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Focus on Activism

Parents' Pride

Victoria Clarke in conversation with Jenny Broughton

Jenny Broughton is the mother of a lesbian daughter and National Coordinator of Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gay Men (FFLAG). FFLAG is a registered charity run by parents of lesbian, gay and bisexual children, which seeks to promote the well-being of lesbians, gay men and bisexuals, and their families and friends. FFLAG is the umbrella organisation for more than 30 local groups that provide support (through confidential help lines and parents' groups), education and information, and work on issues of equality for lesbians, gay men and bisexuals. I met Jenny in August 2004 in her home in Exeter when she very generously took a couple of hours out of her busy schedule to talk to me about the work of FFLAG and her involvement in the organisation. I transcribed our 90 minute conversation and what follows is an edited version that Jenny has read and commented on. [Victoria Clarke]

Background on FFLAG

VC: Can you tell me about how FFLAG got started?

JB: FFLAG was set up in 1993 as an umbrella organisation for the help lines and support groups that were running in various parts of the country, including the help line I was running for parents in the South West. The first help lines and support groups were started in the 1960s. A woman called Rose Robertson, who is still our honorary president, did a radio broadcast – Woman's Hour on Radio 4 or something like that - talking about her gay son. Rose was amazed by how many parents were contacting her to say 'I did not know anybody else who was in this situation'. With two other women she set up help lines and then support groups for parents.

VC: When did FFLAG become a registered charity?

FFLAG did not become a registered charity until 2000 mainly because there was a feeling that being a registered charity would cramp our campaigning activities. Not that we have ever been really into chucking bombs from the public gallery of the House of Commons or anything like that! We got to a stage where the pressures on FFLAG and the work were growing, and we really needed to get funding. It is of course virtually impossible to get funding unless you are a registered charity. But FFLAG's objectives as a registered charity are very much what they have always been.

VC: What are FFLAG's objectives?

JB: The core work started off being support for families, and we always say families - we are there for everybody in the family including the lesbian, gay and bisexual person, and their friends. We produce two booklets *How do I tell my parents* (3rd ed. 2000) and *A Guide for Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays* (3rd ed. 2000). The information and education side of FFLAG's work has grown enormously because there is now a huge demand for information from all kinds of organisations. FFLAG also campaigns for equality, for justice, and for a society which is much more open to diversity, much more inclusive, and which respects the individual.

VC: Can you tell me a bit about your role in the organisation and what you do?

JB: There are at the moment six trustees and the trustees run the organisation, because we have no paid workers as yet, and no central office. As Chair of the trustees and the National Coordinator I have the responsibility for driving the organisation. The pro-active side of the work is networking, speaking at conferences, doing workshops and presentations, awareness raising and working with LGB organisations at local and national level on issues of equality.

Jenny's story

VC: How did you get involved in FFLAG?

JB: My daughter picked up a copy of *Spare Rib* I think and there was something in the magazine about the Manchester Parents Group and she said 'oh mum you ought to get in touch with this group, they're fantastic'. I thought it would be very interesting to meet the parents involved in the group, which I did, and they said 'there's no support for parents in your area of the country, would you run a help line?'

VC: Why did you get involved in FFLAG?

JB: I do not think it was ever for me an issue about having a lesbian daughter because by the time I had contacted the Manchester Parents' Group I was long past having any particular concerns about it. My initial reaction was to say all the wrong things that one could actually say. I made every mistake in the book. Which is quite useful to have done because I can actually listen to parents now and say to them 'I think you reacted so much better than I did' (laughs). I was not looking for FFLAG as a life line for myself but there are parents in FFLAG who did come through that route, who contacted FFLAG first for help for themselves and then two or three years later are back working to support other families, and that's brilliant.

Changes and cross-roads

VC: What changes have you witnessed during your involvement with FFLAG?

JB: Over the twelve or thirteen year period that I have been involved in the parents' movement, the age at which young people come out has changed dramatically. When I was first involved young people came out to their families from the age of eighteen through to their early twenties, and sometimes even later than that. Now it can be anything from thirteen, fourteen. The peak age in our experience is now around fifteen, sixteen, which of course brings up a whole different set of issues both for the young people and for their families. Because we're talking about what their life is like in school, whether they are out to their friends, whether school is a safe, supportive place for them to be or not, it's sadly not in a lot of instances. So, the whole issue of homophobic bullying has become a huge part of our work.

