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Come out, stay out, stand out: Eight stories of gay and lesbian high school students

Nicholas J. Pace
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
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COME OUT, STAY OUT, STAND OUT:
EIGHT STORIES OF GAY AND LESBIAN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

An Abstract of a Dissertation
Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

Approved:

Dr. John K. Smith, Committee Chair

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July 2005

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ABSTRACT

Existing research, though limited, portrays a bleak picture for gay and lesbian students. The majority of the literature is of a quantitative nature and often reveals many challenges for gay and lesbian students, including verbal and physical harassment, low self-esteem, poor grades, and a particularly high risk of suicide, among other dangers. As a result, many gay and lesbian students remain “in the closet.”

In 2000 a scholarship was established in honor of Matthew Shepard, a University of Wyoming student who was the victim of an anti-gay murder. The Matthew Shepard Scholarship is a privately-funded award given annually to openly gay and lesbian high school students in Iowa, covering books, tuition, and fees at an Iowa regents’ institution. While sexual orientation has commanded significant attention in the media and political landscape, research into the school experiences of gay and lesbian high school students, particularly research of a qualitative nature that captures the nuances and uniqueness of students’ individual experiences, is notably lacking.

Eight Matthew Shepard Scholarship winners were interviewed in this qualitative inquiry to gain an understanding of their lives and school experiences. Triangulated in-depth interviews were analyzed to identify emerging themes. Their experiences reveal that, while each faced significant challenges related to their sexual orientation, they are much like their heterosexual peers in terms of a universal human need for acceptance. Coming out was a turning point for gaining acceptance, which in turn allowed them to ultimately be selected as Matthew Shepard Scholars. Their status as scholarship winners

further enhanced their lives, despite the burdens of being gay or lesbian in a homophobic society.

The research offers a number of implications for educators. Among them are the importance of acceptance and a need for greater awareness from educators in addressing homophobic and hostile school atmospheres. The results also demonstrate a desire among the students to bring about change through existing channels. It also identifies a need for more research into gay and lesbian students' experiences and the need to acknowledge the presence of gay and lesbian students in all types of school settings.

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Dr. Lynn E. Nielsen, Committee Member

Dr. Victoria L. Robinson, Committee Member

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I am deeply indebted to the chair of my committee, Dr. John K. Smith. I was fortunate that he was the professor for my first course in the doctoral program. With his guidance, I began to ask questions I had not asked before. His guidance and friendship has been better than I could have reasonably expected.

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I'm also indebted to the Matthew Shepard Scholarship founder, Rich Eychaner. When I first met Rich, I was a nervous high school principal awaiting the presentation of one of the first Matthew Shepard Scholarships in Iowa. Several years later, his assistance in inviting the students to participate in this project was absolutely essential. As I have heard their stories, I'm moved by the impact his vision and the scholarship has had on the scholars, but also their families, classmates, schools, and communities.

Of course, I would not have had any stories to tell if not for the eight Matthew Shepard Scholarship winners. From day one, I have been impressed in so many ways. They have generously and willingly sat down with a stranger to talk about their experiences and have minced no words. Their openness in sharing their intensely personal experiences is inspiring, as are their hopes for the future. I'm convinced that we have not heard the last from them.

I'm also moved by the support and patience given by my family. My parents, Mike and Gail Pace. Their support throughout my life and this project has been something I hope to equal with my own children. They have always encouraged me to see the possibilities.

My work in the doctoral program as well as this dissertation would have sputtered long ago without the love and patience of my wife, Roxanne. She has shined as a mother and true partner during these five years. Whether I needed a weekend alone to write or a copy editor on a road trip, she made it happen. I could not have completed this project practically or emotionally without her.

Finally, the patience of my children Sienna and Adison, has been essential. Although they may not have always understood why their dad was so often gone in the morning when they woke up and still gone when they went to bed, the fact that they ran to the door when I did arrive home reminds me of what matters. If I can serve them as well as the aforementioned have served me, I will be happy.

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CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND AND SOURCE OF MY INTEREST

As a first year social studies teacher, I had both the blessing and curse of working under an administrator who, in my youthful judgment, was marginal. My idealism (along, perhaps, with a touch of arrogance) told me I could do better. Thus, I returned to school, earned a Master's degree, and became an aspiring school administrator at a time when dozens of schools advertised open principalships.

After sending out numerous applications, I was hired as a principal for a school located in a picturesque Midwestern community with a population of 1,500 people. The main street offers a familiar view of rural America, with pickups parked in front of the hardware store and minivans outside the Carnegie library. Kids ride bikes and skateboards to the swimming pool and tiny movie theater, operated by volunteers, that runs a few weeks behind the latest releases. At the golf course, league night hosts bankers, welders, and farmers.

The school, as is common to many rural communities, is a three-story building made up of several additions from different decades. The K-12 complex is quite large, but not fancy; its modesty is a reflection of both the community's frugality and pride. Athletic events, band concerts, and the fall play are almost always sellouts, regardless of the talent level that year. For example, on basketball game or concert nights, folks pack into the seven rows of bleachers on each side, often a full 45 minutes prior to the event. The school cooks prepare holiday meals annually and townspeople and elderly alumni are often invited to school on these occasions, where they enjoy dining with the school staff.

Often, student musical or artistic events entertain them. Having attended and worked in small rural schools, this was my kind of setting. I was comfortable in a place where the school lies at the heart of community and social life.

Though the school's enrollment of about 300 seventh through twelfth graders was small, the demands of my position were not. My calendar was always booked with meetings and athletic or extracurricular events. I was working hard to establish credibility with students, staff, and community members as someone who could handle the disciplinary expectations of the school while simultaneously addressing the elusive concept of instructional leadership.

One of the key people who aided me in this task was the secondary guidance counselor. We quickly developed a close working relationship and met regularly to discuss student issues, such as attendance, behavior, and academics. This counselor also proved to be a valuable informant as to what the teachers were saying about the "rookie" principal.

On a fall day during one of our standard discussions, she told me that one of 38 members of the senior class, "Pete" as I call him, had been cautiously exploring his sexual orientation with her via email messages. She explained that he had said everything but, "I'm gay," and had shared the same secret with a small number of friends. Pete had not been the subject of any of our conversations previously. I was not surprised by what she was telling me. I simply hadn't given Pete much thought. That would change.

In the spring of the year, she told me that Pete had officially come out, and that most of the students either knew he was gay, or soon would hear this news. Several other

issues immediately dropped out of my mind when, in her next breath, she told me that Pete intended to bring his boyfriend (from another school) to the prom. I responded by telling her that she should try to talk him out of it, fully convinced that this was not an issue our school and community were prepared to accept. Being out and gay was one thing, I thought, but a same-sex prom date was quite another, at least in this community.

My initial desire for the counselor to discourage Pete from bringing his boyfriend to prom came from a purely managerial mindset. That is to say, I did not have personal, philosophical, or religious objections. Actually, I had not given sexual orientation a lot of thought, especially in an educational setting, as most of my attention was focused on navigating my new position. The sexual orientation of students was not on my radar screen.

Faced with this unexpected issue, I was simply convinced that the combination of Pete's openness about his sexual orientation and his plans to have a same-sex prom date would bring chaos to our school and community. I suppose I thought, in some sort of high-minded way, that this could undermine the educational environment, but what I knew was that this was going to cause *me* trouble. I was convinced that this would be a situation that our relatively conservative, traditional rural community would not handle with ease and I was in the middle of it.

Vivid worst-case scenarios began to fill my head. I wondered, aloud sometimes, how I would manage incidents like students protesting Pete's sexuality in the form of a walk out, or how I would prevent more serious problems, such as assault or violence in an isolated hallway or locker room. I anticipated that this could be the issue that was

simply too big, controversial, and emotional to handle and maintain business as usual. I needed some guidance about how to prepare for its potential repercussions.

Unsure of where to turn for information, I picked up the phone for advice from some of my trusted and experienced colleagues down the road. My fellow principals seemed genuinely concerned and sympathetic, though no one could offer any real guidance, as none of them had dealt with this issue, either. One principal's tongue-in-cheek suggestion was to contact a school in the state in which a female student had brought a 62 year-old man as her date to the prom.

As the day of the prom drew closer, it became obvious that Pete had no intentions of changing his plans. In fact, he had spoken of trying to top his dad's senior year exit from the same high school. Legend held that, years earlier, Pete's dad had ridden a motorcycle through the second floor hallway on his final day of school. As I prepared for the prom, I tried to be extra cognizant of the pulse of the student body and their reactions to Pete and the rumors that were now circulating. As I did this, I paid special attention to where Pete was during the day.

I worked on my administrative tasks in 45 minute blocks of time, making sure I dashed into the hallways during passing periods, always at what I hoped would be the right place at the right time, to keep an eye on potential trouble spots. To my surprise, Pete's coming out and prom plans had not provoked the attention and reaction from students I had anticipated. In fact, almost nothing was happening. I was even more concerned because this might be "the calm before the storm."

I wondered if the calm would change to storm when Pete and his boyfriend strode into the prom arm in arm during the traditional promenade into the building. As it happened, Pete, his boyfriend, and two female students entered the prom as a group of four without incident or insult. With Pete and his boyfriend safely and uneventfully in the building, I checked off one of my concerns. At least the first part of the night had gone smoothly.

Tradition also dictates that the junior parents prepare a meal for all the attendees. While the food is being served, students pass notes to one another. I thought my worst-case scenario was beginning to unfold when a female student in Pete's group brought me a handful of notes that had been delivered to their table. To my horror, the notes featured crude anti-gay stick drawings, profanity, and the like. Thanks to the cool advice of a trusted staff member, I held back from taking the microphone and lambasting the students. Instead, I instructed the wait staff not to deliver any more notes to Pete's table.

Despite the rocky incident, the rest of the prom, to my surprise, proceeded without incident. The chaperones instinctively interacted with students in a pleasant and friendly manner, even when Pete and his boyfriend attracted more than the usual amount of attention by dancing, embracing, or kissing. My sense of relief at midnight when the last students left the building was not one I will forget. A few days later, however, my relief vanished as the counselor came back to my office to tell me that the newly established Matthew Shepard Scholarship Committee in the state capital had selected Pete as a scholarship winner.

I knew who Matthew Shepard was, but was unfamiliar with the new scholarship, which was being awarded for the first time. She informed me that the scholarship was awarded to three openly gay or lesbian high school students in the state and covered full tuition, books, and fees to a state university. The scholarship required that it be presented publicly at the school's awards ceremony.

New worst case scenarios passed through my eyes, as we had received word that an infamous religious protest group would be demonstrating at another school where a Matthew Shepard Scholarship was being announced. Out of this concern, I contacted the scholarship officials. They calmed our nerves by assuring us that Pete's identity as a recipient was known only to us and the committee. He had not been publicly identified--yet. Nonetheless, I informed our local law enforcement (the county sheriff, 20 miles away) in case we had trouble on awards night.

In past years, the ceremony had gone off without a hitch. Suddenly, however, we found ourselves perplexed with where to place Pete's award on the program and whether the placement and timing would impact people's reactions. We had, of course, a number of well-qualified students receiving a host of generous awards, but they all paled in comparison to the monetary amount of Pete's scholarship. What if the word leaks out and protestors come? What if someone starts shouting while Pete is crossing the stage? Should Pete's award of \$25,000 over four years be presented before or after the pork producers' scholarship of \$500?

Again, my fears of what might happen went unrealized. My sense of relief after Pete received his award to polite, though tentative, applause was almost equal to my

relief after the prom. The same was true for graduation day, when Pete strode across the same stage to receive his diploma. He would later recount that a few people avoided shaking his hand when the crowd made its way through the senior class receiving line on the school's front lawn.

Initial Research and Pilot Study

The following year, I accepted a university faculty position in teacher education. In this role, I was responsible for teaching a human relations course. Because of the nature of this course, it struck me that my experience with Pete and his senior year warranted a closer look.

I began conducting qualitative research into the events surrounding Pete and his senior year. I wanted to know if others would have anticipated, as I did, a lot of strife and controversy as a result of three things—one, an openly gay student in the school; two, the student bringing a same-sex date from another school to prom; and three, winning a large scholarship reserved for openly gay and lesbian high school students.

Starting with Pete, I went back to talk with his classmates, community members, and teachers about the school year and Pete's situation. One by one, participants revealed that, like me, they would have anticipated an unfriendly, if not hostile and hard-to-manage reaction from many in the school and community. When pressed about why our expectations were not realized, participants offered a host of explanations.

Some speculated that potentially hostile students were simply afraid of getting into trouble. Others viewed the official and informal leaders of the senior class as being very influential and adept at communicating a message of tolerance or acceptance. Others

pointed to Pete's status as a third generation member of the community. The guidance counselor hypothesized that since Pete was not involved in extracurricular activities and was not a threat to other's statuses as athletes, musicians, or artists, many lacked a real reason to lash out at him.

I was not surprised to learn that virtually everyone I interviewed expected a rough and controversial ride through this school year. Yet, as my discussions with some of Pete's classmates deepened, I was taken aback to learn that, for many students, Pete's sexuality was not the big story.

There were many bigger issues, particularly for the high-achieving students in Pete's physics class of six students. One by one, these students recounted how Pete's situation gave them the impetus to talk about challenges they each faced as they made their way through high school. They revealed how they used their physics lab groups as a forum to share issues that were previously well hidden, even though most of the 38 seniors had attended school together since kindergarten.

Stories flowed about feeling ostracized for not attending weekend beer parties and the difficulty of remaining true to a friend (Pete). One student of Jewish heritage described how she didn't know what the swastika scratched on her folder in elementary school meant, but that it was a vivid lesson about how someone felt about her. A number of students revealed their level of concern over a suicidal classmate. I was struck by depth and intensity of the hidden struggles and issues each of the students revealed, especially since I thought I had been keenly in tune with the high school student body of only 150.

Thus, I began sharing my experience and the results of my research with my college classes. I refined and revisited my research and have presented the experience on campus, in the state, and at the National Rural Education Association conference (Pace, 2001). This research was published in *The Rural Educator* (Pace, 2004a). In addition, an autoethnographic piece on my experiences as principal surrounding these events was published in *Principal Leadership* (Pace, 2004b). The same piece was later republished in *Ed Digest* (Pace, 2005).

My involvement and learning on the issues surrounding gay and lesbian students has also led to my membership on the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual & Transgender (GLBT) Youth in Iowa Schools Task Force. The task force seeks to provide information to educators and the public about the challenges of being gay or lesbian in high school (or the challenges of being *perceived or labeled* as gay or lesbian in high school).

My own research and involvement on the task force has increased my awareness of the complex issues surrounding sexual orientation in schools. I am now aware of some sources of information that are currently available to educators, but many of these sources are newly developed and yet unknown to many educators and school leaders. They were certainly unavailable or unknown to me when I needed them as a young principal.

As I moved through my doctoral program, I received lots of advice about the dissertation process. The suggestion that kept reappearing in my mind, however, was to pick something that I am truly interested in, because of the sheer size and commitment the dissertation entails. As I wrangled with potential topics, examining the life/school

experiences of the Matthew Shepard Scholars came to the forefront of my mind, much like realizing that Pete's experience when I was principal warranted further study.

As I began to think more about this potential topic, two things struck me. First, I had a hard time forgetting my concern and frustration when faced with Pete's coming out in our school. I was certainly relieved that the catastrophic scenarios I had imagined had not materialized. On the contrary, our school dealt with the situation in a manner that protected everyone's rights and delivered a quality education to all. I'm in an instant both proud and humbled that, a couple years after graduation, Pete sent me an email in which he said he thought he went to the best high school in the world, because "no one was going to let (him) fall through the cracks."

I knew that there must be other teachers, parents, and administrators who, like me, are filled with fear, uncertainty, and confusion when unexpectedly faced with openly gay or lesbian students. Further, I wondered how Pete's experience in our school compared to other openly gay and lesbian high school students who had been selected as Matthew Shepard Scholars. Was my school the exception? Would my fears have been confirmed (or worse) if I had been principal at another school? Or, are educators who, like me, expect the worst somehow missing something that should inform us that perhaps our worst-case scenarios are unlikely? Do we as educators, perhaps unknowingly, run the risk of creating a self-fulfilling prophecy by expecting problems, as I had? Clearly, I had more questions than answers. But I had a feeling that research into this topic could be of some consequence and of use to educators. Beyond that, I wondered if there was much research

—

available. Perhaps the topic had been explored quite thoroughly but unbeknownst to me as a young principal, grappling for guidance.

When I was preparing my presentation and articles on my experience I, of course, examined the literature on gay and lesbian students in schools. Initially, I doubted my skill as a reviewer of literature, convinced that I must not be looking in the right places, because I found very little. After talking with advisors and professors, I determined that I was not the problem. There is a relatively small body of literature that addresses this population, especially in high school. I was also concerned that this limited amount of research that was often of the survey type—generally rather surface accounts of the statistics on harassment, truancy, and the other challenges and dangers gay and lesbian students face. While these surveys are all well and good, they did not seem to speak to the experiences I'd had as principal. To me, there were no real people with real issues in the percentages, averages, and numbers.

Thus, I decided to in-depth interview a limited number of gay and lesbian students who, like Pete, publicly announced their homosexuality while in high school. I wanted to understand, as much as I could, the lives and uniqueness of gay and lesbian students.

It struck me that the Matthew Shepard Scholars, because they are out and open high school students, might offer a lens through which to at least partially understand the lives of gay and lesbian students.

About half way through my doctoral program, I discussed the idea with my Qualitative Inquiry professor and now dissertation advisor. He confirmed that my idea

and questions were legitimate and worthy, and his enthusiasm in addressing the issue set me on the path toward this project.

Thus, with the help of names of scholarship winners, and especially the scholarship founder, I talked with eight students/scholarship winners at length (see Appendix A for details concerning the inquiry procedures). I must begin with the background of the Matthew Shepard Scholarship, followed by the students' individual stories.

Roots of The Matthew Shepard Scholarship

The Matthew Shepard Scholarship began in 2000 following the anti-gay murder of University of Wyoming student Matthew Shepard in 1998. The scholarship covers books, tuition, and fees for up to four years at an in-state university and is awarded with the blessing of the Shepard family, although they are not involved in the process. The scholarship is awarded annually to openly gay or lesbian high school students and is based on academic aptitude, academic achievement, community service and financial need. Typically, between three and seven full scholarships are awarded each year, along with honorary scholarships of \$500. If the scholarship committee determines that more than three deserving students have applied in a given year, it may award more than three full scholarships. The scholarship has steadily grown over the past five years and is underwritten by a private charitable foundation, in association with Iowa Pride Network, and a regional community center for GLBT persons.

Although The Matthew Shepard Scholarship began in 2000, its roots can be traced in the experiences and generosity of the scholarship founder, Rich Eychaner.

Growing up in another state, Rich recalls his family's accounts of its struggles through the Depression, along with a steadfast belief in the value and merits of a quality education. His father dropped out of college due to financial difficulties and never returned. A mother who was a teacher and school board member for many years helped solidify the value of education in Rich's mind.

Standing along side the family's strong belief in education was a keen interest in social justice and an appreciation of diversity. Growing up in a midwestern college town, Rich recalls the many benefits of exposure to and embracing of diversity as a youngster. He recalled,

My parents were long-time churchgoers and...in 1959...started adopting Cuban families after the Cuban revolution. I can remember going to the...airport and picking up the family just getting off the airplane from Cuba and driving them back out through and they're looking at the corn, thinking it was sugar cane...Also when a black woman was hired to teach at the university...they couldn't find a house, no one would sell them a house in town and so they moved out to the edge of town on a country road to find a house. I remember riding my bicycle out there (to help in) the garden...I'd baby sit for the kids and stuff like that...So there was a whole series of things like that that my parents would express an interest in, minority people and providing opportunities for people, you know, to get ahead, who had ambition and skills and ability, but you know, who needed some kind of help.

These lessons later developed into a generous tuition and fees scholarship awarded to local high school students in Rich's hometown. That award sought to honor the lessons taught by Rich's parents and provide educational opportunity for local high school students, based on minority status, race, national origin, ethnicity, physical challenge, or sexual orientation. These application criteria were combined with academic aptitude, academic achievement, community service, and financial need. After ten years, however, no one had applied under the sexual orientation provision.

Rich remembers thinking about the scholarship and feeling as though something was missing. He wanted to see more connections, more networking, and more solid and lasting ties in which scholars were giving back to the community instead of a stand alone, yearly award. At about the same time, Matthew Shepard was murdered in Wyoming.

That event crystallized the need for a new scholarship. Rich recalled, "...this was a transforming experience for the country and for an awful lot of gay and lesbian people, as well as non-gay and lesbian people around the country." He saw an opportunity to begin building the type of network he had seen as missing with the earlier scholarship. "I wanted to build networks with the kids, so that they didn't operate as isolated ships in the nights...we've built convoys..."

So was born a scholarship honoring the legacy of Matthew Shepard. As noted, the statewide award provides full tuition scholarships to openly gay and lesbian high school students based on academic aptitude, academic performance, community service and financial need. In seeking to build a network, the award currently applies only to the state's public universities, although there is some discussion about expanding the program to private institutions. That the scholarship applies at this point only to state universities addresses the goal of building networks, communication, and connections between scholars and others across the state.

The new Matthew Shepard Scholarship, Rich hoped, could continue this transformation and provide an honest public discussion about the oft-avoided topic of sexual orientation, young people, and education. "I also wanted to do something that transformed the state...it gives an opportunity to talk about gay rights and issues in the

state.” To that end, one of the requirements of the scholarship is that it is presented publicly at the school’s awards program. Rich said most scholars, families and schools have welcomed the award presentation and subsequent discussion, although that open reception is not universal.

Some parents are less willing to embrace the scholarship and the experience. Some have consented to allowing public recognition of their son or daughter only if they receive the full scholarship, not just the honorary award of less monetary value. Rich explained,

And we said, “Well that’s not the deal. The deal is we come and present it in your high school because it’s not just about educating the kids, it’s about educating the communities...letting them know they have kids in the community who happen to be gay and lesbian, and they should be proud of it. Recognize these great kids.”

With the recognition that comes with being identified as a Matthew Shepard Scholar, also comes responsibility to actively continue active participation in community service activities and to uphold the ideals of the scholarship.

Rich also acknowledged how the prestigious scholarship generates surprise among sometimes unsuspecting attendees at the school awards program because of its monetary value as well as the open manner in which it is presented in a packed gymnasium. Rich described the large trophy of an eagle and adds with a smile, “...there’s this third grader out in the audience who’s (as h/she admires the trophy) saying, Mommy, Mommy, how can I get one of those? Shut up, kid, we’ll talk when we get home.”

This public discussion and presentation of the award certainly generates the desired dialog. It also puts a human face on the gay and lesbian students. As a result and as a part of being openly gay or lesbian, Matthew Shepard Scholars’ names and pictures

appear on the scholarship website and brochures. To further the discussion and humanization of gay and lesbian students, the scholarship group has begun calling attention to the issue and scholarship by interacting with state legislators, some of whom are less than enthusiastic.

So we're starting to hand out brochures to every legislator, every year, sometimes twice...saying, "Oh, the deadline's coming up, distinguished gay and lesbian students in your district, make sure they apply." The goal is to teach them you have gay and lesbian students in your district...you know, get on with the program. And so every way we can think of, we're just trying to get that message out there for these (kids in the state).

Rich said he understands that some people's uncomfortable reaction to the Matthew Shepard Scholarship comes from their perception that the award is a reward for being gay or lesbian. This view, he explains, misses the point.

The whole thing is designed to be educational...not make gays and lesbians feel it's something they should be ashamed of, but make it something they should be proud of. And in my mind, achievement is being out, being successful in college, setting records, in spite of whatever extra burdens are out there for being a lesbian in high school. It's not to reward kids for their sexual orientation, it's a reward for how they've handled their sexual orientation.

He continued, explaining the emancipatory goals behind the award,

I wanted to reach kids and give them some hope...But I also wanted to recognize the kids that were out. I also wanted to say to those who don't like it in the closet that aren't proud and don't feel safe to come out until they get to college or a little bit later, or an awful lot later. I wanted to say, you know, "If you had the courage to come out...it would help you, it would make life a lot easier."

In addition to fostering open discussion on gay and lesbian rights and providing educational opportunities for deserving students, the scholarship seeks to broaden people's horizons of what a gay or lesbian person can be. As a result, Matthew Shepard Scholars and their families are invited to a formal awards ceremony in the capital city,

and scholars later attend a college preparation workshop. These experiences provide powerful and vivid images of the possibilities that are open to students with the help of the scholarship. Many of these opportunities appear in stark contrast to the familiar images of gay and lesbians that many students and their families are most accustomed to.

(So we) brought the kids out of their hometown...these kids are nervous, they are in the Des Moines Club with a beautiful nighttime view of the state capital, they're amidst all these adults...you know you get all these stereotype images in their heads...they're surprised...the plan was to have people say, "Oh yeah, I could see my kid be somebody like this, here's a doctor, here's a lawyer, here's a you know, totally respectable adult." And the parents get images they can take home and work on.

The experience in the capital often causes a dramatic shift in attitude among parents and moved them toward acceptance and understanding. Some parents who were, at best, reluctant participants, leave changed. Rich related,

...I remember a dad who didn't want to come to the dinner...and then we're leaving and he said, I don't remember what I had for dinner last night, I don't remember what I did two days ago, but I'll remember tonight for the rest of my life.

Over the past five years, the scholarship has gained considerable attention, as awards have been presented to students in public, parochial, urban, suburban, and rural high schools across the state. The application process is publicized through scholarship brochures that are mailed to every high school guidance counselor, principal, high school newspaper editor, school journalism advisor, and every newspaper in the state. Rich acknowledged that not all guidance counselors actually pass the information on to students and some instead choose to throw the information away.

Some research leads us to believe that this is not surprising. For example, and Harris and Bliss (1997), Sears (1992), Telljohann & Price (1993), and have contributed to

research into guidance counselors' interaction with gay and lesbian students. Much of this research supports Rich's first hand experience that many Matthew Shepard Scholarship brochures intended for students' hands wind up instead in the counselor's garbage can. In addition to word of mouth publicity among students, teachers, and parents, gay and lesbian advocacy groups forward information via email and on websites.

Rich explained that the number of applications has varied from year to year, as have the number of awards given. As word of the scholarship has spread, Rich cites the committee's desire to award each deserving applicant at least something. As a result, honorary scholarships of \$500 are awarded in addition to the full scholarships. Applications are received by the scholarship committee, which is made up of gay, lesbian, and straight people. The scholarship committee evaluates applications according to the four criteria. Prior to awarding scholarships, the committee conducts personal interviews with finalists. Since its inception in 2000, the Matthew Shepard Scholarship has awarded 25 full scholarships and 28 honorary awards, totaling approximately \$650,000 in educational opportunities.

The goals and intentions of the scholarship are aimed at both an individual and societal level. The broad-ranging and bold vision of the Matthew Shepard Scholarship can perhaps be summarized in a statement by Rich. "If you want to be (for example) an architect, we can introduce you to someone. Come out, stay out, stand out. You are accepting responsibility that maximizes who you are, whatever it is."

CHAPTER 2
THE STUDENTS' STORIES

Mark

Sitting in a café, Mark describes his coming out and school experiences in a way that makes one feel that he must have done this a thousand times. It's not that his words sound canned or overly rehearsed. Rather, he explains it as one might describe any significant memory to an interviewer or even someone in casual conversation at a party or in the student union. He's comfortable talking about it. He's done it before.

Part of his ease of presentation is because Mark has, in fact, presented his story to college classes, community groups, educators, and a host of other interested parties. As a Matthew Shepard Scholarship winner, folks know who he is and aren't shy about asking to hear his story. Another reason may be that communication comes easily and naturally to the 21 year-old college student who has established his own media company, which publishes a bi-monthly magazine that focuses on gay and lesbian issues. The magazine features stories about gay pride, school experiences, politics, and activism. It has also featured Matthew Shepard Scholars, like himself. Not surprisingly, Mark says hopes to build on this impressive start in the media business, perhaps one day moving into cable news and other electronic media.

Dressed in a sweatshirt and jeans, he speaks clearly and concisely, calling up vivid memories that he's shared on a speaking and presentation circuit. He explains that he grew up in a Midwestern community of about 70,000 that is known for its blue collar, working class roots. Meat packing and manufacturing have been the trademark of the

community for generations. Mark's high school reflects this heritage, even to the extent that students and teachers there lament the fact that the school has had a hard time shedding its gritty reputation as a rough place. Much of this is due to tumultuous racial, social and economic upheaval in the 1960s and 1970s. It's not hard to find teachers, students, and school officials from Mark's school willing to talk at length about how this perception of "North High School" and its 1,100 students is grossly inaccurate. Some seem to have a chip on their shoulder and are angry about the misperception. Others just want to paint a more accurate picture of NHS.

It was here that Mark attended high school, gently and gradually coming out as a sophomore. Mark says he expected more problems than he actually experienced. His experience runs contrary to the amount of strife and controversy some would predict for an out, gay student at North High. But, to capture the essence of Mark's story, we must back up a bit.

Mark recalls knowing, on some level, that he was gay as when he was a sixth or seventh grader. Even before that, he remembers, "...that I was interested in guys, probably in fourth or fifth grade. I knew that there was something different then," he explains. But, Mark says, he didn't know at the time exactly how to classify the feelings. A more clear realization that he was gay came a few years later, in junior high.

During this period, Mark dealt with the questions, mostly internally. He was not out to anyone. He now acknowledges, however, that others may have known or at least suspected that he was gay, even years earlier. Upon reflection, Mark recalls talking with

his fifth grade teacher after he had come out in high school. The teacher knew, even when Mark was a fifth grader. “He was like, “Oh, I knew that,” Mark laughs.

His internal questions followed him to church with grandparents, aunts, and uncles. These family members provided a connection to religion, since neither of his parents is particularly religious. He thought that possibly the church might provide him with guidance or insight in to the lingering questions he was having about his sexual orientation—maybe even offer him a cure. “Well...I think that part of me was thinking that maybe becoming religious would...help cure it or something like that.”

It didn't. Instead, that he is gay became increasingly clear to him. In an effort to understand what was happening, he did a lot of reading. Materials in the library were limited but information on the Internet was much more plentiful. An added benefit was that it could be accessed more anonymously. There was no nosy librarian to stamp or scan the books. In addition to information and, perhaps more importantly, the Internet offered other people, real people, who were sorting through the same questions he was.

Mark explains,

I did, I mean a lot of reading, like in the library and that kind of stuff. And worked online. I think the Internet is actually something very helpful to find research and to talk to people online who are going through the same thing at the same time. I think the Internet is probably the reason why people are coming out earlier and people are dealing with it better. Because there are other people they can talk to, or you know, anonymity with the level of protection that they wouldn't have otherwise.

For Mark, cyberspace provided the essential forum through which he could weigh things, explore options, and make decisions. It was truly a time of research and considering all options related to his sexual orientation and how to handle it. He recalls,

Part of me throughout middle school was dealing with the issue, part of it was looking for the possibility of how to deal with it, I should say. You know, thinking about it and accepting it, thinking about rejecting it, thinking about trying to find other ways to deal with it. And, I think I probably knew all the way along. I just kind of accepted it, but at the same time, I wanted to consider the possibilities.

Circumstances and chance outed Mark at home one day, before he was ready to come out to his parents. Mark was on-line and printed some adult gay material when his mom walked into the family computer room and saw what he was reading. He says they had a brief discussion about “what this meant” but that his mom wasn’t fully ready to face the reality. After that, it wasn’t talked about.

After several months of deliberation and exploration, Mark entered high school as a ninth grader, accepting his sexual orientation. “And so I went into high school, accepting...accepting it and, knowing that, you know, I am gay and that’s who I am.” He says this self-admission was like a weight being lifted from his shoulders. He was, however, not out to anyone else.

When Mark felt ready to come out to a classmate, he chose to do so in a letter to a female friend. Mark laughs, rolling his eyes, explaining, “And it turns out that she had a huge crush on me.” Despite this, he says this first revelation went well. His classmate accepted the news and this was more than a small relief to Mark. It signaled that perhaps he could continue to reveal his secret to carefully chosen others.

He says that with each person who reacted favorably, or at least without hostility, he was encouraged to widen the circle of people who knew, albeit gradually and cautiously. This is something that Mark says has to be done wisely and with forethought. He explains,

I think a big part of it is knowing who's going to be accepting and coming out to them. I mean, and obviously, to a certain point, they're going to find out, either from other people or something, you know. Everyone will find out. But, you know, finding the people who you know are going to be accepting and willing to help you by keeping you encouraged.... You've got to calculate it right.

Mark continued this pattern, telling a few select individuals. There was no grand, dramatic announcement or proclamation. Classmates and teachers who Mark had not told directly generally figured it out for themselves. As Mark hypothesized, some had suspected something many years before, like the fifth grade teacher. Others quickly realized it when Mark and his boyfriend at school started attending school dances together.

Asked about the reactions he expected when more people began to find out, Mark says that overall, he anticipated a generally positive experience at school, although he felt there would be a mixed reaction, with some support and some hostility. His experience was fairly close to what he expected—maybe even better than he anticipated. Asked to rate his school experience on a 10-scale, he gives it a seven, noting that he, "...thought it was going to be a lot harder than it was." An unexpected event, however, reminded Mark that not everyone was going to receive him with open arms. Some, instead, would choose a clenched fist.

While walking down the hallway to class one afternoon, he found himself surrounded by four students. Mark was assaulted and punched in the stomach. He recalls that he was, "...jacked up against the wall the whole time." Mark reported the assault to administrators, who he says acted quickly to discipline the four boys. He credits their quick action for preventing further violent altercations.

Mark recalls other incidents, though they were, in his mind, minor. So minor, in fact, that he chose not to report them to school officials. For example, one student, who had actually been somewhat of a friend to Mark, did an about face. Often, Mark says, the student would spit on the floor in Mark's path as he approached. Mark reasons,

I could have reported some of the things that he did. Whenever he would see me in the hallway, he would spit or something like that. I didn't report him, because, first of all, I didn't take it personally. I mean, I didn't have any problems with it. If I would have found out that other people were having problems, I would have done something.

He appears to be saying that he felt strong enough to handle this.

The tension never resulted in a physical confrontation, but the hostility was unmistakable. Ironically, Mark wonders if the student may actually have been wrestling with sexual orientation questions of his own, and directing his rage at Mark.

He knew who he was. He also knew that the school had an obligation and responsibility to allow him access to an education. He recalls,

Well, I went into high school, and I think this is part of the reason that I could come out, and I knew that, no matter what, the school had to get me an education and I had the right to be there. And, I could get, you know, I could be who I wanted to be and do what I needed to do. And they still would have to, you know, to let me stay there.

Beyond the basic knowledge of the school's obligation to him, Mark says he also benefited from the caring, nurturing environment his school administrators tried to establish and maintain, even in light of North High's tough reputation. He explains,

And so...the administrators knew who I was and they cared about me personally. And so that was very helpful. And you know, when I was assaulted the first time, it was made very clear that that's not appropriate. And I think that probably was very helpful, you know.

Mark says that his peers offered him signs of support, especially after he had been assaulted.

...the dances, you know, were obvious. And I kind of anticipated that there would be a split. You know, some people would be accepting. Some people would be ok with it as long as it wasn't around them. You know, and some people would just be totally against it. And when I was assaulted and we started going to dances, everyone was really, really...everyone that I talked to and everyone that I'd heard about was very accepting with it.

Some of the support he received came from unexpected sources.

Mark: And some of the thuggish kind of people would come up and be like, "Cool," or whatever.

NP: Really?

Mark: Yeah, it was like, wow.

NP: You couldn't have expected that.

Mark: No, I didn't at all.

NP: Why did they do that?

Mark: I don't know...I think that probably the majority of them were trying to be supportive.

NP: That had to blow you away.

Mark: Yeah, it did. Yeah.

Mark knows of no official records kept at North High about the numbers of gay and lesbian students, but says that, to his knowledge, he was the first to be fully out. Despite the general conclusion that he had been the first, after he gradually came out and was known in school as being gay, a number of others followed suit, perhaps as many as

six or eight students. Both Mark's status as the first, as well as that a handful of students followed suit, reasonably soon after seem remarkable.

So, Mark was in the midst of a school and coming out experience that was, in many ways, surprising. Despite North High School's enrollment of more than a thousand students, he was the first openly gay male student in anyone's memory in a school known, albeit inaccurately, as a rough place. When he was assaulted, school administrators and fellow students responded with unmistakable support. In reflecting on this period of his school life, describes it as "relatively smooth."

In elaborating, Mark explains the solace and affirmation he took from a coming out process and school experience that was generally better than he expected. Beyond this pleasant surprise, he found it to be energizing. He explains,

I think it was kind of a little bit liberating. A tiny little bit. It was kind of like a freedom...it was just like the freedom that, you know, I can do, talk about things that I wouldn't have talked about before.

