remarry and try it again.

My wife and I are friends now, and my relationship with my children is as good as it can be with them 2,000 miles away. I have a new job and we are all rebuilding our lives, though we shouldn't have needed to do so. There was no need to create more pain in this world by convincing me to marry and then ostracizing me when the inevitable happened. But we are picking up the pieces and moving on, in my case, without the church in my life. At least I am here to pick up the pieces, unlike my sergeant, whose wife and children had to deal with both his coming out and his suicide at the same time. 🙏

Paul R. Thomas

A favorite scripture story of mine, showing how the Savior works in our lives, has been the incident of the Samaritan woman at the well, as recorded in *John 4*. Though Christ knew this woman for a sinner (she was then living with a man she was not married to), through her, many of her fellow outcast Samaritans came to believe in Christ as the Messiah. I think we can assume that through her life and testimony of Christ, many came to be converted to Christ and His gospel all on their own (see *John 4:42*). In this story, Christ has set a pattern for me as the parent of a gay child to try to live up to. Let me explain.

When we first learned that our longtime suspicions about our son Geoff were true — that he was gay — we went through a series of incremental revelations. I remember first of all feeling that Geoff's "condition" was something akin to my high blood pressure, a sort of handicap. What an insult I have learned that to be, to attack our son's sexuality as if it were a handicap instead of something fundamental to his character and personality. The second stage was to pray hard that Geoff could somehow endure the temptations of his true nature and stay celibate. This certainly had worked for some of my single friends. Why not for our son? (I'll admit that I still see some strength in this view, theoretically and morally.) For me, the third stage might best be called the nonjudgmental stage. In this stage I haven't left my church's moral stance behind, but I am trying to learn to love and to draw on the powers of Heaven as described so eloquently in that most powerful of revelations during Joseph Smith's personal crisis, *D&C 121*.

When Christ met the Samaritan woman to whom He was not sent, though He immediately knew her faults, sexual and otherwise, He first asked her to do something for Him, to get Him a drink. Then He talked about a well of living waters that would end her thirst. Surely this thirst-quenching well corresponds to the tree and its fruit in Lehi and Nephi's visions — the love of God. God loves us unselfishly, not asking whether we are perfectly deserving of His love. So it was with the Samaritan woman and Christ. He did briefly and frankly catalogue her sex life, but first he offered the love of God. So sweet did this love seem to the woman, that she left her water-pot duties to share the Savior with her friends (verses 28-30; compare Lehi's reaction on tasting the fruit in *1 Nephi 8:12*). I still have high hopes for Christ's love and what it can do in the life of our son Geoff and in all of our lives too. When we drink and taste of that love, we can endure any trial that life sends us.

Just as our family was learning about Family Fellowship this past spring, less than a year after Geoff had come out to us, I came to know very personally that Christ deeply cares for and loves all of our homosexual children. One Sunday night, rather late, I received a phone call from a young returned missionary who formerly lived with his family in our ward. We reminisced

about our times together in interviews when I was his bishop. As soon as we began to talk again, I sensed that this young man was gay and needed someone he trusted to talk to. I invited him to come down to visit me at my office at BYU sometime soon and then suggested that we get together with Sandy and have dinner at home. He quickly agreed to a visit, which we scheduled.

The day this young man came to our home was a witness to me of our Father's love for all of us. Our visit began in a friendly, casual way at about four p.m. During dinner, Sandy asked our young friend about our suspicions that he might be gay, which he quickly affirmed. This young man would like to be fully active in the church, though he has been disfellowshipped. We expressed our love for him, and seven hours later he went home, carrying some of that love with him, we hope. Soon thereafter we met him at the Spring Family Fellowship Conference at the University of Utah.

Later in the summer, we talked with a single daughter of our closest friends in England, asking her to let her parents know about our son Geoff's homosexuality when she visited her parents in York. (In his youth in Yorkshire, Geoff had been particularly close with another daughter in this family, now married with six young children.) When our single friend went to visit her sister, she pondered whether our "coming out" mandate included anyone beyond her parents. Then her sister told her of a dream she had just prior to the single sibling's visit. She said, "I had a dream about Geoff Thomas the other night. The dream leads me to believe that Geoff is gay." Then the elder sister felt free to come out about Geoff to this close friend from his youth in England. And this busy young mother hadn't seen Geoff for twelve years.