There are also a growing number of parents who actually ring and say 'look my son has or daughter has come out and I do not have a problem with this, what I have a problem with is the way that society treats my son or daughter. Can you send me some information? What can I do to help? What can I do to support?' There are a lot more positive reactions from parents, and there is a lot less of what I call the 'poor me syndrome', 'what am I going to say to the neighbours, how can I tell the grandparents, it will kill them'.

VC: It sounds like there are lots of demands being placed on FFLAG.

JB: FFLAG as an organisation is very much at a crossroads now and we cannot any longer fulfil all the roles that people ask us to do - from consultations at the Department of Trade and Industry on the latest piece of equality legislation to packing up two hundred booklets and sending them off to the Wirral. It has become too big to be run as a purely voluntary organisation. This is great, and is a tribute to everyone who works within FFLAG, and to the respect that FFLAG is held in but it is time for FFLAG to move forward. What is most important to us is the respect of the LGB community, because who else are we doing it for? We are not doing it in order to hold other parents' hands and say 'there, there, never mind, it cannot be helped you have a lesbian daughter or a gay son, it will all be alright, sometime over the rainbow'.

Parents' reactions to a son or daughter coming out

VC: How do you make sense of some parents' reaction to finding out that their child is LGBT?

JB: We grow up in this heterosexist society that lays down norms and most people just chug along those track lines without questioning anything very much, maybe seeing the odd headline in a tabloid, a few scurrilous words or seeing a stereotype on television. Then suddenly wham, bang, homosexuality is right there in the middle of their own family, in the closest relationship that anybody can ever have with another person, and that can come as a shock. I doubt that there are many parents, even if they say 'oh it's absolutely fine by me, no problem, no problem' who do not think 'would life not have been easier for them if they were not gay?' For many parents their child's sexuality is an unknown quantity, and it becomes 'the problem'. But that is not the problem - the problem may be that the son or daughter is actually in a relationship with someone who is treating them appallingly, and that has got absolutely nothing to do with the sexuality of that person.

VC: But everything gets read through that lens...

JB: But it gets read through that lens, yes, absolutely - because that is the prism through which some parents tend to see their lesbian, gay or bisexual child.

VC: How important is for young lesbians, gay men and bisexuals to have the support of their families?

JB: Certainly with the problems young people have to face in schools and the horrendous level of suicide, para-suicide and self-harm that goes on, the young people that come through it and cope with it are the young people who have support from their families. The ones who have gone under - because where else is there to go? - do not have that, either because they felt unable to talk to their family about it or because they have and they had a rejection.

Successes and disappointments

VC: What have been some of FFLAG's big successes over the last few years?

JB: Our 10th anniversary conference 'Making a Difference' was in October 2003 in Birmingham, and was hosted by Birmingham City Council, which was fantastic. To have our four patrons - Angela Mason OBE, Sir Ian McKellen, Michael Cashman MEP and Baroness Doreen Massey of Darwin - standing on the platform in Birmingham last October and talking about ten years of FFLAG and FFLAG's work was incredibly empowering for us. From that conference came the setting up of 'Education For All', with FFLAG, in partnership with Stonewall and LGBT Youth Scotland, working to challenge homophobic bullying and to help schools provide a safe learning environment for everyone within the school community.

VC: What about some of the other high points?

JB: Reactions from young people, from families. The kind of email where you have somebody saying 'I have been trying for years to get my mother to accept me for who I am and she never would, she would never talk about it, but I sent her your literature and she has talked to somebody in FFLAG, and we have a relationship again'. I think if we have done that for one family, for one mother and daughter, that is enough. The fact is we do it for families all over the country.

VC: What about some of your disappointments?

JB: I think the biggest disappointment is that so often we only have an opportunity to preach to the converted, and the people to whom we really need to talk to will not talk to us, will not open the door at all. The lobbying that we have done over the years - particularly in the House of Lords - we only ever got to meet face to face and talk to those peers who were actually supportive of a particular issue.

VC: What about some of your other disappointments?

JB: Well FFLAG is at the moment still totally dependent on donations, subscriptions to our quarterly newsletter, and sales of the booklets. There is an assumption that FFLAG must be funded – I am being funded for sitting there at the end of the phone, at all hours of the day and evening and Sundays and Saturdays. I suspect they cannot quite believe that people actually do this on a purely voluntary basis! We do have sponsorship for the booklets and the newsletter. But project funding does not answer the basic problem of how this organisation continues into the future?

Political strategies

VC: How are you working for change?

JB: It seems to me that it is a circle, because you cannot support parents without doing something to change society and to change hearts and minds, which is a long business. You start by changing legislation, and that at least lays a framework, it lays down a marker for what society will or will not tolerate. I do believe in legislation, but you need more than legislation.

