


Frank and Carol Mensel

Family Focus

 Our appreciation for Family Fellowship is perhaps most simply captured in the idea that it engages us in helping combat man's inhumanity to man. It seems to us that mindless violence is increasing everywhere, and children, gays and the poor are its most frequent targets and victims. Family Fellowship makes us a part of a focused effort to combat one facet of violence and injustice, and to combat it within a culture where Christian virtue should dispel all prejudice, but fails to do so.

Our own coming out has been a challenge spanning more than two decades. It was apparent to us from our youngest son's earliest boyhood that he was unlike his siblings, mostly because music was his constant companion. His sister and two brothers were usually absorbed in sports. But with Bob, piano and organ and classical music came first. His brothers attended the University of Utah on athletic scholarships, while Bob later majored in music at the University as recipient of a Washington (DC) Alumni Scholarship.

It was in his undergraduate years that our coming out became a more conscious process. Hindered by frequent bouts with chemical depression, he labored more than a decade to complete his bachelor's degree, mixing his classes intermittently with various jobs. We were encouraged by the sensitivity and maturity we saw him achieve in his extensive volunteer work with the "crisis" hotline at the University, in which he became a training director. Among other jobs, his work as a psychiatric technician at Salt Lake area hospitals also enlarged his perspective and sensitivity.

His choice of the University of Oregon for graduate work marked another breakthrough for all of us. Completion of his master's degree in choral work boosted his confidence and became a stepping stone to his current success as music director and conductor of the Portland Gay Men's Choir.

To live with someone gay in the family is to know one of life's richer challenges — a learning experience which, if embraced with open and caring attitudes, engenders heightened feelings of love, loyalty, and sensitivity. So many of the gays we have come to know embody a quality of spirit, of humanity, more elevated than that which we see in people less tested by scorn and discrimination. If the meek truly are to inherit the earth, then legions of gays surely will be at the front of the parade.

Our transition has probably been more or less typical of parents of gays. As our son's comfort grew in an affirming community, our

comfort rose in equal measure. In the course of our transition, we came to realize that our problem was less in accepting gays than in keeping faith with the rest of the world and its intolerance of gays. Perhaps this is true with most parents of gays. Family Fellowship has strengthened our ability to accept both.

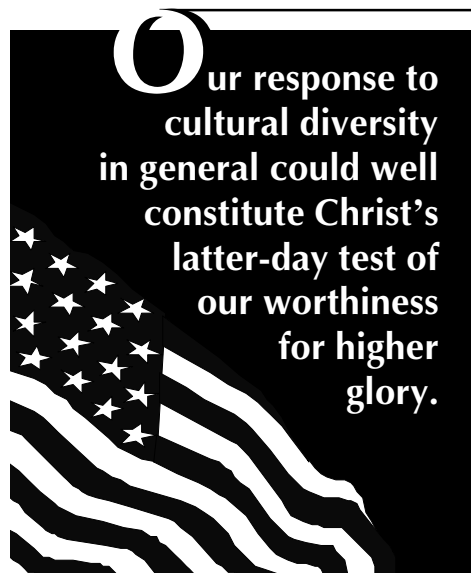
When parents find themselves straddling a chasm between devotion to family and loyalty to church, their consciousness of prejudice, injustice and misinformation becomes very acute. At least we found it so: ours has quickened a hundred-fold. Because of how deep our affection is for our son and his siblings, and for the many wonderful gay friends and their families who have become our spiritual kin inside and outside Family

assurance attends them at home, the culture immerses them in ambiguity and inescapable vibrations of self-doubt. The gay child simply cannot identify with the sex-centered roles and stereotypes propagated by Mormon culture.

To share mortality with a gay child or sibling is to celebrate diversity. Within Family Fellowship, we have yet to meet a parent who does not find such associations to be spiritually enriching, and enhancing of the meekness and humility that give a whole new meaning to the term love. Interaction with other parents of gays, their families, and friends with greater frequency has led us to a more conscious practice of virtue in other facets of life, to a keener sense of man's inhumanity to man, and a deeper appreciation of the diversity of the natural world. We believe without reservation that God intended diversity as one of his greatest faith-building gifts. The Church is distinguished today as much by its diversity as by its growth. The growth and diversity are inseparable. Our response to cultural diversity in general could well constitute Christ's latter-day test of our worthiness for higher glory.

