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When Parents Come Out as Parents of Gay and  
Lesbian Children: A Transformation of the Self

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A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology  
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Arts in Sociology

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by

Crissy E. Stewart

May 2002

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Keywords: Parents, Parenting, Parental Support, Gay and Lesbian Children, Deviance, Identity  
Formation

## ABSTRACT

### When Parents Come Out as Parents of Gay and Lesbian Children: A Transformation of the Self

by

Crissy E. Stewart

This study examines how and why parents of gay and lesbian children come to join a support and advocacy group when same-sex attraction and sexuality are still considered deviant and immoral by the majority of society. Based on participant observation of and interviews with parents in two separate support and advocacy groups this study examines how parents come to define themselves in terms of the issues they are fighting for, in this case gay and lesbian acceptance, inclusion, and equality. This research also examines how parents formulate new religious convictions to satisfy their new parental role as supporter and advocate of their gay or lesbian child, all the while maintaining that they are normal, moral, and good parents, replacing this courtesy stigma with exemplary parenting. In addition, this study explores how parents re-tell stories from their child's past, using "retrospective interpretation" that foretell their child's gay or lesbian identity in adulthood. These stories rely on any deviation from culturally accepted and expected gender roles and norms, which are then interpreted as "evidence" or "indicators" that the child was always gay or lesbian and would be in adulthood as well. Furthermore, the parents create a new self based on their religious alterations and the location of artifacts in the child's past that predict a gay or lesbian identity.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The last 20 years of research on gay men and lesbians has shifted from documenting the social and psychological adjustment of gay men and lesbians to an interest in understanding broader social experiences and situations in their lives (Ben-Ari 1995). Research on the parents of gay and lesbian children is even more limited, yet in the past 10 years more research has emerged on the disclosure of sexual orientation to a parent by gay men and/or lesbians (D'Augelli, Hershberger, and Pilkington 1998; Ben-Ari 1995; Waldner and Magruder 1999), and the reactions to and consequences of this disclosure (Robinson, Walters, and Skeen 1989; Savin-Williams and Dube 1998; Beeler and DiProva 1999). All of the studies on parental response to the disclosure of a child's gay or lesbian sexual orientation are concerned with the initial response of parents and the stages of acceptance that follow. Other research available presents studies on sexual orientation and family development (Litzenberger and Bettenheim 1998) and gay intimate relationships and the available support for these (Meyer 1990).

When a child comes out to parents as a gay man or lesbian the accepted notion has been that the parents' discovery generally leads to a family crisis or to emotional distress (Troiden, 1989; Savin-Williams and Dube 1998; Boxer, Cook, and Herdt 1991; DeVine 1984; Mattison and McWhirter 1995; Robinson et al. 1989), and that a period of grief and mourning follow, from initial shock to eventual acceptance of their child (Savin-Williams and Dube 1998; DeVine 1984; Robinson et al. 1989). It is believed that parents experience grief similar to the grief felt by parents whose child has died

(Robinson et al. 1989), but they mourn their dreams and plans for their child. Robinson et al. (1989) also suggest that the parents then experience the birth of new dreams and a new relationship with their gay or lesbian child as they learn to accept their child's new identity. Coming out to family may lead to rejection, estrangement and maltreatment (Beeler and DiProva 1999) and such treatment does represent a significant social problem; yet research is available that shows that estrangement from family is the exception rather than the rule (Laird 1996; Robinson et al. 1989; Weston, 1991).

Some studies suggest that family members go through their own process of "coming out" to other family members, friends, and coworkers (Beeler and DiProva 1999; Crosbie-Burnett et al. 1996), and that parents decide when to disclose or conceal that they have a gay or lesbian family member. Beeler and DiProva (1999) suggest that parents construct a coherent story surrounding the gay or lesbian family member which becomes a family story embedded in the context of their history and current situation. Furthermore, it is suggested that family members tell stories from the past or "re-story" the past (Beeler and DiProva 1999) in an attempt to explain to others that the gay or lesbian child's actions and behaviors in youth are evidence that he or she would be gay or lesbian in adulthood. Schur (1971) calls this "retrospective interpretation," in which a deviant behavior has been identified in one individual, followed by others, who are close to this individual, "recognizing" apparent "indicators" of such deviation in earlier behavior. When this happens, Beeler and DiProva (1999) assert that innocuous pieces of information from the child's youth become loaded as they are reinterpreted by family and friends. When this reinterpretation of the past takes place the "evidence" available to "prove" that the child was always gay or lesbian, or would one day be gay or lesbian, is

usually based on stereotypical explanations of gay men and lesbians that are homophobic, sexist, and heteronormative. This “evidence” to “prove” that a child is gay or lesbian is comprised of incidents from the child’s past when they have defied traditional gender roles for men and women. Litzenger and Bettenheim (1998) state that because traditional gender roles are based on a heterosexual orientation, homosexuality disrupts not only expectations about the love object, but also expectations about gender itself. Pharr (1988) asserts that women and men who identify as gay or lesbian are, for the most part, hated because of the challenge they pose to gender norms. One of the biggest hurdles for parents whose child has come out as gay or lesbian is to reconcile the contradiction created between current normative gender roles and the assumption that a gay and lesbian sexual identity automatically defies these roles.

With all the problems that gays and lesbians, especially youth, face today, developing a positive gay or lesbian self-image suggests a healthy resolution of sexual identity issues (Waldner and Magruder 1999). However, the development of a gay and lesbian identity remains difficult because both resistance to heterosexual imperatives and creation of a homoerotic identity are required (D’Augelli 1994). Therefore, the same conflict that must be resolved in order for gay and lesbian persons to come to a healthy resolution of their own sexual identity is the same one that parents whose child has come out as gay/lesbian must also resolve: the contradiction of how, or if at all, to wed socially constructed heteronormative expectations with a gay or lesbian sexual identity.