VC: It seems that being parents gives you authority and access that many LGB organisations struggle to achieve.

JB: Yes and we want to use that, because we have a right and a responsibility in terms of education - we need voices among the governors who have the power and the responsibility in schools. I think we are also a link between young people and the authorities in one way or another. We occupy a position that, if handled right, can be quite influential. I know when I've been speaking to a reasonably hostile audience there is something I suppose for them slightly puzzling in having this ordinary middle aged, middle class woman, standing there and saying 'I am the mother of a lesbian daughter, and neither of us has two heads' (laughs). I wish we did not always have to go back to the personal to make the point, because we are talking about matters of equality and of justice.

VC: So you use your personal experience to fight for change?

It should be always down to those basic principles but so often you actually have to argue it from the personal. I feel quite torn about that because I would rather argue it from the principles but if I have to use the other to make a point I will. I suppose people find it difficult to relate unless they actually see the human face of the discrimination and so there is a value in letting them see that.

Research collaborations

VC: What involvement has FFLAG had with research?

JB: Until now it has been mostly with research projects that individual students have brought to us, perhaps for their dissertation or something like that. We have worked with researchers at various institutions and we have worked with the Trust for the Study of Adolescence to produce a newsletter for parents with LGB teenagers.

VC: So the typical request is for help finding participants?

JB: Yes that is usually what researchers want from us: 'Do you have parents who will talk to us, who will answer a few questions?'

VC: What good has come out of your involvement with research?

JB: When there is an outcome - whatever that outcome is - that actually is put to practical use. The projects that I find it hard to justify is where they have simply disappeared into a black hole or onto the shelves of an academic library never to be looked at again. What we look for is research that illuminates aspects of a situation or that it is possible for us to use in a practical sense. From this point of

view, research, if it is good research and is well thought through, can be hugely valuable because a lot does rest on it. There is this obsession with statistics. There are many times that you may have a gut feeling that this is how things are, but a gut feeling is not enough to persuade an education authority to act or a statutory agency to fund something. It is not enough just to say LGB kids have problems in schools, you have to be much more specific than that. I find that time and time again within the field of LGB youth research the same statistics crop up, and they are from the same pieces of research, and they are getting more and more dated now. The argument that we get put to us a lot is 'oh but things are better now, aren't they?' In some ways, yes they are and in some ways they have not moved an inch. I think we need to be able to show where they have not moved an inch, and the only way we can do that effectively is with good academic research. That is why academic research is so important to FFLAG's work.

Looking to the future

VC: What kinds of questions would you like psychology practitioners and researchers to be thinking about, what would you like them to be doing in their work?

JB: I think looking behind the obvious question, and probing the subtext a bit more. Is that too unspecific?

VC: Have you got an example that might explain it?

JB: Well a very basic one – if for instance you were asking a parent, 'what was your first reaction on being told?' You will get a probably a reasonably simplistic response to that - 'I was devastated' or 'No problem'. Look at the circumstances in which they were told because that is hugely important, and sometimes this is not looked at enough. Background is also important if you are asking 'what was your reaction?' 'Why did you feel like this?' 'What was it that made you feel like that?' See if you can pinpoint how much of it comes from the whole environment in which we live, whether it's from a specific belief system, culture or faith, whether it is fear for the child, whether it is fear for themselves. There is so much subtext in what parents say, even the ones who say 'oh I have no problems with that' - you listen a bit further and you find actually that they do. What they have very often been able to do is just put their arms around their child and say 'it's fine, it's fine'. That is the first reaction and that is what their son or daughter needed in that moment. But afterwards come the questions, the fears, the doubts. It is how you track that whole progress really, that is so important, because if one can do that then may be one can find some pattern in there that can be useful in helping other people.

VC: What about the future?

JB: We have always said that what we are working to put ourselves out of a job! Hopefully there will come a time when there is no need for an organisation like FFLAG, but I honestly cannot see that happening within the next 20 years. In ten, fifteen, twenty years time, there will still be a need for education and support.

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For information on ordering the booklets *How do I tell my parents* (3rd ed. 2000) and *A Guide for Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays* (3rd ed. 2000), and other publications see the FFLAG web site www.fflag.org.uk

A postscript: In October 2004 FFLAG obtained funding from Lloyds TSB Foundation to employ a full-time Administrator on a twelve month contract. An appointment has been made and Ann Durbin will start on the 4th January 2005, based in an office in Bristol.