In addition, Mark's presence as an out gay student was cause for students and staff alike to address an issue that many had not faced, even in a fairly large and diverse urban high school. He explains,

...there was a lot of openness, there were a couple of teachers who, or one in particular, that I'm thinking of, who, he wasn't, how do you put it.... You could tell they had difficulties dealing with the issue (sexual orientation). And it was...I always thought it was interesting because you could tell he was thinking about how to say it and I think it was, it was eye-opening for me. It was eye opening for him. And you know, it made him reconsider things.

Simply, Mark's presence put a human face on sexual orientation where one had not, at least overtly, been before. And, this caused many of his teachers and classmates pause.

While things were, on balance, going surprisingly well at school, Mark was about to face another, unexpected challenge. He came down with a complicated and unusual illness that began as a painful headache, and quickly and frighteningly developed into a situation in which he had lost a good degree of control of his muscles. Mark says doctors' "best guess" was that he contracted a complicated form of mononucleosis. He was soon flown to a regional hospital where he remained in intensive care for two weeks. Over the process, he lost about 40 pounds. When the condition was finally brought under control, Mark was quite frail and had to virtually learn to walk and control major muscles again.

I was surprised to hear Mark say that rumors of HIV and AIDS weren't prevalent at school. Mark and his friends at school knew the symptoms of HIV and AIDS and that they didn't match the symptoms he was experiencing. Still, he remembers having an HIV test, along with countless others as doctors tried to pinpoint the cause of his sudden illness.

When this frightful bout with mono was behind him, he turned his attention at school back toward diversity issues and ways of addressing issues, such as sexual orientation, that had often been avoided or at least unacknowledged.

Mark and a classmate started a student group at school that focused broadly on issues related to diversity. Though gay and lesbian issues were certainly on Mark's mind, the decision to form a more all-encompassing diversity club as opposed to a Gay - Straight Alliance (GSA) was a calculated one. Mark and his friend reasoned that a more broad based diversity group would have an easier path toward administrative approval,

although his good relations with school administrators were well established and he doesn't believe school officials would have tried to squelch the GSA.

Further and perhaps more significantly, the two students hypothesized that a more general diversity group might be more saleable to classmates. They thought this group would be the right fit for the school at that particular time. Plus, the group would certainly be able to address gay and lesbian issues, along with other topics related to diversity. He explains,

I'm just thinking the faculty would get behind it, and at that point...there were people who were supportive, but as far as...the push to make sure things happened, you know, it's ultimately the student that should be doing, but there needs to be faculty involved and faculty supported. And, I don't think that (support for a GSA as opposed to a diversity club) was there.

Finally, as Mark was involved in rehabilitation from his illness and catching up on schoolwork, he knew he had a limited amount of time to give the new group. If a GSA would, in fact, be hard to establish, this was not the time for Mark to fight that battle.

As time went by and the diversity club began to take hold, Mark began working with local and state organizations concerned with civil rights. He says he came to realize that his high school, despite its rough reputation and the fact that it did not have a GSA was actually more open to diversity issues, including gay and lesbian issues, than other nearby, more suburban and affluent high schools. He feels fortunate to have been at North High. He explains, "South and Ridgeview (neighboring high schools) have no clue about diversity at all. And Ridgeview is really behind. I'm glad I didn't go to either of those schools."

He also feels fortunate for the support of his family. He says his mother initially had a harder time accepting his sexual orientation than his father, whom he describes as “very accepting, always has been.” Eventually his family was so supportive that Mark’s boyfriend from high school lived with Mark’s family for a few months after his own home fell victim to adult alcohol and drug addictions.

Through the coming out process, recovering from his illness, and establishing the diversity club, Mark says he maintained a fairly consistent B grade average. He was able to successfully balance school and social life while gaining back his health and strength. He also says he became quite close to a number of quality teachers.

In addition to teachers and administrators who were professional and supportive, Mark also says the way he approached things was an important factor in having a “relatively smooth” experience at school. If there were things his teachers and administrators needed to know, he made sure the channels of communication were open and functioning. He explains,

I think a big part of it was that I, I was very persistent in making sure that the administrators and teachers and everything knew what was going on and that they were on top of it and that they followed through with it.

Self-advocacy. And, according to Mark, when he made them aware of something that needed action or attention, action was taken, attention given.

Applying for the Matthew Shepard Scholarship was, for Mark, a natural. A couple years earlier, he had met another Matthew Shepard Scholar from a small, rural high school not far away. After getting to know that Matthew Shepard Scholar, Mark had been planning to apply when he became eligible as a senior. When he was selected as a

winner, he says doors of opportunity began to swing open. “(Scholarship officials) called me and I, like, immediately was like (wow!) And you know...I think it opened a lot of doors even before I knew that they were there, as far as, you know, possibilities.”

Pressed for specifics, Mark describes how the Matthew Shepard Scholarship has provided him freedom from financial concerns. In addition, he also speaks about the valuable networking and connections he’s made with other scholars, scholarship supporters, and members of the gay and lesbian adult community. He describes,

...once I got to (Des Moines) for the first time, you know, for the awards presentation...I started meeting all the people who were involved in the scholarship as well as a lot of (Des Moines) people who were just GLBT. It started opening a lot of doors and you know, you’re getting people who can be resources and be helpful.

Mark knows that the networking with other scholars and successful adult members of the gay and lesbian community has been enlightening for him, as well as many other scholars. He says that he appreciates the value of these relationships and believes that they have served him well since coming out. Mark suspects, however, that seeing the substantial community, both gay/lesbian and straight, that is behind the scholarship was especially beneficial and meaningful for his parents, as it has been for many others.

Today, Mark is a junior in college, majoring in electronic communication. He continues publishing and growing the bimonthly magazine, but already has set his sights on his life after graduation. Mark says that might include television and broadcasting as long-term goals. He says he plays around with the idea of a state-wide news channel “to kind of mix it up, in a way that’s never been done before.”

Looking back on his high school life and coming out experience, Mark comes across as being comfortable, self-assured, but not arrogant. He does not seem to live with big regrets or questions, although he does offer some reflections on the compromise he and his classmate chose when contemplating whether to establish a GSA or diversity club. In retrospect, he wishes he had moved ahead with an attempt to establish a GSA at his high school.

While he is decidedly complementary of his school, its teachers and administrators, he also wishes he had addressed some big picture issues within the school. He is clearly frustrated by petty issues that pale in comparison to larger questions of diversity and tolerance.

For example, he notes that his high school renovated office areas in many areas of the building at about the time he was graduating. He laments that when he recently visited the school, “they were still complaining about the size of their cubicles.” Mark says these minor issues are unfortunate and miss many more important points.

...I mean these are walls and sticks and a box. Starting a diversity club was something that’s logical...I think that if I was there...if I was to do it again, I would probably try and get a GSA started. This isn’t anything I’ve really thought about before, but you know, just in retrospect. I think I probably would have done that.

Further, Mark recalls the teacher who he could tell was not sure how he felt about GLBT issues in school and how Mark’s situation was “eye-opening.” Mark says that, looking back, he would now “probably work more on faculty education” on gay and lesbian issues in education.

In thinking more about the need for awareness and insight among teachers and administrators, Mark can relate to how many teachers and administrators feel as though they're navigating uncharted, unfamiliar seas. "I think that teachers and administrators and counselors are afraid to (address GLBT issues), not, not all of them, but a fair majority of them are afraid to...stand up for GLBT issues." For some, he suspects that they're simply unsure of what to do.

For others, Mark suspects that they may be caught in a setting rich with homophobic or at least prejudiced overtones. He suspects that self-preservation is a powerful force for apprehensive teachers and administrators. He explains,

Because they're uncertain about how the people are going to feel about it. I mean, even though they're straight, they're afraid that you know, if they seem too positive about it, that you know, people might wonder about them, may not think they're gay but just, you know. It's not a politically smart decision.

Mark is empathetic for school people who are caught in this predicament. His advice for them is straightforward. It would also fit nicely in a sound-byte on the statewide news network he envisions developing one day. He offers, "If you decide that you're going to be a teacher, or if you want to be a person who is in the school, then you need to be there for everybody."

Those *are* big picture issues.

Jackie

Jackie sips lemonade on a warm fall day at a small coffee shop adjacent to her university campus. Dressed comfortably in a t-shirt and jeans, she almost looks like the typical student one would see sitting in the bleachers at a high school football or volleyball game. In an academic setting, one can easily imagine her sitting toward the

front of a large lecture hall. She is exceptionally well spoken and articulate--a blend between soft-spoken and well-spoken. She is so at ease in conversation that she comes across as being much more mature than the average college freshman.

Jackie grew up in what she describes as a “very supportive” family. The oldest of four children, she recalls her family as open and tolerant. For example, when she or her siblings encountered a gay or lesbian character in the media, they comfortably asked their parents, “What is a gay person?” She says they always got an honest answer. While her parents calmly and directly answered her query, she also knew they would not particularly want one of their children to be gay. Jackie says while her parents held no hostility or disdain for gays and lesbians, they simply thought the inherent burdens and struggles of “gayness” would be too much for anyone.

As fate would have it, they would in fact have a lesbian daughter who would face those struggles. And, their daughter would encounter challenges, both expected and unexpected, as her sexual orientation played out in a fairly conservative high school of 1,600 students. She happily relates that, despite some trepidation, her family accepted her sexual orientation. A gay male cousin, who had come out a couple years before Jackie, probably helped this process to a measurable degree.

Jackie’s high school is one of two public high schools in a conservative Midwestern community of about 60,000. She describes her hometown as, “not openly homophobic” but “not really open to change,” either. She remembers chasing boys at recess as an elementary girl along with her classmates, simply because it seemed like the thing to do. Jackie was, however, already questioning her sexual orientation, though she

might not have called it that at the time. She explains how she fell in line with the expected behavior, even though it didn't really fit with what she wanted to do. She recalls,

I guess I always just tried (to fit in) and second-guessed it (her questions). I didn't know if it was what I should be doing as an individual, but it's what everyone was doing. I didn't want to be the different one.

By eighth grade, many of the other girls had boyfriends, some since fourth grade. Although Jackie remembers that she "didn't want to be the outcast," her questions about her sexual orientation were becoming stronger and more frequent. Despite her caring and supportive family, she was uncomfortable openly expressing these questions and feelings. Her uncertainty even overrode the openness and support that she had always known as a child. She explains, "They were very caring, I just, I just wasn't sure, didn't know how they would react. I understood that they would always love me, but it's just a fear..."

By the time Jackie entered high school, her cousin, a gay male, had come out. The family generally accepted this, although Jackie says the news was more easily received on her mother's side than on her father's, which was, "very, very Catholic." Eventually, however, both sides of the family reconciled the issue, either by acknowledging it fairly openly (mother's side) or by avoidance but without hostility (father's side). She explains, "...it wasn't really a family topic on my dad's side, but on my mom's side, it was very much talked about."

While this experience gave Jackie some comfort that she too could, at some point, reveal her secret, she was still nowhere near being ready, comfortable, or confident in doing so. In fact, she was still making great efforts to pass as straight, just as she had

done years before in elementary school. The rules of the game had changed, of course, because it was no longer chasing boys on the playground. It was dating them. So, Jackie actively dated boys and portrayed a straight façade because, “it felt like something I had to do.” She said she became pretty good at it--maintaining the façade.

Jackie found that the issues surrounding sexual orientation were almost completely absent from her school experiences and curriculum. She recalls that if it came up in a classroom discussion, the topic was typically avoided with a teacher responding, “we’re not going to go there.” Teachers were, however, willing to promote compulsory heterosexuality. This may have been done without malice or even unknowingly, but the effect was unmistakable to Jackie. Teachers conveyed the compulsory heterosexual assumptions through routine interactions and policies, such as the way they explained the school dress code. She describes, for example, “A lot of them specifically said, like girls, do not wear provocative clothing, you’ll distract the boys...you shouldn’t wear the pants down so low, it will disgust the girls.”

Given her own apprehensiveness about coming out, and with prevailing atmosphere of compulsory heterosexuality, it is not surprising that Jackie increased her efforts to pass and fade into the high school crowd. She had been involved in the school’s talented and gifted program as an elementary student, but now she made a conscious decision to let her grades slide. She wanted to bring about a specific result—blending into the woodwork. The decision to blend was easy. Pretending to be someone else was harder. She recalls,

I tried to be a student, I just tried to be normal. And that’s when it got really difficult, because I was afraid of being the A student. I was afraid of being

something else they could poke fun at...I avoided anything that could put a spotlight on me.

At Jackie's high school, like many others, alcohol and tobacco were highly desired but forbidden, fruits. Alcohol, tobacco, and partying were vehicles for fitting in with the crowd, going with the flow. Jackie jumped in, along with many of her classmates, although it failed to bring her feelings of comfort, validation, or belonging. In fact, they brought the opposite. She recalls,

...a lot of my friends were smoking, so I tried to pick it up. It's nothing I really accepted, it's nothing I ever really felt comfortable with. I suppose I'd pick up some of the alcohol abuse. It was another way that I could be just like them.

Fortunately, however, she knew it was self-destructive and leading nowhere. "As I kept doing (it), I saw that I was just destroying myself, it seemed."

While making efforts to stay out of the spotlight and maintain the appearance of an average, straight student, Jackie was also moving closer to the point at which she could be more honest, be herself--come out. In addition to her gay cousin's coming out a couple years earlier, she recalls a couple of other factors that moved her in that direction.

One was her relationship with a youth pastor at her church, who also happened to be a lesbian. "I'm very strong in my faith," Jackie explains, and describes her friend as a wonderful confidant who helped her sort through the difficult intersection of her Christianity and sexual orientation. Jackie says this essential bond with her youth pastor allowed her to explore her feelings and whether she could move toward self-acceptance. What's more, she could consider if she would, one day, summon the courage to come out herself. She recalls, "I suppose it was really difficult for me to understand myself until I

saw someone else (who was like her). That I wasn't alone, that I had a really good friend...She was a wonderful confidant."

What's more, Jackie says the youth pastor helped her explore these questions without expectation, pressure, or judgment. She explains,

She, you know, told me, "Just because I am (a lesbian) doesn't mean you have to be." She made that very clear. It was just someone I identified with...And just to see, she told me her coming out story, her coming out process, about how difficult it was and the fact that after everything she (had experienced as a part of coming out) that burden had been lifted.

The two also explored the Bible and homosexuality and considered different views and interpretations of Christian scripture. Although the sharing between the two didn't immediately convince Jackie that she was ready to come out, she knew the connection was valuable. Jackie took heart in knowing another young lesbian woman who was accepted, respected, and successful. She took encouragement in that, although most parishioners assumed the youth pastor to be a lesbian, her sexual orientation had never been a negative issue or problem. She recalls,

We all knew that (the youth pastor) was a lesbian, but nobody really brought it up...it was always said that, you know, it's not a problem. I guess she was a big help. Got me set in the right direction. She really stood by me and talked to me, and (gave me) confidence in my faith and in the fact that she had been a successful homosexual and that this was not something that she had let hold her back.

During this period when she was edging toward dropping the facade, Jackie was also questioning the nature of her feelings toward a female friend. After a considerable amount of time, she gently revealed some of these questions to her friend and said she did not know entirely what she wanted from their relationship. To her surprise, Jackie learned that the two friends shared mutual crushes on each other.

Gently and with subtlety, Jackie was coming closer to openly announcing her homosexuality. Hers was not to be a grand announcement or loud proclamation. Rather, she let others simply see for themselves. A picture may, in fact, be worth a thousand words, as Jackie recalls walking down the hallway holding hands with her girlfriend. “It makes a big statement.” As one might expect, the news in her high school traveled fairly quickly. Jackie and her girlfriend then joined only a handful of other quietly out gay and lesbian students.

Although Jackie had mustered the confidence to come out, albeit gently, her fears and apprehensions had not vanished. She had heard stories about other students’ coming out experiences and they gave her no cause for comfort. She expected to hear slurs in the hallways, to see notes passed in class and find threatening messages on her locker. “I was afraid that all the stories I had heard would become true for me and that’s what I was really afraid of most...The worst would be vandalism, sex, violence, stuff like that.”

Happily, though, she was not to experience many of those things. Jackie relates that her coming out experience was, “better than I expected, it was tolerable.” She attributes some of this to a group of supportive peers, most of whom were straight but, according to Jackie, “had been harassed because they had been perceived as homosexuals.”

The harassment she did encounter was generally muted and lacked the hard-edged intensity of in-your-face conflict. Jackie recalls, “I was so glad...some glares, and stares, and some laughing, but it wasn’t the head on harassing.” But, all was not perfect and to

her surprise, she lost some friends. Jackie thinks that some of the friends she lost were simply not open to her true identity. Others, she says flatly, “were just not good friends.”

Like many other gay and lesbian students, Jackie found her new open sexual orientation to be a turning point. She found new confidence and energy. She recalls, “the peer pressure of substance abuse and things definitely (went) down. I found confidence in myself.” In addition, she approached school and indeed her life at school differently. She was no longer intentionally neglecting her homework, but had new, more passionate interests now. She felt she had a cause. She wanted to leave her mark, make changes in her school and her world. She explains,

I’d still have problems with not doing all my homework, but other things took up my time. I (read) a lot of books for fun finally...like, I don’t know, liberated. I could go out and learn everything. I could go out and be in the community. I wanted to learn what I could to. I wanted to find different activities.

Jackie was already involved in the GSA at her school, but she now had new energy and hopes for the group. “I could get my GSA involved in, things I could actually strive and make people work for, make it a better place.” She came alive.

Her newfound focus and drive ultimately allowed Jackie to be selected as a Matthew Shepard Scholar. The public nature of the award generated a lot of attention and discussion, both positive and negative. Jackie was ready for it. “I was so excited that day, and knowing that they (some classmates) were going to come and tell me this scholarship was wrong.”

Whereas previously, gay and lesbian issues had been ignored or quickly squelched in discussion, Jackie had brought the issue to the front burner. She expected

and experienced some hostility in the classroom, but also found unexpected allies and support.

Actually, there was just one person who went on about how I didn't deserve this because it wasn't fair...So, as soon as you put it into perspective...I guess...I changed their minds about this. And I found out I had so many other allies in the classroom who stood up against these other people and said, you know, "It's something she's earned..."

In particular, Jackie credits a social studies teacher for allowing the class to wrestle with this issue, especially since it had been previously ignored or too hot to handle. She also credits the administration at her school for a positive, supportive response to any concerns she had. One such concern was a glaring need for some gay/lesbian awareness training for the teachers in the high school.

While gay and lesbian issues and class discussions had previously been avoided or absent, homophobic jokes, slurs, or comments were not unusual. Jackie even recalls one teacher making such jokes with some frequency, often to the delight of an entire class. In response to Jackie's scholarship and the awareness it generated, the school began holding "Educator Awareness Workshops" for teachers, focused on increasing awareness of subtle as well as overt harassment of gay and lesbian students. The workshops also called teachers' attention to harassment directed at students who are *perceived* by others to be gay and lesbian and are thus labeled and targeted.

In these workshops, Jackie developed and presented information on language, jokes, and classroom environment problems from her own experience. She suggested ways teachers could intervene. She says the workshops were generally well received and well attended, however a few teachers seemed to deny that this was a significant issue in

their school. A few of these teachers always seemed to be absent from the workshops, due to unforeseen, last minute circumstances.

Jackie says that the workshops and attention generated by her coming out and scholarship, made many teachers much more vigilant at correcting students who made inappropriate comments. She acknowledges, however, that some teachers seemed to address slurs only when a gay or lesbian student was present. At other times, she says, some teachers still let it slide.

Jackie set off a firestorm of controversy when she applied her newfound confidence and assertiveness in questioning some t-shirts that had been made by a school club. The club had printed the shirts, which featured writing in a foreign language. One of the messages conveyed by the shirts was a gay slur, but was subtly disguised by the language. She brought this to the attention of the principal, who agreed, and quickly moved to disallow the shirts from being worn at school.

The issue didn't end there, however. Her actions triggered a new round of taunting and harassment. Some parents were upset that the t-shirts had been banned and went over the principal's head, taking their complaint to central office administrators. Jackie remembers how upset one of the central administrators was with her because she had "caused him more trouble." The controversy continued, and some students and faculty accused Jackie of overstepping her role as president of the GSA.

Jackie, however, maintains that she was acting as an individual. Further, she maintains that the shirts were simply inappropriate, as evidenced by the principal's move to prohibit them. She says the entire situation was unfortunate and unnecessary and that

the student designed shirts should never have been approved by the group's teacher/sponsor.

Hearing her story, one wonders if the parental objections were because they actually thought the slur on the shirts was harmless and should have been allowed. Or, could the parents simply not accept that an openly lesbian student called their sons and daughters on the inappropriateness. Was it that they had no real problem with gays and lesbians, until one impacted their own worlds or wardrobes? Whatever the case, she has no regrets and hopes this sort of thing won't happen again in her school.

Jackie credits principal's leadership in setting an important tone in her school. From prohibiting the shirts, to promoting the workshops for teachers to gain insight into gay and lesbian issues, Jackie says his actions were key. She explains,

...the principal was very, very supportive...I think if you didn't have someone of that caliber in such a supportive position (of authority), then many of the teachers would not abide, and (if teachers didn't set an example) the students did not feel it necessary (to refrain from harassment).

As an out high school senior, Jackie was no longer content to run from the spotlight. While she doesn't seek it, neither does she hide. She has persisted. The momentum and energy created by her coming out and subsequently being awarded a Matthew Shepard Scholarship has taken her activism to another level. In recent years, an ad-hoc task force has organized statewide public forums in which educators, parents, community leaders, and others are invited to discuss gay and lesbian student issues from a variety of viewpoints. Speakers at the public forums include different combinations of students, educators, clergy, and legal experts, depending on the context of the setting.

When a forum was organized in Jackie's community, she did not miss the chance to contribute. And, she found the community's reception to the forum generally encouraging. Just as her coming out experience at school had showed her that there was less hostility and intolerance than she expected, her self-described conservative community also surprised her. She relates,

Well, it was a wonderful experience. I was very nervous. I've done public speaking before, but this was the first time I'd actually had specific individuals come up and have said a lot of the problems they're facing... There was so much support and they were some people that you would not expect to be there... it was really surprising and inspiring... some of these people were there to defend the cause and the ones who weren't supportive necessarily, they were really willing to hear our stories.

Jackie is now attending college, courtesy of the Matthew Shepard Scholarship. She speaks in a clear, thoughtful, and articulate voice. As she reflects on the past and looks to the future, she notes a number of important issues. First, Jackie's religious faith remains important to her. She reports that she is currently "church shopping" in her college community to find a place of worship in which she fits.

With regard to the Matthew Shepard Scholarship, she says she recognizes a network of support associated with the scholarship. She finds support and comfort in knowing that there are people ready and willing to support her, and "things to back me up." Because of the network, Jackie also feels a sense of duty and membership in a cause. "...I really feel that I, in a sense, owe it to them. I want to go back and make sure that they made an investment, I suppose, in me. And I definitely plan on being involved in the community."

Jackie hopes to increase her involvement in community education on gay and lesbian issues. As she describes this goal, she seems to draw energy from the encouraging public response to the public forum back home. Someday, she sees herself fulfilling a role perhaps similar to her youth pastor—someone who is available when needed. She explains, “I’d like to do community centers...I’m there, where we can talk...I know what I need to do, I know that is possible. I would like to see more (gay and lesbian) awareness begin in communities.”

While she intends to be active in addressing gay and lesbian issues, she argues that this has to be done in the right way. As an example, she describes a gay male friend as “militant” and one who’s “always trying to push it forward, we’re here, we’re queer, you have to accept it mindset.” In Jackie’s view, this is probably not the best way to go. In fact, she says, his well-intentioned efforts may actually be hurting the cause.

She says he would likely get better results if he realized that people need time and education. She explains,

It’s something people have to get used to, rather than just going up there and expecting people to say it’s ok...he’s very aggressive...which is not always necessary. And I think it’s causing him more problems than it’s actually helping.

Her pragmatic ideas for an open dialog are sensible and inspiring. They also seem far removed from the girl who once dated boys out of peer pressure and intentionally abandoned her honor student status in favor of alcohol and conformity, desperate to avoid the spotlight or attention. And, they’re a long way from a life in the closet.

Steve

Steve carries himself confidently but without arrogance. We meet in a coffee shop near his campus. He's polite, comfortable and seems relaxed, but not sloppy or un-kept like some of his collegiate peers. He could pass for being older than the average college undergraduate student. There is a calmness and maturity to him, and he speaks with the clear, concise manner one would expect from someone interested in speech and linguistics.

Steve explains that he grew up in the same community that is home to his university. His childhood was, "pretty basic...nothing dramatic ever happened." He doesn't place his parents' divorce in the dramatic category, since "that happens with 50% of the people.

Steve says he knew he was gay when he was in seventh grade. He says the realization came to him gradually, as somewhat of an awakening process. Much of this resulted from situations in which he was surprised to discover that the way he was seeing things was often quite different from the way his peers were seeing things. He recalls,

...I think it (his awareness of his sexual orientation) just kind of settled in...I got myself into some sticky situations in elementary school. You know, with other friends in my class...

For Steve, sticky situations resulted when he was "trying to experiment" in terms of how he expressed himself and his interests. He recalls,

...when you're a certain age you think the way you're thinking is the way everyone else is thinking, just because you don't have the life experience to know that there are other perspectives out there.

These other ways of thinking "backfired pretty much every time."

Steve says the point at which he knew he was gay not an epiphany or bolt of thunder. Rather, it was a simple and gradual realization. He explains, "...in junior high it was just kind of, it wasn't like, it wasn't a big epiphany, and it was like one of those, well, shoot, I guess I'm stuck."

When Steve came out to a close friend, he wondered if the friend might possibly feel the same way. He did not, but the friend received the news well. He recalls, "It turned out that he was fine with it." Steve reflects that the relief he felt in coming out to himself and a friend, "was actually a lot bigger...than I anticipated it would be."

The matter of fact way in he explains this is exemplary of Steve's calm manner and persona. Despite his coming out, Steve says his junior high years were nothing too far from the ordinary. In fact, Steve says that, save for his broken leg at soccer practice, "junior high was pretty unremarkable."

As we talked, I had a difficult time reconciling parts of his description. On one hand, I found myself picturing a junior high student who had determined that he is gay and came out to a classmate. That it itself seemed remarkable to me. Yet, to hear Steve's explanation, it was not. As our conversation continued, however, I began to understand that his description and interpretation belies a larger, philosophical issue—the way he views the challenges of being a gay or lesbian person in America. Further, it reflects what he thinks is too often an untold reality of being a gay or lesbian person—a reality that is much more optimistic than typically expected.

Steve had, like many of his peers, turned to the Internet as a source of information, entertainment, and chat. As a result, he had read many coming out stories

and how significant they were to people. Steve thought, however, that his situation was different, perhaps somehow less legitimate or significant, since he was only coming out to one person, a close friend.

He learned, however, that his coming out was quite significant. He recalls,

I had been on the Internet a long time ago, So, I'd read all sorts of stories about people talking and hearing things from other people that had (come out). I'd read coming out stories online about how big opening experiences, what that was like. I figured out that when I'd come out to one person, it's probably going to be just like a project with that person, but it actually was a huge deal to me. I guess it was, I expected it to be just this little deal because I was only coming out to one person, but it made all the difference in the end.

Steve had told himself that coming out to only one person was not a huge event, but it nonetheless seems to have been a turning point. Steve did not immediately expand his secret to any other people. Still, the impact of coming out was a powerful, transforming influence on him, even if the change could not be detected by others. He explains,

...you go from just one person who you're out to. I think that you go from, it's a huge difference from total isolation. I imagine that it's like if you were, if you spent a great portion of your life isolated in a room with absolutely no human contact and then the first person you finally encounter, it (being out), it's so different...I imagine that that is what it is kind of like for most people. It's just for a long time, they feel like being confined and...with absolutely no human contact whatsoever. When they finally reach out to one person, it's amazing. What a difference. Even if it's just one person.

At the start of high school, Steve was out to only the one friend. He also was isolated socially. He attended a public high school of about 1,700 students in a community known chiefly for the local university. He says that the right kind of labels and clothes were essential markings of a student who had social and economic capital and

who ran in the right crowd. He clarifies that he was not a member of this crowd, "I was not one of the popular people. I wasn't popular by any means."

As his freshman year rolled along, Steve and the friend in whom he had confided drifted apart. Now making his way through the high school that was more than twice the size of his junior high, he had cultivated a few new friendships. He came out to a couple of carefully selected new friends. This was, "done without a hitch. In fact, one of them told me that he liked me so much, he thought that we were such good friends that he might be gay, too. He didn't know." If Steve's questioning friend was, in fact, gay, he did not come out. Still, Steve was affirmed by the acceptance he was getting.

He goes on, smiling, "However, I can't say that I'm pure. I have dated a female." Asked to explain, he says this was due to the feeling that he might not be completely ready to be exclusively gay, even after having come out to three classmates. Rather, he says that the couple enjoyed a good relationship as friends. And, he thought that perhaps, "she could be an exception to this rule."

Any lingering questions about his sexual orientation were extinguished the summer after his sophomore year. Steve and his girlfriend had dated for six months or so. He recalls,

...every summer I went to this forensics camp. It was a very good camp and I was rooming with a guy who I was really attracted to and it was driving me nuts. And, over the course of those two weeks, we had become friends. I mean, obviously, it was never going to work with (his girlfriend).

He seems uncomfortable admitting that his breakup with the girlfriend happened on-line. His girlfriend of several months may have suspected something, as she cut

quickly to the chase and asked if he was attracted to another boy. Steve recalls, “And at that point, it was true. And that’s when she stopped talking to me.”

Even in the large high school of 1,700 students, their breakup was big news. The couple that some had tabbed for marriage one day was no longer holding hands in the hallways. What the others didn’t know, yet, was the reason for the break up. But, as a result of the summer camp, Steve knew beyond a doubt that he was gay.

Steve never had a relationship with the boy from the summer camp. After the breakup with his girlfriend, he met another gay male student from a nearby community via the Internet. The other boy was nearly as isolated as Steve. In his matter of fact style, Steve explains that he thought, “if I’m gay and you’re gay and we’re both here, we might as well (hang out and get to know each other).”

With his sexual orientation solidly confirmed in his own mind, Steve was ready to widen the circle of people who knew. “I was ready to take the plunge,” he recalls. He was ready for this, despite being familiar with other gay and lesbian students’ fearful accounts of what happened to them after coming out while in high school. Through the Internet, Steve was well read.

...I had read all sorts of horror stories about how people had gotten, I mean, all you see are horror stories because those are, horror stories that people give out about people who got beat up, who experience harassment in the classroom, and have to drop out of school.

Steve also knew he would be the only openly gay or lesbian student in his high school. He smiles, recalling how word quickly spread about the gay student named Steve, since there were many Steves in the building. “I was the gay one...it’s amazing,

statistically...even if we buy the statistic that 10% of the people are gay, even if we say that leaves 170 people, that's a hell of a lot."

So, at the start of his junior year, armed with the knowledge that he would be the only openly gay student in school and with the coming out horror stories firmly implanted in his mind, Steve made it official to everyone. Rather than a grand announcement or statement, he let clothing do the talking for him. He remembers arriving for the first day of school, "I was wearing a tight t-shirt. I'd like to point that out. I'd been working out all summer, so I was showing off," he says with a grin.

While he may have been showing off his new, physically fit body, he says he had no desire to make his sexual orientation into a loud, boisterous statement. He didn't want to be in anyone's face. He explains, "I didn't want to get on a megaphone and start announcing to people, nor did I want to reach out and shake my hand and say I'm (Steve), I'm gay."

Rather, he let people figure things out for themselves, largely via his changed physical appearance and clothes. The reaction from his peers and classmates surprised him, especially since he was keenly familiar with coming out horror stories. But, he welcomed the pleasant surprise.

Steve says many of his classmates, especially the girls, seemed to already know. As for his male classmates, Steve says his straight appearance may have caught them by surprise. Some were in denial.

...the response that I got from a lot of girls was that they kind of knew. All of my guy friends, there happened to be fewer of them, as is often stereotyped, couldn't believe it, couldn't believe it. I must look really straight or something.

While some of his female classmates confirmed their suspicions that he was gay and male classmates tried to believe the revelation, Steve was enjoying a relatively smooth coming out experience. Perhaps remarkably, he had not faced harassment and hostility. He describes,

In the hallways, I never got shoved against the locker. I never heard ‘fag’ mumbled under anyone’s breath when I was walking down the hallway. I know people talked because people would talk, but no one ever said anything to me....my experience was actually pretty good.

But, the unremarkable and smooth series of events at school may have lulled him into a false sense of security. He didn’t know that major obstacles lay ahead. Given his experience at school, perhaps he could not have known. Some of the obstacles around the corner more closely resembled the struggles of other gay and lesbian students that Steve had read about.

School policy held that there were only two dances at which students were allowed to bring guests from another school. The annual Valentine’s Dance was closed to students from other schools. Steve was dating the male student he’d met on-line and wanted to invite him to the Valentine’s Dance. So, he approached the principal with his request.

“I marched into his office and said the Valentine’s Dance is coming up, I’m gay and would like to take a guy. I can’t take a guy from (his high school) because (of the rule about no outside students at that dance).” The principal granted the request, albeit somewhat reluctantly, asking, “You going to cause any trouble or anything?” Steve interpreted the principal’s reluctance as more of a concern over an unknown out-of-

school guest than reluctance about a same sex date. He was pleased to have his request granted.

When Steve and his date arrived at the dance, they were denied admission for the couples price of \$5. After protesting with the woman taking admission, Steve and his date each paid the \$3 per person admission. He would take up the issue later, but for the time being, he was satisfied because he had been given permission to attend the dance with his out of school guest; something he might not have expected a while earlier.

After the obligatory warm up period, during which most high school students stand around and talk, Steve says people gradually began to dance. As he and his date were dancing, Steve was shocked to feel something smack against his back. He recalls,

Eventually, after I, you know, a certain length of time, people start moving and I felt something hit my back and I thought it was just a pop bottle, like this (20 ounce plastic bottle). And then it came again. And then a huge, someone had thrown a whole bottle of Coke from the vending machine at me...Someone actually threw a set of keys, which I never really understood, because, I mean, they would've needed (them) to get back to their car or their house.

The deluge continued, Steve remembers, with, "coins, empty bottles, full bottles, not everything would hit, but..."

This stunned Steve, in large part because it was completely opposite of the muted reaction that he had interpreted as accepting or tolerant at school. "It was the first physical thing that had ever happened...I was completely blown away. Like, I felt very, very...I was very disappointed in this." The smooth reaction to Steve's coming out at school now appeared in sharp contrast to events at the Valentine's Dance.

Unexpectedly, he was afraid.

I was scared, because, I, it's like if you go into a...it's like the situations you go into and you never even question it, that your safety might be in jeopardy. Like, if you came into this coffee shop, you know, but that all of the sudden the place got held up...one of the biggest reasons you'd be scared is because you never had anticipated that that would happen.

One of Steve's classmates reported what was happening to a teacher on duty. The teacher responded that they would keep an eye on things. Steve thinks this teacher was being honest and doubts that chaperones were intentionally or negligently looking the other way. He points out that it was a dark and crowded place with hundreds of students milling about. He trusts that the chaperones simply did not and could not see everything that was going on.

...I have no reason to suspect that...they were seeing this happening and ignoring it. Because on the ground level, it's a safety issue and if a student gets hurt and gets seriously injured on your school property, you are going to get one hell of a lawsuit and they will lose. Every person who works in a school knows that.

It almost seemed like Steve was attending the dance with a different student body. By day, he'd experienced no slurs, harassment, or ill treatment. By night, at the dance, he was a target for thrown objects. And more.

I noticed a lot of people pointing." This, too, was something that had not happened in the hallways at school. "...I'm not sure why they wouldn't point in the hallways...this group of three guys, they came, danced near us and purposely bumped into us. They were just, you know, rocking their own solos...and then a couple of them were making these new type dances that were basically demonstrating anal sex. At that point, we decided to leave the dance floor. We walked outside and we just sat on the steps for a while outside and chit chatted, not about what had happened, just shooting the breeze. And I said, you know what, let's just leave. And so we left.

Steve thinks that some students were encouraged by the music, the dark, and the chances that they wouldn't be caught by a teacher.

I heard “faggots” for the first time ever at school (at the dance). In the hallways, it never happened. But maybe because it was a dark, party type atmosphere that they...feel emboldened by the atmosphere...

Whatever the reason, he saw a side of his student body that he had never seen before, and never anticipated.

If his peers were inspired to their harassment by the change in venue found at the Valentine’s Dance, Steve was not immediately sure how to react or how to feel. He remembers feeling a mixture of emotions. “The next day, I woke up pretty pissed. Because it was more of like a disappointed being pissed than a genuinely being angry and kind of hold somebody responsible.” His feelings were catching him off guard, in large part because his previous school experience as an out gay male student had been so positive, or at least so uneventful.