Parents of gay and lesbian children may find that upon their child’s coming out that they are no longer just “parents” but that they are “the parents of lesbians and gay men” (Fields 2001), a title that could cause them to lose moral standing as a parent



because popular explanations for a child's homosexuality often implicate the parents. Katz (1975) contends that this loss of status could occur, but that these identities also lend authority since "parent" is a moral identity, "one that signals not only who or what a person is, but also that a person holds moral worth." When parents speak and advocate on behalf of their gay and lesbian children, they can offer compelling new models of how mainstream communities might embrace gay and lesbian people (Fields 2001). However, the parents' moral worth might rest on their having raised "normal" men and women (Fields 2001). Parents of gay and lesbian children, like others in close proximity to someone who is considered deviant, contend with a "courtesy stigma," which means that their stigma is *courtesy* of their child's deviant behavior or identity (Goffman 1963). Yet, the role of "parent" proves to be "a moral identity that lends straight mothers and fathers credibility as spokespersons for queer communities" (Fields 2001). As these "moral" spokespersons for gay and lesbian people, the parents attempt to redefine their children's deviance as well as restore a view of themselves as successful parents. The stories that the parents re-tell of their children's socially deviant identities is an attempt to "normify" their gay and lesbian children, but as these stories become the coming out stories of the parents these stories also attempt to "normify" their identities as well (Goffman 1963). The irony in this is that parents learn to accept their children as gay men and lesbians through this "normalization" (Fields 2001), a process that bases "normal" on heteronormative qualities and expectations, not on same-sex/queer values.

The parents I studied for this research were not very different. I became a participant observer at two chapters of the same national support and advocacy

organization, called Parents' Pride (pseudonym), for parents, friends, and family who wanted to learn more about, support, or advocate for a gay man or lesbian in their life.

### Importance of the Study

In a culture where parenthood is still considered one of the highest achievements in heterosexual adults' life, and where same-sex relationships are still, for the most part, considered a deviant sexual sub-culture, it is interesting to learn that there is a group of parents who are creating a place for both of these that allows the parents to maintain a high moral position as parents but also allows their gay and lesbian children to be "normal" within the larger culture. Parents are initially struck with the question of how to maintain their moral identities as parents *and* support a child who is gay or lesbian, when such a disclosure by a child reflects poorly on the parent(s). Stuck between two conflicting and opposing ideas that are not wed very easily, the parents found a place to accept and support their gay and lesbian children that still allowed them to be good and moral parents.

To do this, the parents altered some of their religious views regarding homosexuality and retold family stories to "prove" that their child was always gay and/or lesbian. With these new stories parents came to see their child's same-sex desires and relationships as "normal" and natural, not something that the child chose, but as something the child was born with. This new way of seeing their child's sexuality allowed the parents to accept their child's "deviance" as "normal," and it also allowed them to continue to embrace their church and religious doctrine, regardless of any teachings that traditionally classify same-sex desires and relationships as wrong. As a

result of this transformation the parents have become almost “superparents” (Fields 2001) and struggle to exceed normal expectations of parents. They claimed not only to be better parents and love their children more than other parents but also that their children were better men and women than others. Furthermore, they also claimed that they were better parents for having a gay or lesbian child. The significance of this research is that parents alter such strong beliefs regarding religion and homosexuality in order to fulfill assumed and socially constructed parental duties, such as being supportive of their children. Without abandoning their children or their religious views, parents resolve the conflict by slightly altering their religious views and the causes of homosexuality, making their child “normal” and themselves moral.

#### Overview of the Study

Chapter 2 discusses the methodological approach of this study. Chapter 3 is a discussion on how parents alter religious views and convictions to reach acceptance of a gay or lesbian child. Chapter 4 asserts that parents explain a child’s gay or lesbian sexuality by gender deviations remembered from the child’s past which serve to “prove” that a child would be gay or lesbian in adulthood. Chapter 5 explains how parents present a new self in order to wed their new ideas about religion, homosexuality, their children, and parenthood.

#### Definitions

*Coming out.* This is a term that refers to the disclosure of one’s gay or lesbian sexual orientation, most often a public declaration of being gay or lesbian. Throughout this thesis this term will refer to the coming out of gay and lesbian children to their

parents, but also to the coming out that parents do when they openly declare to friends and family that they have a gay or lesbian child.

*Coming out story.* An individual's personal story about one of the following: 1. realizing that she/he is lesbian/gay for the first time; 2. telling friends, family, or colleagues she/he is lesbian/gay; 3. having lesbian or gay sex for the first time; 4. being discovered involuntarily as lesbian/gay by family members, friends, or colleagues (The Lesbian Almanac, 1996). Most lesbians and gay men have more than one story. This research focuses on the coming out stories of parents who have gay and/or lesbian children who have disclosed their sexual orientation.

*Queer.* Since the early nineteenth century queer has been a derogatory term for homosexual, but it was reclaimed by radical lesbian, gay, and bisexual activists in the 1980s as a proud name for themselves, which resulted in the academic field called Queer Studies. "Queer" blurs both gender and sexual orientation and is regarded as more inclusive of difference than lesbian or gay (The Lesbian Almanac 1996). When queer is used in this paper it will be used in this latter manner.

*Straight.* This term refers to a heterosexual person or people.

*Lgbt.* This stands for "lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered." Other people use glbt, beginning the group with gay men instead of lesbians.

## CHAPTER 2

### METHODOLOGY

Parents' Pride (a pseudonym), is a local chapter of a national organization of the same name. I decided to study this organization of parents to see what made them different from non-supportive parents of gay men and lesbians. I wanted to know what made a parent seek out an organization such as Parents' Pride, and then what made them stay active members. I wanted to know how parents overcame religious hurdles and how they reconciled their child's sexual orientation when socially it is still deemed sinful, immoral, and deviant.

The national organization of Parents' Pride provided local chapters with brochures and other literature; issued position statements, led national political efforts, and hosted an annual convention that members of the local chapters could attend. In their annual membership applications, the two local chapters of Parents' Pride that I studied described their threefold mission that it shared with the national organization and other local affiliates: "to promote the health and well-being of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered persons, their families and friends through: support, to cope with an adverse society; education, to enlighten an ill-informed public; and advocacy, to end discrimination and to secure equal civil rights" (Parents' Pride Mission Statement). Parents' Pride held monthly meetings, conducted discussions at local schools, churches, and colleges; marched in local gay pride events; and addressed local policy makers, law enforcement, and school board members calling for the extension of civil rights to all gay and lesbian men and women.