Our second concern is for the immeasurable suffering of the vast legion of gays we don't know and don't hear about. All too often, the talk in parental support groups centers on gifted offspring, as if we are trying to champion the cause of gayness through the pride we voice in the accomplishments of achievers. One parent remarks, "He's about to finish his Ph.D." Another says, "She has three degrees." Another says, "He's a college dean" or "She's vice president of her company." It's only human nature that the gifted will more frequently enjoy family support, and will make their way more consistently, and more easily, than the less endowed. But listening to gays and lesbians tell about being disowned by their natural families, and about the trials of forming new spiritual families of their own, cuts deeply.

The challenge that should be uppermost in all our minds is the enormous suffering that less visible gay people endure in their daily lives. The scale of it is incalculable in our society. As a couple, we take strength in the belief that people who condemn or disdain others for what nature clearly has made them are, in fact, condemning God. Clearly, he is the author of gayness, just as he is the maker of the glorious diversity manifest throughout earth and the universe. The mistreatment of gays wherever it occurs in the Christian world is completely at odds with God's supreme law of love. 🙏



Fellowship, we find our caring interwoven at every step with two broader concerns.

One concern is for the ignorance, callousness and hostility toward gays and gayness which permeate our professed Christian culture, and the corrosive divisiveness that they inflict upon families, church and society. We have fretted for years over a question that Gary Watts has raised: "Are we becoming a world of disposable people?" Fighting such a threat is to us what Family Fellowship is all about. In Mormon culture, one of the surpassing challenges of raising gay children lies in making them understand, and feel, that they are loved. However much affection, attention, and

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

Claire Malmstrom

In 1937, when I was 7 years old, my only sister was born with Downs Syndrome. When she was only 10 years old, doctor after doctor advised "putting her away," so my parents consented to place her in the American Fork Training School, a life sentence at that time.

When she came home for Christmas, birthday, or vacations, I was the one to drive from our Holladay home to bring her home and to take her back afterwards. From that time up to the present, I have been the designated caregiver. Although it must have been heart wrenching for my parents to send her back each time, there was a certain relief because there was a stigma attached to families of mentally retarded individuals. Even parents blamed each other and tried to "hide" these children from public view. Unfortunately, I was part of this sick period of time and even asked my parents to hide her in another room when I had a date coming to pick me up.

The Training School had a lock and chain on the door of each three-story dormitory. The children would cry and pound at the door when they were returned. The bottom floor consisted of a bare floor and wooden benches placed around the walls. A smaller room was lined with shelves of cardboard boxes where each resident was "allowed" to keep all their clothing and worldly goods. However, this room was locked at all times. The top two floors were lined with long barred windows, and steel cots were placed row after row where the children slept. There were no blinds or curtains at the windows. Imagine how frightening to a child afraid of the dark or of the lightning. There was no one to tuck them in when they needed a hug or comforting. Back then there were no televisions and very few organized programs to break up their endless days. The meals were served on tin plates at a wooden table with benches. I won't even tell you about the food. My sister spent 40 years in that *Snake Pit*. Thank goodness she is now in a group home.

Then, miracle of miracles, one day some loving parents donated some old used carpeting. Other parents donated worn couches and chairs. Still other parents skilled in upholstery recovered them and soon the children had a soft place to sit. An old piano was donated, then a record player. Money was collected from parent groups and blinds were purchased for the windows. Bright material was sewn into drapes to brighten the rooms and bed spreads were placed on each cot. The community started to style the residents' hair; an end to the typical institutional haircut. Science was discovering that most of the

mental retardation was not caused by genetics, and parents started to feel free to talk about and show their love for their handicapped children. See what power parents can have when they band together?

We have all witnessed what our "Christian" legislators and governor have done by passing Bill 246, a bill that will exclude some of our priceless children from the support they so desperately need. Many of our brightest, most creative and talented young people will seek suicide as a way to end the pain they feel after being rejected by their church, family, and society in general. Utah ranks fifth in suicides of young males between 15 and 20. Does that



tell you something? My son was one of the lucky ones. He survived his attempt and we are so grateful. We as a parent group are still small in number, but we are growing each day. It's time for us to each make the commitment to stand up for our gay children, to shout to the world that we are here and we no longer will stand by and see society crucify our kids. We must come out of the closet and be proud of our children, as did the parents of the handicapped children back in the 40's, 50's, and 60's.

In no way do I mean to infer that our gay and lesbian children are handicapped, except by a society that refuses to educate itself and understand and accept our sons and daughters. We must do more. We must be more visible in the media, with our extended families and in the community. This will be hard for many of us, myself included, but standing by and witnessing the pain of our gay children is unacceptable. Let's each of us make the commitment today that we will be available to those who need our support by giving of our resources, time and effort to make life a better place for all of our children. It won't be easy. Even today bigotry still is prevalent and hate is still directed towards those who are different. This hate comes from society and uneducated parents who perpetuate the beliefs they have harbored all their lives, and pass this hate on to their children.