As Steve thought more about the events of the evening and how he should respond, he gained some clarity. “I really didn’t know what I was supposed to do, so I did the only thing I knew how. With a guidance counselor in tow, “(he) went straight to the principal.” The principal asked him to name or identify the harassers, which Steve was unable to do because of the dark and the large student body. “...if I saw them in a line up, I could pick out, but I didn’t really know who...I couldn’t tell you who threw anything...”

Following the visit to the principal, Steve did the other thing that was familiar to him. He began putting his thoughts down on paper. He explains,

I was on the newspapers and I was just writing something personal, just for myself because I like to write. Sometimes, the easiest way to, you know, if you’re angry at someone...it’s recommended a lot that you write a letter to them. And so, I started crafting this little essay type piece about, about what had happened. And

this was, this was, this was sort of like my own, my own therapy was writing this and because I was on the (newspaper staff), I had kind of like a journalistic edge to it.

As he wrote, he recalled being denied the couple's admission price of \$5. He also knew that the principal had granted his request to bring another male student as his guest. He felt this made it obvious that the two would be attending as a couple. He confronted the teacher who had denied him the couple's admission price. She told Steve that the principal had instructed her to only allow opposite sex couples in for the couple's price.

He was now on a roll. He had a cause. He had a fire. He approached the newspaper sponsor and told him that the writing had developed into a story that he thought needed to be told. Soon, his story was being told, in front of his peers on the school newspaper. Having attended the dance with a same sex date, he was obviously out to anyone who was paying attention. To this point and with a couple exceptions, he had come out mostly by letting people observe and maybe speculate.

Now, he was standing in front of his peers in the journalism class, preparing to read the piece that raw emotion had compelled him to write, originally as therapy for himself. And he was scared. "I was already out, but I was more scared when I was about to read that to all those people than I ever was for coming out to anyone."

The piece took on a life of its own. "And what happened was that...as I kept revising it, I realized that I had more to say. And so, I kept adding to it and eventually it became too big for the front page..." It grew into a large piece with accompanying artwork by another student. The piece attracted a lot of attention, something Steve admits

with a mix of pride and humility, smiling, “this is actually a famous piece of literature at my high school now.”

Not long after the school newspaper featured Steve’s writing, he received an email message from the state human rights commission and the Hate Acts Rapid Response Team, a local/regional civil rights group, seeking more information. They advised Steve to take his concerns to the next level in the district, which he did.

The central office administrator Steve dealt with earned his high praise for the way she handled his complaint. He explains,

She has the most incredible sense of justice. She would be willing to fight to the death for things being good for you. She had a vested interest in making everybody’s experience in that school district positive and worthwhile and fulfilling...

In the end, the district changed its admission policy for dances so it no longer reflected compulsory heterosexuality in the couples admission price of \$5. Instead, a uniform price of \$4 applies to everyone wanting to attend the dance. “I’ve called it heterosexual assumptions of what constitutes a couple in my article,” Steve explains. “At least this would stop the institutionalization of those assumptions.”

In addition, the district moved to address the harassment and dangerous atmosphere at the dance when peers began throwing things at Steve and his date. Steve maintains that the chaperones at the dance simply didn’t see what was taking place as items were thrown. Now, however, “there has to be more chaperones. And you know, a lot of people don’t like that idea. But I say, tough shit, what if someone was throwing stuff at you?”

Steve's article, along with the attention it attracted and response it drew, represent another turning point for him. Once reluctant to share his writing with his peers on the school newspaper staff, he was now fully empowered and on a mission. He had experienced some of the worst his schoolmates had to offer, but wasn't afraid of reactions or harassment. He suspects that some potentially hostile classmates were probably "too scared to say anything," explaining that he "had this bad ass attitude about how like, just, you know, just try (to harass me). And watch what I do to you." Bring it on.

Part of the new, "bad ass attitude" comes from the fact that Steve had garnered the support and respect of many peers from whom he had previously been isolated. For example, following his story appearing in the school paper, he received a letter from a freshman student who said she admired him for his courage. He had no idea who the girl was. The letter, however, was evidence of how his circle of friends had grown significantly. "Maybe, just maybe, they actually respected me a little bit more for (the way he handled things)."

He also explains that, since he was no longer isolated socially, he was less inviting as a target for harassment. He continues,

I was friends with lots of people and you know...no body's going to tolerate someone who's messing with one of their friends." Further, he says, "Being *in* and the sociality of high school was crucial to not being beaten up or anything. I mean, if you think about it, who are the kids that get their lunch money stolen? ...No offense, but they're the outcast people who sit at tables by themselves.

Now empowered and energized, applying for the Matthew Shepard Scholarship was a natural for Steve. It was, fittingly, his journalism advisor who suggested he apply for the scholarship. From the outside looking in, Steve might have appeared to be the

perfect candidate for the award. Although he began high school as an isolated, almost invisible entity, he had transformed himself into an academically and socially successful student in high school. He had skillfully worked within channels to impact school policy and had worked to focus attention on gay and lesbian issues in school. He had successfully formed a GSA at his high school. Still, he was not confident that he would win.

In fact, he recalls taking the phone call from the scholarship committee chairman. Steve was thinking that he was about to be told that he would receive, “like a consolation prize.” When he heard that instead he had been awarded one of the full tuition Matthew Shepard Scholarships, he says, “I was like, are we talking the big one, like the one that covers everything. I couldn’t believe it.”

He says the scholarship “gives an amazing example of a gay person.” Further,

Rich (the scholarship founder) and all the people that...gave the scholarship are great examples of you know, regular people, who are openly gay and they’re doing regular things. And some of them are in very professional fields. Some of them are important members of the community.

Steve’s description of the people behind the Matthew Shepard Scholarship blends seamlessly into his vision for the gay rights movement and the place of gay and lesbian people in society. He has powerful ideas and expresses them with the conviction of someone who’s been there.

Simply put, Steve wants gay and lesbian people to be assimilated into society. Toward that end, he argues that many of the actions taken by gay and lesbian activists often hurt the cause more than they help. He explains,

I'm not a parader, I don't believe in it. I mean people get pretty extravagant and they always end up looking pretty silly. Those are the stereotypes people embrace when they're watching the parade, because they (those in the parade) want to throw it into peoples faces. But like I said, from a purely political standpoint, that's not really smart. Because...it doesn't show people that you can be an upstanding, professional, and for lack of a better term, normal member of (the) community, and, and you know, also be openly gay.

Steve applies this pick your battles attitude to his own experience. In looking back at his high school experience, he explains how he wanted to,

show people that I could be a successful student, I could be involved in many extracurricular activities, and I could have a lot of friends and not be, you know, a depressed social outcast and shut myself into a world because I was worried people were talking about me.

To some, this outlook may sound to some like blaming the victim. To others, it may ring of an unrealistic, pull yourself up by your own bootstraps approach. Steve is, however, well aware of the immensely challenging circumstances faced by gay, lesbian, and questioning high school students. While he acknowledges these difficulties, he points to what might be seen as a self-fulfilling prophecy of negative experiences surrounding coming out.

He clarifies this view, explaining,

So, I always imagined that, back when I was not out to anybody and I had read all those horror stories, I always imagined coming out would be worse than it was. But what I learned along the way was that, what I was imagining was going to make it worse...(they're) so scared that something bad is going to happen that they behave as though it has, even if it doesn't.

It is clear that Steve's intent is not to be dismissive of experiences that are far more stressful and difficult than his own. It comes through loud and clear that he believes a majority of the responsibility for the quality and nature of one's coming out experience

rests on the largely individuals' shoulders. Yet Steve also believes that there is enough responsibility to spread around, especially to educators.

Rather than focusing solely on the dismal statistics involving many gay and lesbian high school students, Steve argues that the task of building strong students needs to be a major focus. He argues for a greater effort toward empowering and strengthening young people. They should, he says, be equipped with an internal locus of control.

He explains, "You need to do a better job at empowering people to be stronger individuals." He sees a significant problem with the focus being on the negative occurrences and statistics and not enough attention given toward building people up. "There's little to any at all information...about how to empower people to understand that they are, you know, that they are in control of a lot of things that they may not feel that they are in control of."

For Steve, it's not just about strengthening gay and lesbian students, however. He also acknowledges the need for changes in school policy. Steve knows there will be some who will not change their minds about homosexuality being wrong or abhorrent. Likewise, some will not curtail their harassment and intolerance of their own accord. "...you know, massively mentally reprogramming everybody, it just can't be done." For these, policy is necessary.

In addressing the need for policy changes at his school, he reflects,

I was willing to stand up for it. It became clear that somebody was going to do something about it. The other side is that...if you're just suppressing the problem, you're not changing people's lives. The thing is that people are suffering and it takes a lot longer to, to make people think of something differently. So it goes for people who, you know, are bullies, whether it's in elementary school, junior high

or high school. But because they know they can do it and they know they can get away with it, I think that is why it happens...

In addition to empowering individuals and effective school policy, Steve points to school climate and atmosphere as the third, and perhaps simplest, piece of the puzzle. Educators, he says, must do a better job of communicating expectations and creating the kind of atmosphere in which those expectations will be realized. "...you create a climate where this (harassment) is not acceptable, it will not happen. That's the bottom line."

Steve summarizes his coming out as "a fairy tale experience for the most part, with a couple isolated incidents." He understands that many gay and lesbian students struggle through a dangerous experience that is more nightmare than fairy tale. At the end of our conversation, he reveals the reason he was willing to share his story and powerful beliefs about gay and lesbian issues in school with me.

One of the reasons I actually, I wanted to do this (participate in the study) was because I didn't want you to write a dissertation sob story about all the negative experiences. Because I think it's important for people to know that there are positive experiences out there. Largely positive. Not entirely, but largely positive.

Brad

Sitting in the student union on his university campus, Brad speaks in a soft tone of voice and a matter-of-fact style that is sometimes blunt, sometimes sarcastic, but always direct. One cannot visit with him for more than a few moments and miss that there is a certain intensity behind his words. He has sharp eyes that seem to match the force with which he often speaks. He is of average height and weight. One would never suspect that he weighed as much as 350 pounds in high school. Today, dressed in jeans and a casual shirt, he blends well into the mass of college student humanity milling about in the union.

He describes the middle class Midwestern town in which he grew up as an average sort of place, explaining, “It wasn’t that bad, but it wasn’t that good... The town wasn’t very rich, but they’re not very poor.” The community of about 8,000 is a county seat within about an hour’s drive of a metropolitan area. The town has a reputation as a decidedly blue-collar place, with a considerable amount of light industry for a community of its size. It is a place where car racing, county fairs, and outdoor recreation are the norm. According to Brad, the town’s residents are, “not really open to a lot of things,” but neither are they outwardly hostile to them.

Asked to elaborate on that description, Brad clarifies, “they weren’t openly dismissive and hateful, but they were just like, I don’t care. Keep it away from me, I don’t want to deal with it.” When further asked to clarify what he means by “it,” he says, “Anything that wasn’t traditional.”

Brad says his experience growing up as one of isolation. He grew up with his parents and younger sister and some extended family nearby. He describes his family as being “the stereotypical Germanic, waspy, farm, Midwestern people... Just not really talking about things,” although he remembers parental warnings directed at he and his sister about the dangers of drugs, alcohol, and sex.

Reflecting on his growing up and school experience, Brad says he never really fit in. He identifies four factors behind his lack of connection. “I was never really accepted into anything, very early on, for four reasons, but I didn’t figure it out until much later.” Brad says the four factors were the rapid rate of his physical development and size, his intelligence, depression, and later, his sexual orientation.

He recalls the first and second factors, explaining,

I had facial hair and acne in the fourth grade. I was always taller than some of my teachers, so like, even in the first grade...And then we found out through (district testing) that I'm talented and gifted. I couldn't really believe that, that I tested high enough to get into some, like, more accelerated classes.

School was easy for him.

These factors, along with his sexual orientation, which would reveal itself in high school, created a situation in which Brad says he clearly did not fit in. Nor did he want to.

I couldn't identify with other people and what they wanted. They couldn't understand why I thought the things that I thought and (did) the things that I did. So, it was just very separate.

Plainly, Brad never belonged. His choice of play was a long way from cops and robbers.

It seems like I was just bigger than everyone else and I always had strange behavior, or when we played house like at daycare or preschool, it'd be something out of a soap opera, like Mommy was in a coma and Daddy's evil twin was there. Something random...I remember dressing up like Blanche from *The Golden Girls*.

Brad says that in addition to his physical size and intelligence, his propensity to aggressively question things that were commonly accepted isolated him even more. He says his atheism further contributed to his social solitude.

...I was an atheist. Most people of the school went to church. I went to church before and I thought it was total bullshit. They'd tell these stories and I'd ask questions like, "If we were all (descended) from the same...two people, wouldn't we all be really disgustingly inbred by now?" They didn't answer that. And I asked, "What about after the flood? If (the world were repopulated by) the same family, wouldn't we all be inbred again?" They didn't answer that. They said, "Stop asking such disgusting questions."

When the church failed to adequately answer his questions, Brad was turned off.

He recalls, as early as an eight or nine year old, hearing sermons and talk at church about openness and respect for people mixed in with a racist joke after the service during coffee

hour. "Sometimes I'd hear a racist joke," he remembers, "and I'd be like, that's bullshit. And of course, I'm like not even eight...I was just saying things to piss people off."

Brad's unusual behavior and aggressive questioning led to him being diagnosed with depression in his early teens. At one point, doctors discussed placing him in an institution after he reported hearing voices as a child. The doctors felt he was too young to know what an inner monologue was. He was treated for this for about six years and eventually medicated with antidepressants. Brad remained socially isolated throughout his middle school years.

In high school, Brad recalls viewing his isolation as a welcome alternative to the quest to be one of the group with friends and classmates.

...I actually kind of liked not belonging to a group because I knew people weren't going to stab me in the back every time I turned around. Like, these two girls would say, "Oh we're the best friends ever," but then when one of them leaves the room, she'd say, "I fucking hate her"...Then why are you saying you're her best friend if you hate her?...I couldn't understand why people would say they are friends, and then like, say terrible things about each other. Or like, tell everyone this person's secret. I couldn't comprehend why this was going on. I thought this is not how I wanted to be, or if people are going to be like that, I'd rather just, like, not belong to a group at all.

Brad was also extremely apathetic during this period. While he was making good grades, he lacked interest in much of anything. He explains, "Like, I didn't care if I did this or did that, but sometimes I'd just vegetate, not necessarily sleep, but I just wasn't interested in doing lots of things...it didn't matter."

Brad suspects that these differences in him led people around him to start deducing that he was gay, even before the thought entered his own mind. Looking back,

he thinks other people were, “figuring things out much earlier than they would admit to. Like I think everyone knew (about his sexual orientation) at least a decade before I did.”

Brad says that his early adolescence was devoid of the typical thoughts about sex and sexuality. When pressed about whether he remembers *any* sexual thoughts about boys or girls, Brad answers concisely, “Consciously? None.” He explains simply, that he’d never had “sexual thoughts or feelings.” He attributes this surprising lack of interest or insight, in part to being out of touch with his mind and body, again due to his physical size and rapid development.

...because of my body, I wasn’t in touch with my mind. My body was something else entirely, (it) moved of its own accord. And it wasn’t just that, I was also grotesquely overweight. I was about 350 pounds by the time I was 15 or so.

While Brad says isolation was comfortable and he had no desire to be one of the gang, he did take refuge in food. Recalling this period of isolation, he says, “I was isolated, I didn’t have anyone to talk to. I didn’t have the friends, but food was always there. Food didn’t call me names. It didn’t treat me like crap.”

If others around him truly suspected or knew that Brad was gay ten or so years before he knew himself, his own realization came in an instant. In contrast to many other gay and lesbian students, Brad says his realization came almost out of nowhere. At age 15, he remembers, explaining, “Oh yeah, it took less than a day,” to realize that he is gay.

... Well, I noticed that my (teacher’s assistant or student teacher) for American History was really attractive and he played football, and he always wore tight clothing. I kept getting distracted by that. And I remember one day, he helped me to find something in my book. And so I was sitting at a table, my hand was on the book...and so he came around and was helping scan the page with this one hand next to mine on the book, and his face was close to mine, and he was breathing on my neck and in my ear and I was just wondering why I couldn’t concentrate. I was getting really confused and flustered and couldn’t speak. And then, like, after

class, I'm like, "Maybe I'm gay." So I'm thinking about his for maybe ten seconds, I'm like, "HmMMM, maybe." And then I see an attractive male classmate walk by and think to myself, "He's got a good ass. Yeah, that's pretty gay."

And so, Brad says, he moved through the crowded school hallway, pondering this new revelation in his introspective, matter of fact style. He explains, "I panicked for all of like, what, 10 or 15 seconds, and I decided to go to the library. Well, if I 'm going to do this, I might as well find out what's going on." Not surprisingly, his search for current information in the high school library was a short one. Brad recalls the query, "Nothing. Everything was outdated from the 70s and early 80s and I was like, "What the hell is this bullshit," when they had stuff that even I knew was outdated..."

After finding no useful information in the library, Brad went on-line. He explains his research with a sarcastic air,

Like, I thought I may as well see what is going on first, before I get worried about getting kicked out of my house or anything...I wasn't afraid of being beaten up or killed. I wasn't afraid of anything.

He simply wanted information.

He soon found a gay college group located at a small liberal arts college not far from his hometown. Over the coming months and years, Brad would become the only high school student involved in the group of gay and lesbian college students.

His apparent lack of fear or apprehension stands in contrast to many other gay and lesbian youth who wrangle with whether and how to come out, even unto themselves. To clarify this bold statement, I asked Brad if his lack of fear was because he thought he could handle whatever came his way or because he didn't think those terrible things would happen to him. He answers,

Probably both. Because honestly, I think everyone was a bit afraid of me, so I don't think they would ever say any shit to my face... They thought I was off, that I might do something. This was the time when all the school shootings were happening.

If his classmates really thought he might be some kind of threat, it underscores how little they knew of him, how isolated he was. His classmates apparently failed to see past his imposing physical appearance, sarcasm and intellect. They missed obvious signs that Brad says, showed that he was far from a threat to anyone. He says,

My family doesn't own a gun. I'd written all these (reports for classes) that were about pro-gun control actions, so like, what the hell are you talking about (others being afraid that he might be prone to violence)?

By age 15, Brad had found and read enough material about sexual orientation and high school to be familiar with the perils of being openly gay and in high school. His quest for information had acquainted him with a body of literature that painted a decidedly bleak, stressful, and often-dangerous atmosphere for gay and lesbian high school students.

When those accounts failed to match the reality of Brad's experience, he was thrown off, surprised. Although he had always been a loner, his experience was shaping up quite differently than the literature led him to believe it would.

Contrary to what his reading had led him to expect, Brad's gayness appeared not to be a big deal. He had not made an open, public declaration. Rather, he suspects that many people had quietly assumed that he was gay for a number of years. Now that he was out to himself, he made no attempt to dissuade people who suspected him. Further, he doesn't recall many people being concerned with it. There was neither a spurt in popularity nor an interest in attacking or harassing him. This reaction, combined with the

accounts he had read, caught him off balance. “Some people just thought I would come out a year or two before I actually came out. Some people just said, huh, Yeah, that sounds about right.”

The lack of reaction even angered him. He continues,

And then, I would get pissed off, because I was reading all these (materials)...make sure you take care of this, and watch out for this happening and no one cared. I was expecting at least one comment, one something, but no one said anything or did anything. I was never threatened. Nothing was vandalized.

This is, perhaps, where Brad’s story becomes something of a paradox.

On one hand, he describes his hometown as being not particularly open to things that were out of the working class, middle class norms. Despite this, his sexual orientation and perhaps an assumption that he was gay seems to have barely made the radar at school and within the community. When asked to explain why his sexual orientation did not match the commonly described experiences of others, he offers a couple intriguing explanations. First, he believes his long-standing isolation and physical size were important factors, as was his intelligence and propensity to openly question and challenge things.

A second possibility Brad raises is that even though he says his community was not particularly open to new and different things, he thinks that the presence of other gay men and lesbian women in the community and school district made his situation less of an issue. He says that most of these people were not *officially* out as gay or lesbian. Rather, Brad says they all appear somewhere on a continuum of being known, suspected, or assumed to be gay and lesbian. Brad thinks that many in the community had suspected

the adult gays and lesbians long before and stopped paying attention. Like Brad, they had not made grand, public announcements. Rather, they may have been simply identified and/or assumed, as was Brad, perhaps with a comment like, “huh. Yeah, that sounds about right.”

In describing the gay and lesbian members of his school and community, Brad explains that the school had two lesbian guidance counselors in elementary school as well as a bisexual special education teacher. As he reminisces about these people in his community, his mind seems to click into gear, remembering others,

Yeah, and we had gay parents, like Tom had, his mother was a lesbian, I think...oh, and there was a lesbian gym teacher. Wow, I think there were two lesbian gym teachers...sorry, there were *lots* of lesbians.

When pressed about whether all these people are really out and open as gays and lesbians, Brad clarifies,

Well, yes and no. Yes, like, everyone knows. There's no way you can really hide it. At the same time, I don't think they've gone around...putting bumper stickers on the car... We also know that they dated within this group Like, I know Tom's mother, she's a doctor, I think she dated one of the counselors.

He insists that one could ask most people from his community about gay or lesbian teachers and they would easily identify those that he describes. It is important to note, however, that although these people were known to be gay and lesbian, Brad was not really in contact with any of them. These people did not provide a community of support to him and he remained as isolated as ever

In addition, Brad recalls the presence of some other gay and lesbian high school students. He assumes that some of these students were closeted and attempting to pass for straight. Some were largely successful. He says others may not have overtly

acknowledged their sexual orientation in a public way, but, “they were just very plain, very out. Like, people knew before they did.” In Brad’s situation,

I was just the most accepting of myself and open when it came time for that. Everyone else just sort of, they didn’t talk about it. They didn’t do anything with it. They just *were*. End of conversation.

Brad believes the presence of these others, whether open or suspected, made coming out easier for him and also less likely that he, like the many accounts he’d read, would be harassed, belittled, and attacked. Still, he anticipated a reaction. Something. He recalls, “...I kept expecting things, but that’s why I say they must have known since I was very young, because no one said anything, no one did anything.... No one said anything to my face.”

Just about the only harassment or difficulty that Brad can remember in school was one girl who,

didn’t ever like to sit by me in class because her parents kept telling her that I was a heathen... Yeah, you go, I was a heathen, you forgot the atheist. I just like it. It fits me, it fits my behavior and attitude.”

He hardly sounds shaken.

Brad’s experience also differs from others in that he says he never felt any significant pressure to pass for straight. He does recall some disappointment among some family members when he never showed any serious interest in dating girls. He notes that he is the last male family member to carry the family name, and that this may have caused some family members some grief.

Academically, Brad’s grades were decent, mostly As and Bs, with Cs in math and science. Here again, his experience fails to match what he had read about other gay and

lesbian students' school experiences. Unlike many other gay and lesbian students, Brad did not skip school out of depression or fear. His grades suffered from neither an internalized struggle with his sexual orientation nor the stress of being openly gay or lesbian. His high intelligence appears to have served him well, along with what he views as low expectations from the school.

“It’s not like I had to try hard. Because they had such low standards, I could just crap out a paper in 20 minutes before they needed it, and they’d be like, Oh, I love it.” He says the only real suggestion he received from teachers was that he should not use so many complex sentences in his writing, because his, “professors in college might not like it.”

Although Brad didn’t make a grand announcement about his sexual orientation, he acknowledges that he was a changed individual after coming out to himself as a sophomore. Through the noticeable change in his demeanor, he began to forge new friendships with the gay and lesbian college group. “Afterwards, I was much friendlier, much more at peace with things, because (before) I was always pissed off and angry and unhappy.”

As his circle of new friends widened, he began to lose some weight. As he lost weight, he began to take more of an interest in his physical appearance. He remembers,

...I felt like I wanted to look good for other people, because before I didn’t care what the hell I looked like. It’s just the same people I knew everyday...Before, there’s no reason to bother, it’s the same people I’ve known all my life. What the hell do they care? I know what they look like, they know what I look like, there’s no one to impress. There’s no one to look good for.

As Joe's new friendships grew, his weight came off, and his mood brightened. "I was happier, I (wanted) nicer clothes..."

He speaks convincingly about his new friends in the gay and lesbian college group and what they meant to him. "Like, they were the first real friends that I ever really had. I could talk to them and I knew I wasn't going to be used for something." These friends, Brad knew, were true friends, unlike others he'd known, who had often tried to use him, which served to push him further into his sullen isolation. The walls were coming down.

That Brad recalls so little harassment or hostility at school is a surprise. He is confident, however, that if there had been problems, his teachers and school administrators would have responded. He recalls that some teachers took it upon themselves to monitor things and, "asked every now and again if I was getting hassled or had anyone causing me trouble. No one was but if someone had, I think they would have taken some action."

Brad says these improved relationships with teachers after he was out were again due in large part to the change in his demeanor. "...they just liked me more later, because I was happier and less of a bitch...And I was starting to write better essays...they liked the fact that I would put more effort into my research..."

His newfound positive attitude also revealed a previously hidden sense of courage. This revealed itself one day when Brad was flirting with a military recruiter at school, whom he says was oblivious to what was going on. Brad, however, wasn't the

military type and his invitation to the soldier to have coffee was not out of a sincere interest in military service but was of a more romantic or sexual interest in the officer.

Brad says his sexual orientation and change in demeanor didn't really impact his family relationships. Like the others who had suspected his gayness, he says his parents and sister had figured things out on their own. An indirect conversation with his parents about his interest in the gay student group at the nearby college was a good hint. Brad's dad had also seen the searches for gay youth groups in the cache on the family computer. Likewise, he laughs describing how he thinks his sister knew, as well, at least in part because of the way he made fun of her *Teen* magazines.

While Brad does not describe his family as particularly close or expressive, it is worth noting that he never seriously feared being kicked out of the home. Although they did not have any family discussions about his sexual orientation, there appears to have been an implicit support or tolerance, not unlike that at school. For example, Brad's father had driven him to a gay and lesbian social event in a nearby city, with full knowledge as to what the event was about although they never directly talked about it.

It seems that there was little doubt in the family about Brad's sexual orientation. Any remaining questions were summarily obliterated in what Brad describes as a funny scene when the family went to the photographer's office to select Brad's senior pictures. The photographer's practice was to blow up several proofs to a size of about four by five feet. Brad's blown up portraits included a healthy dose of his gay paraphernalia. He recalls, with a laugh, "...so I have all this gay stuff with me...freedom rings...pink triangles...couple of flags..." When his parents saw the proofs, the reaction was,

“Oooohhhh...If you want, order those for your gay friends, but don’t take them to school and don’t send those to grandma...I’m like, “Alright.”

Brad learned about the Matthew Shepard Scholarship through his friends in the gay college group. He suspects that he might not have known about it otherwise, because the counselors at his school did not make a practice of actively trying to match certain students with certain scholarships. He explains, “...all they do is just set them out on little tables and stands and in a big book of scholarships.”

When he applied, Brad says he didn’t think he would win, partly because he didn’t think he had done enough community service. “...all I’d done was donate a bunch of books to the school and public libraries.” He was, however, also becoming something of a resource for teachers, whom he says would often ask him about gay and lesbian issues and how gay and/or lesbian students might react to them.

For example, “...they’d have questions about whether something would have been offensive to gay people, like certain articles or stories. I’m like, no, don’t worry about it.” Again, some of Brad’s new and dry sense of humor could now be seen in his responses. “I was like, what are you talking about? That poem was really boring. Wasn’t it about a plant or something?”

Like his coming out, there was no large reaction to Brad winning a Matthew Shepard Scholarship. School tradition dictated that all scholarships were read at the commencement ceremony. He learned after graduation that the superintendent was hesitant to have Brad’s scholarship announced along with the others. He was surprised and gratified to learn that two teachers and two other administrators had confronted their

boss on the issue. "I found out later from two teachers, the principal and the vice principal that when they found out about that, they were going to be really pissed off if he didn't read it." In the end, Brad's scholarship was read, along with all of the others.

Today, Brad is nearing the end of his college career and speaks convincingly about the impact the Matthew Shepard Scholarship has had on his life. The scholarship, he says, eased considerable financial pressure and freed him from being so concerned with paying for his education. The award has allowed him to be a part of other groups, which he has done with considerable vigor. It's transformed him. "I've completely changed...probably for the better...(as a result of)...coming out and the Matthew Shepard Scholarship."

He's been involved in theatre productions on campus, something he says he will continue after college. He has been active in laying the groundwork for a recognized gay fraternity on campus, and their efforts have been well received. This is something he suggests all gay and lesbian students investigate at either their schools. "Just get something together, find people to talk with, find people to meet with in a safe environment."

Brad has also been involved with the gay and lesbian student group on his campus, although he is harshly critical of much of its activities and focus, and the way in which it tries to make its points. He's critical of the group, which he refers to as "a meat market." A significant problem, he says, is the group's lack of focus on what should be the real issues.

He reserves stronger language for how he sees this group and others actually hurting the cause of gay rights and awareness through foolish and ill-conceived ideas.

...they don't have the damn common sense to pick and choose their battles. They will take the most ludicrous, stupid arguments and make a huge deal out of it. And, I think it's just insulting, because when they do have a serious argument, no one pays attention.

Brad says the gay/lesbian groups and gay/lesbian-friendly groups would be wiser to focus their energies on what he calls real issues. For example, he's frustrated by what he sees as foolish accusations of homophobia when gay and lesbian signs are taken down after being improperly placed in a spot reserved for faculty communication. Describing another incident that hurt the cause, he relates a story of how a gay student interrupted an English lecture just to hand out condoms. He explains,

...they'll say or do small little things or just they'll have somebody write things in to the paper, and it just embarrasses me because it makes gay people look petty and small, and childish and immature. And like they can't form real arguments, and it's just like, I can't deal with this, I can't deal with this behavior. It's just embarrassing and I feel bad for the people who were arrested for being gay, for the people who I know, who are in their middle age...who really had hard times coming out. And here they are, just throwing it away...I just can't comprehend that. It's too much. It's just too much petty stuff and not enough big picture stuff. It just really hurts me when I see it going on. I just...It's like spitting on people's graves. I'm sorry. It just really offends me.

As a Matthew Shepard Scholar, Brad recognizes a responsibility to make good grades and be involved in the community, "not just the gay setting." He's also cognizant of how some seek to, in his eyes, take advantage of him as a Matthew Shepard Scholar, by expecting that he should do more than his fair share in advocacy groups. In addition, he says he is vigilant in guarding against others' attempts to use him as access to the funds behind the Matthew Shepard Scholarship.

Like people would ask me to do things, just because I was a Matthew Shepard Scholar, because I think they wanted (Rich's) money..."Hey, by the way, next time you talk to (Rich), could you ask him for some money for us?" "No."

Brad is interested in a career in real estate, though he can't see himself leaving his love of the theatre behind. And, like the gay and lesbian groups, he thinks theatre groups have a responsibility to address big picture, sometimes-edgy issues in a substantive way. His dry, often sarcastic manner comes through as he summarizes, "You're not going to learn anything with the *Christmas Carol* every other year."

His impassioned criticisms seem a long way from the isolated, sullen, and completely apathetic 15 year old who realized he was gay one day after American History. He says he'd like to thank the student teacher who, probably unknowingly, gave him the courage to discover himself. He explains,

...he was always nice to me and respectful to me and just his being there was enough and I just wanted to thank him for that...I just really want to thank him and find him, even if he is straight. I don't care...But, if anyone ever puts me in contact with him, I will thank them forever.

Joe

Seated in a popular coffee bar near the campus of his university, Joe matches the description of Joe College, Anyplace U. His baggy jeans, comfortable shirt, haircut and backpack are the look favored by most of his collegiate peers. Talking with him, however, reveals another story; one that is quite different from most of the other customers, who are half-studying on a pleasant fall afternoon.

Joe explains that he grew up in a family fraught with challenges. He was born to young, unmarried parents and the relationship didn't last. His mother later married another man but Joe and his stepfather never had a smooth relationship. He remembers

constant strain with his stepfather, “who always called (him) fruit loop.” Joe says that he suffered through a home life that was a mess. He has chosen to block out a lot of his childhood, describing it as “kind of dark.”

Joe’s half brother and half sister suffered, both younger, also suffered from the dysfunction in their home. Their challenges eventually revealed themselves through a suicide attempt by his half-sister and trouble with the law for his half-brother. Eventually, the state intervened and removed his half siblings from the home. Although many of his childhood memories are unpleasant, Joe seems anxious to impress on me that he had a longstanding close and nurturing relationship with his grandmother.

Things were not much better at school. As a third grader, Joe and his family moved to a county seat town of about 5,000 located in a predominately rural area of the state. Despite the decidedly rural context, Joe says he felt considerable pressure not to be perceived as a rural/farm kid. He remembers a lot of pressure to wear the right clothes and be seen as economically prosperous. He recalls, “I was on the farm and I just kind of lied about my life.” He lied about “...(his) economic status and all that stuff”.

At the time, he wasn’t giving his sexual orientation any thought. He was more focused on trying to fit the expected social norm of his school, but it wasn’t working. He describes being made fun of for one reason or another from the time he was in third grade all the way through the seventh grade. He says he was called gay a lot, but that the term was commonly used and lots of his peers experienced the same thing. In his school, like many others, the slur was just one of many that were thrown around loosely, aimed at anything that could be criticized—in Joe’s case, a kid who didn’t fit in.

For Joe, respite from this chaotic situation came from his grandmother and biological father, who made sure someone was there to pick him up each weekend and take him to the larger city where they lived. Once there, Joe could relax for the weekend, get his laundry done, and be free from the stress and “mental abuse” that was commonplace in his home, especially from his stepfather.

Although he didn't know it at the time, Joe's grandmother had been meticulously gathering evidence of just how troubled his home life was. When she came to pick Joe up, he remembers her taking care to snap a few photos showing the condition of the home. He didn't think much of it at the time. He was just ready to go.

In the summer after Joe's seventh grade year, his grandmother told him that she did not think he should return to home. Joe's grandmother calculated that his mother would not go through a custody battle, knowing the damaging information that she had assembled over the years. In addition, she speculated that Joe's mother would not want the fight because it might result in her losing child support.

Grandmother was right, and by the middle of his eighth grade year, Joe moved to the city with his grandmother and biological father, although child support continued to go to Joe's mother, back in the small town, some 60 miles away. In speaking of his “parents,” he refers to his biological father and paternal grandmother.

Joe's initial transition to his larger, suburban school was difficult, even though he had never really felt like he belonged in the small town school and was glad to be gone. He met some of the same difficulties being accepted at his new school, but by the end of his eighth grade year and the start of high school, he had made some friends.

At about this time, a small voice in the back of his mind was questioning his sexual orientation. He says that at the time of this questioning, he knew, at least on some level, that he was gay but was not ready to admit it. He recalls, "I kind of knew, but I denied it, until like sophomore year."

Although he didn't know it at the time, Joe says his grandmother and, to a lesser extent, his father, were having the same questions about him. One day, they confronted him: "...So they finally asked me and I told them, yeah, I was." The reactions of the two most important figures in his life differed significantly. His dad's reaction was vivid. He recalls, "I cried a lot and my dad just, like, turned pale with a look of shock."

Years later, his grandmother revealed that, "she'd known since I was a baby..." At the time, however, Joe's grandmother was a bit more difficult to gage. He maintains that it was her intuition or suspicion that made his dad aware that there might be something out of the ordinary with Joe. He thinks she was almost certainly the reason for the question. Her love for him was undeniable, as evidenced by her rescuing him from his chaotic home. Yet, how she would mediate her love for her grandson and her personal views toward sexual orientation was hard to know.

For Joe, the hard part suddenly felt like it was over. He says he had internally admitted to himself that he was gay at the time his grandmother and dad confronted him. Now that the two most important people in his life knew, he was far less concerned about letting other people know.

So sophomore year I started to come out to people. Like, I told two friends. And, because once my parents (dad and grandmother) found out, I didn't really care who found out, because that's who I was like, hiding it from.

Despite the relief of his “parents” knowing and his subsequent ability to let some others know, Joe was not fully ready to identify himself as a gay young man. A combination of factors swirled together to actually push him back into the closet, even after he had come out to his grandmother and father. For one, Joe knew their religious beliefs did not mesh well with his sexual orientation. He remembers that his father “kept telling me it was a choice.” And so, Joe began to wonder--began to hope--that it was perhaps just confusion or a temporary situation. “I was, ‘Yep, this is a phase.’”

At about this time, even though he had quietly come out to a couple friends, Joe began dating a female classmate. “Well, then I kind of went back in the closet, like, ‘Well, I’m not that way.’” Pressed to explain himself, Joe says that this was not an attempt to *pass* for being straight. Rather, it was an attempt to convince himself that he really *was* straight. “Yeah, to talk myself out of it (being gay),” he explains.