These are two incidents that have helped me to know that Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ care for us individually. Our family clearly has a lot to learn. So far we have learned to judge less and to love more. We pray for more of that love from God that Lehi described as filling his soul "with exceedingly great joy" (*1 Nephi 8:12*). Though to some around us we may seem like the outcast Samaritan woman at the well, let us freely share the joy of God's love. 🙏

Sandy Thomas

When the second of our four sons, at age twenty-eight, chose to inform us of the complexities of his personal life, he eased us into it by allowing that he thought he was bisexual. I sensed almost immediately that this was merely a gentle way of introducing us to his true feelings. I was shocked, but not surprised. Shocked because I had mistakenly concluded for some years that Geoff was asexual. Asexual, because he was so very distant in his relations with either sex, almost excessively moralistic (as well as a truly moral person), but essentially shut down emotionally. That assessment of his life never dominated my thinking about him because he was — and is

— so very successfully goal-oriented, always developing his considerable talents, at times doing more in less time than was seemingly sane; always pushing, always pursuing, always accomplishing, always running ... running *from*, I now realize, a certain reality ... as well as running forward. Having figured out Geoff's life, as mothers are wont to do, and feeling safe with the analysis, his disclosure struck me with particularly remorseful, personal force. Thus, the shock.

At the same time, I wasn't surprised. For some years prior to Geoff's fourth birthday, I had nagging thoughts concerning his psycho-sexual development, and decided to seek advice about the possibility of counseling for what I was beginning to perceive as "abnormal." Being assured that he was too young for anything so complex to be resolved, I dismissed all such ideas for the next twenty-four years. The word "homosexual" never fully took form in my mind. With hindsight I look at those early concerns as preparation for accepting with comparative ease Geoff's now confronted, long and onerous struggle. I can only speculate about the depth and degree of mental, emotional, and as they mature, social and spiritual struggle and isolation that our homosexual children experience during childhood and adolescence. I realize this is still a theological minefield, but my greatest pain is in not recognizing his particular needs as he lived a life apart, from a very early age. What haunts me more is what I could or would have done, had those needs been recognized, without making matters worse. How I would like to see a safety-net for today's generation of young people with such lonely concerns.

After assuring Geoff of our love and genuine concern for his future welfare and happiness, Paul and I still had to go through the very real stages of "coming out" — by ourselves, with the other children (who had their own varying responses and degrees of acceptance), and with our extended families, friends and neighbors. I was determined to put a human face on this most "unthinkable" of human conditions. I want others to think about it, hard. No amount of social censure or misperception on the part of others is going to further alienate my child from his family. I want to speak up and speak out in hopes of alleviating the unconscionable silent suffering of good, thoughtful, soul-searching individuals from whom we do not seek separation, but increased understanding and closeness. For the most part, the little crusade is succeeding.

Frequently I'm asked, "How are you coping so well with this burden?" Well, it *isn't* a burden. I feel particularly blessed to be Geoff's mother, and when asked by other mothers the above question, I am deeply relieved that he is *mine* and not someone else's. I don't profess to have all the answers to the origin of same gender attraction nor solutions to the suffering and divisiveness that it still causes in society. But as one who believes in continuing personal and institutional revelation, I expect to — one day. I keep on my desk a clipping from a recent ward bulletin that both amuses and informs me, which I think particularly apt under the circumstances: "To believe in God is to know that all the rules will be fair, and that there will be wonderful surprises!" 🙏

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.

Forum Fireside October 8, 1995

— Mildred and Gary Watts, Provo

The quarterly meeting of the Utah County Family Fellowship was held on October 8th at the Utah Valley Regional Medical Center in Provo. Sandy Thomas presented the Family Fellowship pin that she had made up by a local jeweler. It is a very attractive copy of our Family Fellowship logo. The pins are selling for \$40 a piece.

Millie Watts talked about the joys of e-mail and encouraged everyone to get online and signed onto the Family Fellowship listserver.

Lynette Malmstrom, LCSW, spoke on the topic of "Dropping the 'H' Bomb." She was brilliant and humorous as she presented ideas and skills that can be used in sharing our stories and 'coming out' to others.