Hopefully it won't take us as long to effect change as it did for those poor individuals who were so forsaken many years ago. 🙏

The quiet young woman grew angry and threw her tray of food against the wall. She ran down the hall, followed immediately by an orderly. The other patients ignored the incident but I couldn't. I was anxious, scared and confused. I hated this place and I wanted to get out. I was behind a locked door with people that were a danger to themselves and a threat to others. I was one of those individuals. I had tried to kill myself just two days before.

On the other side of that door was a wonderful life. I had a beautiful wife and wonderful children. We were active in our church. We had a beautiful home and our own business. We had a relationship and home life that all of our friends envied. Why would someone want to destroy themselves and end their existence? I didn't drink or have any serious health problem. Why was I here? I was born a homosexual.

I grew up in a large religious family. I was the sixth boy in a family of eight boys and one girl. All the boys were typically aggressive. But I was different, quiet and shy. The smallest thing would upset me and I would go crying to mother when everybody else started to get rough. I was the child my parents never had to discipline. I loved going to church and taking in all that I could. I wanted to do whatever the church asked me. Later on in life the church would be my greatest pain.

I remember throwing a baseball against a wall day after day so I could throw like the other boys. I was never able to. Once all the boys my age were playing basketball in the church. I told myself I was going to play no matter what. It's what all boys do! I was the last one picked. "We might as well have a girl playing for us," my team said. I was shattered. I quietly slipped out and went up on the stage behind the curtains to practice. I remember trying so hard to dribble and throw the ball like the other guys. Someone had followed me to the stage. After about five minutes of practice, I heard him laugh and say "What a girl!" Being a girl is by no means bad, but I was a boy! I quickly found the back door. "Real men don't cry," I was told. I cried often, but no one ever saw me.

I had always been sexually attracted to men; even as early as five. I thought it was natural and that I would grow out of it. At about fifteen, when I found out you had to be sexual with a woman to have children, I was very upset. I condemned myself because I was attracted physically toward men and that was wrong. I was glad marriage was a long way off. The Church taught that it was immoral to be physical with the opposite sex until marriage, which was a relief to me. I dated a lot during my High School years and enjoyed dating girls very much, but the thought of being sexual with a girl that I cared for just didn't seem right to me. It seemed unnatural. My friends talking about how embarrassing it was when they danced close to a girl and their hormones took over. Why didn't that happen

to me? When I danced close to a girl, nothing physical or exciting would happen. In fact, when I kissed my dates goodbye, it was like kissing my sister, friendly, but nothing sexual. Surely, I would grow out of it and be normal.

Homosexuality was not yet in my vocabulary. One day in a church class for young men, the discussion of homosexuality came up. I was appalled. They were describing me! My church had made such an issue of sexuality with the opposite sex, that I felt that I had done nothing wrong, since all of my sexual experimentation had been with the same sex. Homosexuality, "the crime against nature, the most grievous of all sins but murder." I had committed a sin almost as grievous as murder through my thoughts and experiments as a youth. I had to repent! I wanted to go on a mission for the church and I was guilty of the most terrible of all sins! I immediately scheduled an appointment with my bishop. I plead with God to forgive me for the way I felt. When had I let myself fall? I was sorry and wanted to change these feelings. I must have been so terrible that the devil made me feel this way even before I was eight years old! Why?

The year before my mission for my church was one of heartache and confusion. I fasted, prayed and pled with God to change these feelings. Girls I dated would be more than willing to be physical with me. I tried so hard to turn these feelings toward them. We would get started and I would feel so guilty about using them just to change me. Fortunately, I never defiled a woman to try to prove anything to myself. I have always respected women and have never taken advantage of them. I decided that I would think of nothing sexual, male or female! I would study the gospel and devote everything to the church in preparation for my mission. I was required to see a high official of the church. I had friends who had sexual relations with girls, and all they had to do was talk with the bishop. They were normal; I was not. The feelings of my youth came back. Why wasn't I like the other boys? The church official that I talked to said that if I worked hard on my mission, followed the teachings of