Joe was determined to not be gay. The harassment and slurs he’d experienced, along with the religious views of the significant people in his life were causing him a lot of stress.

I was like, ‘I can’t be this way. It’s not right’ ...I didn’t want to be that way. Like, I was mad at myself for being that way. I remember being a little kid and praying that I wouldn’t be that way, even though I knew I was.

As Joe came in and out of the closet, the stress was taking its toll on him. He fell into a depression. At the same time, his grades fell dramatically from their typical near four point level. In the past, he had always tackled challenging and AP courses when they were available. In the midst of his turmoil, however, he lacked the focus that he needed. Finally, he resigned himself to the fact that it was time to come out, and for good.

So, he told his girlfriend. Seated with Joe on the family couch, she met the news with tears, but not hostility. Joe's description of these events almost resembles a movie script. Joe says his dad walked into the room, moments after he had revealed his news to her and asked if everything was ok. When he told his dad what he'd just told his girlfriend, "he's like, oh, that's nice." Perhaps this was because he'd been told earlier and had recovered from his initial reaction. The boyfriend – girlfriend relationship ended, although the two remain close friends today. "She's a great person, I still love her. We still talk."

At about this time, Joe knew his grandmother was wrestling with her religious views of homosexuality and the grandson she treasured and had rescued from a bleakly troubled home. And, Joe supposes that his father enmeshed in this struggle, too. This may be part of the reason that Joe's father suggested that the family engage in some counseling. Joe says a larger reason, however, is probably that his grandmother told his dad to make the suggestion. "Everything that he said is a direct quote of my grandma," Joe explains.

The experience with the counselor represented another, unanticipated twist. It sounds again like a far-fetched made for TV movie. It may, in fact, be true that reality makes great theatre. Here, Joe is an unenthusiastic participant in the counseling, mostly because he remembers bad experiences with state counselors and social workers who were involved in his family and home life as a young child. He explains, "...if you ever have a kid taken out of a home, they have an in-home counselor...Basically lies to say

how wonderful your family is and blah, blah, blah. Like, I'd been to counselors all my life."

Dad, in the drama, is a committed Christian, who loves his son but is torn between his son's apparent homosexuality and the effect it's having on his life, and his own religious beliefs. So, dad apparently follows the matriarch's suggestion that they seek counseling. As perhaps can only be anticipated by a Hollywood writer, the counselor turns out to be a lesbian, though this was not immediately known to Joe's father.

After some time, Joe thinks his father began to realize that the counselor was, in fact, a lesbian. Joe paints an intriguing picture of this situation in describing the counseling sessions. After a while, he says that his father and the counselor would be arguing about sexual orientation, with his father saying it is a choice and his counselor offering a different view, in effect defending Joe and his sexual orientation.

In the end, the counseling stops, as it appeared to not be working. Joe remembers, "So, counseling doesn't really work at all. I'm like, I just had to get up early on Saturdays. Just makes me mad. Like, I just kept complaining." For his father's part he says, "...that he loved me, but that he doesn't believe it's a choice. That's what he said to me."

The turning point for Joe came between his troubled junior year and when he became a senior. Without the knowledge of his parents, Joe joined a gay and lesbian youth group that included students from a number of different high schools in the metro area. Once there, he made connections with other gay and lesbian high school students. In addition, he found an unexpected interest in gay rights and activism. He explains,

“...that’s where I met Cassie (another Matthew Shepard Scholarship winner whom we will meet later)...I started feeling good about it, like maybe it was ok.”

As his bonds with the gay and lesbian youth group strengthened, so did his comfort and confidence with regard to his sexual orientation. He recalls, “...through the summer of my junior year and then senior year, I was happy, taking that classes that I wanted, and I was pretty much out to everyone.”

Joe says his high school is known for its diverse student body and a welcoming climate that reflects that diversity. In fact, he relates what he says is a common joke among high school students in the city. “Everyone at (his school) is either gay or black,” he says with a laugh. Despite this, Joe notes that coming out and staying out did not always appear to be a comfortable option. Once connected with other gay and lesbian youth, however, he was able to take advantage of the open and welcoming atmosphere at his school.

Through the gay and lesbian youth group, Joe was now feeling comfortable and beginning to get involved with activism and gay rights. He admits, however, that his initial purpose was much more self-serving. He knew of the Matthew Shepard Scholarship and planned to apply. He also knew that community service was a criteria for the award. Thus, his decision to become involved in activism was a calculated one. He explains, “...I worked my butt off originally, to be quite honest...Like, it was just for the scholarship, but then I actually started liking it. Like, I found my passion.”

His newfound passion and activism led Joe in new directions. It exposed him to political ideas along with people and causes he was drawn to. His voice rises slightly as

he describes finding this niche, how the work energized him. The energy he takes from these activities as he describes projects he's worked on and political figures he's been able to meet, such as Hillary Clinton, is unmistakable.

That energy carried into school Joe's senior year. In fact, he was now so comfortable and inspired that he ran for a school office. Joe's new confidence was evident in the new outlook he had at that time, "...You can like me or not like me, I don't care...I don't know, I was just myself." Armed with catchy slogans and operating in a school environment that welcomed diversity, he lost the election, but to another gay candidate. He believes some of his opponents hurt their chances by coming across to some as being homophobic or at least somewhat anti-gay.

While Joe realizes that not everyone may be comfortable or supportive of his sexual orientation, he doesn't allow or want his sexual orientation to be the forefront issue or the biggest part of his identity. While he was officially out and open, he says he wasn't on parade, not in anyone's face, not militant. In addition, he says his sexual orientation is a significant part of who he is as an individual, but it's *only* a part. It does not represent his entire identity as a human being. He explains, "I don't have to be like, 'Hey!' It's a *part* of me, but it's not *who* I am. I mean I'm (Joe), I'm not..."

NP: "Joe, the *gay* kid?"

Joe: "Yeah, exactly."

Joe says that, throughout this process, his teachers and administrators at school were nothing but supportive. When he was actively involved in the gay and lesbian youth group as a senior, his activities caused him to miss a lot of school. He says his teachers

were always willing to work around the absences so he could participate but also be successful in school.

When Joe was selected as a Matthew Shepard Scholarship winner, school administrators and teachers continued to show their support. As graduation approached, school officials were concerned over the possibility that a notorious anti-gay protest group planned to demonstrate at Joe's graduation ceremony. The group has a history of malicious displays at numerous events that it interprets to be associated with gay and lesbian issues. For example, it has sent faxed messages that threatened to "picket the graduation exercises of any high school giving official recognition to any out-of-the-closet fag/dyke recipient of a Matthew Shepard Scholarship" (Westboro Baptist Church). The school principal talked about this privately with Joe. She also later discussed the matter with students in a school-wide assembly in which she emphasized her expectation that there would be no violence or disruptions by students.

Joe was both amused and bolstered by the fact that some students approached him after the assembly and, ignoring the principal's admonition and bragged, "We're going to buy a paintball gun" in case the protestors show up.

Joe's graduation ceremony was marked by disruption, though it was due to power outages and unsettled spring weather at the start of tornado season, rather than the protest group. As it turned out, the extra security the school had hired was helpful in making sure graduation attendees were safe from the weather, not wrapped up in the midst of a protest or melee about gay rights and sexual orientation.

Today, Joe sees the Matthew Shepard Scholarship as far more than a monetary award. It is an extension of the passion he unexpectedly found through the gay and lesbian youth group. He explains, "I've seen how important it is...not just a \$6,000 scholarship for four years. Like, there's more to it than that." He sees the award as an incentive to get involved in a cause larger than himself.

Joe says he's grateful for having attended his open and diverse high school. He hopes educators have a real sense of how important it is for gay, lesbian, or questioning students who are simply isolated to have a safe space, somewhere to belong. He hopes teachers know how meaningful little things can be, such as a safe space triangle hanging in a classroom or a simple statement in a course syllabus about how respect for all people will be the rule at all times.

He's grateful for having attended his high school and speculates that he might not even have known about the Matthew Shepard Scholarship if he had stayed at his original school. In addition, had Joe says he may not have made the connection with the gay and lesbian student group that proved to be so important to turning his high school experience, and his life, around.

In fact, Joe says he actually felt more comfortable being out in his high school than he does currently on his university campus. Still, Joe says he now enjoys a comfortable circle of friends and that his sexual orientation is "...just not, it's not an issue...my friends that joke, why can't we be gay? They're like I wish I was gay..." Despite this comfortable exchange, Joe fights their friendly sarcasm with some cutting

humor of his own. "I'm like, why would I choose to be the most hated person on Earth? Like, I don't know, that's not really a smart choice, I don't think."

As he reflects on his difficult childhood, his depression, strained relationships, and coming in and out of the closet, one can see the personal distance he has traveled. And he certainly remembers wishing God would change him or that he could change himself. Now, however, he reflects, "...When I was younger...I was thinking that if I could change it (his sexual orientation), I would. But now, ...its' who I am and I can't change it. I don't know if I could..."

And, not surprisingly, his reflections come back to the essential role his grandmother has played in his journey. She had never been hostile or intolerant toward him, and had rescued him from a dismal home life. Yet, Joe always knew that she was wrestling with how to balance of love for her grandson and accepting his sexual orientation vis-à-vis her religious beliefs.

Despite the real world challenges Joe's sexual orientation posed, they both see now how the challenge can bring a chilly and uncomfortable silence to even the closest family relationship. If, Joe explains, parents and children were better able to navigate this issue with honesty and less fear, all could have great benefits.

In the end, Joe, his father, and grandmother worked through difficulties and barriers that might have irreparably harmed other relationships. Differing views toward sexual orientation did not trump the bond that spans three generations. Joe says, without hesitation, "My dad is just a really great guy. Dad and I are closer than ever."

Initially, in the midst of the family's sorting through Joe's sexual orientation, Joe joined his father at his conservative Christian church, largely out of obligation. He remembers, "Like, Sunday morning, my dad's like, all I ask of you is to go to church with me...so I'd go. But now, when I go home, he comes in Sunday mornings, and is like, do you want to go to church with me? Like it's not an issue any more."

Further, Joe and his grandmother recently appeared together at a panel discussion that addressed gay and lesbian issues. He explains, "...we did the panel across (the state) and my grandma spoke at one of them and she said she'd known since I was a baby..." For Joe, these admissions represented his family's journey across territory they probably never expected to travel. Nor, did they necessarily want to make the trip.

Joe illustrates how far the three have come, as he explains,

...I talked to her the other day, and she's like, she was watching *Oprah* and it was like talking about gay men who had been married their whole life. And she said, "If I would have come to you sooner, when I first found out (suspected), would that have made it better for you?" I'm like, "Yes!" Because, I guess she's like salt from the Earth...she really understood that...you can tell your parents everything but *that* (that you're gay).

Like his respect for his father, Joe's admiration for his grandmother is unmistakable. It's clear that he takes energy from the influence she's had on him. The strength of that connection has allowed the family to work through issues that once seemed almost insurmountable. Joe sees how his essential bond with his grandmother and father, along with a diverse and open high school helped him traverse the difficult path from a questioning young child in a dysfunctional home, to a self assured, involved, young man with goals and friends. He hopes other students have it as good.

Finishing his cappuccino before meeting a friend to study, he summarizes, returning to the importance of his grandmother and family. “Like, she’s my strength. She’s in my fight all the time...my family came around and I’m thankful for that...your family is there...I was a lucky kid.”

Aaron

Aaron grew up in a county seat community of about 9,000. The city’s website touts the community’s aggressive drive to attract business and industry, along with its progressive outlook about improving quality of life. The community, like many other small towns in the state, is quite homogeneous racially and ethnically, tracing most of its heritage to European immigrants who farmed, followed the railroad, or the opportunity to homestead in the middle and late 1800s. The community supports both a public and parochial school system. The town is known for having the headquarters of a popular snack food company.

Speaking with Aaron, one is struck by his honest and unconcealed manner, even when discussing challenges he experienced during high school. We meet in the student union on his campus. Aaron is dressed in jeans, un-tucked shirt, and denim jacket with tortoise rimmed glasses and scrunched hair.

Aaron describes his earliest memories of the public school system as being fraught with difficulties. He recalls picking on other children as a first grader in an attempt to get attention. He was placed in a number of special programs as an elementary student. Because of his problems in the public school, his family also tried home

schooling. After a month or so, although he returned to the public school because, “(his) mom couldn’t handle it.”

Aaron’s problems continued and his path through the upper elementary and middle school grades did not get easier. He recalls that most of the problems were social difficulties with other students. He frequently complained to teachers that someone had touched him or picked on him. He describes his situation as follows: “I got really mouthy, I got beat up a lot.”

In fifth grade, Aaron’s father committed suicide. This shook the family severely. Aaron remembers the pain and it’s effects,

All three of us, my mother, my brother, and I had an extremely hard time at first dealing with the suicide. My father’s parents had an extremely difficult time. I remember both making comments about how parents aren’t supposed to bury their children.

Aaron explains that his father was involved in the family’s farming operation with Aaron’s grandfather. His father struggled with a bi-polar disorder and the up and down stress of a family farm, weather conditions, and poor crop prices were more than his father could take. He reflects,

I was fairly close to my dad and he always helped me study for school. I remember the night before his death, he had helped me study for a spelling test the next day. I went to school on Thursday and got a perfect (score) on the test and couldn’t wait to get home to tell him, because I knew he would be proud. But I never got the chance...It was a very challenging time for our family.

Further changes came in eighth grade when his mother remarried. Aaron describes almost constant disputes with his stepfather, Carl, with whom he had almost nothing in common. It seemed that Aaron didn’t act like a man. “He was a jock, you know, and he got the stepson who was a homo, queer son or whatever and that kind of

sucked. It went on for a long time.” Likewise, Aaron also had consistent difficulties with a younger brother, who related much more easily with their stepfather. Aaron says his stepfather viewed his brother as, “just a wonderful prodigy son.” Aaron occupied a different role. “This is the lazy son, the stepson and blah, blah, blah.”

The house was often filled with swearing, name-calling, and occasional shoving matches between Aaron, his brother, and stepfather. At least once, the dispute resulted in a call to police and his stepfather moving out, for a month.

It had become clear that the family needed some guidance to deal with the almost constant strife and tension. So, at his mother’s insistence, the family got involved with counseling, though Aaron and his step-dad often found excuses to miss or went reluctantly with minimal participation.

One way Aaron dealt with these difficulties was by choosing to be extra busy with a job and school activities. Fortunately, he had his driver’s license and access to a car. Being able to drive the ten miles or so into town for work and school activities provided him with some needed escape from the home.

One of his school activities, the debate team, had a significant impact on Aaron, his outlook, and the way he interacted with others. It prompted him to consider controversial ideas and different perspectives. Getting involved in debate, he says, opened new doors and ideas to him. He was less likely to simply take things at face value. He wanted to question the norm, the status quo.

So I get involved with the debate team, which was absolutely amazing to me. It just changed my views on everything. I used to be this little, Mom’s little boy. I just couldn’t believe what I heard and I know I constantly questioned it. I’m always thinking about the repercussions of things.

It proved to be a perfect fit for the once mouthy little boy.

In high school, Aaron recalls feeling a lot of pressure to have a girlfriend. He explains, "I felt very pressured to have a girlfriend. Like the high school, well, if you don't have a girlfriend that proves you're gay. And I still didn't know what I, I mean, I didn't know what I was." Aaron does remember having some crushes on girls, but these relationships were "more like friendship."

The pressure caused Aaron to question himself. He recalls,

I could feel the pressure and people would be like, "Oh, there's the queer," and I'd be like, "Shut the fuck up." There was a lot of, you know, just unnecessary bullshit of high school. I'm not one of the people who lets things people say get to you often, but for some reason the stuff was flooding all the time. I just couldn't (take it). I let it hit me too hard.

At school, Aaron battled harassment from other students, many of whom were athletes in the grade below his. He tried to maintain the facade that it was not affecting him, but acknowledges that it took a toll.

The jocks, a lot of jock stuff. And you know, I was just like, I'm not going to put up with it. I'm above you in so many different aspects, there's no need to be putting me down. I took it personally.

Aaron didn't know if he was gay, but the pressure and harassment were starting to impact him, especially during his junior year in high school. He explains, "I still didn't know what I was, I mean I didn't know. I just felt shitty. I just felt, uuugh. And then I would question myself, well maybe there's something more. Maybe there's something I'm missing here." But, he didn't know for sure.

That Aaron had not decided whether he was gay or straight seemed not to matter. Others had apparently decided for him. He explains,

Junior year, (I) hung out with another of the seniors who was always talking like he was gay, had a lot of feminine qualities, but wasn't out. He came out the end of his senior year after he had graduated at a party when he was drunk. And because I had hung out with him all summer, I was kind of like a queer. So the summer before I came out, oh my gosh, there was a lot of, "Oh, (Aaron's) hanging out with *him*, they're screwing each other," crap going on....I was immediately labeled as a queer and a fag by many peers for this.

Sexual orientation (or guilt) by association.

Summer vacation and a job provided no respite from the hostility and harassment.

He explains it this way:

And I dealt with a lot of stuff at work. Like, I was a crew leader (at a fast food chain), which meant that the crew was supposed to listen to the crew leader. And I would get that, "Oh, blah, blah, blah, you're just a fag anyway, you don't know what you're talking about."

But, he was gaining resolve and wasn't content just to tolerate the comments.

And I just went up to the owner of the store and said, "If you don't do something about this, I will call the cops and I will press charges and if you don't do it I'll call, you know, whoever the hell I have to call. I'll get you and them in trouble." And they (the harassers) proceeded to be talked to, and blah, blah, blah. It stopped for a long time.

As is true for many high school students, Aaron found, the Internet to be an important source of information. Aaron made some acquaintances on-line and developed friendships with other students from a nearby high school. Some of these acquaintances were gay and lesbian. Over time, he felt himself developing feelings for a male friend from another school. Aaron recalls how the questions about his sexual orientation were becoming stronger. The answer to the questions, while not definitive, was becoming clearer. He remembers, "I'm sitting there with (him), you know, and I'm just like in love. I definitely am not straight, I don't know if I'm bi, but I'm definitely not straight."

As a high school senior and after a good deal of contemplation, Aaron decided to reveal his secret to his close friend and debate partner, Jennifer. He recalls, “And I just told Jennifer. I was like, ‘Jennifer, I definitely think I’m gay.’ Jennifer’s reaction was pragmatic, almost clinical. “She was just like, ‘Well, what are you going to do?’ Aaron’s own uncertainty mirrored his friend’s. He was not sure how to respond or react, asking himself, “How am I going to deal with this?” He didn’t know.

Although he had been, at best, a reluctant participant when his family was involved in counseling, he was considerably more motivated now. Aaron turned to the same family counselor for guidance. He remembers, “And I called him up and just said, Mike, I think I’m gay. I need to talk to you.” His contact with the counselor happened in secret, with school activities or his work schedule being the official reason for not being at home. The excuse worked, for a while.

Aaron felt uncomfortable hiding this from his mother, who was paying for the counselor. “But I hated it the most because I was lying to my mom.” His secret, however, could not be held for much longer, since his mother regularly received bills from the counselor. Perhaps she already knew.

Prior to his senior year, Aaron had still not come out to his mother, although she had suspicions. He recalls how his mom would sometimes try to gently open the door of dialog, offering, “You know, if there’s ever anything you need to tell me about yourself, or anything you need to tell me.” Aaron thinks her suspicion came from his almost-clandestine visits to the counselor. A change in his behavior and appearance may have triggered some as well, because he had a new interest in fashion and the clothes he wore.

For years before, Aaron had “never really worn anything but jeans in high school.” Now, out to himself and his debate partner, he “went shopping and (he) started going to the Gap to find sexy clothes.” So drastic was the change, that even Jennifer, his initial confidant and debate partner, voiced her shock and discomfort. “She’s like, this isn’t you!” (She) was really upset, like got really upset with me when I started doing the whole, stereotypical, flame, blatant boy clothing thing. What have you done with Aaron?”

The change in Aaron’s appearance was unmistakable. His peers at school interrupted their standard high school chatter about cars, relationships, and sports to question (harass?) Aaron about rumors about him and a male student from another school. As Aaron was quietly coming out to a few more friends, he was unsure of how to handle the constant questions. He didn’t know which rumors could hurt him and bring more questions and further rumors. At the same time, he wondered if some of the rumors might actually assist him in confirming his sexual orientation to groups of students that were particularly interested in this bit of high school gossip. Perhaps the rumors could be in some ways helpful.

It was, in fact, the rumors that brought him out, all the way out, to his mother and younger brother, who was in middle school. One night in the fall of his senior year, Aaron, his mom, and brother had a frank conversation in the family camper that was parked in the yard. There, Aaron came out to his mom and brother. Aaron informed his younger brother that the wild rumors about him and his sexual activity were untrue, but that the impetus behind them—that Aaron was gay—was true.

Aaron's mom reacted with fear, despite the fact that he thinks she may have already known. Her fears sound like those of any mother. She told him that,

it was a small town and she was like, "This will destroy our family and your senior year! You've worked so hard to become this outstanding person!" I volunteered with everything, I taught Vacation Bible School in the Catholic (church). I was an awesome debater, I was in the paper at least once every month.

Aaron's younger brother's reaction was more predictable. Still in middle school, his brother immediately thought of how a gay brother would impact him. Aaron says his brother's reaction troubled him most. He recalls,

He just looks at me and he goes, "Well, they're not true, are they?" And I said, (to him) "When people have been asking about it, I haven't been denying it, so the rumor may not be true, but the principle behind it. I'm gay. And he was just like, "Oh my God."

It was obvious, perhaps understandable, that his brother was afraid of how this would impact him in the middle school. He explains, "You know, because it was like, in (our town), you know, 'Oh my gosh, my brother's gay, so I must be too.' And that was the only thing that I was most upset about."

By this time, Aaron's stepfather was gradually on the way out of the family picture. In fact, he didn't even know that Aaron had come out until the following May. By that time, Aaron's mother had divorced him.

As Aaron emerged from his closeted secrecy into the light, his grades fell apart. He recalls, "The first part of September and October when I was going through this entire process, my grades were absolutely atrocious." For Aaron, the stress of balancing family, school, and the coming out process was just too much. And his grades weren't the only problem.

Soon, Aaron found himself being treated for situational depression. His doctors tried a couple different medications, with limited success. He lost 20 pounds in about a month. His debate performance had slipped, battles with and harassment from co-workers had worsened, or at least felt more difficult to deal with.

Now Aaron was out, and all the way out. His clothing and manner indicated it. And there seemed to be no going back. The change was noticeable, unmistakable. As Aaron describes it, “abrupt. It was, like a 180 for me.” Despite the depression, social struggles, weight loss, and rumors among schoolmates, Aaron didn’t want to go back.

I don’t have to hide it and I’m not ashamed. I’m going to do whatever I want with my hands, I’m going to walk how I walk and I’m going to wear what I want to wear. And I’m going to say what I want to say. And laugh like I want to laugh.

And so, the 180-degree change marked a turning point. As Aaron recalls, “for the first part of October, I just completely buckled down. And people would come up and ask me and I would just say, yes I am. That’s who I am.” In contrast to the harassment and rumor-mongering that Aaron had experienced for much of the previous couple years, he now found himself in an altogether new situation. He was suddenly and unexpectedly more popular, at least with some students. This was particularly true with girls. He recalls, “I had this giant popularity spurt that was just awesome, because all the girls in my class, even ones I had never said anything to, were just super, super friendly.”

When pressed to explain the change in how he was received after coming out, Aaron can’t fully explain the difference. For some of his peers, he suspects that he may have been a novelty as the only out and open gay student in the high school of about 700

students. “I don’t know if it was, ‘Oh my God, it’s Jack off of *Will and Grace*! I’ve never seen a gay guy, look at him.” For some, he suspects this may have been the case.

In addition, however, Aaron feels that the change was due, at least in part, to the fact that he felt more comfortable in his own skin and expressing himself, in this case his new interest in fashion and his appearance. “Maybe it was because I was being more talkative.”

But his coming out experience wasn’t all rosy. Aaron lost friends. For some, revealing his sexual orientation was something that trumped common interests and bonds of friendship. One friend reacted particularly negatively to Aaron’s new, openly gay appearance and attitude, saying, “Good God, (Aaron). You don’t have to make up for 18 years of not being gay all in one week.” Shunned by some who had previously been friends, Aaron went looking for support and allies. Aaron would soon learn, however, that all who seem friendly and supportive are not to be trusted.

One of Aaron’s friends had met “Bob,” a 35-year-old man on-line. The friends had met the man for casual conversation at a shopping mall. The group enjoyed an informal dinner and conversation. Bob invited the group to his house the next night.

Aaron says naiveté, alcohol and a predatory middle-aged man skillfully exploited him that night. As the alcohol flowed, Aaron and the others found themselves getting more and more comfortable. Aaron recalls this dangerous and painful memory this way:

...I’m getting drunk...and (Bob’s) like, “let’s go out to the hot tub”...and Bob and I went to the hot tub for like 10 or 15 minutes...and we’re talking about his life, my life, blah, blah, blah, and I’m not sure what to think of this guy right now, it’s just like, “damn, he’s really old to be hanging out with young kids, something’s not clicking here yet,” but I wasn’t sure what it was...He’s like, “Have another Smirnoff...” We’re in the hot tub and there’s strobe lights and the stereos on and

everything and then the girls come out (and get in the hot tub)...and pretty soon this 29 year old guy who lives with (Bob) because he got out of prison and needs a place to stay shows up...and so then pretty soon the light from the hot tub is turned off and somebody's hand is up my pants. And I'm just like..."My friends are here, you're old, get away (from me)."

Aaron got out of the hot tub and escaped to the bathroom, where he says he intended to "hang out" until the group could leave. Instead, he says Bob soon came to the bathroom. He explains that he, "...got seduced, ended up seduced, did way more than I wanted to do but not everything I could have done and didn't remember the guy's name when I was done."

Aaron says that Bob's calculating, predatory nature now seem obvious, but didn't at the time. A few nights later, Bob showed up at the fast food restaurant where Aaron worked a few nights later. He remembers,

Yeah, (Bob) came in and was watching me and then they left but like they were out in their car until I like, walked out from work and then drove off, and I was like weird. And I'm like, it kind of looks like (Bob) but I really couldn't remember what he looked like, which really freaked me out.

The next night, Bob returned to the restaurant to see Aaron and invited him back to his house. He explains,

So I kind of went out there and hung out and nothing happened, really. I was just like, "Oh, you know, I've made a friend. You know...maybe he wasn't that drunk, but I was drunk and it was my fault somehow, for letting that stuff happen (on the first night)."

In hindsight, Aaron now sees how Bob played on his youth and the fact that he had only recently come out and needed a friend. He recalls, "And when stuff happened it was the whole, "Oh my God, you're beautiful," you know, everything anybody would ever want to hear. And I fell into a trap."

Aaron remembers that “the same stuff happened” on another occasion when the two met for dinner. Shortly after, Aaron found himself lying to his mother about who had sent him the roses on his birthday. After talking with some of his friends as well as his counselor, Aaron decided that things weren’t right with Bob. He also found out that Bob wasn’t 35, as he had said. He was 43. Aaron says he was disgusted and livid, among other emotions.

He and a friend subsequently filed a complaint with the county sheriff. Aaron said the officers said, “Oh, well, we’ve heard of this before, but you’re the first boy.” This report set off a complicated weave of legal maneuvering. Aaron says the situation is still not resolved. He is still pressuring officials to bring charges against Bob, at least for supplying alcohol to minors. He has enlisted the assistance of an attorney who is a scholarship supporter and a member of Lambda Legal, which focuses on gay civil rights issues.

Aaron now sees clearly what happened. He explains, “My molestation occurred largely because I had recently come out and was vulnerable to the point where I was trusting of anyone who seemed to be an ally.” This perilous and painful experience has shattered his naiveté. Now, the bottom line for Aaron is beyond questions of consensual sex and legal hair splitting. He says he has taken this on, “just so other people would not be having to go through what I have gone through.”

Aaron also endured harassment from peers in the hallways. Much of it, as had been the case in the past, came from “the jocks,” who would say, “Oh, there’s the faggot,” or “Go fuck yourself.” He says the situation was further complicated by the fact

that the guidance counselor was also the coach of one of the school teams. He explains the awkward situation this produced. “And I was like, how am I supposed to go talk about my issues of coming out and what affect its having on me to the coach?”

He believes that the counselor/coach turned a deaf ear to the harassment was going on. He recalls, “You know, if he heard it and he did not stop it, which I find very hard to believe he did not hear something to my knowledge he has done nothing to change the situation differently. And therefore, he has condoned (the harassment).” And, the potential reason for the counselor/coach’s inaction is not lost on Aaron. “And I was like, a violation of sexual harassment will take your quarterback out of the game because that is seven days of ineligibility.”

Fortunately, circumstances did not prevent Aaron from benefiting with other teacher-student relationships. When asked about the other teachers’ response to his situation, Aaron says they were excellent. He insists, in fact, that, “They were all awesome.” He also credits them as being “instrumental in helping my image and stuff.”

Yet, he recalls that teachers were not often in the hallways during passing times when the harassment typically took place. When present in the hallways, he isn’t sure how much they heard. If teachers heard the comments, he says they did not respond, and this caused him some concern. He remembers, “I was afraid of being beat up, but I wasn’t really really afraid of it.” On other occasions, such as in the classroom, he recalls that teachers typically left comments such as, “That’s so gay” go uncorrected. Except by him.

When teachers let these comments slide, Aaron was quick to engage in what sounds like a brutal cross-examination.

And then I'd always be like, "Excuse me, do you mean stupid or are you calling me stupid? Is my lifestyle stupid to you, because that's just offensive to me. Like, when you use the word gay (as meaning) stupid, it makes homosexuality to be stupid." I'm like, "I find this offensive because that is my way of life." Or fag. I love the fag joke. "Did you know that in the 14th century, they would start a fire and burn all the homosexuals at a stake and that is where the word fag comes from? Think next time before you use the word." And they're just like, "Oh." Then they'd sit there and be dumbfounded.

In the spring of the year, Aaron applied for the Matthew Shepard Scholarship, at the urging of one of his teachers. He received the scholarship information from one of his teachers, since he lacked a connection with the counselor/coach. He remembers talking with his mom about the scholarship and that he was sure he would not win.

Aaron's energy increases when he describes the phone call on Easter Sunday, inviting him to come to the capital city for a scholarship interview. The stress, curiosity, and excitement rolled into one as Aaron, his boyfriend at the time, and mom went to the capital for the interview. He remembers his excitement, almost a frenzy. "I'm freaking out, I'm going crazy and stuff, and I go there (to Des Moines for the interview) and it's really awesome." The excitement rattled the award winning debater. "I'm like, I've done debate, I'm a good public speaker and I'm just freaking out."

Arriving at the interview, Aaron recalls feelings of apprehension when it came time to leave the boyfriend and mom behind for interview the scholarship committee. The committee, however, did what they could to put everyone at ease, asking mom and boyfriend if they wanted to look around. Aaron was nervous going into the apartment full

of people he didn't know, with the focus on him. He remembers his mom's reassurance that, "The school wouldn't be supporting us if this was bad."

As the interview proceeded, Aaron remembers the experience broadening his horizons. In addition, he was exposed to a positive gay community. He explains that the interview with the scholarship committee took place at the home of the scholarship founder in the capital city. For Aaron, this was an impressive and eye-opening experience. "And I get up to (the) apartment and it's really awesome, awesome, awesome, showing me around the condo, out to the patio, which (buildings Rich, the scholarship founder) owns." The image of successful, professional gay and lesbian, as well as straight scholarship supporters was memorable.

The application and interview experience served to push Aaron forward with his college and future plans. He was so convinced that he would not win the scholarship that at the time of the interview, he had not fully completed his college applications. He had allowed them to settle onto the back burner.

A few weeks later, however, being awarded a Matthew Scholarship further strengthened his resolve to confront harassment at school. In addition, he redoubled his academic efforts. Asked if being awarded the scholarship had empowered him, he recalls, "Probably in large part. I was just like, I don't have to take this shit. I had to take this shit in the fall. I'm being who I am and getting through this all. I'm behind in my schoolwork. I need to catch up."

Likewise, as the spring rolled on and when he had heard enough of the slurs in the hallway, Aaron would increasingly report the offending students to a teacher or the principal. When this was done, he recalls, “They responded to it really well.”

Aaron is grateful for what he sees as quality relationships with excellent teachers, despite the fact that they sometimes needed prodding to correct or address intolerant student comments. He cites one teacher, in particular, as being especially important and helpful. The teacher was one with whom Aaron had worked through his extracurricular activities in speech and debate. Her greatest qualities, according to Aaron, were her openness and ability to be something of a friend without simultaneously sacrificing her role as a teacher. He recalls,

We would talk about everything. We talked about how she believed in God and church and how God had gotten her through everything. She could be a parent. She'd chaperone trips, she'd turn into the coach. It was cool.

When asked to reflect back on the kind of school experience he expected coming out in high school, Aaron quickly answers that he expected a bad one. He was afraid of being beaten up. He remembers nights when he didn't want to walk to his car alone. To his surprise, however, the experience wasn't as bad as he thought it would be, though he still labels it “less than glamorous,” with a roll of his eyes.

Community reaction to his scholarship was, in many ways, similar to the reaction at school. As was the case at school, some in the community objected to the scholarship. The local newspaper featured a story on Aaron's award and future goals as well as a number of letters to the editor that were critical of the scholarship, some objections on religious grounds. And there were some who, unexpectedly, voiced their support. He

recalls, “And then people would come through my line at Wal-Mart and be like, your story made us cry and be like, Oh my God, that’s awesome.”

Aaron continues to use his debate skills. He is actively involved in the debate team at his university. His activism carries through on a personal level, as well. During our conversation, our discussion about his activism reminded him that he planned to call the superintendent back home and ask if signs promoting a gay and lesbian student conference on a college campus had been posted. He suspected that they would not have been posted, but that the superintendent would not be surprised by his phone call and that the signs would go up quickly after his phone call.

Aaron sees the scholarship as a meaningful tool for future success, describing internship opportunities that other scholars have had via connections of persons associated with the scholarship and scholarship committee. He says he values the connections he has with those associated with the scholarship and the professional contacts they can help him to make. He also values the scholarship retreat that helps prepare students for the academic and social challenges that come with college and with being publicly identified as a Matthew Shepard Scholar.

Aaron’s road to college has not been a smooth one. His family life was full of challenges, even prior to his coming out and being awarded a Matthew Shepard Scholarship. Though it all, though, he has grown stronger and perhaps strengthened some family relationships that had been strained long ago.

Near the end of our visit, Aaron harkens back to the impact his father’s suicide had on his family. He remembers being worried about further disgracing the family

name. Aaron elected not to tell his paternal grandma the specifics of the Matthew Shepard Scholarship. Rather, she learned that it is awarded to openly gay and lesbian high school students. He recalls a poignant conversation with his grandma reading the article about his scholarship in the local newspaper.

So Grandma read the article from the paper and she was crying by the time she was finished. She was like, "I really, really want to know why you didn't tell me." And I was like, "Well, I didn't want to embarrass you and I didn't want to disappoint you," you know. "We had a hard time with Dad's death and I figured this would be even worse, because I'm always going to be around, always going to be here," and she's like, "I don't care what you are, as long as you're happy. And, you just need to know that I don't care and I'm going to love you no matter what." And I'm like, "Oh my God. Thank God."

In addition, Aaron has grown more resolute about his future plans. He recalls complaining to his co-workers and manager at work about the harassment he was receiving over the way he dressed and carried himself. His complaints were often met with responses such as, "Oh, you're just a fucking queer. Shut the fuck up."

Aaron understands the argument that says he should expect some criticism if he chooses to dress and present himself in a way that will be judged as gay. While he understands the argument, he also understands his right to be himself.

Sometimes they argue that I brought it on myself. But my response is, I may have initiated some kind of discussions and attention to myself, but (it) would be legitimate for *them* to dress and express themselves (too). It shouldn't be, "Oh my God, he's dressing like a flamboyant little gay boy."

The response of the fast food manager is indelibly stamped in Aaron's memory, along with the drive to do something about it. Today, Aaron has set his sights on a future in law school. "I'm going for law. I want to look out for the little guys who get crap from their employers." Perhaps the two will meet again one day.

Cassie

Cassie sits comfortably on a barstool in a coffeehouse near her campus, dressed in a gray sweatshirt, tortoise rimmed glasses. She chooses her words carefully but has a comfortable, engaging manner of speaking. Not too loud but not meek. She is unpretentious and completely at ease, reflecting on a host of experiences in her family and school. She comes across as very genuine and open. Polite.

Cassie grew up in what she describes as a unique community and family setting. She lived with her parents and younger sister in a house on the same property as her paternal grandparents. She describes her family as being close; her grandmother was determined to maintain her strong Swedish heritage and traditions. Her school district consisted of a group of small communities on the fringes of a metropolitan area. The communities combined to create a high school enrollment of about 1,300 students, yet the district and its communities maintain a decidedly rural, small town feel.