A light buffet and visiting was enjoyed by everyone following the meeting.

Gamofite Retreat December 2-4, 1995

— Scott Mackay, Orange County, CA

I just returned from one of our incredible weekends. Twenty-eight men, Gamofites (Gay Mormon Fathers), met in the Wasatch mountains just outside of Heber City in the family cabin of one of our number for a life-defining weekend. We arrived in batches Friday evening (car pooling in 4-wheel drive vehicles from the base of the mountain) until all had gathered. Of the 28, four were from California, two from Nevada, one from Missouri, one from Illinois, one from Colorado, and nineteen from Utah. This was the first retreat for 17 of our brothers.

The first evening was spent in socializing, administrivia, a get-acquainted game, and the lighting of a candle in honor of World AID'S Day and in special memory of the three Gamofites who have passed on since our group was founded four years ago. This was the time when each of us prepared a poster about us (typically featuring pictures of our lives and families). After the opening session described above, we sat around the fire and socialized.

Early Saturday morning we awoke to a great breakfast (the food team outdid themselves). Then at 9:30 our guest facilitator (an extraordinarily insight-filled local therapist) arrived, and till 2:30 we went on a voyage of healing; healing the wounds within, and getting on with life, unsticking ourselves. It was a sacred time filled with tears and love. At one point we wrote a letter to ourselves from a person or persons who had hurt us, the letter contained the thoughts and words we could have only dreamed of receiving. The tears and healing balm flowed.

"Food glorious Food" followed us all day. Saturday afternoon, during free time, instead of a sensible nap, I headed out with a new brother to the sledding hill, sled in hand. My inner child rejoiced while my aged tabernacle suffered and froze. It was glorious and freezing. After a couple of hours we grudgingly went back in. Wassail was awaiting us, as were dinner chores — which I promptly dressed for in a special apron and gloves prepared for the occasion. The fire crackled, conversation and brotherhood flowed, and I was in a space I never wanted to leave. Then, the talent show. What do you get when you put twenty-eight talented boys together and the freedom to explore? You imagine it. Songs and poems, and of course, our Relief Society lesson, what a night! Sleep was late in coming.

Good morning, it's Sunday, and on to the spiritual culmination, our traditional exploration of our souls. We closed around 12:30, cleaned the cabin and headed to brunch at the Homestead in Heber. It was as hard as always to say good-bye. The new team was selected and Gamofite Utah II, set for May/June, got kicked off. A more perfect setting or weekend could not be envisioned!

Forum Fireside January 14, 1996

— Mildred and Gary Watts, Provo

The next Utah County Family Fellowship Forum will be held on Sunday, January 14th at 5 p.m. at the Utah Valley Regional Medical Center in the Clark Auditorium. Please plan on joining us for education, entertainment, food, and fellowship!

Parents Conference May 3-4, 1996

— Marv Peterson, Farmington

Family Fellowship is planning a Parents Conference which will be held on May third and fourth in Salt Lake City, scheduled tentatively at the Doubletree Inn. It will be Friday evening and Saturday. This meeting will provide an opportunity to bring other new parents into our group and will be a time where we can have some open discussion. It will end with a brunch and an open microphone opportunity on Saturday morning. Please mark your calendars. More information will be forthcoming.

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 or a shorter account which could be included in the newsletter. For more information, please call Claire Malmstrom at (801) 768-9112.

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



By Micah Edward

Last night while the snow,
Sifted soft and ivory pure,
Struck its stinging barbs beneath
To divest me of my dignity,
I shivered... white on white.

As the early morning rain,
Sent to nurture, fair and free,
Dripped its poison acid down
To abase me from my brotherhood,
I sobbed... wet on wet.

While the wind this afternoon
Flowing warm, filled with light,
Raised an angry tempest up
To batter my remaining faith,
I prayed... what on? What?

Here, now, the silent skies
Press serenely to say nothing
But deafen me with abandonment.
Yet, I'll weather this one too.

And when tomorrow
shelves the elements,
'Though stripped and shamed,
beaten, estranged,
And all without apology,
I'll still love.

And all without apology
I'll still love.