To begin my study on parents of gay and lesbian children I began attending a Parents' Pride chapter once a month. Each meeting was an hour and a half long. I took notes at each of these meetings with each of the participant's consent beforehand and explained my purpose for being there. I began setting up and conducting personal face-to-face interviews immediately with every parent in the group who agreed to be interviewed. I interviewed six parents from this first chapter, which included two married couples. All the parents in this chapter had gay sons except one of the women who attended alone, and who had a lesbian daughter. All of the parents in this chapter had been active members of Parents' Pride for at least five years, and the average length of membership was 10 years. All of the parents' children were adults and lived somewhere else, so the parents never attended the meetings with their gay or lesbian child.

In order to explore the experiences of more parents I began attending another Parents' Pride chapter, which had, on average, 25 people in attendance. The meetings for this group met once a month and lasted two hours each. I took notes at the meetings, participated with other Parents' Pride members on panels at a local college and church, and attended a couple of Parents' Pride board meetings at the home of the chapter president. I conducted seven personal face-to-face interviews with the parents from this chapter who attended on a regular basis, ranging from a semi-new parent to the meetings (this mother had been attending for four months) to two couples who had been attending different Parent's Pride chapters for about 10 years each. Unlike the first chapter I observed, a couple of the children, who were both under 20, did attend the meetings with their parents.

In my fieldwork and later in my analysis of the Parents' Pride parents, I relied on a symbolic interactionist perspective, which is essentially a social-psychological perspective that focuses primarily on the social development of the individual. Its central task is to study how the individual develops socially as a result of participating in group life and to understand the meanings that people come to share in their dealings with each other.

#### Description of the Setting

Both of the Parents' Pride chapters that I attended met at a church, in each of the churches' libraries. The first chapter I attended met at a Unitarian church, the second met at an Episcopal Church. The meeting rooms at both churches were set up to enable all participating members and guests to be able to see one another, so the chairs were placed in a circle in the room.

Personal interviews at the homes of Parents' Pride parents were conducted in living rooms or dens, with usually a table of some sort between me and the parent(s) where I would place my tape recorder. All of the couples interviewed together except for one, and this was the only time an interview was conducted with another person in the house who was not participating in the interview.

#### Data Collection and Analysis

I attended Parents' Pride meetings once a month for 24 months (January 2000 to December 2001), and for a couple of months, I attended the meetings of both chapters. In all, I conducted personal face-to-face interviews with parents in 9 households, all of them in the home of the Parents' Pride parent(s). Of the 9 households, three included

married couples who were interviewed together (six interviewees) and seven parents were interviewed alone. In addition, in seven of the households the parent(s) had at least one gay son and in three of the households the parents had a total of three lesbian daughters. Each interview varied in length to one to three and a half-hours. I also conducted short follow-up e-mail interviews with some parents in order to clarify information gained from the interview. All of the interviews were tape recorded and transcribed in full. Once the interviews were transcribed I wrote “notes-on-notes,” in which I analyzed my observations, as well as my own experiences in the field setting (Kleinman and Copp 1993). Themes that emerged from this ongoing analysis guided further data collection, namely, the questions I would ask in subsequent interviews. The patterns that I explore in this study emerged from this process.



## CHAPTER 3

### RELIGIOUS ALTER(C)ATIONS

Most parents came to their first Parent's Pride meeting hoping to receive support from other parents who already experienced what they were now experiencing: a child's disclosure of a gay or lesbian sexual orientation. These parents also sought knowledge about an issue that, for most of them, they knew virtually nothing. Most of the parents stated that they believed that by listening and talking to Parent's Pride parents who had already been through what they were now going through, they would somehow come to a better understanding of homosexuality and learn how to support their child. Parents also just needed understanding and a sympathetic ear in a place where they knew such a dialogue would be safe to have. As Mae, a Parent's Pride mother of a gay son, explained to me during her interview:

I got involved in Parent's Pride because it was the only safe place to go for me...we had known that our son was gay for about ten years and I had nobody that I knew of that was safe to talk to, so when we finally moved to another place and found a Parent's Pride, then I finally had a place to get information and to talk to people that I knew was [sic] safe. Who do you talk to? And so I didn't have anybody to talk to and it was very...it was very frustrating, it was a hard ten years. (Interview)

Davis (1961) asserts that individuals with visible handicaps seek out other visibly handicapped individuals or "safe" places, where they can feel comfortable being themselves without fear of rejection or open prejudice. Many Parents' Pride parents did this same thing, echoing Mae in her need to talk, her need for knowledge, her need to feel safe, and her need for closure on this gaping hole in their lives for which they sought answers. Put another way, parents sought a place where they could go and be honest that

would be stigma-free. Cathy, a mother of a gay son and one of the Parent's Pride presidents and facilitators, said that most parents "come for support and to learn more about their son or daughter"(Interview). When I asked her what she thought parents expected to gain from the meetings she said:

Knowledge. Understanding. An understanding of others like them, because you feel very isolated as parents...I think people come for support and for knowledge, to learn more, to understand more.

Audrey, a mother of a lesbian daughter stated that she "think[s] most of them [parents] come probably to have a place where they can begin to feel educated and find some consolation and direction" (Interview), while Rodney, a father of a gay son, stated that:

I think a big part of what helps people is the simple fact of learning that they are not alone and they are not the first ones to go through this. And the feelings that they are feeling and the questions they are asking are probably the feelings and questions that other people have dealt with. And I think just in general it is very helpful to know that whatever it is we are experiencing is not something that is unique and a first time event and that other people have experienced it.  
(Interview)

What parents expected to get out of the Parents' Pride meetings and what they actually received over the long run are for the most part two different things. As the parents stated above, they wanted information, knowledge, someone to talk to, a feeling of safety, and to know they were not alone. What most of the parents received from their Parent's Pride membership seems much more substantial than this support by other parents.

Once the parents found a safe and understanding environment where they could get support and knowledge from other parents, they were faced with further and more difficult hurdles. One of the most significant challenges or struggles for Parents' Pride parents was their need to support their children eventhough many of their churches

vilified homosexuality. Most of the parents I interviewed identified themselves as very religious and most of them attended their church of choice each Sunday morning. The parents I interviewed also wanted to be good parents and do what was right for their children but found it difficult at first to reconcile the contradiction created between their church's position against homosexuality and their child's coming out as a homosexual. For many parents this contradiction is too great and their religious convictions too strong, and children are not accepted or supported by their families or their churches. For the Parents' Pride parents I interviewed, their desire to be good parents outweighed their reliance on such stringent dogmatic tenets. They altered their religious beliefs in order to accept their children as gay and lesbian people and to continue to be religious people themselves.