Cassie feels fortunate to have had her extended family being nearby. However, she sees both advantages and disadvantages to her high school's small town feel with large enrollment. On one hand, students grow close during younger grades and become quite familiar with one another, while enjoying proximity to a larger metropolitan area and the opportunities found there. On the other, she recalls feeling "tired of the same people all the time," as the school and communities felt in some ways cut off from things happening in other places.

Cassie says she can't remember questioning her sexual orientation in elementary school, although she is a self-described "outspoken kid." By this, she means she was a

child who was always comfortable asking questions about things. While not ornery or belligerent, Cassie says her matter-of-fact manner sometimes held the family in “shock and awe by the things I would say.” In junior high, for example, Cassie felt completely comfortable questioning her mom about sexual orientation after watching the television show *Ellen*. When her mother answered her question, Cassie’s interest in sexual orientation subsided, for a while. Such questions were simply par for the course for inquisitive, curious, and genuine Cassie.

Cassie’s curious and genuine nature, however, didn’t lead her to form many solid friendships. Rather, she was socially isolated. She just never seemed to click with many peers and did not enjoy the friendships one might expect, given her inquisitive nature. When Cassie entered high school in 9th grade, she was drawn to get involved in a community service group at school. Since her high school was quite homogeneous racially, her curious nature prompted her to jump at the opportunity for “stepping outside the box” to work with the homeless and other populations. She knew she was unlikely to have these experiences within the walls of the school. Through her activities with the community service group, she was exposed to a summer camp operated by the National Conference for Community and Justice (NCCJ) that delved further into issues of diversity. Cassie was glad for the opportunity to look further into issues surrounding diversity that were absent, invisible, or ignored at her high school.

At camp, Cassie interacted with people from different backgrounds and experiences, as the groups explored topics of racism, socioeconomic class, gender, sexual orientation and other topics that rarely came up at school. This period of exploration

coincided with a small voice in Cassie's head that was delicately questioning her sexual orientation.

When Cassie listened to a camp leader relate her experiences as a lesbian, she describes an awakening of sorts. "It was strange...like 'Oh,' you know, but that explains so many things." Cassie recalls that this experience made her suddenly realize that she, and perhaps some others had been, almost silently, internally, questioning for some time. She now says her attendance at the camp and the introspection it caused were a turning point, explaining, "I spent the rest of the summer just kind of contemplating everything."

Cassie kept these contemplations to herself, although her mother sometimes asked about future plans, potential boyfriends, and other standard high school issues. Cassie's answers to these questions, especially those that dealt with friends, were short, since she was isolated socially. She reflects, "I didn't have any other girlfriends and very few other guy friends. I kind of maintained my own little bubble."

Although she was socially isolated, Cassie began to seek more involvement in activities, most of which were outside of her high school's offerings. Early in her 10th grade year, an invitation came to participate in another diversity opportunity through NCCJ. This group was made up of high school students from across the area and would explore a host of issues, especially students' reactions to the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Two male classmates from her school who had also attended the summer camp would also attend the sessions, which were once a week for six months.

When the lesbian camp counselor showed up at the meetings of the diversity group, Cassie was both pleased and relieved, because she felt she had learned a great deal

and formed somewhat of a bond with her. The counselor did not know, however, the impact she had on Cassie. In fact, the counselor could not have known, since all of Cassie's dialogue up to this point, had been internal. Cassie was, at the time, out to only herself.

After a short period of time, she was gaining comfort and confidence through the Monday evening group meetings. Then, cautiously and gently, she told the two classmates who had accompanied her to the diversity group that she was a lesbian. She recalls, "...they're kind of like, yeah, we got that idea. So that was kind of the first time that I told somebody, kind of in a roundabout way."

As her sophomore year continued, Cassie found herself existing in two parallel worlds. She "lived a second life for a while," feeling completely comfortable at the once-a-week meetings while feeling isolated and alone at school. She recalls the paradox of being completely comfortable with her friends at the weekly group meetings, but not yet ready to come out to her parents or her school. She found that, in some ways, it was easier to open up to people from other places, noting, "I think sometimes it helps to talk about things with someone who is interested but not directly involved...they're not walking home with you...In some ways they can be a more objective person."

The group consisted of both straights, gays, and lesbians, and discussed a host of issues, including sexual orientation and coming out. To her relief, Cassie and her confidants spent a good deal of time discussing the coming out process. This safe haven was essential for her.

I started forming a strong relationship with not just the youth, but the staff there. And it was so nice having a place to go when I, you know, I was never scared.

And I was thinking how am I going to explain this to my parents? Because I wasn't ready to come out to them.

Cassie was concerned not only with how she would explain things to her parents. In particular, she was concerned with a possible emotional reaction from her mother. As a result, she decided not to force a conversation. She continued to grow her involvement in the diversity group. Looking back, she suspects that her parents were, like her two classmates before, beginning to assume that she was a lesbian, as she continued to immerse herself in the group's activities.

Despite her open and inquisitive demeanor as a child, Cassie was not ready to tell her parents, but was ready to drop occasional hints. One of the groups' activities was preparing a parade float that advocated equal rights for gays and lesbians. This provided Cassie with a project she definitely wanted to be involved in as well as a convenient hint for her parents.

She recalls,

I wasn't exactly lying (about the things she was involved in at the group), but I was kind of, you know, giving roundabout reasons why I was doing what I was doing. And my parents, I remember them saying, "Ok," you know, "if you do the float, that'll be good for you." When I told them I was going to *sit* on the float, they got really, you know, "but people will think you're gay if you're sitting on the float." I was like, "Well, I don't care."

Cassie's mother may have been no more ready to deal openly with her daughter's sexual orientation than Cassie was. As a result, Cassie says,

She just kind of let go of the leash and started letting me, you know, like I didn't have to ask questions or ask to do stuff any more. I think she was, like, afraid...And in the back of her head...she didn't want to deal with it, and her way of not dealing with it is to let me do whatever I want.

One thing Cassie was ready to do, though, was address gay and lesbian issues at school. Her activism had caught fire at the Monday night group and she was ready to apply this energy to her high school. She does not know of any other gay or lesbian students in the school. At the time, she had only quietly come out to her two male classmates from the diversity group.

Energized by the group's activities and discussions, Cassie and the two classmates who had accompanied her to the NCCJ activities began talking about forming a GSA at their high school. She recalls that, "by this time, you know, the three of us knew that we were pretending to be something that we weren't (straight)." She also recalls that they knew establishing the group would be a challenge. The three, however, didn't fully know how difficult it would be to start the group. In retrospect, Cassie says, "I think if we knew how much trouble it was gonna be, we wouldn't have started, at least not then."

Cassie and her two friends began by reading up on GSA's and suggestions for establishing them in schools. They also researched the high school's requirements for initiating student groups. In Cassie's mind, they were approaching the issue in the right way, since they knew it would be sensitive and anticipated some challenges. They felt they were walking in with their eyes wide open, working through the established, proper channels. She explains, "I thought we were very, you know, going about it in the right way because we weren't being too up front (confrontational) about things."

When it came time to meet with a school administrator, the obstacles to their mission crystallized. It was patently obvious that the administrator didn't want to go there.

After explaining to the administrator their wish to start a GSA and the reasons behind their desire, she recalls, “He’s like, ‘Well, I don’t think it’s a good idea.’” But Cassie and her friends persisted in their efforts, requesting subsequent meetings with the same administrator. The three, however, found that the administrator was rarely available to meet with them.

At about the same time, two guests came to school to discuss Republican and Democratic views on politics. After their presentation, Cassie and her friends approached one of the speakers who had indicated that he had been involved with youth starting GSAs. When Cassie and her friends explained their difficulties, the speaker contacted a school law attorney who, in turn, assisted Cassie and her classmates in drafting a more formal letter for school administrators that explained their request.

Initially, however, the administrator’s response to the letter was the same. Cassie remembers,

...we submitted it and we weren’t hearing anything. He just wouldn’t meet with us. He would make these (statements) like, “We don’t need a GSA, I don’t want to talk about this, there’s no gay students in this school.” And, like, I just wanted to say to him, you know, “I’m gay.” But I was never ready to say that.

After more obstruction, Cassie learned through an outside school source that the school law attorney had contacted the administration and informed them of the students’ rights and the district’s legal obligations. The attorney, apparently rattled the administrator’s cage, and the results were almost immediate.

She remembers the morning she and a couple friends were sitting in the cafeteria when the administrator walked up and said in a disdainful tone of voice, “You guys can have your group now. And just walked away.” The exchange was so noticeably

uncomfortable that Cassie recalls students at nearby tables turning to ask “what did you do to him?” Cassie shrugs her shoulders and laments, “It’s so sad that it had to come down to that.” The three never wanted a confrontation. They just wanted a GSA.

Although the experience of starting the GSA had been frustrating and the students finally had official permission, her success was coupled with disgust. Recalling the battle to even get the school’s permission, Cassie relates, “I was like, ‘I cannot believe I go to this school. Not that I’m better than the people there, but...I can’t seem to get people to even talk about these issues.’” The fledgling group was now off the ground, but administrative support was still noticeably absent, as the GSA was frequently told that their signs needed a change or that material for the school announcements had been submitted too late or were inadvertently forgotten.

The first GSA meeting drew a small “crowd;” Cassie and her two classmates. It was not, however, because the new student group had gone unnoticed. On the contrary. Cassie saw an immediate increase in chatter in the halls about the new group, along with an unmistakable air of hostility. She remembers being

scared to put up posters because the first round of posters got ripped down before school started...people were saying these really hurtful things...like “gays should die.” I remember one kid saying, “I’m going to start the anti-Gay KKK.”

Cassie was bolstered by the fact that some teachers began disallowing anti-gay jokes and slurs in classrooms and hallways. She also recalls a chilling lack of response from some others, “And I remember the teachers would even hear these jokes because nothing was done. Rarely, if anything.”

Shortly after this, Cassie was a little surprised to be asked to serve on the district's diversity committee, although she says her membership initially represented little more than window dressing. "We didn't really have any meetings, it was a title," she explains. Ironically, the head of the committee was the same school administrator who had resisted the students' attempts at forming a GSA. Cassie remembers that he often arrived late to the handful of meetings.

On one occasion when the committee did meet, Cassie and some of her GSA classmates presented the argument that the school's teachers needed some education in the area of gay and lesbian issues. When presented with their ideas for some teacher training, he was again uninterested. Cassie was still surprised by the level of hostility she encountered.

...he's like, "We don't need to do that," and like, just kind of yelling at me on things, you know, "You're jumping the gun, trying to change too many things in the district, you're going to get yourself in trouble, you're not going to make it in life with an attitude like that." And he really, really hates me. I'm like, "How can you be saying that to a student who's trying to help you?"

After the confrontation in the committee meeting, the administrator walked out. Though the exchange hurt and disappointed Cassie, she was heartened by the fact that a couple of teachers present offered their sympathies and assistance. The teachers did not actually provide substantial or material assistance, but to Cassie the offer and show of support still was meaningful.

Shortly after, Cassie and her GSA friends decided on a change in strategy. Because the GSA appeared to be generating no students but plenty of hostility, they decided to change course, and start a more general diversity club at school. This was

timely, because the school had been dealing with racial issues that surfaced during a football game with a rival urban high school. The new group, they reasoned, would be more timely and saleable to school officials and students alike, and might bring more students into a forum by which they could address broader issues of diversity, which could eventually address sexual orientation. To Cassie's delight, the diversity club attracted as many as 100 students at times.

Toward the end of her junior year, Cassie came out to a few classmates and teachers. This news was generally well received, at least in part because the people she chose to inform were people she expected to be supportive. Some who she didn't tell directly simply asked if what they'd heard was true. Some others, predictably, reacted with some hostility, making comments in hallways or hanging signs on her locker.

This represents, however, another turning point for Cassie. She remembers not being afraid of the negative reactions she was encountering. This was quite a transformation from the time when she was afraid even to hang GSA signs in the school. At this point, she had confidence in herself. She also had a reputation among others. She explains, "...by that time I had a name. I'd taken on the administration, so you know, you should be really scared of me."

Cassie's newfound confidence was, in many ways, a plus. She feels that many potential harassers simply steered clear of her, not wanting to take her on. At the same time, she speculates that even some potentially supportive classmates steered clear as well, not wanting to be too closely identified with a lesbian or at least with an outspoken challenger to the status quo. So, her activism and reputation cut both ways.

That summer, Cassie accepted an opportunity to serve as a counselor at the summer camp that she had attended a couple years before. This experience further energized her. She was now more committed to her cause of tolerance and dialog, and less concerned with potential reactions or controversies. She went into her senior year, “like ok, I don’t care if I piss people off now. So, I went into the year, you know, getting the GSA, making announcements, hanging up posters.” And, by this time, Cassie was directly out to some select friends, and assumed to be out by most others.

Cassie applied her energies to reporting anti-gay slurs to school officials anytime she heard them, demanding that action be taken. Further, Cassie took her concerns directly to those in a position to take action—her teachers. She explains, “I was like, I’m not telling you how to run your classroom, you just have to make an effort to make it a welcoming environment and a safe environment for your students.”

Sitting in class one day, she was startled to hear her name read during the daily announcements, congratulating her for winning a local newspaper’s activist award. While she was pleasantly surprised and honored, she again tasted the paradox that often comes when publicity and a hot topic collide. “And then, that’s when it all started,” she recalls.

Any remaining anonymity about her sexual orientation quickly vanished when Cassie’s activism award was read during the school announcements. What followed, she says, were a lot more comments, many of which were rooted in religious beliefs. She describes these objections and exchanges as being “the heavy stuff, you’re going to hell.”

She recalls a tense and ongoing exchange in an English class in which a fellow student made a gay slur related to gay marriage. That’s when the lid came off. Cassie

recalls, “(Cassie’s friend) looked at this girl and she’s like, ‘You think gay people should go to hell? You’re going to want to go to hell after you hear what Cassie has to say.’ I’m like, ‘Oh my Gosh, she just opened up a can of worms.’”

At that point, the teacher moved to allow the exchange, but with some ground rules. She continues,

And the teacher sat there and was like, “What happens in this room, stays in this room.” He’s like, “I don’t want anything physical, but this is good for you guys to talk about.” And I’m like, “First of all, I’m gay, you know, for any of you who didn’t know.”

The other student quickly tried to back off, offering that she hadn’t meant to say those things or to offend Cassie. Again, Cassie explains, “I’m like ‘Well, you know, that doesn’t matter anymore, because you said it. You know, don’t apologize because you just made an ass out of yourself...’”

And so went the English course. Cassie and her classmates participated in an ongoing debate through the course, with her classmates sometimes changing sides during the course of their extended, fervent arguments. Now, Cassie was fully empowered, and taking strength from the fact that some of her classmates seemed to identify with her point of view.

In addition, she recalls being bolstered by seeing that a few other students began coming out. She remembers, “Which was amazing. You know, kids would come to me, you know. ‘I think I’m gay’, and I’d be like, ‘Yeah!’ I’m so glad that people are willing to, you know, say that, And to be able to confide in me, trust in me.”

Cassie’s confidence and assertiveness were now unmistakable. The support of her friends was more evident, as well. “...friends that I was hanging out with here a lot more,

you know kind of, standing up for my fight, you know, also talking with the staff. And it evolved into a really good thing.”

Amazingly, the staff was now beginning to turn to Cassie for advice on how to handle anti-gay slurs and comments, which she says were very common in classrooms. Her counsel to the teachers was simple, direct, and rooted in common sense. “...the staff was starting to ask me questions...like, ‘How do I, you know, tell kids not to say that?’ I’m like, ‘Well how do you think?’ You know, ‘You just... explain it to them.’”

When asked about her grades during this tumultuous senior year, Cassie says they were not good. Her cause and activism didn’t always jibe with the time it took to secure good grades. She explains,

I felt like I had to fight every battle...I was kind of ignoring the academics of school and focusing on the battle. And it, it caught up to me. You know...I was like, “Oh my Gosh”...I was so upset with myself for a while, that I let my grades drop because, you know, I always thought of myself as a good student.

Ultimately, however, she uses a wider lens to consider the balance between her grades and her activism at school. She reconciled that, in the big picture, the trade off might be worth it. She explains, “I was really upset with myself for a long time...and then I’m like, you know, I think I made a lot of positive changes in the school district.”

As a child, Cassie had been comfortable asking any question. As an out lesbian in high school, however, she never quite got to the point where she was completely comfortable sitting her parents down to tell them. Rather, she let them figure it out, which they did. This seems to have worked, as she recalls, “I was out to my parents, but I never like, (told them). They just knew.”

I asked if she ever sat them down and said, “Mom, take a breath?” Cassie answered as though her actions had communicated her sexual orientation better than her words could have, even for the girl who was once comfortable talking about everything. “I never felt like I needed to,” she smiled.

As a Matthew Shepard Scholar, Cassie sees many of the same challenges she experienced as an activist in high school. On one hand, the connections and opportunities associated with the scholarship are priceless, along with what she describes as “true bonds” with other Matthew Shepard Scholars. At the same time, however, she knows that in some ways, the reputations of Matthew Shepard Scholars precede them. For example, some members of her campus gay and lesbian organization seem to expect that Matthew Shepard Scholars will take the lead on virtually everything. She says this expectation can be overwhelming. While Cassie is not one to shy away from work or a battle, she knows there is enough to go around.

However, Cassie is clear and adamant that the experiences and benefits of the scholarship far outweigh any burdens or obligations that others may assign to the Matthew Shepard Scholars. She says her scholarship and life as a Matthew Shepard Scholar transcend the money and friendship bonds between scholars.

She sees the scholarship and her role as a recipient as part of a larger legacy. She explains, “...it’s so much more than a name, what did the name really mean? The Matthew Shepard story is such a difficult story. In memory of him, to have this opportunity. It is just amazing.” She continues,

We all had our battles in high school, and of course we’re going to have battles the rest of our lives. It’s not going to stop after we graduate from college. I mean

for a long time, the scholarship has so much potential. It's flourishing and doing great things, more than is already done.

When asked about coming out experiences and advice for others, Cassie rejects the notion that the experience is necessarily more difficult or dangerous in one type of school versus another. Instead, she points to a combination of the staff and the individual student, saying,

...you choose to fight your battles...the location isn't an excuse. Like to say that somebody went to a country school, so it's going to be worse than somebody from a city school. It isn't an excuse...It's more how the staff handles it...I don't think it's the location, I think it's just who you are and...you get to know the people in your school.

Today, Cassie says she hopes that her high school is a more open place, where the issues she wanted to explore openly as a high school student can be addressed. She says the GSA attracts maybe five or six students to its meetings, which seems small out of a student body of more than a twelve hundred. But still, she remembers that not so long ago, no GSA existed and school administration denied both the need for the group as well as the presence of gay and lesbian students.

Cassie's younger sister is now in high school and is either the beneficiary of Cassie's efforts or the victim of the backlash. Or both. Whichever the case, Cassie's passion for her cause and pride in her sister is evident, as she explains,

I'm so proud of her. I'm so proud of her. She'd definitely already formed a name. She has to be an individual in how she fights the battles and...I'm so amazed that she's not taking that crap and them making fun of you. She's part of the GSA. She talks a lot to the staff. She is, I think, you know, a little (Cassie), minus the gay part.

David

David and I meet at the outdoor dining area of a college hangout near his campus. It is a splendidly warm Sunday afternoon in the fall. David has short hair and a soft voice that is occasionally drowned out by a loud car or motorcyclist, the latter apparently determined to enjoy what is surely one of the final days this fall that will be suitable for cycling. He is dressed comfortably like almost all the college students around us. Leaning back comfortably on the wrought iron patio furniture, we begin to visit about his coming out process and growing up.

David describes his hometown of 5,000 people as, “one of those communities where everybody knows everybody.” David says the small size of the high school (about 500 students) and community is a mixed bag, being “kind of a good thing and sometimes it’s not,” because, “everybody knows everybody else’s business to a certain extent.” Beyond that, he paints a familiar picture of a small community in which people describe “where someone lives in terms of where someone else lives,” rather than using house numbers and street names. His is a county seat town with a mainstreet that still flourishes, despite the accessibility of big box stores and strip malls within easy driving distance. The city’s proximity is often a plus for high school students, who often opt for shopping malls and movie theatres rather than the town square, “because there’s not a whole lot to do.”

David says that, on balance, it was a good place to grow up, save for a lack of diversity, “...pretty much everyone is Caucasian, Protestant.” When in our conversation I suggest that diversity often takes forms other than skin color or religion, he clarifies his

point, saying, “And even in that sense, there’s like no homeless people. It’s pretty much middle class, you know. There was not any diversity at all.” As a corollary to his hometown’s homogeneity, David recalls that “anything outside the, their own little world, was a little more difficult” (for people to accept or get used to).

When asked if this homogeneity means he grew up as the normal small town kid, he says no. David suspects that growing up in a fundamentalist Christian home made his experience growing up notably different from most of his peers. That experience included family church activities each Sunday and Wednesday. The church, he explains, was non-denominational and focuses on Biblical teaching. He describes it as a “Word church.”

David recalls the first pangs of questions about his sexual orientation coming during eighth grade and his entry into high school. The questions revealed themselves gradually and at a time when David says he was “really, really depressed” and “a loner.” “I really didn’t have any friends. I kind of kept to myself,” he recalls. As the questions continued to occupy the front burner of David’s mind, he looked for a place to belong and someone with whom to identify. He didn’t really find belonging, but he found identification in an odd place.

...I remember watching (afternoon talk shows) like *Sally*...and you know, they’ve got all those outrageous guests. And you know one of the themes is like, my husband’s cheating on me with another man...And, like although...it wasn’t a positive image at all, I kind of identified with them and thought, “I think that’s me....”

His religious beliefs, however, added to the torment and questions, and seemed to push him further into isolation and depression. He continues, “...at the same time I

thought that's wrong, that's a sin. You know, my parents would disown me if I am that way. And so, I really, like, didn't really come out to myself."

As a result, David made a conscious decision to avoid things--people, social events, most anything. "I was in denial for a long time and very hesitant to label those feelings," he recalls. Surprisingly, David's grades during this period were exemplary. This was, however, a function of his decision to isolate himself and pour his attention into his studies. He recalls, "I didn't do anything but study...Because I was afraid of people getting to know me. If they knew who I was, they wouldn't want to be with me."

The depths and severity of his depression and anguish may have been easy for David to hide and others to miss because of his good grades and quiet demeanor. He simply appeared to be a quiet young man who studied--all the time. No outward signs of trouble could be seen. Yet.

Inside, however, the torment that David felt over his sexual orientation was in danger of taking him over. He recalls,

I was very depressed. I was suicidal. I'd lie awake at night and pray that God would take my life or take the feelings away so that I wouldn't have to deal with them...because I had been taught that it was a sin. I attempted suicide nine times.

Yet even the suicide attempts were disguised from his parents and classmates. When his parents were away, David "took a bunch of pills, someone's prescription that I had found in the medicine cabinet. And I threw up and threw up and threw up." His true condition, however, still eluded those around him, who, "just thought I had the flu...or something."

In the midst of his anguish and depression, David recalls a strong pressure to be straight, pass for straight or make himself straight. As a result, he, “started dating a girl my freshman year, more so to cover up probably, just to try and convince myself that, you know, if I date a girl, then I’ll be normal.” Then, David arrived, unexpectedly, at a turning point.

“...at one point I had forgotten to bring a long sleeved t-shirt for gym class, and so I asked (a friend) to borrow a shirt and (she) asked why.” That day, part of David’s secret came out of the bag. The part that David disclosed was that he had attempted suicide by slitting his wrists. The deeper, more hidden part of his depression—his internal struggle with his sexual orientation—remained hidden for a bit longer.

David’s friend immediately informed the school guidance counselor, who contacted David’s parents. His grandparents picked him up from school that day, as a caution against David going home alone to an empty house. His parents preferred that David begin seeing a Christian psychologist, but they couldn’t find one. Not wanting to waste time, however, his parents had arranged for him to start seeing a secular psychologist within a week. At about the same time in this quick sequence of events, David’s mom discovered his secret.

He recalls, “...my mom had read my journal and it was...that I had a crush on some boy in my class or that I thought I might be gay...so she confronted me.” This was a moment David had hoped would not come, recalling his fear over the potential reaction of his parents. At this point, David says he “expected her to, like, have my bags packed.”

His mom's reaction was instead, a relief. He remembers, "...she hugged me and told me that she still loved me and that she'd do everything she could to help me."

David suddenly found himself in a state of confusion. On one hand, he was meeting with a secular psychologist. Although he had not directly acknowledged his sexual orientation to the psychologist, she was assisting him in exploring his feelings.

During the counseling process, she provided him with information that,

didn't really tell me it was ok to be gay and she didn't really tell me it was wrong to be gay. She gave me a lot of information about homosexuality and about...other people and gay experiences, other people's theology about what the Bible says about homosexuality...(She) just really gave me a sense that I wasn't the only person that had those feelings and that maybe the Bible wasn't infallible. Maybe there was, you know, some room for interpretation, which was not anything I had ever been told.

At the same time, he was, at his parents' behest attending weekly sessions with his youth pastor.

And basically he just tells me everything that I had already heard a hundred million times. Such as Bible verses...that relate homosexuality as a sin...if I really want to change, willing to have faith, that God...can change me.

David recalls the disappointment and frustration that would come from the weekly meetings. "It was really discouraging to hear, because I felt like I had done that, like I had prayed and nothing ever happened."

David had a general knowledge about other methods of addressing homosexuality, such as reparation therapy. He wondered if someone would float this as an option. He recalls the situation as being nearly overwhelming and that the conflicting information was perhaps hurting more than it was helping. For a while, the well-intentioned but conflicting information was producing far more questions than answers

for David. “I wasn’t even sure (what he was)...maybe bisexual or if I was just confused.”

David now reflects on this period as being outed by others, by the circumstances, by his mom happening across his journal, as opposed to a conscious decision to come out.

After a time, the youth pastor advocated changes in David’s life that were, in David’s mind, too drastic. He explains,

...they wanted me to give up all my friends, change my choice of music, you know, make sure there was no positive image of homosexuality coming at me...they wanted me to start hanging around with the guys.

He protested, arguing,

“...if I give up all my friends, I will have no friends. If I give up all my friends who are girls, I will have no friends at all.” And, and that was a scary thought, to not have any...And the friends that I did have weren’t real close.

The impasse was reaching further into an area that was very important to David. The youth pastor had determined that he was not willing to change and that, as a result, “they couldn’t really do anything for me and I was ok with that.” David, however, was not ok with the fact that the church also asked him to resign his position as a preschool teacher in the church nursery. He had always held a strong interest in children and entertained ideas of teaching or counseling as a career.

The request or ultimatum shook him. He remembers,

...they asked me to resign my position as a preschool teacher because I had different views than our church and that if someone in the community or someone in the church were to find out that I was questioning my sexuality, that they, the church had different ideas than I did, that people might not feel comfortable having their children watched by (me)...

David can’t recall the words he used in responding to the church’s request. He does, however, remember the pain and fear of considering what he thought this would

mean for his future chances of being able to pursue his dream of working with children. It left him listless and empty. He remembers,

I remember crying because...it had always been my passion to work with children. I loved little kids. And, for them to tell me that...it really hurt to be told that you can't work with kids. And that made me feel like, you know, the rest of my life, this is how I'm going to be looked at and how I'm going to be treated. You know, if I endorse this, you know, homosexuality...I'll never, I can never be a professional or you know, do anything with my life because I'll always be looked at this way.

He says the church assumed he would comply. As it happened, however, David refused to resign his position. Instead, he continued to show up for his work time in the preschool, noticing that his name was never listed on the work schedule. David confronted the pastor's wife, who was in charge of scheduling, and explained that he hadn't resigned.

She explained that "...we don't want you working back there, you were asked to resign and you're no longer on the schedule." David says what stung even more was that he was told that, "we know that you're good with the kids and we know that you put your heart working with children, but...it's the rest of it, it's the general public that we're worried about." At that point, David says, "...I quit going to church."

The strain at this point was not limited to David. Despite his fundamentalist Christian upbringing, he was now walking away from his church family. That left his parents in a quandary, as well. He recognizes how his family was pulled in at least two different directions, much as he had been between the secular psychologist and the youth pastor. He reflects, "I think my mom really...felt caught in between the moral duty to the church and, you know, her loyalty to me...I think she was unhappy with the church's

decision, but understood where they were coming from.” If she was also unhappy with David’s decision to stop going to church, she did not tell him so.

Although David had cut his ties with the church, he was still seeing the psychologist. He credits her with helping him reach a point at which he could accept himself. When he eventually decided that this was not a phase, that he was gay, he found the courage to come out psychologically to himself, and gradually some others. The results, reactions, and responses surprised him, as did the feeling he had about finally being open about his secret.

“...for the most part, it was a relief. It felt pretty good, just being like, you know, it’s not having to pretend anymore,” David remembers. And so gradually, David started to rekindle friendships that he had previously abandoned in an attempt to isolate himself and hide in his studies, safe from anyone finding out who he really was. As he gradually worked through this process, to his surprise, he found himself energized and affirmed by the coming out process. “And with each person that I told, it was...this huge adrenalin rush, like...how are they going to react? What are they going to say? And every time, it was a positive reaction.” What’s more, David was surprised by the fact that the girlfriend he had previously dated in an effort to pass was both understanding and supportive.

Likewise, the reception from another close female friend was affirming. David was apprehensive about telling her, because she frequently uttered sarcastic, anti-gay slurs, not so much he says as evidence of a hostile or intolerant attitude, but more as a simple manner of speech. He recalls, “she was completely positive and to this day, were still like best friends. She was like, ‘That’s awesome.’”

By this time David had gained confidence and comfort in his own skin and was completely accepting of his sexual orientation. He was able to come out to more people. He also was still seeing the psychologist, though not as frequently. At the same time, he says his mother was still torn about how to handle his situation. On one hand, David says his mother could plainly see that he was becoming more comfortable, empowered, and open with who he was and his sexual orientation. He also feels that his mom was distressed at how the psychologist was allowing him to feel more comfortable with his sexuality, which did not square with her religious beliefs. Soon, David's mom stopped paying for the sessions with the psychologist.

At about the same time, David started going to church in a nearby city with his grandparents. His grandparents' church was similar to his own in terms of its fundamental outlook. Once there, David found a girl he knew from church camp whom he thought was a lesbian. When he asked her, she confirmed his suspicions. The bond and subsequent discussions between them did much to reassure David that he "hadn't failed as a Christian." He took solace in the fact that his friend had, like him, been raised in the church, born again, and had wrestled with the disquieting questions surrounding her own sexual orientation. He remembers thinking, "It (his homosexuality) wasn't because I wasn't doing something right," with respect to his faith.

In the spring of David's sophomore year, he was out to most of his close friends. This included many members of the high school band, which made a trip to Florida over spring break. There, he bought and wore a t-shirt that brought him out to everyone who didn't already know. He eliminated any remaining ambiguity or uncertainty about his

sexual orientation when he boarded the charter bus with the shirt that read, “Let’s get one thing straight—I’m not,” emblazoned across it.

Although nearly everyone in the school band already knew, the proclamation via the t-shirt was a still big step. He recalls that “it was a dramatic point of the whole trip...For a small town, it was like a big, huge thing.” So big was the news that many people back home had heard about the shirt and David’s official, public coming out even before the band returned home. Once back at school, David encountered a range of reactions; some expected, others surprising.

“Some people would come up to me and be like, ‘I heard that you came out. Are you gay?’ And I’d be like, ‘Yeah,’ and they’d be like, ‘Awesome. Congratulations on coming out’ and all this.” David recalls that he knew for certain that his coming out would be big news in his self-described homogeneous hometown, but the extent of the positive reactions surprised him. Asked to describe what he expected, David recalls that he anticipated a mix of positive and negative reactions.

David recalls that unfriendly responses were rarely overtly hostile or threatening. More often, they were subtle and just below the surface. For example, he recalls hearing classmates mumble slurs like “faggot” and “queer” under their breath in the school lunchroom, and this came as no surprise. He also suspects that other things were said outside of earshot. “...I think it was more people talking about me, behind my back, rather than saying anything directly to me.” Other negative reactions simply included people who clearly wanted nothing more to do with David.

David says he had anticipated possibly losing some friends, though not many. Despite the comments and loss of some friends, he does not recall being fearful for his physical safety. “Maybe kind of in the back of my mind, I was afraid of that (being threatened), but it wasn’t really necessarily afraid...”

David did have a physical confrontation with a fellow student at school. The conflict took the form of a shoving match after the other boy approached and “was just kind of in my face and really negative.” The other student was charged with sexual harassment, although David eventually dropped the charges.

He recalls that, although sexual orientation is not specifically included under the school’s anti-harassment policy, school officials were always quick to act when he reported problems. “There was always action taken...It was always handled very professionally,” he says. Fortunately, over time, David says the harassment began to subside, partly because students knew he would report them and school officials would take action. In addition, the fervor of his sexual orientation may have run its course. Perhaps the students (and community) had moved on to other issues.

Like the school administrators, David also gives his teachers relatively high marks for their handling of his situation. While still a closeted freshman, he recalls a teacher making some homophobic jokes and comments to students. Once finished with that teacher, however, David never encountered him or others like him again.

And later, as an out, gay student, he did benefit from some other teachers who were particularly supportive. He remembers,

Some teachers were really supportive. My band director was really supportive. Like, during one of my band lessons one morning, we didn’t actually play or

anything. We just sat there and talked...he just kind of gave me his reassurance that you know, if I needed someone to talk to, if people were bothering me, that he was there for me and that he was accepting.

In the same vein, he cites the steadfast support of a family and consumer science teacher who consistently affirmed that, “she was there for me...(I) never had any teachers that were negative.”

While things at school seemed to be well under control, relative safety and support during time outside of school was not always a given. He remembers his car being a frequent target of eggs, key scratches and other vandalism. Though he had a good idea of the perpetrators, it could never be proven.

One spring afternoon following a friend’s graduation reception, a classmate approached David as he was pulling away in his car. When he rolled down the window, the classmate punched him in the face. As he had done before, David reported the incident to the police and filed charges, which he later dropped. Filing and dropping the charges marked the end of the physical and verbal harassment from that student, but not the invisible but tacit tension between them.

David’s high school experience shows a remarkable turn around in his four years. Unlike his freshman year, in which he consciously chose to isolate himself in his studies, David’s senior year was filled with extracurricular activities and lots of friends. “I was still on the color guard, I joined the cheerleading squad. I was involved in several different clubs...there was this huge difference between my freshman year and my senior year.” He continues, “I was, like, I was popular. I would say I was pretty popular in high

school...I had the group that would kind of harass me, but for the most part I had a lot of friends.”

As he became more social, his grades also changed. Specifically, grades were less important to him because grades and schoolwork were no longer his single focus and means of separating himself from the rest of the world. He was no longer running from interaction, from someone discovering who he really was. He was no longer running from being outed. He was himself.

By his senior year, things had changed significantly. He reflects on his high school years, “I just started to have a life throughout high school. School wasn’t the only thing that I focused on and some of my grades were still really good.” David perhaps explains the transformation more succinctly in reflecting,

I think that if I would have gotten a B my freshman year, I think that might have been enough to encourage a suicide attempt...I think it was just that I was comfortable with myself and you know, that I talked to people. I wasn’t like the antisocial, you know, afraid to say anything to anybody about anything.

David was now comfortable with himself and had friends and social outlets to go along with it. When the guidance counselor provided him with the brochure for the Matthew Shepard Scholarship, it seemed like a natural, although when he won, he found there were still some bumps in the road that had to be navigated.

The awards assembly during which the scholarship is presented was stressful for David and his family. He sees them as still being caught in a difficult position of not having completely reconciled their religious views on homosexuality on one hand and support of their son on the other. He relates,

...they were there and they were supportive...I think they kind of didn't really know how to react, because they knew that I was, getting a lot of harassment in school and at the same time...they didn't affirm homosexuality, but at the same time they were always there for me and always comforting.

With extended family members and the general public, reactions were in many ways, similar to those at school. Some folks were supportive, some seemed not to react, and some reacted negatively. For example, David recalls explaining the scholarship to his grandmother, who noted that the scholarship is awarded to openly gay and lesbian students, saying "well you're not that." When he explained to her, "Well, yeah, I am," she told him those were "lies from the devil and Satan." After that, David did not discuss it with her again.

The public presentation of the award generated a considerable amount of publicity in the local weekly newspaper. Some letters to the editor expressed support for David, the school, and his family. Others had a harder edge. "It was a big controversy, for quite some time," he recalls.

It is fascinating to listen to David reflect on his coming out experience and the transformation that took place during his high school years. The once suicidal, isolated loner in the closet became a more confident, social, scholarship winner who is comfortable with himself. He attended a gay pride festival with his sister and, in fact, gave a speech that other Matthew Shepard Scholars have referenced in other interviews. As a senior and scholarship winner, David "...was more comfortable with myself...And, its ok if not everyone likes me."