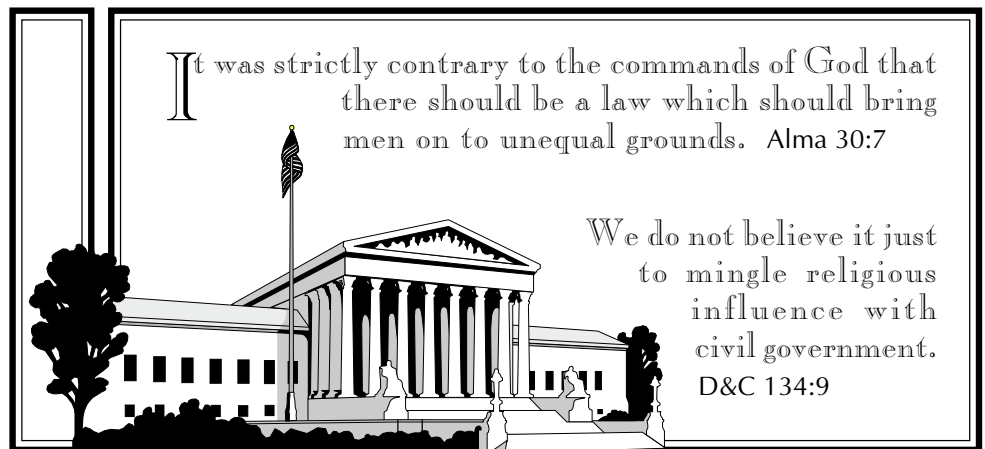
the church, then came home and married, all of these evil feelings would go away. I believed him and trusted that that would happen.

I fulfilled an honorable mission and returned home. I married a woman who was beautiful in every way. This would change me, I just knew it! Sexuality in the marriage was not horrible to me as I had feared it might be, but it was confusing. The sexual drive my brothers talked about was not there. I deprived my wife sexually which must have damaged her self-esteem. She had to pursue me. I was a good husband and loved her very much in every way, other than sexually. We had three beautiful children and made a home together.

But I was pretending, lying, and that was wrong. When you make love you should make love with that person. That's what I wanted. I loved my wife so much! My fantasies overpowered me in our love making, so I was unfaithful. Was I to pretend all my life? My wife was worth more than that. My feelings were something I couldn't change. Finally, I couldn't pretend anymore.

I received counseling and some therapy, but then had a nervous breakdown. Since the church taught that I was damned anyway, suicide would have been easier for my family than knowing that I was a homosexual. Convinced that it was better to die, I attempted to take my own life. Thank God my wife found me in time. I was rushed to the hospital and later put in the psychiatric ward where I received some of the best education of my life.

I am a Child of God. God loves me, even as a homosexual. I've lost my wife and children to someone who is like other men, a man who can throw a baseball or shoot a basket. But as a homosexual, I have discovered that I can still be happy! I have been in a relationship with a man who loves me, and I love him. We have been together for over seven years and we plan to spend the rest of our lives together. I'll always miss my children and wife, but I have discovered a joy which I used to think could only exist within the bounds of heterosexuality. God willing, this joy will be a lasting one. Whatever happens, at least now I am being honest with God, myself and others. 🙏



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.

Utah County Forum Firesides April 21 and July 14, 1996

— Mildred and Gary Watts, Provo

The Utah County Family Fellowship Forum was held on Sunday, April 21st at 5:00 p.m. Diane Barlow, Salt Lake City School Board Member, shared her perspectives on the reasons for her 'no' vote on the controversial 'gay clubs' issue at East High School.

Gerry Johnston, our chorister, told us about the life of Evan Stephens. He has written many hymns for our Church and has been recognized as having same-sex attractions.

Doug Worthem, a gay faculty member at Rowland-Hall High School, shared his experiences and personal insight on gay students in a private school.

Clayton Vetter, a faculty member at Skyline High School, talked to us about the difficulties gay students have in the public schools. He recently 'came out' at a special press conference called at the State Capitol Building. He shared with us the response of his students, their parents, and other faculty members.

Thanks to all who attended. It was wonderful to be together again.

The next Utah County Forum will be on Sunday, July 14th at 5 p.m. in the Clark Auditorium at Utah Valley Regional Medical Center, 1034 North 500 West in Provo.

Gamofite East II Retreat April 26-28, 1996

— Robert Olsen, Baltimore, MD

God does love Gay Mormon Fathers since we had beautiful spring weather for the Gamofite East II Retreat on April 26-28 in Washington D.C. Our jogs and sight seeing were enhanced by the beauty of the flowering trees and bushes.

There were 19 men at the retreat. To get to know each other better, we played a game where we had to tell three things about ourselves — two true and one false — and try to guess which ones were true. We also had a talent show, touching and breathing exercises, and sharing of our life journeys.

We are indebted to the people who gave of their time to give us information and inspiration. Roy Musick, Mormon psychiatrist, provided very practical ways to communicate some of our difficult issues to our loved ones and families. Frank and Carol Mensel of Family Fellowship shared their loving spirit and experiences on family relationships. Thankfully we have such wonderful people on our side.