The Parents' Pride meetings helped parents reach this place of acceptance by the chapter's claim that sexuality, even homosexuality, is not a choice, but God-given, and they defended this argument with explanations or "proof" told through stories that their child showed signs of being gay or lesbian even in childhood, which I analyze in Chapter 4. In order for all of the parents to feel comfortable about their children and about their religious convictions in relation to homosexuality, the group as a whole implicitly bought into a new set of religious beliefs, despite opposing religions and doctrines, even if this new set was not openly presented or discussed. Christianity, local churches, religious associations, religious spokespersons, and doctrines were discussed a lot at the meetings of the two Parents' Pride chapters; however, the parents never discussed their religious beliefs per se. However, there was an understanding that the organization itself had adopted a certain religious and political stand, and as members, the parents stood behind

this stand. It seemed that most parents approached the issue of homosexuality and religion from very different standpoints, yet I think it is also very important to remember that they belonged to a larger organization, Parents' Pride, which espoused beliefs regarding homosexuality and religion. The organization's stance is that homosexuality is a normal sexual expression and that religious teachings can be and are loosely interpreted. As regular and active members of this organization, parents were aware that there existed a certain number of possible choices for them to adopt to explain how they believed and why they believed their son or daughter was not immoral, sinful, and/or deviant. Once the parents decided to accept that this was how they wanted to explain support for their gay or lesbian child, they then created their own story or journey to acceptance.

The reactions to a child's disclosure of a gay or lesbian sexual orientation differed from parent to parent, yet for many of the parents their religious background and beliefs served as their central stumbling block. In interviews I specifically asked parents if any religious beliefs had in any way made it difficult for them to support their child when he/she initially came out to them. Bob, a retired Methodist minister with two gay sons, told me in a joint interview with his wife, Carolyn, that "at one time we were very conservative fundamentalist Christians" but that now they attended the Unitarian Universalist church. Another Parents' Pride couple from this same chapter told me in a joint interview that they thought Bob and his wife Carolyn were not Christian, yet Carolyn states that:

Our orientation growing up and well into adulthood was mainline Christian. Through the years we've questioned and discarded as irrelevant much of what we were taught that we just HAD to believe; but we still consider ourselves Christian.

A number of our fundamentalist family members would not agree, nor would our Southern Baptist neighbors. (E-mail interview)

With their religious conversion came a religious acceptance for gay and lesbian people in Bob and Carolyn's eyes.

Tom and Mae, the proud parents of a gay son, attend the Parent's Pride chapter that Bob and Carolyn founded. During my interview with them, Tom told me that he and his wife belonged to three different churches, an American Baptist church, a Methodist church, and the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC), and he joked that, "We're gonna make it to heaven one way or another." For Tom and Mae, religion and their religious beliefs were very important. Tom said in the interview that, "I prayed that God would change him [their son]" and Mae added that they thought their son's sexuality was just a phase, and that it was not permanent, but that, "I pushed it back, I tried not to deal with it." Later in the interview Tom tells me again that:

I used to pray you know, that God would change him, well for a long time I prayed that this wasn't true even when I realized this was true. "God, make him change this, help him so that he can have a normal life,"...and so one night I was, this is an important incident, in prayer and then I got this message [from God]: "Tom, you know I don't work that way." I thought, where did that come from, you know it wasn't verbal, it was just in my mind. That was God's way of saying he [their son] is what he is. That's when I really came to grips with—this is the way God made him, up until that point I wasn't ready to accept that God made him that way, I figured he was that way by accident or something, but he wasn't made that way.

For Tom to accept his gay son he needed to feel that his son's sexuality was something God-given and natural, which would eliminate for him all ideas that his son could possibly be a sinner, immoral and deviant. Mae did not have a transformation like Tom's, but she seemed share his beliefs, perhaps because of his powerful new conviction.

Understanding that a lot of religions and many Christian denominations view homosexuality as a sin against God, Judy was very thankful that she and her husband Rodney attended an Episcopal church, although she was raised Catholic. Judy said she began questioning her Catholic faith when she was in parochial school and adds that, “God was out to get you and you better not commit a sin.” She also stated that:

[I do] not take the Bible literally. I really believe that God loves everyone, whether they are Catholic, or Buddhist, or Jewish, or Atheist or whatever. And that nobody has the right to tell you what’s sinful or bad.

She also stated that sometimes she would like to be able to go back to Catholicism, but that:

There are many things about the Catholic church that I don’t agree with and I get angry...not just for their stand on homosexuality...but their issues about abortion and divorce...who knows how much of this is God’s plan.

Judy added that:

My being an Episcopalian at the time this all came out [son’s coming out] for me was probably very, very healthy...so I never had to struggle with that, thank God...and I never struggle with the religious stuff at all.

She later mentioned that she thinks sexuality is genetic and that it is “ridiculous” to think it could be a choice. This idea that sexuality, both heterosexuality and homosexuality, is genetic or inevitable ideologically removes the sin from the issue and, for religious persons, makes it God-given, natural, and “normal.”

Claudia, the mother of a gay son who died from AIDS, had a somewhat different relationship with religion and its stance on sexuality. She stated that:

We didn’t have that religious thing, I have a lot of faith and I believe in God, and I go to church, and the kids were brought up in the church, but Aaron [my son] left the church way back, I don’t think he had been to church since, and I did not have a minister when he was dying, he didn’t ask for that...and I didn’t have a minister when we spread his ashes here...so he didn’t have that religious baggage

and I don't and his dad was not religious at all, he never went to church after the kids were baptized...but I see anybody with [a] fundamental religious background as tortured.

Claudia also stated that her son was born gay and that she never really anguished or lamented over his coming out as a gay man. She added:

I don't ever remember feeling, you know, Oh why did this happen to us, or any guilt...it's just the way things are, I firmly believe that, and he did also, that it's probably in the genes, and that maybe environment has something to do with it, but, I really think you're born that way, you don't change...I think it's genetic.

Much like Judy, Claudia saw her sons sexuality as inevitable, which allowed it to be viewed as natural and "normal," even in God's eyes.

Cathy and Levi, who had a gay son, were also very religious and belonged to a non-denominational church. Cathy was the president and facilitator of one of the local Parent's Pride chapters. When asked whether sexuality was a choice Cathy stated that, "I always had the opinion that it wasn't a choice, I never thought it, but when I did think about it I remember thinking...they don't choose to live like that, they just are."