His transformation continued as he became more involved with the scholarship and its requisite college preparation seminars. In addition, David's interaction and

connection with the gay and lesbian community that makes up the network surrounding and supporting the award grew. David explains,

I met all the scholars, and it was really the first interaction with other gay people that I'd had. And so, that was a good thing too...In (his hometown) I might be the only(gay) one, but in the world, I'm not.

Since being selected as a Matthew Shepard Scholar, David has enrolled in at a university, where he is contemplating a career in education or clinical counseling. He talks about linkages with other scholars and students in other universities. On his own campus, he's a member of the GLBT student cabinet and an advisor for the GLBT student services office. In addition, he runs a GLBT Bible study and has spoken publicly about his experiences. He's out to his 300 fellow members of the university marching band and his entire residence hall.

Asked if he's a different person than he was as a closeted freshman in high school, David sums,

...I'm definitely a different person, but I definitely still remember what it felt like to be, to be that, to have that low self-esteem. And I remember how I felt about myself and so, in a way, it's still a part of who I am, like something that if it hadn't happened, if I hadn't gone through that, then I wouldn't probably be the person who I am today.

CHAPTER 3

INTERPRETATION

The stories of these young people reveal one clear point--coming out was the paramount turning-point in their lives. Each student followed a different path, but each clearly traveled through this most important event of their young lives. The importance of coming out to each one is not surprising because it accords with what one would expect and with the literature on the coming out process (see Troiden, 1989; & Cass, 1979).

What is more interesting, in part because it is not well addressed in the literature, is how the process of announcing or disclosing their sexual orientation occurred. Most of the Matthew Shepard Scholars didn't fall into a well-imagined scene from a television movie, sitting mom and dad down around the kitchen table to tell them the news. One thing that did not happen in any of the eight lives was a grand announcement. Steve recalls, "I didn't want to get on a megaphone and just start announcing to people, nor did I want to reach out and shake my hand and say, 'I'm (Steve), I'm gay.'"

The closest thing to a "grand announcement" may have been David letting a t-shirt do the talking for him. His t-shirt effectively announced his sexual orientation on the school band trip to Florida. The news arrived back home even before the band. But even in this instance, "grand" hardly applies because a number of his fellow band members strangely suspected if not knew he was gay before he wore the t-shirt.

Several students let their parents figure it out for themselves. Cassie says she never felt like she needed to overtly *tell* her mother. Her actions and subtle hints let her mother put the pieces together over time. By the time she was ready to sit on a parade

float promoting gay rights, it served to confirm what her parents already knew. Likewise, Aaron's mother began to wonder after her son's change in demeanor and not-so-clandestine visits to the family therapist. Her suspicions finally led her to ask her son.

The same was true for Joe. Mark was "outed" when his mother saw gay material he was printing from the Internet, while David's mother discovered and read his journal entry about a crush on another boy. Their different ways of informing parents and family, without directly telling them is not uncommon and is referred to by Savin-Williams (1990), for example, as indirect disclosure. (see also Herdt and Boxer, 1993; Remafedi, 1987a, 1987b;).

A number of the students also used indirect disclosure with their peers and classmates. Brad reports that many of his peers seemed to already know or assume. Steve says that the girls seemed especially perceptive and already knew. Aaron made no grand announcement, but answered questions when posed by classmates. The same was so for David, who recalled, "Some people would come up to me and be like, 'I heard that you came out. Are you gay?' And I'd be like, 'Yeah.'" Jackie holding hands with her girlfriend in the hallway effectively disclosed her sexual orientation, but required no words. She recalled how this "makes a big statement."

However, not all of the students' disclosures to their peers were indirect. Several students directly disclosed their secret to peers, but most often these more direct disclosures were given to carefully chosen friends or confidants. In these instances, the students exercised care, calculation, and planning in deciding when, where, and to whom to come out.

For example, after a good deal of soul-searching, Jackie told a female friend that she was questioning the nature and extent of their friendship. “I don’t know what I want in this relationship. And so, this was the first time we’d said we had crushes on each other,” she recalls. Mark wrote a letter to a female classmate and notes that coming out is an important step. He explained, “I think a big part of it is knowing who’s going to be accepting and coming out to *them*. You’ve got to calculate it right.”

The details of the process of disclosure and coming out vary just as each student varies in personality and disposition. Regardless of the route taken, however, the students ultimately arrived at a place at which they were different from where they started. Here, they were more able to accept themselves and seek acceptance from others. They were better able to face the routine challenges of adolescence, along with the magnified challenges that comes with being a sexual minority in a largely homophobic society. To say that coming out has been the major transformative experience for each of them is not an exaggeration.

Thus, the lives of these young people are divided by coming out. They had a life before and after—very different lives, as it turns out. To fully understand the meaning of this transformation, I will turn our attention to two areas. I will first interpret the students’ lives before coming out with respect to the relevant literature. I will illustrate how the students’ lives, despite different circumstances, share the common thread of a search for acceptance. Next, I shift focus to a discussion of the students’ lives after coming out, again with respect to the literature.

Life Before Coming Out: The Road to Acceptance

Each of the eight students had unique experiences. Each hailed from different backgrounds and school settings. They grew up in cities, suburbs, small towns, and on the farm, each with diverse family dynamics. When ready to come out, each student revealed their sexual orientation in different ways that reflected both their individual personalities and their particular environmental situations.

The one thing, however, that is common to each before coming out is the need for acceptance. A review of the literature on personality and identity theories makes this clear. There is little question that all people have a need for acceptance (see Maslow, 1968; & Rogers, 1961). Maddi (1996, p. 103) explains Rogers' thoughts on the importance of acceptance this way:

...when people feel hopeless and unworthy, they disregard others and treat them poorly. Conversely, when they begin to accept themselves, they will also gain appreciation and acceptance of others, not only of the ways others resemble them but—and probably more important—they ways they differ.

So, as it is for all of us, the need for acceptance is the dominant theme in their life stories. This was a need for acceptance that drove their actions, thoughts, and fears as they negotiated the many challenges of adolescence.

For these eight people, however, there was one obvious thing that set them apart for the majority of young people—they were and remain homosexual in a largely homophobic society. This difference magnifies and accentuates the challenges these students faced as they grew up (see Mallon, 1994). Once the students accepted themselves, summoned the courage to come out, and gained acceptance from some others, they were able to move toward what Maslow (1968) termed “self-actualization.”

It is essential to take note of the clear and present dangers of being gay or lesbian in high school. A handful of scholars, however, have begun to identify problems with much of the existing research and its overwhelmingly negative focus. They are critical of the negative focus, which reinforces the notion that gay and lesbian students are wholly and essentially different from those around them (see, for example, Harris & Bliss, 1997; Jordan, Vaughan, & Woodworth, 1997; Savin-Williams, 1990).

Research into the lives of gay and lesbian youth is difficult. Gay and lesbian students' status as minors and a high school atmosphere that encourages them to stay in the closet present access problems for researchers. Thus, many studies of gay and lesbian students' experiences are conducted with gay and lesbian youth who are involved in mental health programs and non-representative samples. Many gay and lesbian youth choose not to come out until much later. As a result, many studies are actually retrospective accounts from adult gay men (see, for example, Anderson, 1995; Durby, 1994; Herek and Berrill, 1992; Savin-Williams, 1990). These studies, while valuable, may not accurately address the experiences of gay and lesbian high school students.

Second, a few scholars have begun to argue that the overwhelmingly negative focus of much of the existing research misrepresents the experiences of most gay and lesbian students. This over-emphasis on the negative aspects of being gay or lesbian in high school obscures, "the fact that most LGB teenagers (like most straight ones) suffer through but survive adolescence" (Raissiguier, 1997, p. 35).

In addition, research that indicates almost nothing but problems for gay and lesbian youth does a disservice to gay and lesbian youth by focusing too much on the

problems of gay and lesbian youth and not enough on the promises that these young people have. The focus on the negative tends to minimize or overlook research that concludes most gay and lesbian youth appear to be socially well adjusted and psychologically healthy (See Savin-Williams, 1990).

Miceli (2002, p.203) calls for a more balanced look at the lives of gay and lesbian youth:

A major drawback of this same perspective presented in the majority of the literature is that it focuses largely on the negative aspects of growing up gay, lesbian, or bisexual, giving the impression that homosexuality invariably leads to suffering and unhappiness. Although this might win public sympathy for the population, it is not a full account of GLB youth. What such a perspective misses is an understanding of GLB youth who have successfully avoided such negative experiences and outcomes, and the variables that contributed to such success.

So, a dichotomy exists. On one hand, we see that research into the lives of gay and lesbian youth is hard to find compared to other topics in education. What we do find shows a life full of danger, hostility, and heartache (see, for example, Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network [GLSEN], 2003; Hetrick and Martin, 1987; Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2001; Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey [MYRBS], 2003). On the other hand, a handful of scholars criticize much of the research that focuses on the problems and dangers of gay and lesbian youth. (see, for example, Harris & Bliss, 1997; Herdt & Boxer, 1993; Jordan, Vaughan, & Woodworth, 1997; Kielwasser & Wulf, 1994; Savin-Williams, 1990). Savin-Williams has termed this a “problem-focused perspective” (1989, p. 212).

These scholars do not deny that gay and lesbian youth face many challenges. But they say, so does everyone, and the negative pictures painted by the majority of research

obscures and ignores the fact that most gay and lesbian students do manage the challenges of high school, along with everyone else. Perhaps the gay and lesbian students walking the halls are not that different.

It is with this background in mind that I interpret the stories of the eight students' lives before coming out--a period of their lives centers around a search for acceptance.

The Questions Begin

All of them remember when the questions about their sexual orientation began. Most recall the questions being the strongest and most urgent in middle school. This is not surprising because it accords with other research which has shown that same sex attraction in gays and lesbians appears between about 10 and 13 years in both boys and girls (see, for example, Coleman, 1982; Jay & Young, 1979; Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948). This, of course matches common sense, which tells us of heightened interest in sexuality during these years (see, for example, Green, 1974; Martinson, 1994). Hence, gay and lesbian youth in these years may not be much different from anyone else in that sense.

Joe remembered being called gay with some frequency in elementary school, but he attributed this more to the language that was common in his school; He did not necessarily feel these comments were directed to him and his sexual orientation. He thought at the time that it was just the way kids talked in school, and, besides, Joe was too busy trying to "fit in" to the typical elementary school activities to spend a lot of time thinking about his sexual orientation. By the time he had reached eighth grade, however,

his questions had become stronger. Joe said that before long, he knew the answer to the questions, but he denied it until he was a sophomore in high school.

Mark recalled being interested in other boys as a fourth or fifth grader, but he didn't know how to classify his feelings at the time. He remembered weighing the questions more and more through junior high and ultimately entering high school as a ninth grader having accepted that he was gay. Even admitting it to himself was like lifting a weight from his shoulders.

While Mark had reconciled his sexual orientation and experienced the relief of coming out to himself as he entered high school, David's time of questioning and uncertainty was just beginning. The appearance of David's first questions coincided with his entry into high school. It was a time when he was "really, really depressed." He also faced the additional burden of the disconnect between his fundamentalist Christian upbringing and growing realization that he is gay.

This conflict led to an increasing depression and isolation, as David did not want to go against the religious principles he had been raised with. David's suspicion that he might be gay was contrary to what he'd been taught. As he worked through this tug-of-war, he found that he could identify with "all those outrageous guests" on television talk shows like *Sally*. Some kind of unwanted bond with these bizarre strangers on television was the closest thing David had to acceptance.

Steve knew that he was gay in seventh grade. He remembered that the ways he often chose to express himself got him into trouble in elementary school. As his attempts to express himself "backfired every time," he increasingly realized that not everyone was

thinking the way he was. When he determined that being gay was the answer to the questions he had been having, he described it as just something he realized.

Jackie remembered participating in the routine and expected behavior for elementary girls. She recalled chasing the boys at recess, along with everyone else. She didn't really want to and now thinks that she was probably questioning her sexual orientation as an elementary student but couldn't have known it at the time. Literature indicates that many gay and lesbian youth report feeling somehow different at a young age, though they may not classify their feelings as sexual (see Bell, Weinberg, & Hammersmith, 1981; Green, 1985). What she did know was that she wanted to fit in. "I didn't want to be the different one," she explained.

When the questions became too loud and frequent to ignore, these students embarked on a difficult search for acceptance from themselves, others, institutions, and society. But before they could accept themselves, they needed information. The students sought information from a number of sources; the Internet, media, other people, and school.

Certainly one place that was virtually useless from an information standpoint was the school. Sexual orientation and issues involving gay and lesbian youth are not often seen in the literature or in school curricula. Simply put, gay and lesbian students and gay and lesbian issues are typically invisible in schools. This invisibility often leads to the assumption that they are not there. However, some estimates suggest that as many as 10 to 12% of high school students may be gay, lesbian, or questioning and perhaps a million

or more small town high school students are unsure of their sexual orientation (see, for example, Durby, 1994; Remafedi, Resnik, Blum, & Harris, 1992).

The presence of gay and lesbian students in schools has been denied and ignored. The same is largely true for gay and lesbian issues in school curricula. Research into the experiences of gay and lesbian youth compared to other topics within education is very limited (see Harris & Bliss, 1997; O'Connor, 1995; Smith, 1998;). Research has shown that access to information is a key element in serving the needs of gay, lesbian, and questioning youth, but that few schools adequately address students' needs for information. Researchers have noted that information on sexual orientation is usually "censored" from public schools (see Kielwasser & Wulf, 1994; also O'Connor, 1995; Rofes, 1995).

When the lives of gay and lesbian students do get consideration in the literature, a bleak and disturbing picture takes shape. The small body of research focuses on a host of problems and dangers associated with being a sexual minority in school and society. These negatives include how sexual orientation issues are typically avoided in school and, if addressed at all, are almost always handled in a negative light. This is often because educators are unprepared or unwilling to do otherwise (see Fontaine, 1997; Sears, 1988, 1992; Telljohann & Price, 1993).

Accurate, appropriate information on sexual orientation was not available to students, but an overriding message of expected behavior was impossible to miss. The literature points out how the school atmosphere powerfully communicates and enforces a rigid code of "compulsory heterosexuality" (see Rich, 1980). Others have pointed to the

“presumption of heterosexuality” (see Epstein & Johnson, 1994) for all students. Students who stray from the expected norms do so at great peril (see Elia, 1993; Harris & Bliss, 1997).

Brad’s realization that he was gay came in an instant. After being perplexed at how he was flustered by the proximity of an attractive male student teacher, he began to wonder. When he found himself attracted to another male student in the hallway, he suddenly knew. Brad’s next stop was the school library.

Even though he’d been gay for a “matter of minutes,” he knew the information he was getting was outdated and of little use to him. He laughed, remembering that first search in the library, “Everything was outdated from the 70s and 80s and I was like, what the hell is this bullshit, when they had stuff that even I knew was outdated.” The lack of appropriate information in the high school library led Brad to go on-line, where he eventually connected with a gay student group at a nearby college.

David also sought information at the school library. He remembered “a few books at the school library, but they were pretty outdated...” On top of that, David was too afraid to check them out, for fear someone would see what he was reading. He remembered, “stealing them and returning them later.”

When students were unable to obtain useful, current information at school, they turned to other sources to educate themselves. All of these sources were outside the walls of their high schools and ranged from the Internet, to the media, to other people.

Several students found the Internet especially useful. Like Brad, Aaron made connections with other gay and lesbian youth via the Internet, although one of these

contacts would eventually led him down a dangerous path of exploitation. Steve remembers having read many accounts of coming out on Internet sites. Mark's quest for information over the Internet actually led to his being "outed" when his mother saw gay material that he was printing with the family computer.

Some research has demonstrated that access to information and support groups is particularly lacking in rural areas (see Anderson, 1995) and in the central part of the country (see Thompson, 1995). Some have pointed out that support services are often most available to adults in large urban areas (see Savin-Williams, 1990). Thus, given the geography in which they found themselves, the students' search for information may have been more difficult than in other parts of the country.

Young people in search of information will, of course, get it anywhere they can find it. Since David was "too nervous" to check out materials at the school library, he turned to a source that would let him remain anonymous—television. His source was the television talk show, *Sally*. He remembers identifying, at least in some degree, with the show's "outrageous" and wild guests, even though everything he was hearing and seeing was contrary to his Christian upbringing.

He later recalled how important it was to make real connections with other young gays and lesbians through the Matthew Shepard Scholarship. He gained a good deal of comfort as well as information from these relationships. Information flowed and David noted, "It was the first real interaction with other gay people that I'd had." This showed him that he might be the only gay student in his hometown, but that he wasn't the only

one in the world. And, he no longer had to try and identify with whoever appeared on the set of *Sally*.

Common sense might suggest that as gay and lesbian characters become more common on television shows like *Ellen* and *Will and Grace* as well as the big screen, that a more open dialog of gay and lesbian issues will result. While this may be true in some cases, David's experience seems to match what some researchers have argued—that popular media and entertainment often serve to reinforce negative stereotypes, heterosexism, and the view of gays and lesbians as deviant, dangerous, or abnormal (see, for example, Cloud, 1992; Dow, 2001; Durby, 1994; Kielwasser & Wulf, 1994; Shugart, 2003). In addition, Saad (1997) observed that *Ellen's* coming out episode was of little impact to most Americans.

For Cassie, information came through human contacts that were made outside of school. This opportunity came only because Cassie sought it for herself, since she was interested in more diversity than was available in her homogeneous high school. Likewise, Jackie's access to information came via a trusting relationship with a youth pastor, not through the school.

School mission and vision statements are now as common as the fight song and cafeteria. The schools these students attended, like most others, have optimistic, positive mission and vision statements. These thoughtfully crafted and well-intentioned statements promote the districts' desires to prepare students for things like "the challenges of tomorrow" and foster "respect for the worth and dignity of individuals."

Yet, when these students sought information at school about their secret challenges, they found little or no information.

Isolation and Passing

In addition to seeking information anywhere they could find it, the students' stories revealed another theme that is common to all of them. They were socially isolated. They responded to their isolation in two different ways. Some students, such as Brad, had always been isolated and simply remained so. That gay and lesbian youth are isolated is well established in the literature (see Blumenfeld, 1995; Elia, 1993; Martin & Hetrick, 1988; O'Connor, 1995; Owens, 1998; Savin-Williams, 1990; Unks, 1995; Uribe, 1995). Even the popular lexicon of "in the closet" communicates the extent to which gays and lesbians are hidden and set apart.

Others carefully planned and executed a series of charades designed to help them avoid attention and being seen as different. As Jackie put it, she avoided, "Anything that could put a spotlight on me." For these students, managing their isolation was a calculated, conscious decision—a way to negotiate who they were versus who the world around them expected (demanded?) them to be. This process of identity and stigma management is known as "passing." They developed ways to pass for straight or to at least hide from suspicion and accusations of being gay or lesbian. (For consideration of passing and strategies for identity management, see for example Goffman, 1963; Humphreys, 1972; O'Connor, 1995; Sandstrom, 1990; Sanelli & Perreault, 2001; Troiden, 1989.)

Brad had always been isolated. From almost his earliest memories, he was sharp-tongued, cynical, and prone to call things as he saw them. He grew up in what he described as a non-communicative family that was “just not really talking about things.” The world seemed to always push him away. For example, he remembered when people at church responded to his youthful questions about everyone could have descended from Adam and Eve by scolding him to “stop asking such disgusting questions.”

Added to his sharp cynicism was a rapid growth of physical size and development that gave him facial hair and acne as a fourth grader. On top of this was a keen intellect that landed him in the talented and gifted program. All of these factors produced a young man who was never a part of the group.

As he grew older, he became keenly aware of the power and importance of peer groups in high school. He could also see how volatile, fickle, and insincere many of these relationships were. Brad welcomed his isolation from peers because of the two-faced nature of many high school relationships. And again, what he saw and heard pushed him away.

I actually kind of liked not belonging to a group because I knew people weren't going to stab me in the back every time I turned around. I couldn't comprehend why this was going on. I thought, this is not how I wanted to be, or if people are going to be like that, I rather, just like, not belong to a group at all.

Even though there were other gay and lesbian students in the high school, as well as adults in the community who were suspected to be gay and lesbian, Brad didn't have any contact with them. He had become quite comfortable in his solitude.

Joe was no stranger to isolation, either. As an elementary and junior high student in his first school, he quickly realized that it wasn't cool to be seen as a poor kid from the

country. He had early practice managing his isolation and pretending to be what others expected. His situation gradually improved after his grandmother and father took custody of him, but initially had similar troubles adjusting and making connections with friends in his new, urban school.

Despite being an outspoken, gregarious child, who grew up and attended a high school with more than a thousand students, Cassie too had a history of isolation. Rather than forming long-standing bonds with childhood pals, she felt stifled, alone, and “tired of the same people all the time.” Her only real connections with others came through an outside school source—the diversity group and summer camps offered through the NCCJ.

Cassie lived a life of near complete isolation in her high school, but formed meaningful, caring relationships through these outside school connections. She remembered how she “didn’t have any other girlfriends and very few other guy friends (at school). I kind of maintained my own little bubble.”

Steve’s early experience was also characterized isolation. Before coming out to a junior high friend, he described his life as “total isolation.” Things went well when he came out to the junior high friend, although they eventually drifted apart—something Steve said was not due to his sexual orientation. The stage was considerably larger at his high school of 1,700 students. There were no out gays or lesbians and he was still isolated, even more so.

Steve said his was a high school in which the right kinds of clothing labels were important. He recalled, “I’m not an Abercrombie, or jock, or whatever. I think people

extract a lot of negative personality traits out of the brands that they wear. I was not one of the popular people.”

Aaron’s experience was also characterized by isolation. Like Steve, Aaron had never been a part of the mainstream social group at his high school. Set apart from his peers, Aaron was often the target for harassment at school and work. Although he had not determined his sexual orientation, others had labeled or accused him of being gay. They had decided for him, but Aaron knew the essential litmus test for being straight—dating the opposite sex. Passing.

“I felt very pressured to have a girlfriend...if you don’t have a girlfriend, that proves you’re gay. I could feel the pressure and people would be like, oh, there’s the queer...just unnecessary bullshit of high school.” (See Smith, 1998 for an excellent look at the process by which students are identified as “fag.”) The “off and on” girlfriend Aaron had during this time may have helped him pass to some extent. In the end, however, the relationships were more like “platonic friendship” and he was still isolated and targeted.

David tried to pass in another way. He completely absorbed himself into his schoolwork. His isolation was a calculated decision. David reasoned that if he focused completely on his studies, he could successfully avoid interacting with peers, or anyone who might discover his secret. “I didn’t do anything but study...Because I was afraid of people getting to know me. If they knew who I was, they wouldn’t want to be with me.”

Absorbing himself in his studies, essentially hiding from others was easier for David than facing the fact that his identification with gays and lesbians on television went

against everything he'd learned as a Christian. David's efforts earned him A's, as well as a darkening cloud of internalized homophobia and isolation that eventually led to nine suicide attempts. Internalized homophobia has been defined as low self-esteem and self hate as a result of one's homosexuality (see, for example, Herek, 1984a, 1984b; Gonisorek & Rudolf, 1991; Smith, 1988).

David's academic experience differs from results of some research. His efforts to isolate himself and focus almost completely on his grades did produce straight A's. Some researchers have found that most gay and lesbian students suffer from poor school performance as a result of managing their identities and questions about whether to disclose. (see Elia, 1993; Jordan, Vaughan, & Woodworth, 1997; Remafedi, 1987a, 1987b; Walling, 1993)

Other researchers, however, have noted that many gays and lesbians successfully manage these challenges and still succeed socially and academically (see, for example, Harbeck, 1994; Miceli, 2002; Raissiguier, 1997). Remafedi (1987b) observes that, like David, some gay and lesbian students may absorb themselves in their studies, possibly at a detriment to their social development. Harbeck (1994) has noted an effort among some gays and lesbians to make extra efforts to excel in order to overcome what society may view as a fatal flaw—homosexuality.

The litmus test for heterosexuality and key to passing at David's high school was the same as Aaron's—heterosexual dating. So, David combined a girlfriend with his studies as a way to manage his isolation and to pass. He “started dating a girl my freshman year, more so to cover up, probably, just to convince myself that you know, if I

date a girl, I might be normal. Be *seen* as normal.” David says that his efforts were having no effect at changing his own feelings, and may not have done much to change others’ either. When he eventually came out, some peers told him that they had suspected all along.

Jackie also struggled with how to handle her sexual orientation. On the surface, Jackie’s description of her situation sounds far less isolated than other students. Unlike some of the others, she did talk about a circle of friends, many of whom had been harassed because they had been perceived as being gay. Connection to this group of friends represents an important part of the beginning of acceptance.

Despite the fact that Jackie had the benefit of a small circle of friends, she was not immune to the isolating effects of being a sexual minority. The climate of compulsory heterosexuality at her school was not lost on her. She recalled teachers admonishing students not to wear clothes that were likely to distract the opposite sex and etcetera. The effects of the environment and her concern over disclosing her sexual orientation were, at least for a time, more powerful than her connection to friends. They kept her in the closet.

In order to manage, Jackie constructed a façade designed to help her fit in and *appear* less isolated. Like David, grades were a part of the plan. Jackie’s choice, however, was to consciously let her once stellar grades slide so she could more effectively blend into the crowd. (For examination of gay and lesbian students’ poor academic performance, see for example, Jordan, Vaughan, & Woodworth, 1997; Remafedi, 1987c.) Whereas David poured himself into his studies, Jackie pulled back

from hers, opting instead for high school beer parties, heterosexual dating, and cigarettes. All of this was an attempt to pass for straight.

A number of researchers have examined the connection between poor school performance and these kinds of behaviors among gay and lesbian youth. (For example, MYRBS, 2003; Telljohann & Price, 1993; Walling, 1993 have noted gay and lesbian students' propensity to poor attendance and propensity to skip school.)

Others' attempts to pass were coupled with the hope that perhaps through heterosexual dating, they might discover that they were only confused or that their homosexual feelings had merely been a phase. Perhaps the right person of the opposite sex could not only help them pass, but also cure them, make them straight. Joe recalls starting to date a girl even after he had come out to his grandmother and father. "(I was trying) to talk myself out of it. I was like, 'I can't be this way. It's not right.'" Steve experienced similar feelings and explained that his heterosexual dating with a girl was because, "maybe she could be an exception to this rule." She was not, however, and he soon realized that, "obviously, it was never going to work with (her)."

Danger

The search for acceptance led some of the students into dangerous territory. While the entire body of literature on gay and lesbian youth is not large, research into the many risks and dangers gay and lesbian students face is omnipresent. Danger presented itself to the students in three forms—verbal and physical harassment and assault; substance abuse, depression, suicidal ideation/attempts; and predatory gay adults.

Most faced verbal and physical harassment and assault, to varying degrees. The research indicates how common it is for gay and lesbian students to be verbally and physically threatened or attacked. Some reports show that more than 80% of GLBT students experience verbal harassment at school and nearly 40% report being physically harassed or assaulted (see GLSEN, 2003). Other reports shed light on how often gay and lesbian students endure anti-gay slurs like “faggot, dyke, queer,” and so on, even from school staff members (see GLSEN, 2003; HRW, 2001; Jordan, Vaughan, & Woodworth, 1997; MYRBS, 2003; Thompson, 1995).

Danger for some of the Matthew Shepard Scholars took the simple but very real form of physical violence. Several scholars experienced physical assault. For example, four students assaulted Mark in a school hallway. Likewise, David was shoved up against a locker in addition to being punched in the face outside of school hours. These experiences match the literature on physical assault noted above.

The impact and frequency of this harassment varied significantly. Some students endured an almost constant barrage of verbal hostility. Verbal harassment that came “flooding” toward Aaron at school and certainly had an effect. “I let it hit me too hard.” Other students, such as David, experienced harassment that was much more subtle and could be found just beneath the surface. David recalled how, “in the lunchroom, (he) could hear the word faggot a lot more often. The same was true for under-the-breath comments in hallways, which David said was about what he had expected.

Others, however, experienced very little harassment. In fact, Brad recalled being “pissed off” at the lack of reaction to his sexual orientation. “I was expecting at least one

comment or one something, but no one said anything or did anything. I was never threatened. Nothing was vandalized.” Likewise, until Steve experienced outward hostility at the Valentine’s Dance, he had not had any verbal or physical harassment at school. He recalled, “I never got shoved against a locker. I never heard ‘fag’ mumbled under anyone’s breath when I was walking down the hallway.”

Other students revealed how they found themselves responding to hostility, compulsory heterosexuality, and attempts to pass by going with the crowd into substance abuse or worse—suicidal ideation and attempts.

Jackie’s experience with danger during her search for acceptance came as a result of her attempts to pass. Before coming out, she remembers how she, “didn’t want to be the outcast.” Her method of ensuring that this would not be the case was to go along with whatever the other students were doing. In Jackie’s situation, it was alcohol and tobacco. Though she does not describe it as something that became habitual or controlling, she recognized the danger it presented. Plus, it wasn’t really her.

...a lot of my friends were smoking, so I tried to pick it up. It’s nothing I ever really accepted...I suppose I’d pick up some of the alcohol abuse. It was another way I could be just like them. As I kept doing (it), I saw that I was just destroying myself, it seemed.

Research indicates that many gay and lesbian students do not come to the same realization as Jackie. Many are unable to stop. Research has identified a heightened risk for suicide among gay and lesbian youth (see Hammelman, 1993; Kourany, 1987; MYRBS, 2003; Owens, 1998; Remafedi, Farrow, & Deisher, 1991; Rofes, 1989). Others have noted that gay and lesbian youth often become entangled in a downward spiral of seeking comfort and acceptance through drugs and alcohol (see Hetrick & Martin, 1987;

Hunter & Schaecher, 1987; Gonisorek, 1988; Remafedi, 1987c, 1990). This can, in turn, lead to a host of other problems, including addiction, unwanted pregnancy, disease, and prostitution (see, for example, Icard and Traunstein, 1987; Mallon, 1993; Pederson, 1994; Russell, 1989; Ziebold, 1979).

Although the literature says that gay and lesbians students have an elevated risk for suicide is common (see, for example, Gibson, 1989; Hammelman, 1993; MYRBS, 2003; Remafedi, Farrow, & Deisher, 1991; Rofes, 1989), David is the only scholar here who discussed suicidal feelings and attempts.

David's despair was well hidden before coming out. This was due, at least in part to his attempts to pass by focusing almost entirely on his schoolwork. He successfully maintained high grades without setting off any alarms with peers or parents for unusual behavior. He passed very convincingly as a quiet, polite kid who studied all the time.

David eventually attempted suicide nine times, mostly with pills. He said that at least a couple of the attempts were nearly successful. "I was probably pretty close a couple of times." David was so skilled at passing and hiding his inner turmoil that even his suicide attempts were hidden from those around him, including his parents. He recalled, "they just thought I had the flu or something."

What finally rescued David from his repeated hidden attempts at suicide was a chance event—he forgot to bring a long sleeved shirt for physical education class. When he asked to borrow a shirt from a classmate, she discovered that David had slit his wrists. His friend told the guidance counselor, who informed David's parents and within a week,

he was engaged in counseling with a psychologist. He had avoided becoming a statistic of successful gay suicide.

While David was the only student to discuss suicide, a number of others related how they passed through times of deep depression and hopelessness. Joe remembered being, “mad at (himself) for being that way” and strong feelings of depression. Aaron too struggled with depression and significant weight loss that required medical attention. He recalled, “I lost 20 pounds in a month and a half.” Brad recalled being treated for “really high apathy.”

A third group of students found themselves exploited by predatory, gay adults or dangerously close to such exploitation. I have noted how the literature demonstrates that gay and lesbian students are typically isolated socially, often with few connections to resources, support, and information. Even when students made connections, they were not always safe places for young, gay and lesbian adolescents who were seeking information and acceptance. While some vulnerable young gay and lesbian youth take refuge in connections with other gays, some find themselves caught in a web of exploitation or worse (see, for example, Valentine & Skelton, 2003).

Some may point to these risks of exploitation as a problem that is unique or endemic to the gay and lesbian community. However, one need only pick up a newspaper or tune into television news to see that all young people, are in fact, vulnerable to older sexual predators. From abuse scandals in the Catholic Church, to alleged abuse by United Nations peacekeepers, to inappropriate teacher/student relationships, young people can be

taken advantage of in a variety of settings by a host of predators, gay and straight. In this sense, too, gay and lesbian youth share much in common with their heterosexual peers.

Aaron, for example, faced a considerable amount of harassment and taunting from coworkers and peers, even before coming out. He remembered how, “people would be like, ‘Oh there’s the queer’ and ‘You’re just a fag anyway, you don’t know what you’re talking about.’” And he recalled the effect it had on him. “I let it hit me too hard. I took it personally.”

After coming out and making some connections with other gays and lesbians, Aaron found himself drawn into precisely the type of exploitative situation Valentine and Skelton (2003) and other researchers identify as being particularly dangerous. He had made connections with Bob, an older man who proved to be skilled at capitalizing on Aaron’s naiveté and vulnerabilities as he sought acceptance as a newly out gay student.

The danger for Aaron involved a combination of alcohol, pressure, and sex—all pushed by the older, more experienced, and predatory Bob. Aaron later learned that Bob was actually in his forties. Aaron remembered the first incident when he and some friends had gathered at Bob’s house, where Bob had provided alcohol and access to a hot tub.

...I’m getting drunk...and Bob’s like, “Let’s go out to the hot tub...” and Bob and I went to the hot tub...and I’m not sure what to think of this guy right now, it’s just like, “Damn, he’s really old to be hanging out with young kids.” Something’s not clicking here yet, but I wasn’t sure what it was...and so then pretty soon the light from the hot tub is turned off and somebody’s hand is up my pants.

Aaron’s efforts to get away were not successful. When he escaped the hot tub to the bathroom, Bob followed him and pressured him into doing more sexually than he was ever comfortable with. Despite this, a similar situation happened again a few nights later.

Aaron remembered how Bob skillfully exploited him, "...when stuff happened, it was the whole, 'Oh my God, you're beautiful,' you know, everything anybody would ever want to hear. And I fell into a trap."

Aaron now understands why and how this occurred. It was, "largely because I had recently come out and was vulnerable to the point where I was trusting of anyone who seemed to be an ally." The research agrees. For example, some research has found that some predatory gay men view young men as particularly attractive, partly due to the perception that young men are less likely to be infected with HIV (see, for example, Shakespeare, 1996). Others have noted that negative experiences at home and school may mean that many boys lack the self-esteem and strength to say no to unwanted sexual advances and are vulnerable to coercion and unwanted and/or unsafe sex. (see, for example, Epstein & Johnson, 1994; Johnson & Valentine, 1995; Rivers, 2001; Valentine & Skelton, 2003).

Brad recalled a similar situation with dangerous potential, although he staved off the advances of a predatory older gay man. He had made arrangements to attend a gay social event in a nearby city. Ironically, his father drove him to the event because he was concerned about the safety of the neighborhood. He recalled,

I would have driven there by myself, but...it isn't a great neighborhood...my parents didn't like the idea of me going there alone. So my father drove me. And he went to the mall, I think, while I was (there)...So I went there and it was nice. I met some students, I met some older people too, but even there, it would have been nice if I would've had someone there with me because I was sitting by an old grandfather who said, well, first he invited me to lunch and church for a date, as a date, not a let's just talk about things. And then he told me, "You remind me of my oldest grandson, so young, so firm, so fresh." I was very disgusted and very disturbed. Luckily, I had been talking to a police officer who was gay, and I think he was out. Well, I'm certain he was, because he saw to it that the person didn't

get too close after that. So, it was nice because when you know people, there's safety. You don't have to worry about going somewhere and being preyed on by Lord only knows who.

Religion

The students' involvement with religion took two forms. Half of the students did not come from families with long-standing involvement in religion. Some had been turned off by religion at a young age when their questions were dismissed or discouraged. Some sought to explore religion as a cure to their sexual orientation and a place to question. This group's involvement with religion was much more mild than the other half of the students.

The other half of the students came from religious backgrounds. Some had been regular church attendees with a clear understanding of what they had been taught. For these students, the intersection (or collision) of their sexual orientation and religion produced clashes of varying degrees of intensity. The students toiled over how to reconcile the faith they'd been taught with their sexual orientation. The more fundamental the Christian beliefs, the hotter the controversial fire burned.

Mark said his parents are not particularly religious. So, as he was searching for acceptance and answers regarding his sexual orientation, he began attending a Mormon church with his grandparents. He explained that he wanted to "see how that would help me out," thinking that "maybe becoming religious would help cure it (his homosexuality) or something like that." Mark found neither acceptance nor a cure, and now says of his church exploration, "obviously it was a bad mistake." Acceptance denied.