It was sad to see the Retreat come to an end and hard to say goodbye. We left determined to try to live more courageously and love more creatively. The Gamofite East III Retreat will be held on September 20-22.

Parents Conference May 3-4, 1996

— Renèe Van Wagoner, Pleasant View

In 1993 and 1995, Family Fellowship participated with the University of Utah Graduate School of Social Work in presenting symposiums on sexuality and homosexuality. This in-between year, the Family Fellowship Board opted to present a two-day seminar for parents, May third and fourth, at the Doubletree Hotel in Salt Lake City. "Dealing with the Feelings" was the very appropriate focus.

Dr. Roger Gorski presented the keynote address Friday evening. The gay-clubs/Utah-legislature brouhaha has brought homosexuality "out of the closet" in a big way! Well over one-hundred people signed up for the entire seminar. Family Fellowship opened the keynote address to the public, and an additional hundred people came for that session.

Dr. Gorski is Professor and Director, Laboratory of Neuroendocrinology of the Brain Research Institute, University of California at Los Angeles. His address presented a broad appraisal of where science stands in 1996 on the etiology of homosexuality.

Fortunately for those of us in attendance, he was able to translate the scientific information into language we could understand. Dr. Gorski has the remarkable ability to maintain his integrity as a scientist even as he connects with his audience — a master teacher, indeed. In addition, and to our delight, he added an infusion of wit and charm.

Dr. Gorski has spent forty years studying and experimenting on the brain, using laboratory rats. Because many of his studies cannot be replicated in humans, science has no "definitive" answers to some of homosexuality's questions, but his parting shot, said with a twinkle in his eye was, "However, people are really just big rats."

Dr. Gary Watts spoke to us Saturday morning. "Mugged by Reality," was his intriguing title. A few thoughts from his address follow:

Everyone of us is at a different stage in our own understanding. We all carry our own backpack of experiences and that backpack, to a large extent, determines how we respond to the options that are in the marketplace of ideas for us to consider. ... People are never going to "get comfortable" with homosexuality until they become acquainted with homosexuals and us, their parents. Some, like me, must be "mugged by reality" to have their eyes opened. ... At present, gay Mormons are faced with a veritable Sophie's choice: Do I choose my child of church membership or my child of "core longings" for survival? It's a decision no one should have to make. ...

Thanks Gary. We hope the talk will soon

For more information about
Family Fellowship write to:
P.O. Box 9451
Salt Lake City, UT 84109
Phone: (801) 374-1447

be in print and available to all of us. Outstanding! Well done!!

Then there was the Doubletree's wonderful brunch, Dr. Gorski's question-and-answer period and group discussions on subjects of interest to parents. Following that, Marv Peterson moderated a panel discussion. The panel members included: Parents of a lesbian, a married couple (the husband is gay), a father and a mother of gay sons, and the founder of the support group, People Who Care.

Personal stories this year were told by Wayne Schow, whose son, Brad, was the first gay man in Idaho to die of AIDS. Dr. Tom Mathews, gay man, professor of Spanish at BYU and "out" had a fascinating story to tell. Kathryn Stephens completed the trilogy with both humor and poignancy.

The conference ended with the open-mike session. This session always invokes the entire spectrum of emotions in each of us.

We of Family Fellowship express our appreciation to those who organized the seminar. It was outstanding and informative. In addition we thank Dr. Gorski. Please come again.

Thanks Gary and Millie for your excellent leadership as co-chairs of Family Fellowship. Finally, thank you to all.

Reconciliation's Fifth Year Anniversary July 27, 1996

— Duff Dazley, Salt Lake City

Reconciliation would like to extend an invitation to all Reunion newsletter readers to join us on Saturday, July 27th at 6:00 p.m. for our fifth annual fund-raiser, "An Evening on the Roof."

This year's event will take us to the top of the One Utah Center, 201 South Main, overlooking the skyline of beautiful downtown Salt Lake City. Festivities for the evening will include an hour of socializing and appetizers followed by an elegant dinner. But this high-rise adventure doesn't stop there! While the sun is sinking in the west, the stars will start to rise in a showcase of talents from our very own community to entertain us until the evening ends.

So come into the city and dine with us, converse with us and laugh with us, as we celebrate Reconciliation's fifth year anniversary with an urban touch-of-class. The dress for this occasion is semi-formal.

If you plan to participate, please RSVP by July 20th.

Individual tickets can be purchased for \$25 by contacting Reconciliation at (801) 461-3324 or writing to P.O. Box 1501, Salt Lake City, UT 84110.

If you cannot attend the fund-raiser but would like to contribute, please send your donations to the P.O. box listed above. Any contributions in addition to the purchase of a ticket will be appreciated.