Lydia, the mother of a lesbian daughter, said she did not have any religious issues concerning her daughter's disclosure as a lesbian because she is Jewish. I asked her how Judaism viewed homosexuality and she stated:

I think it wasn't even brought up in the Old Testament from my studies. And I don't have any of the New Testament garbage to make me feel guilty, you know, like Christians do...the Old Testament is it. Religion is important to us. I've raised the girls to be practicing Jews and they're proud of their religion and they know that whatever children they have...please let them be raised as Jews.

Although the Old Testament does contain homo-prejudiced teachings, these were not present in Lydia's studies, so for her they did not really exist, although she expressed later on that Orthodox Jews view homosexuality very differently and more conservatively. Then Lydia stated:

Well the way I look at it is...God made us all, so he made...my parents were racially prejudiced, and I just never could understand that because God made black people too. And God made short people and God made tall people and God made gay people and God made straight people, so how could anything be wrong with any of it. God made them all, and that's just probably again my naïve look at things, but it's kept me happy.

For Lydia her support for her lesbian daughter and her beliefs concerning homosexuality were directly linked to her liberal and unproblematic interpretation of religious doctrine.

In their efforts to maintain religion as an important force in their lives, and to be able to accept a child who, the majority of churches and people in society consider as deviant, the Parents' Pride parents had to resolve the contradictions that existed between these two opposing needs in their lives. Some of the parents altered the religious teachings that they once believed in completely, while others leaned more on biological or genetic explanations or causes of homosexuality that allowed them an ideological back door: the idea that homosexuality was not a "choice," and, therefore, was God-given. All of the parents resolved their conflict between homosexuality and the church by employing one of these methods of acceptance; both methods offered the same conclusion for the parents: that their children were born gay or lesbian and that they could accept both their religion and their child's sexuality.



## CHAPTER 4

### GENDER DEVIATIONS AS “PROOF”

Parents approached gender in a similar way to how they approached religion, yet they shared more ideas regarding gender than they did religion because they subscribed to most of the same heteronormative and gendered roles for men and women. Gender, unlike religion, is clearly defined in this culture. To the parents, there were men and there were women and there were understood and often vocalized gender role expectations for both of them. There was masculine and there was feminine and these represented certain behaviors and characteristics that were assigned respectively to men and women, and any people who deviated from these categories became suspect. Almost every parent interviewed for this study in some way explained his/her child’s eventual disclosure of a gay or lesbian sexual identity by indicating their atypical behaviors for their gender. Parents, at Parent’s Pride meetings, would critically condemn the use of stereotyped assumptions made by non-members regarding lgbt people, yet in the personal interviews, parent after parent would explain that, looking back, they knew their child was gay or lesbian by use of some of these same stereotypes about gender expectations and gender no-nos. Culturally, we think gender roles and expectations are biologically determined, just as parents thought a deviation from these same gender norms and roles determined a gay or lesbian sexuality.

Lydia, whose daughter is a lesbian, explained to me that when her daughter was 6 or 7 she said, “She was going to grow up to be a man” and later said that, “If she was a boy she wouldn’t have to wear a dress to Temple” (E-mail Interview). These two

incidents stand out to Lydia as predictors of some sort that her daughter would be a lesbian, although after mentioning these she retracted them and said her daughter's twin wanted to do the same thing and that she was straight. It is not considered natural or socially acceptable for a girl to want to be a man when she grows up because this supposedly defies something innately present in women that would make them want to be the antithesis of men and anything manly. Furthermore, socially constructed norms, such as dress-wearing for girls, if rejected, are seen as a further defiance of something innately and biologically female. Because most parents thought these roles and norms were somehow biologically determined, any deviation from these served as signs that something must be askew with the natural order.

Debra, the newest Parent's Pride member who had a 15 year-old gay son, stated that she always knew her son was gay, yet she reported that he questioned his sexuality and tried to figure out if in fact he was really gay or if this was just something he was going through. She told me:

he has no interest in women, he never has...I mean the boys used to tease him when he was growing up because he wanted to carry a purse, and he always played with all the girls...he never liked that boy stuff. (Interview)

For Debra, her son's sexuality was directly linked to his association with "girl" things, like playing with girls and carrying a purse, but also linked to his lack of interest in typical "boy stuff." These culturally scripted activities became loaded explanations for Debra, as they did with most of the parents, and serve as answers to why their child was biologically gay or lesbian.

Mae and Tom, who had a gay son, said they thought, looking back, that they knew their son was gay because he did not date and had a lot of guy friends. Not dating

and having a lot of male friends does not necessarily predict that a boy will be gay as an adult, but for Tom and Mae it seemed to be a significant indicator based on gender roles and expectations for males.

Cathy and Levi said that their older son blames himself for his gay brother's sexual orientation, and contends that it is because the older brother did not spend enough time with him. Spending time with the brother would presumably entail teaching him a heterosexual perspective, ironically through same-sex companionship. It also suggests that Cathy and Levi's son's "problem" is insufficient socialization to the heterosexual masculine role. They assert that this is "real natural" for people to think this, but yet this theory of socialization conflicts with biological explanations for sexual orientation, which would, therefore, mean that gendered activities determine sexuality and sexual behavior.

Bob and Carolyn, who have two gay sons, assert that before their youngest son came out that they had noticed a "swishy" movement with one of his legs when he played tennis, but that the older gay son had gone through some "obsessive behavior, excessive handwashing, etcetera." For Bob and Carolyn, the need to be able to identify their children as gay in the past also indicates a need to prove that they were always aware that their sons were different in some way, which would prevent anyone from pointing a finger at them to scrutinize their parent-child relationships or their attachment to their children and family. However, in the process, they base a gay/lesbian sexuality on a deviant and socially unacceptable behavior, such as "swishy" movements in men, and "obsessive/excessive behavior."