Aaron had taught Bible school at the local Lutheran church, although he had been raised Catholic. His mom recognized how this, along with many other things he had done in the community were good and looked upon favorably by others. She also knew that when word hit that he was gay, these good deeds and association with a church would not guarantee acceptance. She feared they might instead bring the opposite.

Although he was still many years from discovering his sexual orientation, Brad remembered other questions he posed at church. His questions as a youngster were of a practical type and not unlike questions young children commonly ask. For example, he says he questioned how the entire population could have descended from one family and for more specifics about the great flood and Noah's Ark. The adults' response was for him to stop asking "such disgusting questions."

Brad said he could see the hypocrisy in parishioners listening politely to a sermon on openness and respect, only to hurry downstairs to the church basement for coffee, cookies, and a racist joke. He recalled, "I'd be like, 'That's bullshit.'" His atheism was solidified and he stopped seeking answers or acceptance through church. Acceptance denied.

For the second group of students—those with a longer history of involvement with religion, the interplay between faith, sexual orientation, and the search for acceptance was more complex. Joe, Jackie, and David had longer church involvement and experienced this greater complexity.

Even before the turbulence of reconciling these issues with his father and grandmother, Joe remembered the internalized homophobia he felt as a young child,

somehow knowing he was different, yet hoping he wasn't. "I remember being a little kid, and praying that I wouldn't be that way (gay), even though I knew I was.

Joe explained how his grandmother and father hold some strong Christian views that did not mesh well with his sexual orientation. This caused more than a little friction as he began to come out and seek acceptance. This was especially true after he and his father began attending counseling sessions in which the counselor happened to be a lesbian. The result was sometimes a back and forth exchange between Joe's father, arguing that he loved his son, but couldn't accept homosexuality. The counselor, in turn, "was like defending me" Joe recalls. Acceptance found, partially.

In the end, Joe continued to attend his father's conservative Christian church. Initially, he said he went to church largely to placate his father, who said, "all I ask of you is to go to church with me...you won't do anything else with me. So, I'd go." Now, Joe sometimes attends when he is home from college, and "it's not an issue anymore."

While Joe understands that his sexual orientation and the church's outlook on the issue do not match, he said he goes because his dad likes for him to go. And, Joe explained how he now sees something in the larger picture. He explains, "I go to see...sometimes church is just more than the religious aspect. It's like the fellowship..."

In an unexpected twist, the youth pastor who was so important and influential to Jackie was a lesbian. Like David, she had extensive dialog with her youth pastor prior to her coming out and search for acceptance. The nature of the discussions between Jackie and her youth pastor were also quite different from David's. Jackie was finding acceptance in a place that David had not.

“She was a wonderful confidant. She told me, you know, ‘Just because I am (a lesbian) doesn’t mean you have to be.’” Jackie’s youth pastor also had a different view of homosexuality vis-à-vis the Bible. “She gave specific chapters in the Bible that discussed homosexuality as not being a negative thing.”

Most importantly, Jackie found acceptance. Her youth pastor had been ready, willing, and able to discuss a tense and difficult subject with Jackie when she felt she had nowhere else to turn. Lesbian or straight, Jackie knew she was accepted. Jackie also knew that if she determined that she was indeed a lesbian, that she could be successful, just like her youth pastor. She recalls,

...she was a big help, got me set in the right direction. She really stood by me and talked to me, and (gave me) confidence in my faith and in the fact that she had been a successful homosexual and that this was something that she had not let hold her back.

Likewise, she was assured of acceptance from the congregation, which never seemed concerned with hiding or changing the lesbian youth pastor, or anyone else who might reveal themselves as gay or lesbian. Jackie remembered, “We all knew that (the youth pastor) was a lesbian, but nobody really brought it up...it’s not a problem.” Today, Jackie describes herself as being “very strong” in her faith and being deeply involved in her church. Acceptance found.

When David was describing his county seat hometown, I had a clear picture of a young man, riding his bike down a tree-lined street to the local swimming pool. His familiar description prompted me to ask if his experience growing up was one of “the normal small town kid.” I’m glad I asked the question, because David’s answer revealed how different he feels his experience growing up was from most kids.

“Probably a lot different,” he said.

A lot of it goes into...my family, my experiences relate back to...that I grew up in a fundamentalist Christian home. My parents are very good churchgoers. We went to church every Sunday and every Wednesday night. We were very involved in church activities, we volunteered.

As David struggled with his burgeoning sexual orientation, the conflict between his Christian fundamentalism and homosexuality came to the forefront. He described trying to balance what he'd been taught (that homosexuality was a sin) with what he was feeling (that he was gay). “I'd lie awake at night and pray that God would take my life or take the feelings away so that I wouldn't have to deal with them...because I had been taught that it (homosexuality) was a sin.”

In order to deal with the issue, David's family turned to their faith and the youth pastor at church, in addition to arranging for David to see a clinical psychologist. The youth pastor focused on changing David, suggesting that he could be straight if he wanted to. “He would say...that if I would pray hard enough, if I really want to change, willing to have faith, that God can change me.”

But the message was one that David had heard before. He didn't think it would work. He recalled, “...that was really disappointing to hear, because I felt like I had done that, like I had prayed and nothing every happened.” David's relationship with the church he had grown up in took a further turn south when the pastor suggested he needed to make a wholesale change with his choice in music, and his small circle of friends. Ironically, the pastor called for David to make new friends—with boys. *Real* boys.

The youth pastor at my church, they wanted me to give up all my friends, change my choice of music, you know, make sure that there was no positive image of

homosexuality coming at me. And they wanted me to change, they wanted me to start hanging out with the guys, so that I could, you know, relate to the guys...

But this was a point on which David wouldn't bend.

I told them, "If I give up all my friends, I will have no friends. If I give up all my friends who are girls, I will have no friends at all." And it was a scary thought to not have any. You know, to start telling them that I couldn't hang out with you, I can't be your friend because you're a girl.

The final impasse came when the youth pastor determined that David was unwilling to change, and hence the church could do little for him. It did, however, take the precautionary step of asking him to resign his position as a church preschool teacher. The pastor explained how David's sexual orientation could be a problem if "someone in the community or someone in the church were to find out I was questioning my sexuality...People might not feel comfortable having their children watched by (him)."

David refused to resign, and was eventually removed from the work schedule in the church preschool. He vividly recalled how he feared his church's reaction to him would be a recurring theme for the rest of his life.

I remember crying because...it had always been my passion to work with children. I loved little kids...I cared about those kids a lot and it really hurt to be told that you can't work with kids...That really make me feel like, you know, the rest of my life, this is how I'm going to be looked at and how I'm going to be treated...If I endorse this (his sexual orientation)...I'll never, I can never be a professional or do anything with my life, because I'll always be looked at this way.

Acceptance denied.

So, David quit going to church for several months. Later, however, he began attending another church in a nearby city with his grandparents. The new church was similar to his old one in terms of its theology and view of sexual orientation. There was a

key difference, however. There, David met a young female who he began to suspect was a lesbian. When he confronted her and she confirmed his suspicions, he found acceptance from at least one other Christian.

He remembered,

...at least I had support there, through my friend, Brenda. And so that helped me gain confidence in the church that I hadn't failed as a Christian. That, you know, if being born again, praying, whatever, none of that had worked for me that it wasn't because I wasn't doing something right. Like, she had grown up in the church, too, and she was a lesbian.

Acceptance found.

Some research has examined the importance of spirituality and religion to gays and lesbians (see, for example, Tan, 2005; Wagner, Serafine, Rabkin, Remien, & Williams, 1994). Some literature suggests that many gays and lesbians feel they must choose between maintaining their sexual orientation or their religious beliefs (see, for example, Barrett & Barzan, 1996; Brooke, 1993; Buchanan, Dzelme, Harris & Hecker, 2001; Friedman & Downey 1994; Wagner, Serafine, Rabkin, Remien, & Williams, 1994). See also Mel White's *Stranger at the Gate* (1995) for a personal account of a clergyman and former conservative Christian ghostwriter's struggle to reconcile his faith and sexual orientation.

The collision between religion and sexual orientation is complex and hotly debated. The students' experiences concur with research pointing to the importance of spirituality and religion among gays and lesbians. While this interplay is complicated and often controversial, it is important to note that not all the students had to choose between their faith and their sexual orientation.

Counseling

It is no surprise that the students' need for acceptance meant that counseling would play an important role in their lives. The students participated in and benefited from counseling that came in two forms-- formal and informal. A number of the Matthew Shepard Scholars were involved in formal counseling, either because they sought it themselves or because concerned others arranged it for them. For some, the formal counseling was a result of their coming out. In Joe's case, his grandmother and father arranged counseling sessions with a professional after Joe had come out and the sessions specifically addressed his sexual orientation. Likewise, David's parents arranged formal counseling for him with a psychologist as well as the church youth pastor. In some cases, parents (and possibly students) may have been searching for a cure.

The second group of students sought acceptance of themselves and exploration of their sexual orientation in counseling sessions that were far less formal. These students initiated their informal counseling with people they had come to trust. And, this happened before coming out. Such was the case for Jackie (with her youth pastor) and Cassie (with her peers and camp counselors through the NCCJ).

Aaron's exposure to counseling took place with a professional counselor. The family got involved after his mother became convinced that the almost constant fighting and tension in the house was too much. On a few occasions, it had resulted in a door being kicked in or a shoving match. Enough was enough.

Aaron and his stepfather, Carl, both participated in the family counseling sessions, although neither attended every time or went enthusiastically. This lack of engagement,

of course, had an impact on the effectiveness of the sessions. Yet later, when Aaron was becoming increasingly convinced that he was gay, he turned back to the counselor for acceptance and a safe place to talk. He recalled, "...I don't know what I am, so I found his phone number and I called him up and just said, 'Mike, I think I'm gay. I need to talk to you.'"

David's involvement with a counselor was also a professional. After his suicide attempt exposed the emotional turmoil that he'd successfully hidden from his parents and peers, his parents wasted no time getting him involved in therapy. Their preference was for a Christian psychologist, but since they could not find one, they chose instead to have their son visit with a secular psychologist as well as their pastor. Looking back, he said that starting to see the psychologist twice a week was "the best thing that could ever happen."

David remembered that the psychologist didn't really tell him it was ok to be gay, but neither did she tell him it was wrong. Rather, she provided information about homosexuality, other people's gay experiences, and different interpretations of the Bible and homosexuality. This path was in stark contrast to the advice and explanations that were coming from the youth pastor, who argued that God could help David change, if he were committed enough.

He illustrated the different directions from which these two counselors were coming:

(The psychologist) just really gave me a sense that I wasn't the only person that had those feelings and that maybe the Bible wasn't infallible. Maybe there was, you know, some room for interpretation, which was not anything that I had ever

been told, that (I might be able to) look at the Bible differently...she just gave me a lot of information to soak in.

As noted previously, David stopped going to church after church officials refused to allow him to continue working as a preschool teacher. However, he continued seeing the psychologist. After several months, he was beginning to experience some of the acceptance that he'd previously thought he would never find. He recalled how important and welcomed that acceptance was. "I was still seeing this psychologist...She's probably one credited for my acceptance of myself. And, I eventually did decide that I was gay...and I came out to myself."

His newfound self-acceptance, however, did not mean that the struggle for acceptance had ended. Through the entire experience, David said he knows that his parents were torn between their love for him and their religious beliefs David had initially seen the psychologist twice a week. After about a year, they were only meeting once every two weeks or so. David's mother stopped paying for the sessions.

He explained,

After seeing the psychologist for about a year, my mom became aware that she (the psychologist) was helping me to accept myself and to accept the homosexual lifestyle, and she (his mother) stopped paying for me to see the psychologist.

Joe's involvement with a professional counselor also happened due to the insistence of his parents—in this case, his grandmother and father. Like in David's family, the religious views Joe's father were an important issue. Joe's father was working hard to be supportive of his son. He also made it clear that he had a hard time accepting his son's homosexuality. He believed his son's sexual orientation was a choice. Perhaps counseling could offer a cure.

Like some of his fellow scholars, Joe was reluctant to participate. He'd had negative experiences with counselors before, dating back to the state-employed social workers who came to his mother's house years before. In Joe's mind those visits never produced anything of consequence. As noted, Joe's family had extensive involvement with social workers and counselors before his grandmother and father took custody of him. As a result, he viewed counselors as a waste of time, remembering how the state-employed counselors and social workers told "lies about how wonderful (his family was)" when he was still living with his mother and stepfather.

Joe recalled the irony of the counselor being a lesbian and how his father "kind of knew, but yet he kind of didn't." He also described how his father and the counselor would often argue about whether sexual orientation is a choice or predetermined. In the end, Joe says the counseling ended because it was not working.

It may be true that the counseling was not changing his father's view of sexual orientation. And it may be true that his father and the counselor spent at least some of the time arguing. Joe says his dad insisted that he loved his son but that he didn't accept his homosexuality.

Yet examining the whole of Joe's story revealed an apparent respect for his grandmother and father. Recalling how his grandmother would often strongly suggest what his father should do, Joe smiled, "everything he said is a direct quote of my grandma." While the counseling, suggested by his grandmother and carried out by his father, does not seem to have strikingly changed his father's religious view toward homosexuality, the simple fact that his family pursued it is noteworthy.

Joe spoke fondly of both his grandmother and father. He noted how his grandmother reached a point at which she balanced her own religious beliefs with the enduring love she felt for her grandson. Likewise, Joe's pride and affection for his father was clear. This was especially clear when Joe described how his father has gone the extra mile to be supportive of Joe's brother and sister, who are not his father's biological children. The counseling sessions may have seemed useless and ineffective at the time, the end result is a family that has traveled a great distance toward acceptance and demonstrated great care. Counseling certainly played at least some role in that.

Jackie's experience with counseling was less formal, but was clearly a key event in her search for acceptance. She credited her youth pastor as being an important role model and confidant as she explored her feelings about coming out. Jackie felt free to question and safe to explore the possibilities of coming out, if she determined that she was indeed a lesbian.

That the youth pastor was also a lesbian obviously made a great deal of difference. This gave Jackie the additional assurance that she could be a positive, productive, respected, Christian member of society. And she was not alone. She recalled how, despite her caring and supportive family, she could not bring herself to explore these issues with them. The same was true for her peers. She remembered,

I really didn't have the support. I was scared. I was too scared to say anything (about her questions and suspicions about her sexual orientation) I was afraid that my parents would find out, my friends too. I didn't know if they could handle it, and I had younger siblings, so I couldn't really talk to anyone else. (Her parents) were very caring, I just...I wasn't sure, didn't know how they would react.

She also has a clear understanding of how important this relationship was for her to begin to understand and accept herself. “I suppose it was really difficult for me to understand myself, until I saw someone else. That I wasn’t alone.”

Cassie’s search for acceptance didn’t place her name in the appointment book of a professional counselor at her parents’ insistence, as was the case with David. Neither did it place her family in a heated discussion about the biology or psychology of sexual orientation, as was the case for Joe. Cassie’s counseling was more informal, but no less important and meaningful in her search for understanding and acceptance.

Cassie’s counseling took the form of a connection with the lesbian camp counselor she met through the extra-curricular diversity groups she’d gotten involved with. Almost from her first exposure to the counselor, Cassie could feel that there was something the woman had to teach her. She recalled,

...The woman that’s in charge (of the group)...she’s very open and I could always talk to her and that was nice, because in the back of my mind, I was always questioning things. I knew I could go to her. Really formed a bond between a lot of us.

As Cassie gained comfort and experience with the group, the scope of the issues they explored widened. When sexual orientation came up as part of a discussion, someone suggested that the group specifically ask the lesbian counselor, who was the only staff member who was out. After hearing the counselor’s coming out story, things began to click with Cassie. “It was strange. Like, ‘Oh,’ you know, but that explains so many things.”

Cassie had a safe place to question, explore answers, and seek acceptance. Though she acknowledged that she “kind of lived a second life for a while,” feeling

comfortable exploring issues and talking with the camp counselor who opened the doors of expression and dialog. Back at school, she felt isolated and alone, surrounded by familiar peers she'd grown up with

Each of these scholars benefited from access to and connections with a concerned person who could listen and offer support in their search for acceptance. Some were professionals, paid by the hour. Others were likely had far less formal training, perhaps just a knack for listening and communicating. But each served a key role at an important time. (For a well read account of an individual experience in counseling around gay issues, see Duberman, 1991.)

The students also benefited from some very important relationships with caring teachers. Their teachers and administrators earn generally high marks for the support they showed the students. It is, however, worth noting that none of the key individuals mentioned above were school staff members.

Further, the students give teachers and administrators generally high marks for the way they responded *after* the students came out, even though many of the students still had to take it upon *themselves* to consistently confront gay slurs and negative comments. It is intriguing that the students did not spend time describing teachers they knew were supportive and consistent in disallowing gay slurs and hostility *before* they came out.

Aaron's description of this paradox is illustrative. He said his teachers were "awesome" and credits them with being, "instrumental in, like, helping my (self) image and stuff." And yet, the conversation reveals how teachers failed him at the same time.

NP: And so, you're sitting in class and somebody says, "Oh, that's so gay." That's probably going to be let slide before you're out?

Aaron: It was let slide after I was out, too.

NP: Ok.

Aaron: Except by me.

Some researchers have examined the attitudes, comfort and skill of educators in working with gay and lesbian students. If the results of this research are accurate, schools have a considerable distance to travel before they are adequately prepared to meet the needs of gay and lesbian students. And, if the results of this research are accurate, these students are extremely fortunate that their parents and/or circumstances put them in contact with these individuals who contributed so essentially toward on their search for acceptance.

For an examination of school guidance counselors' attitudes toward gay and lesbian students, see Sears (1988, 1992) and Telljohann and Price (1992). Fassinger (1991) and Rudolf (1988) examine the practices of counselors and therapists in working with GLBT men and women. Others, such as Friend (1991), O'Connor (1995), Rofes (1995), Sanelli and Perreault (2001), Savin-Williams (1990), and Smith (1998) have examined the actions of teachers and administrators.

Disclosure

While some of the research into the process of telling others one is gay (termed disclosure) conflicts, that the process is difficult and stressful is crystal clear. Smith,

Kippax, and Chapple (1998) use the term “closet dynamics” to refer to the way homosexuality is concealed and disclosed.

As was the case for other parts of their experiences, the students managed their own personal closet dynamics differently. The process by which they informed people of their sexual orientation varied from person to person, but most contained elements of three techniques—indirect, direct, and being “outed,” or discovered.

Among these students, the most common pattern was that of indirect disclosure; allowing family and peers to figure it out for themselves. To the extent that any directness was involved, it was typically because people around them had become sufficiently suspicious or curious and asked them. In some cases, family members questioned them. In other instances, peers stopped them in the hallway and asked.

Some students were also “outed,” but not outed in the usual sense. The term has come to mean being exposed or proven as gay while the individual wants, sometimes desperately, to remain in the closet. In these cases, circumstance and chance pulled the students out of the closet, such as the day Mark’s mother saw the gay material he was printing from the Internet and confronted him and when David’s mother happened upon her son’s journal.

Regardless of the path taken and the means of disclosure, all had traveled a great distance and were now on the threshold of what they had been searching for—acceptance. Although they may not have known it at the time, they had arrived at the crucial turning point in their young lives. Standing on the threshold of that turning point,

however, did not mean the students were ready and eager to, in Steve's words, "take the plunge."

The disclosure decision is a paramount challenge for gays and lesbians and the literature reflects the difficulty of this decision. When faced with whether to disclose, they essentially have two options. On one hand, gays and lesbians have the option of remaining in the closet, hiding their homosexuality, and continuing in isolation or passing as they struggled with early on. With this comes internalized homophobia, isolation, alienation, feelings of invisibility and inferiority. A second option is, of course, disclosure. Exercising this option however may be no more attractive to some, as it often brings verbal and physical harassment, loss of friends and family, and discrimination (see Sanelli & Perreault, 2001).

A third common option lies between these two, unattractive choices. The students could selectively disclose to certain people. They could carefully select people whom they believed would receive the news well while at the same time not disclosing anything to people whom they feared might react negatively or with hostility (see, for example, Griffin, 1992; and Norris, 1992).

The students were very fearful of disclosure, but found themselves energized by positive responses, which encouraged them to let more people know, either directly or indirectly. They felt liberated, like a weight had been released, even if only one other person knew. Informing parents was a delicate issue and one that many students sought to do indirectly. Informing peers was done with some trepidation, but more often than telling parents or teachers.

Classmates and coworkers had labeled Aaron as gay for sometime, even though he himself had not determined whether he might be gay. He endured a considerable amount of harassment at both school and work. Much of this was the result of rumors that were spread about Aaron and some of his friends who were gay or lesbian. His disclosure included all three methods.

When feelings for another boy convinced him that he was, in fact, gay, he shared his secret directly with two others—Jennifer, his partner from the school debate team and Mike, the counselor his family had seen earlier. These disclosures were about as direct as one could get. “...I just told Jennifer. I was like, ‘Jennifer, I definitely think I’m gay.’” Aaron wasted no words when he asked to see the family counselor, either. He remembers, “...I called him up and just said, ‘Mike, I think I’m gay. I need to talk to you.’”

Aaron’s disclosure to family members was more difficult. It was also more subtle and indirect. He had long been uncomfortable trying to hide his visits to the counselor from his mother, who was paying for them. He also thinks she may have suspected what was going on, since she would offer comments like, “if there’s ever anything you need to tell me about yourself...”

His heightened interest in appearance and clothes may have triggered her suspicion, as well. The difference was certainly not lost on Aaron’s peers, who seized upon the change in his outward appearance to turn up the harassment and kick the rumor mill into high gear. Ultimately, it was these rumors that created the need for a chat between Aaron, his mother, and younger brother in the family camper one night.

Despite her suspicions, when faced with the reality of Aaron's sexual orientation, his mother reacted with fear, worrying that "this will destroy our family and your senior year." Aaron's brother, who was in junior high at the time, was concerned about how this would reflect on him. His brother also wondered about the reaction of their stepfather, Carl, with whom relations were already strained, at best. Aaron's response was as direct as it could have been. "Fuck Carl. I'm like, 'I have to do what is best for me...can't you see that I'm not happy (living with all these rumors and hiding things)?'"

And, with that, Aaron was out. He explains how the circle of people who knew widened at school and of an unexpected positive response from some classmates.

I am (gay). Yep, yep, yep. And people would come up and ask me, and I would just say, Yes, I am. That's who I am. And then I had this giant popularity spurt that was just awesome, because all the girls in my class, even ones I had never said anything to, were just super friendly.

Joe's grandmother and father were apparently, like Aaron's mother, having their suspicions about his sexual orientation. Rather than hinting that they were available to talk, Joe's grandmother and father took a more direct approach. They confronted him directly. Joe, in turn, answered their question directly. Tears from Joe and shock from his father immediately followed.

Uncertainty about disclosing to parents is very common. Most gays and lesbians can distinctly recall a time of anguish and uncertainty, even when they enjoy close and supportive relationships with parents (see Anderson, 1995; D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 1998; Herdt & Boxer, 1993; Remafedi, 1987b; 1987c; Remafedi, Farrow, & Deisher, 1991). Some research has shown that gays and lesbians disclose to mothers, indirectly or directly, more often than fathers (see D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington,

1998; Savin-Williams, 1990). Many gays and lesbians have wrestled with whether to disclose, how to disclose, and to whom for several years before telling parents (see Anderson, 1995; D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkinton, 1998).

Many parents react with fear, hostility, shock, denial, and self-blame. This negative reaction often leads to what Durby (1994) terms "throwaway" kids, who are wholly rejected as a result of their sexual orientation. Elizur and Ziv (2001) have examined the importance of family support after disclosure, although a positive reaction seems less common than a negative family reaction (see Telljohann & Price, 1993; Walling, 1993).

What followed Joe's disclosure, however, was a sense of relief. Since the two most important people in his life knew his secret, he was less compromised inside. He found the courage to tell a couple of friends, though he later decided to date a girl to see if perhaps he could talk himself out of being gay. A few months later, he realized that things were not working with the girlfriend, and he disclosed directly to her. The two remain friends today.

Mark had silently sought answers to his own questions about his sexual orientation for some time. He said he had come out to himself by the time he entered high school as a ninth grader but had not yet come out to his parents. His search for information, however, outed him to his mother when she saw the material he was printing from the computer. He said his mother wasn't fully ready for this, and that it wasn't talked about much for a while

After being outed at home, Mark's first planned, direct disclosure was in a letter to a carefully selected female classmate. He remembered the sense of relief and energy that came from revealing the secret to others who reacted with support. He stressed how important it was to disclose the secret to people who were likely to give what he was looking for—acceptance.

I think a big part of it is knowing who's going to be accepting and coming out to them...finding the people who you know are going to be accepting and willing to help you by keeping you encouraged...You've got to calculate it right.

Steve came out to a male classmate as a junior high school student. He had read many Internet accounts of coming out and was very familiar with coming out stories. Many of these accounts painted coming out as a hugely significant event. When Steve decided to come out to a peer, he didn't think his experience would match those he'd read about, mainly because he was coming out to just one person.

To Steve's surprise, coming out to even one person was a significant event for him. The numbers didn't matter. What mattered was that he had shared his secret with *someone*. And it had gone without a hitch. He found acceptance and the absence of hostility. "What a difference. Even if it's just one person," he remembers.

These accounts correspond with research that suggests gays and lesbians most often disclose to carefully chosen friends (see D'Augelli, 1991; D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 1998). In addition, research by Harris and Bliss (1997) indicates that 86% of gay and lesbian students chose not to disclose their sexual orientation to their teachers, 92% chose not to tell school guidance counselors, but 36% chose to inform friends.

Likewise, Telljohann and Price (1993) found that gays and lesbians identified friends as being most supportive. In the same study, “none of the female or male respondents ever mentioned that a father had been helpful, nor did many of them identify school personnel” (p.50). Telljohann and Price also hypothesize that peers selected for disclosure reacted positively because they had been carefully chosen, and perhaps might also be gay. This hypothesis corresponds to Jackie’s assertion that many in her circle of friends, “had been harassed because they had been perceived as homosexuals.”

Like Mark, chance outed David to his mother after she found his diary that included a passage about an attraction to another boy. He knew this would be a challenging issue for their family because of their fundamental Christian beliefs. His mom’s initial reaction told him that she loved him and would do whatever she could to help him.

David said his sessions with a psychologist eventually led him to a point at which he could accept himself and begin to think about coming out more directly to others. As he gradually came out to carefully chosen peers, he remembered feeling a “huge adrenalin rush.” When “every time it was a positive reaction,” the once isolated, suicidal young man was coming out and coming into his own.

While already out to a number of peers, David came all the way out with a t-shirt on the school band trip. Not everyone received the news with enthusiasm and David endured some harassment and physical assault. Most negative reactions were muted. What is far more noteworthy, however, is the extent to which he was finding acceptance and tolerance. He remembers, “...people would come up to me and be like, ‘I heard that

you came out. Are you gay?' And I'd be like, 'Yeah.' And they'd be like, 'Awesome. Congratulations on coming out...'"

Brad's disclosure was also unique. After being perplexed by his reaction to his student teacher's proximity to him in class, he knew in almost an instant that he was gay. A few minutes of pondering, he caught himself feeling attracted to a male classmate, made a trip to the library, and disclosed to himself.

Brad came out indirectly to virtually everyone else. This was easy for him because "some people thought I would come out a year or two before I actually came out." Disclosing to his parents was not much of an issue, since Brad's family didn't spend much time "talking about things." Yet, his parents almost certainly picked up on the clues around the house, such as his mention of the gay college group he would later become connected with and the evidence of his internet searches for gay information and chat. While his family was not overly communicative, they didn't react to his indirect disclosure with hostility, shock, or anger.

Once out to himself and connected with the nearby group of college gay college students, the walls that had isolated Brad began to come down. For the first time, the college group provided him with true friends. "Like, they were the first friends that I ever really had. I could go to them and I knew I wasn't going to be used for something."

The once apathetic, sullen, withdrawn Brad began to take an interest in things. The weight came off and a smile appeared. "So, I lost a lot of weight...And I felt like I wanted to look good for other people, because before I didn't care what the hell I looked

like.” Brad’s change was also noticeable in the classroom. Brad had always excelled in school, but now had a brighter outlook to go with his keen academic ability.

(the teachers and administrators) just liked me more later because I was happier and less of a bitch, because (before) I was a really big bitch all the time. And I was starting to write better essays... They liked the fact that I would put effort into my research and do interesting things and topics.

After a considerable amount of passing for straight by chasing boys as a young girl, dating boys as a high school student, and letting her grades slip in a calculated effort to fit in, Jackie too was ready to come out. She had spent many hours exploring the issue with her youth pastor, who explained the sense of relief she had when she had come out.

Jackie’s most direct disclosure was to her friend who would subsequently become her girlfriend. She simply explained that she had been questioning a lot of things lately and that she might want to be “more than friends.” As it turned out, her friend felt the same way and the two had “crushes on each other.”

Jackie was relieved and energized by the fact that her disclosure had gone so well. When she and her girlfriend walked down the school hallway holding hands, the picture told a thousand words. The picture was powerful.

Equally as powerful was the effect that coming out had on Jackie. She felt, in a word, “liberated.” She recalled,

I did a lot of books for fun. I could go out and learn everything. I could go out and be in the community. I wanted to learn what I could do. I wanted to find different activities, things I could get my GSA involved in, things I could actually strive (for) and make people work for, make it a better place.

The energy, affirmation, and feelings of liberation Steve, Jackie, Brad, and David describe match previous research into feelings reported after coming out. A number of

well-read studies have found that many gays and lesbians have a notable sense of relief after disclosing to someone (see for example, Cass, 1979; Flowers & Buston, 2001; Troiden, 1989).

Near the end of an interview with Cassie, I asked her if she ever sat her parents down to come out to them. She smiled and answered quickly, "I never felt like I needed to." Like some of her Matthew Shepard Scholarship peers, she let her parents figure things out for themselves.

This probably wasn't hard for them to do, since Cassie's involvement in the extra-curricular diversity group and summer camp had led her to come out to herself. Once out to herself, she increased her involvement in gay and lesbian causes, such as helping to build and ride on a parade float. These activities filled Cassie's need to be involved in things that were important to her. They also allowed her to leave hints for her parents, since she didn't want to disclose her secret directly to them.

I wasn't exactly lying, but I was kind of, you know, giving some roundabout reasons why I was doing what I was doing. And my parents, I remember them saying, "Ok, you know, do the float...that'll be good for you." When I told them I was going to sit on the float, they got really, you know, "But they're going to think you're gay if you're sitting on the float." I was like, "Well, I don't care."

Cassie went on to explain that she thinks her mother probably knew full and well what was going on, but that she was no more ready to deal directly with the issue than Cassie was. Cassie remembers, "she just kind of let go of the leash and started letting me."

This account concurs with literature that shows most gays and lesbians use "indirect" disclosure to inform others of their sexual orientation. Often, this takes the

form of subtle hints that may be left around the house or may appear through one's actions (see Savin-Williams, 2001; Herdt & Boxer, 1993). Other research indicates that gays and lesbians will often disclose more directly, especially to mothers (see Savin-Williams, 1990; Telljohann & Price, 1993; Boxer, Cook, & Herdt, 1991; Herdt & Boxer, 1993).

Indirect disclosure was the main method for several of the students. But, it was not usually the only method. In a number of instances, even those who had indirectly disclosed to many people found themselves in situations in which they still had to directly disclose. And, that direct disclosure was still stressful and difficult for some.

At school, Cassie had never been as open as she was at the diversity group or summer camp. But her energy for supporting gay and lesbian rights and causes had led her to try to start a GSA at her school. After many setbacks and an administrator who was unsupportive, Cassie and a couple classmates got the fledgling group off the ground.

Cassie was taken by surprise the day her name was announced as the winner of a local newspaper's activism award. Many of her classmates seemed to connect the dots at this point and determine that the activist student who had led the establishment of the school's first GSA, must be a lesbian. Though she had experienced some harassment before, it spiked upward at that point.

Cassie's most direct disclosure came one day in an English class after another student made a negative reference to gay marriage. A heated and on-going exchange followed. She was now unmistakably out. Only the most oblivious classmates could fail to see.

At this point, things gelled for Cassie. A number of other students approached her and told her that they thought they might be gay, too. Her reputation for having taken on school administration to establish the GSA and the way in which she defended herself in the English class argument meant that many potentially hostile classmates steered clear of her. Many others admired her and they showed it. Acceptance. Despite the fact that she never wanted to come out directly, she was energized and strengthened once it happened.

Although Steve was out to his friend, he didn't expand the circle for quite a while. In fact, he dated a female for a while, wondering if she might be "an exception" to his sexual orientation. She was not. When he had at last determined once and for all that he was indeed gay, he chose a means of indirect disclosure that was familiar to some other Matthew Shepard Scholars.

Like Brad, Aaron, and David, Steve let his clothing do a good degree of the talking (and indirect disclosing) for him. He arrived at school wearing a tight t-shirt that accented the physique he'd developed over a summer of working out. He said he "didn't want to get on a megaphone and start announcing to people." Like some other Matthew Shepard Scholars, "the response that I got from a lot of girls was that they kind of knew." Perhaps they had read the hints before the tight t-shirt and workout regimen.

At school, Steve had the benefit of an atmosphere that was free of harassment, comments, or the negative responses common in the literature and that other Matthew Shepard Scholars experienced. After things took a turn toward the hostile at the Valentine's Dance, however, Steve found himself in front of a group of his peers in

journalism class. He was about to disclose his secret directly by reading the piece he'd written for the school paper.

And so I got in front of the other people on the newspaper and I tell you, when I was standing up there about to read this to them...it felt like I was coming out for the first time when I was about to reveal, to share my perspective with all these people that were real friends. Like, we were on the newspaper together. It was a very cliquy sort of thing.

At that moment, the once isolated Steve was officially, verbally coming out to a group of real friends.

When his piece appeared in the school paper, he knew he had done something of consequence. And he knew that, despite the way some of his peers made him feel threatened and humiliated at the dance, he had acceptance and respect from a whole lot of others. He remembered,

No gay couple had ever gone to the dance at (his school) before, ever. Nothing like this (harassment at the dance and his public response to it) had ever happened at (his school) before, as far as anybody knew...No one had ever done anything like that to anyone before...like based on the fact that they were gay.

But it had happened this time, and Steve was calling attention to it. And the response to his article demonstrated clearly that he had found acceptance and support.

He recalled, "I had so many teachers pass me and just be like, 'I can't believe anyone did this.'" And the acceptance and respect was not limited to teachers.

A couple of days went by and I got a letter from (a supportive student he'd mentioned in the article). She was someone I had mentioned in the article because while we were at the dance, in between people throwing stuff at me and in between us actually leaving, this girl that I didn't even know came up to me and she said, "I really respect you for your courage."

Steve's acceptance and affirmation continued and he ultimately collaborated with a local civil rights group and the school district to change the dance admission policy, as

well as the admission policy that communicated compulsory heterosexuality via it's couples admission price.

Their searches for acceptance before coming out were not always smooth. They were not always met with open arms and a wealth of information at the school library and support at every turn. Yet, most of the scholars say that their coming out experience was better than they might have expected.

Asked about his expectations for coming out, Aaron envisioned a scenario similar to the one his mother feared the night of the family meeting in the camper. Aaron said now the experience was better than he expected, but "but less than glamorous." Online accounts of violent and harassment filled coming out experiences had led Brad to think his might be that way. In reality he remembers that, "no one said anything or did anything. I was never threatened. Nothing was vandalized."

The same was true for Jackie, who described her experience as "better than I expected." Each student ultimately found a degree of acceptance they had needed and been searching for. Mark said that he, "thought it was going to be a lot harder than it was." Steve summarizes his experience succinctly. "I made it good."

The acceptance the scholars found manifested itself in many ways. For some, it was a disclosure that was well received or at least one that was not received with hostility. Cassie had support of her peers. Steve received a letter from a student and an email from a civil rights group. Aaron had new friends that he had not known before his "spurt in popularity." After Mark was assaulted and later attended school dances with his boyfriend, even the "thuggish kind of people would come up and be like, cool..." When

Joe's principal called the student body together to warn them that a religious protest group might be coming to graduation to picket Josh's Matthew Shepard Scholarship, classmates told him they'd be ready with paintball guns.

Once aware of the acceptance that was out there for them, their lives took off. The energy and affirmation they found when disclosure went well moved them to tackle new challenges. They turned away from their isolated pasts and eagerly embraced new challenges, from battling resistant school administrators, to handling harassment and intolerance, to establishing new groups to create more positive, welcoming school environments.

Life After Coming Out: Staying Out, Standing Out

A number of scholars have offered models and theories of homosexual identity formation (see, for example, Coleman, 1982; Lee, 1977; Ponce, 1978). These various models argue for differing numbers of phases through which all gays and lesbians pass en route to formation of a homosexual identity. Cass (1979, 1984) and Troiden (1989) offer the two most-cited models. Troiden's 1989 work expands upon earlier models offered by Cass (1979, 1984), Plummer (1975), and Ponce (1978).

The first stage in Troiden's model is sensitization, which occurs before puberty. In this stage, individuals assume they are heterosexual, but may not think about sexuality at all. As time goes by, however, they gain social experiences that will later help them to characterize themselves differently from many around them. Over time, they may increasingly feel that they are somehow different, such as enjoying play experiences that are more typically associated with the other gender.

Troiden's second stage is identity confusion. Stage two is characterized by the onset of feelings that one might be homosexual, which typically runs contrary to the self-images individuals have held. This is a period of active questioning, confusion, and turmoil and is generally the period in which the first same-sex attractions may be recognized. Individuals in stage two typically adopt a number of coping strategies: (a) denial; (b) repair; (c) avoidance; (d) redefinition; and (e) acceptance.

The first coping strategy is denial. Individuals using denial typically focus on eliminating any feelings or activities that might be associated with homosexuality (see Goode, 1984; Troiden, 1977). Repair is Troiden's second coping strategy. Repair often involves professional assistance or counseling as a way to eliminate or replace homosexual feelings (see Humphreys, 1972).

Avoidance is the third coping strategy identified. Individuals using avoidance typically recognize their thoughts and feelings as homosexual but also as unacceptable and something to be avoided. As a result, a number of strategies may be used, such as avoiding information about homosexuality, increasing one's focus on heterosexual dating and activity, and escapism through drugs or substances (see Cass, 1979).

Troiden's third stage, "identity assumption," is characterized by,

...self-definition as homosexual, identity tolerance and acceptance, regular association with other homosexuals, sexual experimentation and exploration of the homosexual subculture (p.59).

In the fourth and final stage of Troiden's model, termed commitment, individuals arrive at a point at which they are comfortable with themselves. "The main characteristics of the commitment stage are self-acceptance and comfort with the homosexual identity

and role” (p.63). This stage is also characterized by increased happiness after gays and lesbians have (sometimes finally) defined themselves as homosexual as well as a change in the ways they try to manage stigma (see Coleman, 1982, Troiden, 1979).

The commitment stage is perhaps best illustrated in the literature by work by Bell and Weinberg (1978). Their findings indicate that an overwhelming majority of gays and lesbians at this stage would choose to remain gay or lesbian, even if offered a pill that would make them heterosexual. A full 95% of lesbians and 86% of gays said they would decline the pill. More than two thirds of both gays and lesbians indicated they had little or no regret about their sexual orientation.

Coming out was the major turning point in each of the students’ lives. This did not mean that the difficulty of being homosexual in a largely homophobic society was no longer present. Even though they had come out and found some level of acceptance from others, they continued to face challenges, hostility, and harassment. For some, the harassment intensified. The key difference, however, was that the students were better able to handle the challenges before them. They were also better able to define themselves—better able to start becoming the people they wanted to be.

The ability to handle the challenges and define themselves in terms of their own aspirations initiated an upward cycle in their lives—one that eventually led them to applying for and earning a Matthew Shepard Scholarship. The Scholarship solidified their transformation. As Rich, the scholarship founder, described the emancipatory goals of the scholarship,

I wanted to reach kids and give them some hope...but I also wanted to recognize the kids that were out. I also wanted to say to those who don’t like it in the closet

that aren't proud and don't feel safe to come out until they get to college or a little bit later, or an awful lot later. I wanted to say, you know, "If you had the courage to come out...it would help you, it would make life a lot easier."

With this background in place, I turn our attention to the marked change in the students' lives after coming out and gaining the acceptance they needed. As a result of this transformation, the students' lives changed in two notable ways. First, they were better able to stand up for themselves when faced with harassment or hostility. For some, this meant directly confronting their peers. In other cases, the students worked through established channels to report the offenders and push for changes in their schools. They were no longer hiding, passing, or tolerating harassment or gay-slurs. Second, and often as a result of their newfound confidence, they experienced different (and improved) relations with both peers and school personnel.

Peer Relations and Harassment

Aaron may have experienced the most hostility of any of the students, even before he came out. His life in school was one of being called queer, fag, and discounted at almost every turn. He's described how the harassment was "flooding all the time" and that he let it hit him "too hard."

As Aaron made connections with other gay and lesbian youth, the rumors and speculation grew. When he was seen hanging around with a gay student who had graduated the year before, hostile peers seized on the opportunity to harass him. "Oh, (Aaron's) hanging around with *him*, they're screwing each other. I was immediately labeled as a queer and fag by many peers for this."

After his mother became suspicious enough to warrant a discussion, Aaron eventually came out to his brother and her. He had battled depression, weight loss, scorn from peers, and non-stop rumors about his sexual orientation. But when he was finally out, he didn't want to hide it. He remembers how it felt.

I don't have to hide it and I'm not ashamed. I'm going to do whatever I want with my hands, I'm going to walk how I walk and I'm going to wear what I want to wear. And I'm going to say what I want to say and laugh how I want to laugh.

He was now free to be himself, and it felt good. In addition, Aaron found himself more popular with some students. Some of his peers, particularly the girls, "were just super, super friendly."

He still experienced plenty of harassment and vilification from peers, but he was more able to deal with it. Sadly, Aaron recalls that teachers often failed to address anti-gay slurs and harassing comments in class if they heard them. The difference was that Aaron was now empowered to take things into his own hands and defend himself. He could respond.

...I'd always be like, "Excuse me, do you mean stupid or are you calling me stupid? Is my lifestyle stupid to you, because that's offensive to me? Did you know that in the 14th century, they would start a fire and burn all the homosexuals at the stake and that is where the word fag comes from? Think before you use the word next time."

Aaron's response seems to have been effective. (After his words) "They'd sit there and be dumbfounded."

The same empowering effect applies to Aaron's situation after Bob, the 43 year-old man, took advantage of him. After he realized what had taken place, Aaron filed a complaint with the county sheriff and enlisted the support of Lambda Legal, a national

organization that addresses gay civil rights issues. These experiences, the harassment he encountered at work, along with his interest in debate make Aaron's interest in law no surprise.

Jackie never experienced physical harassment or assault as a result of her sexual orientation. And she became skilled at reading the prevailing atmosphere of compulsory heterosexuality at her school as well as how to successfully pass in it. When she came out, the feelings of liberation, empowerment, and energy were a refreshing change. She recalls, "I (read) a lot of books for fun finally...like liberated. I could go out and learn everything. I could go out and be in the community. I wanted to learn what I could do."

She was also primed and ready for the discussion about sexual orientation, a topic that had long been avoided in her school. When she won a Matthew Shepard Scholarship, she was primed and ready for the discussion. She recalls,

I guess I changed their minds about this. And, I found out I had so many other allies in the classroom who stood up against these other people and said, you know, "It's something she's earned."

Steve may have been lulled into somewhat of a false sense of security due to his initially smooth experience after coming out at school. Despite the coming out horror stories he had read, his situation had been quite different. "I never got shoved up against a locker. I never heard 'fag' mumbled under anyone's breath when I was walking down the hallway." When things turned ugly for Steve and his same sex date at the school Valentine's Dance, he was "completely blown away."

Pop bottles, keys, and a host of other items were thrown across the darkness at Steve and his date. Others intentionally bumped into them and incorporated all sorts of

hostile gestures into their dancing. Of course, Steve never wanted a situation like this. But, like Aaron, he was now empowered and able to respond to it. And respond he did. (For a fascinating personal account of coming out and attending prom with a same sex date, see Fricke, 1981; for the lawsuit for the right to attend prom, see *Fricke v. Lynch*, 1980.)

Steve's first stop was the principal's office, to inform him of what had taken place. Soon after, he began putting his thoughts down on paper. His manuscript wound up as a key feature of the school newspaper and attracted the attention of a local/regional civil rights group, as well as the school board. It also earned him the respect of many peers.

The end result of the situation is notable. For one, Steve took his issue all the way to the school district's administrator in charge of equity. As a result, the school district eliminated what Steve called the "heterosexual assumptions of what constitutes a couple" for admission to dances. Admission today stands at \$4 for everyone. Dances are also supervised by more chaperones. Finally, he exposed a hostile side of his high school that many people had not seen before and were determined not to see again. "Maybe, just maybe, they actually respected me a little bit more." He was not afraid; he was empowered. He "had this bad ass attitude...just try (to harass me)...And watch what I do to you."

David was also once content to disappear. His escape was books and homework. At least nine times, suicide looked like another escape route. After a long journey, however, he came out. Like the others, when his disclosures were well received, he

gained energy, confidence, and the ability to advocate for himself. He remembers, “...with each person I told, it was...this huge adrenalin rush...And every time, it was a positive reaction.”

David’s schedule as a senior was filled with extra-curricular activities and, a lot of friends.

...I joined the cheerleading squad. I was involved in several different clubs...like there was this huge difference between my freshman year and my senior year. I was popular. I would say I was pretty popular in the high school in my senior year. I had the group that would kind of harass me, but for the most part, like, I had a lot of friends.

When I asked him what the difference was, he answered, “I think it was just that I was comfortable with myself and, you know, that I talked to people. I wasn’t the anti-social...afraid to say-anything to anybody about anything (kid anymore).

He was clearly no longer afraid that “if they knew who I was, they wouldn’t want to be with me.” As an out, empowered, confident senior in high school and a Matthew Shepard Scholar, David says he was “more comfortable with myself...And, it’s ok if not everyone likes me.”

When he was assaulted or harassed, he now had the will to respond. He reported harassment and assault to school administrators and, when necessary, to police. He said that his reports of harassment were always handled “very professionally,” even though the district does not specifically include sexual orientation in its anti-harassment policy.

...Every time someone would call me a derogatory name...they would have a detention or an in-school suspension...So, people stopped calling me names because they knew that I wasn’t going to just let them do that...I mean I’ve heard stories where other people’s schools didn’t react that way. But, yeah, I was very happy with the way the school reacted.

Improved Relationships

Aaron's powerful and direct response to the harassment he endured was needed because some teachers didn't address gay slurs and homophobic comments. He remembered that a good deal of the harassment directed at him occurred in the hallways when teachers were rarely present. This is well reflected in the aptly titled report by Human Rights Watch (2001), *Hatred in the Hallways* (see also, for example, Friend, 1991; O'Connor, 1995; Walling, 1994).

Despite some teachers overlooking or sidestepping these comments, Aaron gave his teachers high praise for their direct work with him. In fact, he said, "They were all awesome" and that they were "instrumental in helping my image and stuff." And he said they began to draw on his love for debate by asking his opinion on a host of issues. More importantly, they asked if he was ok.

One such teacher was in charge of speech and debate. Aaron said she successfully walked the tightrope of being both a friend and respected teacher. Openness and accessibility were strengths. Aaron recalled how the two would "talk about everything...how she believed in God and church and how God had gotten her through everything."

Steve also gave his teachers and administrators high marks. When he took his concerns to the central office administrator in charge of equity, she showed her "incredible sense of justice" and worked hard to make things right. Faculty who let him know they were shocked and dismayed by what had happened at the Valentine's Dance

encouraged him. He was also bolstered by the fact that the journalism teacher put the Matthew Shepard Scholarship brochure in his hands and encouraged him to apply.

Jackie was ready when a school-sponsored group produced t-shirts with a gay slur hidden in a foreign language. She informed the principal, who quickly moved to squelch the shirts. Others, however, were not as supportive and Jackie drew the ire of some parents and even a central office administrator for stirring the pot. Jackie was unfazed. She says, simply, that the entire incident was unfortunate and could have been avoided if the shirts had never been produced.

By coming out and receiving a Matthew Shepard Scholarship, Jackie put a human face on an issue that teachers typically avoided or made fun of before. In addition to being willing to blow the whistle when she saw something wrong, Jackie was willing to stand up and disseminate information. She was the key player in the Educator Awareness Workshops at her school, which came to be when the school realized the need for teachers to have more information on sexual orientation.

Previously, “We’re not going to go there” might have been a typical response from some teachers when sexual orientation came up in class. In other classrooms, it was not unusual for some teachers to make an anti-gay joke or slur themselves, often to the delight of an entire classroom of students. While she knows she did not change everyone’s mind, she’s certain that teachers in her school have a greater awareness than before.

Jackie has taken her mature attitude and willingness to educate to a larger stage. She participated in a public forum in her hometown to discuss gay and lesbian student

issues. At first, she was nervous, given her own assessment of her community as being “not openly homophobic” but “not really open to change.” She took heart in seeing a lot of friendly, familiar faces as well as those who were not overtly supportive, but were at least willing to listen. “It was really surprising and inspiring,” she remembered.

Her words and actions were no longer those of a meek high school girl, blending skillfully into the crowd. They are the actions of a thoughtful, mature, empowered student who was willing to step forward.

Cassie also never endured physical violence, but she faced plenty of verbal harassment and hostility as she worked through the channels at her school to establish a GSA. When she was at first turned down by a principal who denied the presence of gays in the building, she pressed on. She eventually enlisted the informal assistance of an attorney experienced in school law who helped the principal have a change of heart. Cassie enjoyed the victory at the time, but a larger struggle lay around the corner.

When her name was unexpectedly announced over the school intercom as the winner of a local newspaper’s activism award, the harassment increased. One student threatened to “start the anti-Gay KKK” in response to the fledgling GSA. Cassie used her new confidence and assertiveness to address intolerance and ignorance. As a senior, the once isolated girl who felt more comfortable out of school than in had a new attitude. “I don’t care if I piss people off now.” She was no longer content to fade into the background. She reflected that it was worth it. “I think I made a lot of positive changes in the school district.”

One of the positive changes has to be awareness among school staff. Other gay, lesbian, and questioning students began to approach Cassie to thank her for her courage. Certainly the principal could no longer claim (or wish) that “there’s no gay students in this school.” She had shattered that illusion.

As was the case for other scholarship winners, Cassie’s situation put a human face on the issue of sexual orientation. Cassie’s presence and new attitude also made for changes in the teachers’ level of awareness. She remembered, “The staff was starting to ask me questions.” To her surprise, the questions were about how they could prevent their students from making inappropriate gay slurs. Their candor took her by surprise. Her blunt response may have taken them by surprise, as well. “I’m like, ‘Well, how do you think?’ You know, ‘You just...explain it to them.’”

Like Jackie, David recalled one teacher making inappropriate comments related to sexual orientation. It was, “before I ever came out (at) school.” (The teacher said) things that were questionable as far as how professional (the statements were)...like homophobic jokes.” These comments stung as a closeted freshman, but David moved on and never had another class with that teacher.

He does cite other teachers as being “really supportive,” particularly his band director. He recalled,

Like during one of my band lessons one morning, we didn’t actually play or do anything. We just sat there, and talked, you know. He just kind of gave me his reassurance that...if you need someone to talk to, if people were bothering me, that he was there for me, and that he was...accepting...I never had any teachers that were negative.

Mark endured a physical assault at school, but praises administrators for acting quickly and effectively in response. "I knew they cared about me personally," he says. When he recovered from his sudden illness, he used the safety and empowerment he felt to start a diversity group at school to tackle issues that weren't being addressed. Like the other scholars, he had put a human face on an issue that was often ignored. And he used that humanity to further the discussion and awareness.

CHAPTER 4

STANDING OUT: THE MATTHEW SHEPARD SCHOLARSHIP

The importance of receiving a Matthew Shepard Scholarship to the students' lives cannot be overstated. For some, the scholarship marked a milestone in their lives that might have been unimaginable a few years prior. For others, it was a long-time goal attained. For all, it was an essential springboard by which the students further enhanced their lives and focused on the future. It helped define who they are and where they want to go. It also clarified their beliefs about the place(s) in society where they hope gays and lesbians will go.

It is clear that the students viewed the scholarship as more than a monetary award. The scholars readily identified the difference it has made in their lives. First, it has made a clear financial impact. Several scholars noted that it has freed them from financial burdens that would otherwise be major concerns. Brad noted that it has allowed him focus more on his studies and he "didn't have to worry about going into massive debt. I could save money for a work abroad program, which I got to do."

But the students are quick to note that the scholarship is about more than money. Joe explained "there's more to it than that." Cassie viewed her involvement in the scholarship is part of a legacy. She takes the fact that Matthew Shepard's name is on the scholarship seriously. "In memory of him, to have this opportunity, its just amazing." The scholars explained how that opportunity includes responsibilities.

The feeling of responsibility was not lost on Brad, who says, "...there's a big responsibility for me to keep my grades up and remain active. It's not just in a gay setting, it's for me to remain active in the community." Likewise, Jackie described an obligation to be involved in the community and make sure that the scholarship committee's confidence in her is deserved. "I really feel that, in a sense, I owe it to them."

Brad also noted a responsibility to protect the scholarship and the money behind it from exploitation. He said he's on guard for transparent attempts by other groups to access the money behind the award. The notoriety that comes with being identified as a Matthew Shepard Scholar is something Cassie mentioned, as well. The scholars try to be aware of others' expectations that the Matthew Shepard Scholars will take leadership roles in everything. They guard against spreading themselves too thin.

Aaron explained his aspirations to a career in law, partly because he wants to address the kind of harassment he endured working in fast food. He made note of the supportive connections he's made across generations. "I know whenever I need a recommendation letter for law school or a law firm all I have to do is call Rich and (other scholarship supporters)." Mark remembered how thrilled he was when he found out he had been selected as a scholar. He had known a 2000 Matthew Shepard Scholar and had set his sights on the award. As excited as he was to have been chosen, he said that the scholarship started opening doors that he didn't even know were there.

Aaron also recalled an immediate effect of the scholarship. Prior to being selected as a Matthew Shepard Scholar, his college plans were up in the air. College applications

were sitting idly on his desk. When he was chosen, things changed. I asked him if I him understood correctly that winning the scholarship meant he felt empowered. He answered,

Probably. Probably in large part. I was just like, I don't have to take this shit (harassment). I had to take this shit in the fall. I felt like...I'm being who I am and getting through this all and dealing with this...I'm behind in my school work...I need to catch up.

Cassie concurred, noting that the scholarship has elevated her confidence and also prepared her for the future. "It's not going to stop after college."

The scholarship has also broadened the students' horizons and aspirations. Rich, the scholarship founder, explained,

(So we) brought the kids out of their hometown...these kids are nervous, they are in the Des Moines Club with a beautiful nighttime view of the state capital, they're amidst all these adults...you know you get all these stereotype images in their heads...they're surprised...the plan was to have people say, "Oh yeah, I could see my kid be somebody like this, here's a doctor, here's a lawyer, here's a you know, totally respectable adult." And the parents get images they can take home and work on.

That vision seems to have taken hold. In Steve's eyes, the scholarship, "gives an amazing example of a gay person." For David, it was the first real connection with another gay person he'd had.

The students' descriptions of what the scholarship has done and what it means to them are inspiring. They are also very much in line with what Rich and scholarship officials envisioned when establishing the scholarship in 2000. The students' comments are evidence of how the scholarship has met its stated goals and how it has helped the students to define themselves as people. It has given them a sense of honor,

responsibility, and exposure positive, successful role models, some of whom happen to be gay or lesbian.

Closer interpretation of their comments also reveals how the scholarship has helped the students begin to consider the role gays and lesbians can and should play in society. It has also helped them define what they view as the best ways to get there.

Standing Out: Looking to the Future and How to Get There

Today, all of the students are in college. Some are nearing graduation while others have just completed their first year. But all of them spoke with an eye toward the future. They described the places they hope gays and lesbians will fit in society as well as the careers they envision for themselves. Through their experiences and especially receiving the Matthew Shepard Scholarship, the students have formulated clear visions for the future.

They related their aspirations to become real estate developers, child psychologists, sociologists, and counselors. They described the possibility of developing a statewide news network and careers as linguists. They know that the fully assimilated place they hope to see gays and lesbians occupy in the future will not be arrived at easily. They know the destination and are committed to arriving there in a certain manner-- through existing channels.

They explained how they viewed themselves as a part of a larger movement in which gays and lesbians become an integral part of mainstream society. Some of the students described a picture in which gays and lesbians might almost be invisible in society, but not due to the walls of forced or self-induced isolation. Rather, a number of

the scholars described a future in which gays and lesbians are fully assimilated into mainstream life in America.

Aaron, the student whose story was literally “flooding” with harassment, hopes to attend law school with the ultimate desire to “look out for the little guys who get crap from their employers,” such as when his complaints about harassment at work were met with, “Oh, you’re just a fucking queer. Shut the fuck up.”

Many people would be drawn to a legal career as a result of such treatment. Many others, however, would be drawn to a more aggressive, attention-grabbing way of challenging the status quo. As Aaron looks back at the negative aspects of his experience, he recalls his reasons for having the courage to pressure law enforcement to press charges against Bob, the predatory older man who exploited him sexually. He showed that he wants action and changes but is clearly committed to working through established channels, “so other people would not be having to go through what I have gone through.”

The desire for change through established channels can also be seen in Aaron’s continued contact with his high school. During an interview he says he remembers that he needs to place a call to the school superintendent regarding an upcoming conference for gay, lesbian, and questioning youth.

His thought interrupted, Aaron changed direction in our conversation, “...which reminds me, on Monday I have to call my high school and make sure they have signs and stuff about the conference over here on the 17th.” He didn’t think the signs would go up without his calls. But supportive faculty members back at school served as eyes for him,

and if the signs didn't go up, he'd call or email again. Aaron was not organizing a massive student walkout. He was working through the channels.

Likewise, Brad's commitment to activism and advocacy can be seen in his work on his campus toward establishing a gay fraternity. Prior to taking a leadership role in this project, he had been involved in the gay and lesbian student organization. He refocused his efforts outside of the campus organization because of the way he says some within the group tend to operate.

...they don't have the damn common sense to pick and choose their battles. They will take the most ludicrous, stupid arguments and make a huge deal out of it. And I think its just insulting, because when they do have a serious argument, no one pays attention... You can't stop a lecture and hand out condoms...you can't do that (and expect to gain support for your cause).

But, as Brad worked through established channels to form the university's first gay fraternity, people paid attention. They also paid them respect. Brad described appearing before the university body that governs fraternities.

...The best thing was that with us, there was no negative feedback...they don't say anything bad about us. Like, we even had people from other fraternities stand up and say, "These are the bravest people I've met; they deserve to be a part of this (Greek system)." And we (their application) were accepted in like 30 seconds. Again, we won an award just a few weeks ago at (a ceremony) for team and community development. We got a standing ovation. One of the few people ever to get a standing ovation.

Brad said emphatically that failing to carefully select one's battles and then fight them in the correct way is hurting the cause of education about gay and lesbian issues.

It's just embarrassing and I feel bad for the people who were arrested for being gay...And here they are, just throwing it way...I just can't comprehend that. It's too much. It's just too much petty stuff and not enough big picture stuff...It's like spitting on people's graves.

He pointed to the theatre as another means of communicating a message and moving issues forward. His characteristic sarcasm came through when he complained that, “you’re not going to learn anything with the *Christmas Carol* every other year. Instead, Brad advocated promoting,

really good, very well written plays. Some are gay, some aren’t, that’s fine. They go with relevant issues in fun, interesting, new ways, and they’re perfect for community theatres...I want to do stuff like that. I don’t want to sit at home and do nothing.

Or hurt the cause by handing out condoms in English lectures.

Steve agreed and argued that the best way to focus on real issues doesn’t include outrageous, attention-getting stunts. He too, advocated picking one’s battles wisely and working through appropriate means to move the cause forward. He explains,

I’m not a parader. I don’t believe in embracing stereotypes to make a political statement. I’m used to watching people walk around without shirts on, with body paint and you know, dressing up...I don’t think that’s the best way to any sort of understanding...I mean people get pretty extravagant and they always end up looking pretty silly, because (they’re confirming) the exact stereotypes that people are trying to defeat...it doesn’t show people that you can be an upstanding, professional, and for lack of a better term, “normal” member of the community and, you know, be openly gay.

Jackie’s thoughts ran parallel. A loud, boisterous, perhaps shocking approach is not, in her mind, the best way to gain understanding and support of her cause. She explained, “...it’s not everyone’s battle, of course...I respect those people more for not being disrespectful about it—the disagreement.” She continued, explaining that “the we’re here, we’re queer, you have to accept it” approach is probably not the best way to win people over. She believed her friend who takes this aggressive approach “is not always necessary. And I think it’s causing him more problems than it’s actually helping.”

Mark echoed the call for a substantive focus and discussion on big picture issues. While he recalled no major regrets from his high school experience, he identified the need for teacher faculty education and identified a key a role for students in that process. After graduation, he returned to school and immediately realized that the size of new office cubicles was a big topic of discussion around the water cooler.

If he had it to do over again, Mark said he probably would have pushed for establishment of the GSA, which in turn could have served to provide some much needed education for faculty members. But, he said he sees both sides of this issue, and explained,

...I think for the (gay and lesbian) students out there who need somebody to be there for them...I think there are people out there who need to be there for them, on their side...if you decide to be a teacher, or if you want to be a person who is in the school, then you need to be there for everybody.

At the same time, he said he's aware of the difficult situation in which gay and lesbian-friendly teachers can find themselves.

Well, I think that teachers and administrators and counselors are afraid to, not all of them, but a fair majority of them, are afraid to take a side and stand up for (gay and lesbian) issues, because they're uncertain about how people are going to feel about them. I mean, even though they're straight, they're afraid that, you know, if they seem too positive about it...people may wonder about them...It's not a politically smart decision.

For her part, Jackie agreed with the need for a focus on big picture issues and education for the teachers. The Educator Awareness Workshops fit the bill. She said she's realistic enough to know that

...there were a few teachers who would like to claim that there still was not a problem that needed to be addressed and simply allowed for the discrimination to continue. As well as the few other teachers who would rather pretend that

homosexuals do not really go to that school. There were far more teachers that were grateful for our workshop.

She remembered the heated classroom debates her scholarship generated during high school. She appreciated the fact that there was less hostility than she thought there might be and plenty of students who were at least willing to listen. The same was true when she spoke at the public forum in her hometown. She recalled, “some of these people were there to defend the cause and the ones who weren’t supportive necessarily were willing to hear our stories.”

Cassie’s view fit with the other scholars, as well. After a good deal of contemplation and discussion with her peers outside of school, she decided to pursue establishing a GSA. She and her couple of friends didn’t storm onto the scene and make loud, outrageous, unreasonable demands for special treatment. Rather, they worked through the channels to exercise the same rights that are afforded to her under the Equal Access Act (see Alexander & Alexander, 2001).

When the principal met her efforts with resistance, denial, and excuses, she continued working through the established channels, even though she was taken aback by the chilly response. She remembered, “I thought we were...going about it in the right way because we weren’t being too up front (confrontational) about things.”

She was not to be deterred, however, and enlisted the informal assistance of an attorney well familiar with school law. Permission to start the group was granted, though begrudgingly. Once the GSA was established, she continued pushing forward for the positive changes she felt were needed in her school district.

And there seems to be no reason to expect that she will stop.

We're going to have battles the rest of our lives. But now (through the scholarship) we have this...true bond with all these people. It's not going to stop when we graduate from college. I mean for a long time.

Conclusion: Lessons Learned

The stories of these eight gay and lesbian students who came out and were ultimately selected as Matthew Shepard Scholarship winners clearly demonstrates that they have overcome significant obstacles and are successful. The ways in which they have moved through their experiences beg the question, "What can be learned from both their struggles and successes?"

As noted, the limited existing literature paints a bleak and troubling picture for gay and lesbian youth, full of verbal and physical harassment, exploitation, substance abuse, depression and suicidal ideation, and risks of alienation from family and friends. These eight students have poignant, firsthand experiences with many of these challenges. And yet, they have risen above them. They have succeeded where others have not.

Do the students' experiences mean that all other gay and lesbian students should, regardless of their individual circumstances and settings, come out and expect acceptance and tolerance, let alone a college scholarship? Certainly not. Sadly, there are countless situations in which gay, lesbian, or questioning students are still not safe to come out, or even to explore their questions. The very existence of a scholarship bearing the name of Matthew Shepard is evidence of the very real dangers that exist in many settings.

The students' stories reveal that, while these dangers are real and must be addressed, the prospects for gay and lesbian youth are not always as bad as we may be

led to believe. The possibility of more positive outcomes exists, given the right circumstances. To be sure, their problems and challenges did not disappear when the students summoned the courage to come out. The verbal slurs occurred and the punches still hurt. But it placed students on a road that we all must travel—the road to acceptance—from peers, family, God, school, and ourselves. Some of the students found it more easily and quickly than others. But it shows that we are all, ultimately, seeking the same things.

Their stories add to the limited body of knowledge that seeks to understand and describe the experiences of gay and lesbian youth. Their stories move beyond what often appears to be skewed survey data and puts a human face on real struggles and real triumphs at the school down the street. Their experiences also raise provocative questions for the future and call additional inquiry. For example, something or some things enabled these students to have experiences that were, in many ways, different from many of the tragic accounts that are common in the literature. What accounts for those differences?

Certainly the students' personalities and individuality are factors. While each family dealt with the students' sexual orientation differently, family dynamics are clearly important. Notably, the students gave their teachers and administrators generally high marks for responding to their needs, though they were far from perfect. The students still often found themselves standing up against anti-gay comments when adults did not. Religious faith was and is central to a number of them, but not all found acceptance and understanding in their churches. Family and friends, of course, are essential as well, but some relationships were irreparably strained. Perhaps Iowa is somehow more gentle,

subtle, or tolerant than some other places. Yet, none of these factors taken individually can fully explain why the students' experiences played out the way they did.

Fortunately for these eight students, a combination of factors seems to have coalesced to place them in a position to overcome the adversity that so often comes with being gay or lesbian. They were able to find acceptance and support, along with a prestigious scholarship. Some adults showed their support. The students seemed to be especially aware of how to work within the system to bring about change. Again, however, these do not fully explain why things happened as they did.

The lack of simple answers highlights the need for additional inquiry and a deeper understanding of these nuances. Educators, parents, and political leaders can all increase their understanding of gay and lesbian students' needs, but must first summon the courage to ask the questions and invite the discussion. They must acknowledge the existence of these students. Will they?

As I reflected on my work with this project, I realized that it really began more than five years ago. When I first encountered this issue, I was still a high school principal, dreading the prospect of having an openly gay student in our small, rural high school. I'm not proud of the fact that, in a half-serious, knee-jerk reaction, I suggested that the guidance counselor try to talk Pete out of coming to prom with his boyfriend. But, faced with a completely unexpected issue for which I had virtually no knowledge or preparation, I reacted cautiously and feared the worst. Reflecting, researching, and writing on the subject has also given me a number of insights and realizations. It has

since reminded me that there are many more educators, parents, and leaders who are unsure of what to do when faced with this challenge.

First, I've learned just how powerful and pervasive stereotypes, homophobia, and uncertainty can be. This struck me one day as I was reading a passage from Reid's *The Best Little Boy in the World* (1973). I later learned that John Reid is actually a pen name for Andrew Tobias, who was not able to sign his own name to his account of his sexual orientation because of his fears and apprehension.

As I read Tobias' personal account, I was surprised to read his description of the efforts he made to hide his sexual orientation. He remembered, "No one would ever catch me at the 'Ho' drawer of the New York Public Library card catalog" (p.40). I immediately identified with this feeling, though I didn't really want to admit it. As I began this project, I sometimes caught myself wondering if anyone in the university library was wondering why I spent so much time in the HQ 75 section of the stacks reading books about homosexuality. Did I peak the student librarian's curiosity when I lugged 15 books onto the checkout counter? Did she see my wedding ring? Are these feelings the product of a culture that is obsessed with a rigid definition of what constitutes "proper" gender roles? Are these questions evidence of how pervasive homophobia can be in our society?

The questions may be evidence of how Mark had it right when he explained the challenge for teachers being supportive of gay and lesbian students. He explained how he empathized with teachers who may be called into question because, "if they seem too

positive about (supporting gay and lesbian students)...people might wonder about them. It's not a politically smart decision."

Sometimes I encountered this in other people's reaction to my dissertation topic. I was encouraged that many people seemed genuinely interested and wanted to talk about it, and perhaps even read it. Many others, however, were clearly at a loss for what to say next. I wondered if they would have asked more questions about a quantitative study of something "safer." Like my questions above, I sometimes wondered if their curious but uncomfortable eyes meant that they wondered how I became interested in *that*.

At the risk of sounding trite, I've also been reminded of how one person, can in fact, make a difference. Rich's vision for the scholarship was born of his experiences as a child, and he sought to create cross-generational connections between students and adults, generate a more open dialog about gay and lesbian issues in the state, and to "recognize these great kids." Their stories reveal that, without a doubt, this is taking place.

I've learned that these students don't seek special rights or privileges. They do not seek to elevate their status by lowering someone else's. They want the same things sought by everyone else—acceptance, as well as an opportunity to succeed in and perhaps even *enjoy* school and life. They, like everyone around them, have fears, dreams, and aspirations. And they want to reach them in mainstream ways. They are not interested in building gay and lesbian fortresses. As Steve said, "We want to get to a point where everybody's ok with everybody."

I've learned that we can, in fact, develop a useful and productive understanding of each other. As a straight, married, parent and former high school principal and coach, I suppose I don't fit the profile of someone who might be researching the lives of gay and lesbian high school students. As principal, I had never given the sexual orientation of my students a thought. I was too concerned with countless other issues in the day-to-day functioning of a high school. However, when unanticipated events (namely Pete) pulled me to learn about these students' experiences, I began asking questions. And, to the extent that one can ever understand another's reality, I have tried. I believe the same would be true for anyone honestly willing to ask, listen, and learn. But we've got to start the discussion.

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APPENDIX

METHODOLOGY

Following receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board at UNI, I contacted Rich and asked if we could get together to discuss the project. We met in the fall of 2004 at a Village Inn restaurant. There, we discussed my questions and goals of the research. Our conversation proceeded quickly due to the fact that we already knew each other.

Despite some of the experience and contacts I had, Rich's support of my project was essential and valuable, especially in gaining access to the scholars. Even though the Matthew Shepard Scholars are publicly known and identified in print and media, Rich thought it best if my invitation to scholars to participate came with a message from him, indicating that he was supportive of the project. He also wanted to know which scholars were participating. Thus, out of that meeting came a key offer of assistance and access to the Scholars, as well as the "blessing" of the scholarship founder.

Following that meeting, I began to receive email messages from a number of the Matthew Shepard Scholars, indicating their desire to participate in the project. All told, I interviewed eight Scholars over a seven-month period. I used guided in-depth questions to allow the Scholars to relate their experiences in their own words. While I had a list of specific questions to guide our discussions, our conversations were typically free-flowing conversations initiated by my question, "Tell me about growing up." The interviews took place in locations selected by the participants, usually coffee shops or restaurants near their university campuses. Interviews were audio taped and transcribed.

Following transcription, I used triangulation (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001) as a means of analyzing the data from the interviews with members of my dissertation committee. As I worked through the transcripts and discussed the process with my committee members, I elected not to use formal coding, but to instead employ a narrative analysis. Silverman (2000) offers narrative analysis as a valid means for understanding participant's categories.

During this process, my committee members and I spent considerable time discussing the form that the dissertation might best take. The group's consensus was that the school experiences of the Scholars would be best understood by crafting them into eight separate narratives, detailing the experiences they revealed and described in the interview process. As I pored over the transcripts, assembled the interviews into eight stories, drawing heavily on the students' own words and descriptions of events. In all cases, pseudonyms for students were used in an effort to ensure anonymity, despite the fact that the Scholars have been previously publicly identified. After the narratives were written, I sent them electronically to the Scholars for member checking (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001; Janesick, 2000). Corrections and clarifications were made when the participants indicated that such was needed.

Interview Questions for Scholarship Winners
 School Experiences of Matthew Shepard Scholarship Winners
 Nick Pace

- Describe your experience growing up...what kind of school/community did you attend?
- How would you classify it? (urban/rural/suburban/parochial/public/private...)
- Were you involved in extracurricular activities?
- What were your most enjoyable or successful academic areas?
- At what point in your life did you decide that you were gay/lesbian?
- How did you arrive at that determination?
- Can you describe your coming out experience? What led you to decide to come out? When? Why?
- What kinds of reactions did you expect from teachers/administrators/classmates?
- Were your expectations realized?
- Describe the experience as it relates to school. Was your sexual orientation “big news?”
- Did your sexual orientation have an impact on your:
 - Academic performance
 - Extracurricular involvement
 - Social opportunities
 - Relationships with teachers, administrators, coaches, sponsors
 - Overall feelings toward school and educational opportunities
- Did anything or anyone at school surprise you?
- Did anything at school disappoint you?
- Many gay and lesbian students report threats, violence, intimidation, and discrimination at school based on their sexual orientation. Describe your experience.
- Do you have advice for teachers and administrators?
- Do you have advice for other gay or lesbian high school students?
- Do you have advice for other high school students?

These questions are intended as a guide to facilitate discussion. As interviews progress, other questions will be used to facilitate discussion and a clear picture of the students' experiences.