Judy, who had a gay son, said she could look back and see things that could have predicted that her son would be gay, but she still asserted that she had absolutely no idea

that he was gay. However, she could still find aspects of his past that could be predictors of a gay sexual orientation. She stated:

[he] was never the jockey type...and he was very close to his sister...the house we had in Maryland had a...little playhouse for kids and I remember my daughter in there with an apron on and a broom and her good friend sweeping it out and playing house and Daniel would join in these activities...he also had male friends...a lot of female girlfriends and his group kind of did things in bunches, he really didn't have a serious girlfriend. (Interview)

Judy also told me that when her son came out he did it officially before her and her husband and their other children, to get it out in the open for everyone at the same time. After he said he was gay, Judy stated that he immediately said, "Mom, this isn't your fault," because as Judy assumed, he was aware of the social psychological theory that attributes same-sex desires to an over-involved mother and a passive father. Daniel refuted parent-blaming theories by explaining that his sexual orientation was biological, his way to reassure his parents that he was always gay and that it was not caused by environmental forces, such as parenting style or parental characteristics.

Rodney, the father of a gay son and Judy's husband, said that he had absolutely no idea that his son was gay when he came out to their family. Rodney also stated that he did not have an idea because his son did not have "effeminate behavior" but that since the son had been out he had seen some "little mannerisms." When Rodney looked back to find indicators in Daniel's past, he said that he did not have a steady girlfriend and that he never got into that "boy/girl stuff" but said this was not unusual because their older son was the same way, as was he himself. Rodney added that maybe Daniel did not date because the interest was not there. Although he found no indicators in his child's past that could have predicted that he would be gay, Rodney said that it could have been that his son was not stereotypically gay, in this case meaning that he was not effeminate. Rodney

did not think his child was gay, but this was based on the same logic that gendered behaviors predict sexuality. Because there were no obvious or stereotypical indicators present, Daniel must, therefore, be straight, he thought.

In Edwin Schur's (1971) research on labeling, he explains that this process is called "retrospective interpretation" and that it often occurs when people come to see a deviator or expected deviator in "a new light." Kitsuse (1962), in his research on reactions to deviant behavior, found that people perceive a person to be a deviator first, then they "recognize" apparent "indicators" of such deviation in earlier behavior. In this same research, Kitsuse analyzed the responses related to imputed homosexuality and found that, "The subjects indicate that they reviewed their past interactions with the individuals in question, searching for subtle cues and nuances of behavior which might give further evidence of the alleged deviance." As Kitsuse states, this retrospective reading provided the subjects with just enough evidence to support that this was going on all along. Furthermore, Schur states that the ramifications of such a rereading of an individual are basic to how the labeling process "creates" deviants and explains that this is especially apparent in psychiatric treatment. He asserts that theories of mental illness come close to requiring that past histories, past lives, and records be thoroughly gone over in order to find "evidence" that support current diagnoses. Harold Garfinkel describes what is involved in this process:

The work of the denunciation effects the recasting of the objective character of the perceived other: The other person becomes in the eyes of his condemners literally a different and *new* person. It is not that the new attributes are added to the old "nucleus." He is not changed, he is reconstituted. The former identity, at best, receives the accent of mere appearance...the former identity stands as accidental; the new identity is the "basic reality." What he is now is what, "after all," he was all along.

For many of the parents in this study, identifying deviations from expected gender roles provided “proof” that their child was gay or lesbian all along. Locating indicators in the child’s past was how the parents rationalized their child’s sexuality. By employing the process of retrospective interpretation, the parents came to believe that their child was gay or lesbian all along, which enabled the parents to also view homosexuality as something that was not consciously chosen. This allows the parents to not have to think about their child *choosing* to live such a deviant “lifestyle,” plus by viewing homosexuality as something other than a choice, all the parents were able to then accept their child’s sexual orientation as natural, biological, and God-given. Furthermore, by viewing homosexuality this way the parents eliminated themselves from being possible causes for their child’s homosexuality. Chapter 5 explains how this also allowed parents to maintain their role as a good parent who is aware of the goings-on of his/her child(ren). To not know something as significant as a child’s sexuality might mean that one is an unobservant and detached parent, which would symbolize a negative parent-child relationship but could also be indicative of poor parenting.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE PRESENTATION OF A NEW SELF

When a child comes out as gay or lesbian, parents experience a wide range of emotions. Robinson, Walters, and Skeen state that parents experience grief similar to the grief felt by parents whose child has died (1989) and others assert that a child's disclosure of their gay/lesbian identity causes a crisis within the family that in turn causes irrevocable damage to the parent-child relationship (Troiden 1989; Savin-Williams 1989; DeVine 1984; Boxer et al. 1991). However, grieving models suggest that resolution of the grieving process will lead to acceptance (Kubler-Ross 1969). A child comes out, parents grieve (although not all do), a change occurs in them, and they move to acceptance of their gay/lesbian child in a heterosexual, heterosexist, and homophobic world. Oft times parents even move beyond just acceptance and become powerful advocates and spokespersons for their children as well as for all gay and lesbian persons. Their support for their child transcends their child and is available to all gay and lesbian people because they do not all have such parental support. So how do parents get to that point of acceptance?

While coming out to parents has been recognized as one of the most difficult and at the same time most important tasks a lesbian or gay man might face, most theoretical stage models have largely ignored the role of parents in the process (Savin-Williams 1989). There is also little research available to suggest that parents also need to come out as parents of gay and lesbian children, although Fields (2001) does assert that the parent's identity evolves from just being a "parent" to becoming the "parents of lesbians and gay men." Parents can come to accept their gay or lesbian child because they love them, but

then the process of coming out becomes their hurdle. The history of their journey to acceptance then becomes their coming out story as parents with a gay or lesbian child. This journey to acceptance, however, is one that, for a lot of parents serves as a significant marker in their lives as men and women, as parents, as members of a community, as political citizens and voters, and as religious church-goers. This transformed self is then the self that is proudly presented to others and this journey to a new self is one that the parents would not want to trade. For most of the parents their identity as parents changed. They moved from accepting their gay or lesbian children to accepting themselves as supportive and active parents of gay or lesbian children, as well as the need to present this new self to their friends, families, and communities. This transition then serves as an important marker for these parents, for they became more than supportive and active, they became a new breed of parent almost, “good” parents who could never consider rejecting a child at all. They became people who also needed to come out and tell their story of their journey to this new self, irrespective of their gay or lesbian child’s own coming out. Their Parents’ Pride membership, as well as their new “good” parent image/role then became almost the central focus of their lives. Audrey, who has a lesbian daughter, said that:

I have come to appreciate a whole segment of the population that would have been pretty much hidden from me...I would really hate not to have had the experience of knowing gay people...I’m probably a different person than if all three of my kids had been straight. And I think that our kids are enriched and our grandkids by knowing that...particularly with Sarah being their role model, they see Sue and gay as being together and that’s a good positive kind of thing for them.

Audrey also relayed a story to me about a man whom she had recently met who said that all three of his children were gay. The man said that if he could give a pill to all of his



children to make them straight that he would not do it, and Audrey agreed with him “and I feel the same way about Sarah.”

When I asked parents if their Parents’ Pride membership and their acceptance of their gay or lesbian child had become central to their lives and to their identities as parents, the responses varied, yet their stories and advocacy and language used to describe this aspect of their lives seemed to say one thing: support and advocacy for lgbt persons is central. Lydia, a parent of a lesbian daughter, stated that her Parents’ Pride membership was no more a part of her identity than being a court appointed child advocate “is a part of my identity. Or being a professor at the university is a part of my identity.” A person’s occupational identity can be such a central part of a person’s life and identity, that it can dictate who they will become, how they will act, and how they will be addressed and treated, yet Lydia equated her position as a professor at a local university with her Parents’ Pride membership and her volunteer work as a court appointed child advocate.

When asked about how central her Parents’ Pride membership and support of gay and lesbian people were to her, Mae, a mother of a gay son, stated that, “I don’t think it’s central but I feel it’s important, we try to go every month.” She said that other things are more important, like their “quiet symbols” they have around the house, which included a rainbow flag hanging from the front porch, pro-gay/lesbian stickers on the windows by the kitchen door, and a rainbow votive in the den. With this said, Mae and her husband Tom explained all the things they do in their life that contradict her earlier statement that Parent’s Pride is important but not central. Mae and Tom never skip a Parents’ Pride meeting at their local chapter, and at one meeting of the other Parents’ Pride group that I

attended Tom was their guest speaker, and Mae was there to support him. Mae and Tom attend a Metropolitan Community Church (MCC), which is a special ministry for gays and lesbians, where they are only one of two straight couples who attend. Tom also preaches at the MCC church one Sunday out of the month because it does not have a full-time preacher. At this church Tom and Mae also attend the board meetings, were a part of the group that chartered the church, and consider themselves the adoptive parents to a few of the gay and lesbian parishioners. Mae says that for a while they were the only straight couple at the MCC church until an older couple started coming, with this she added, “We’re not the token parents anymore” and Tom added, “We joined the MCC to be more supportive.” Mae said that they “talk up Parents’ Pride at church whenever we can, because we feel it’s important” and she said that she and Tom will not knowingly go into a situation where, “We can’t be ourselves, because we had a small experience of what it’s like, what the gays and lesbians must have to go through to stay in the closet” (Interview). Here Mae likens their having to be quiet and discreet about their support for their gay son and gay and lesbian people to what it must be like to be a sexual minority forced to remain in the closet by hatred and fear. To Mae, being out of the closet allows her and Tom to “be ourselves,” a term which refers directly to their identity as supportive parents who must be allowed freedom to express this support openly.

Tom has also preached sermons on homosexuality at his past churches, none of which were MCC churches, and has gone before the deacons before joining any church to make sure that he and Mae could “be out and open” (Interview). Mae and Tom also explained to me that they send out a newsletter each Christmas to family and friends and once they explained in it that they had come out in church, that their son was gay and that

they support him as he is. In subsequent newsletters they provide everyone with updates on what they are doing in Parents' Pride and politically to support the lgbt "issue." Mae and Tom even call their son's partner their "son-in-love" because he cannot legally be a son-in-law. For Mae and Tom their support of their child as a gay man, and their support for all gay and lesbian people as a group, seems very central and almost consuming in their lives. The time and energy they spend being advocates and being supportive parents is tremendous.

Tom and Mae are not the only parents who have made their support of and advocacy for gay and lesbian people such a central and primary focus in their lives. Judy and Rodney were less hesitant to admit the centrality of their support and advocacy than Tom and Mae. Rodney and Judy have been Parents' Pride parents for over 10 years. When asked how she defined herself in relation to her support and advocacy for lgbt people and issues, Judy said:

It's part of my life I guess. It doesn't dominate my life, but you know, I'm out and I am there and it's cool...for me it is a part of my identity as a mother. I think it has made me aware of how much I love my kid...You know, looking back on ten years, my comfort [with lgbt issues] is part of my life, it's part of my identity as a mother. Yeah, I think I have incorporated my journey and all that into who I am as a person. I am a better person for it.

Judy admitted that her struggle at this point in her support and advocacy was to decide "how far I am going to come out." When asked if his support and advocacy was central to his identity, Rodney said:

I think so. Certainly I am sensitive to and aware of, you know gay issues and also transgendered [issues]...I'm pretty well sensitized to that too. It's certainly part of me that one our kids is gay and as a result of that I have a lot of concern about society's thoughts and actions relative to gays...[it's a part of] who we are and part of who our family is.

Judy and Rodney were present at every monthly meeting of Parents' Pride and Judy had accepted a position as officer in the local Parents' Pride. The day I interviewed them, Rodney was busy writing a letter to the editor of the local newspaper regarding the Boy Scouts and their stance on gays in their ranks and Judy confided to me that she worries that wearing a pin around town that says "Parents' Pride is family" or "I love my gay son" will be too risky for her.

Audrey had completely worked through all of her problems concerning having a lesbian daughter by the time she attended her first Parents' Pride meeting. She said she decided to join because, "I thought I could be helpful to other people who were just finding out, because when I had found out it was just devastating and I didn't have anybody to talk to about it, so I think basically I thought...I could be helpful to others" (Interview). She also says that after she came to accept her daughter it was difficult for her to be out because her daughter's partner was a minister and they all had to remain closeted for her sake. Once the daughter's partner left the ministry Audrey said it was easier for her to be as out as she felt comfortable being and stated that "living with secrets is no way to live. I like having it open" (Interview). Audrey also attended Parents' Pride once a month, every month and at one point was even the coordinator and facilitator.

Like Tom and Mae, Audrey attended both of the Parents' Pride chapters that I studied.

Many parents I interviewed dramatically highlighted examples of their advocacy which would have remained unavailable to me otherwise, and as Goffman states (1959), "For if the individual's activity is to become significant to others, [s]he must mobilize his[her] activity so that it will express during the interaction what [s]he wishes to convey." It seemed important to the parents that I know all the work they had done for

the lgbt community. Bob and Carolyn were parents of two gay sons, they were also co-facilitators of one of the Parents' Pride chapters, a chapter that they started 10 years ago. Before they started this chapter they attended the other chapter of Parents' Pride that is a part of this research. On the day that I interviewed them, before I could even start the tape recorder, Carolyn told me that she and Bob had appeared on the front page of their local newspaper promoting Parents' Pride and acceptance of gay and lesbians. Carolyn told me that her Parents' Pride membership is:

Extremely important. Not a day goes by that some facet of our involvement doesn't come up: e-mails, snail mail, newsletter, phone calls, whatever. We do have other interests, however, and we try to maintain a balance. (E-mail Interview)

Bob and Carolyn provided me with a lot of lgbt resources, just off the top of their heads, like websites to look up, and e-mail listserves to become a part of to get newspaper clippings from all over the country relating to lgbt topics and news. They also said that they subscribe to both *Out* and *The Advocate*, two national gay and lesbian magazines. They also told me about a young couple who was kicked out of their house because they were gay and who had to go to a number of court proceedings over the original dispute. Bob and Carolyn took the young men into their home for a while and attended all the court appearances with them to support them through this matter. During our three-hour long interview Bob and Carolyn referred to their gay sons as "our gay sons" and referred to their straight son as "our non-gay son," differentiating their sons solely on their relationship to a gay sexuality. Bob and Carolyn are also extremely active in their community writing letters to the editor of the newspaper on a regular basis and working hard to challenge the sheriff's department concerning a video that they show to schools

on satanism which equates gayness with devil worship. Their work does not stop there. They are even working hard to get the Texas company that made the film to repudiate the video completely and to create another one that does not vilify non-Christians and lgbt people (Fieldnotes). Claudia, who attended the Parents' Pride group that Bob and Carolyn facilitated, said that promoting lgbt issues and supporting and advocating for lgbt people and rights "is her [Carolyn's] life's work."

Judy stated that she and her husband Rodney had been out at a concert one night and had seen a young gay couple in a row up ahead of them. She remembered that she whispered to Rodney that she wanted to walk up to them and hug them (Interview). Like Judy, most of the parents carried their support, acceptance, and advocacy almost like a badge that never left them. Judy also worried about whether she should in fact wear real badges that would automatically identify her as a parent of a gay son, an out and supportive parent, as well as a member of Parents' Pride. Tom and Mae wore their real badges too, but on their home, in the form of a rainbow flag and lgbt friendly stickers that let visitors and passers-by know that their home was a safe and hate free zone, but specifically for lgbt people and their allies. Mae called these "silent" symbols but she stated that these were very important. These badges served almost as a way to advertise the self that the parents wanted to present. Another way to look at this might be that the parents did not want their "audience" (Goffman 1959) to assume other things about them that might contradict this new self and the ideas that accompanied this self.

There is a popular view that exists that asserts that people put on public "shows for the benefit of the people" and that public actors can be fully taken in by their own acts, convincing themselves that the impression of reality which they are staging is the

real reality (Goffman 1959). For the Parents' Pride parents I interviewed I think they believed their performances were authentic, just as I think they thought this new self they now presented was a real self, created after much work to resolve personal conflicts they held about religion, homosexuality, deviance and parenthood. The Parents' Pride parents I got to meet seemed to identify very strongly in their role as Parent's Pride parents and what that meant that they supported, accepted and advocated for all gay and lesbian people.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

After a thorough review of available qualitative data on parents who have experienced the disclosure of a child's gay or lesbian sexual identity, it is clear that more research needs to be done on parents as a group who have experienced such a disclosure. For decades the research available on parents of gays and lesbians focused narrowly on reactions and responses to the disclosure. Jessica Field's (2001) research on parents who belong to a group similar to Parents' Pride is the only research available that asserts that as parents accept their child's gay or lesbian identity, they eventually construct and present their own new identities. The new identity that parents presented in Fields' research was as exemplary parents or "superparents," because they had embraced a stigmatized child as well as the whole stigmatized gay and lesbian community.

This research indicates that in order to maintain respectable images of themselves, while at the same time accepting a child who is culturally and religiously thought of as immoral, sinful, and deviant, the parents recreate their identities to encompass a stance of acceptance, support, and advocacy. At the same time, parents redefine, as well as magnify, traditional parental roles and assign new meaning to them. In order for this to happen, the parents alter their religious beliefs regarding homosexuality as well as use deviations from childhood traditional gender role expectations to serve as "proof" or "evidence" that their child's homosexuality was inevitable. This is accomplished when the parents employ the process of retrospective interpretation and attach significant



meaning to innocuous historical artifacts in the child's past and interpret these as the real "proof" necessary to indicate that a gay or lesbian sexuality was inevitable. To present the child's sexuality as inevitable the parents are allowing themselves to accept that their child's sexual orientation is either God-given or biological, both of which take the blame off their children and themselves. With this the parents disavow their child's deviance (Davis 1961) which allows them to normalize their child's sexual behavior. As the child's behavior is normalized, the courtesy stigma (Goffman 1963), or any feeling of being a vicarious secondary deviant, has also been lifted, and the parents are not only once again good parents but, as Fields (2001) asserts, "superparents." Parents internalize this superparent idea because so many parents still do not accept their gay and lesbian children, and they become a special minority of parents. The parents take on their children's sexual identity as a cause and are transformed into heroic and exceptional parents. Parents then solidify this new identity, prepare answers to opposing viewpoints, and the new self emerges through the well-practiced coming out story. Some of the parents I met were strong and proud in their new convictions and self-righteous about their beliefs. Some of the parents became at times, almost like the religious people who vilify their children and who are so "right" in their perspectives. Some of the parents seemed to proselytize their version of "right" in very similar ways, and were unsympathetic and judgmental of people who had variant views.

The self that the parents presented in the end was one that embodied sacrifice and selflessness, all in the name of their child(ren). The parents accepted and supported their children against all odds, and their personal mission thereafter seemed to mirror the Parents' Pride mission in its attempt to support, educate, and advocate for LGBT persons.

The advocacy work done by parents was an effort to secure equal civil rights and end discrimination for all lgbt people, yet, ironically, it seems that without the continuation of homo-prejudice, something these parents combat on a daily basis, they might not be able to retain their “superparent” statuses.

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