

# Where are the Public Father Figures?

BY MICHAEL ALVEAR

Why do we have public mother figures but not public father figures? Where are the male versions of Judy Shepard and Betty DeGeneres?

It's not that there haven't been straight men that've taken brave stands on our behalf. Reverend Jim Creech was defrocked because he had this radical notion that human beings were equal in the eyes of God and continued officiating at commitment ceremonies for gay men and women despite church orders against it.

And certainly Judy Shepard's husband Dennis has eloquently defended us. His statement to the jury during the sentencing phase of his son's murder trial is one of the most moving, searing speeches I've ever heard or read.

But as strong and courageous as these men have been, they have not risen to the level of "Public Parent" in the way Judy Shepard and Betty DeGeneres have.

Some of it has to do with our own distrust of straight men – a well-earned distrust. An alarmingly high proportion of lesbian girls and gay women have experienced some kind of emotional, physical or sexual abuse at the hands of straight men (some psychologists believe it's near 20 percent of the lesbian population).

We gay men don't fare much better. We get beaten up or killed by them far too often.

I think we fear straight men too much to embrace them as father figures in the way we embrace women as mother figures.

That's a shame because we need these public figures. Some of us are starved for the love of our fathers, a love that came easily when we pretended to be who they wanted us to be, but dried up when we stopped pretending.

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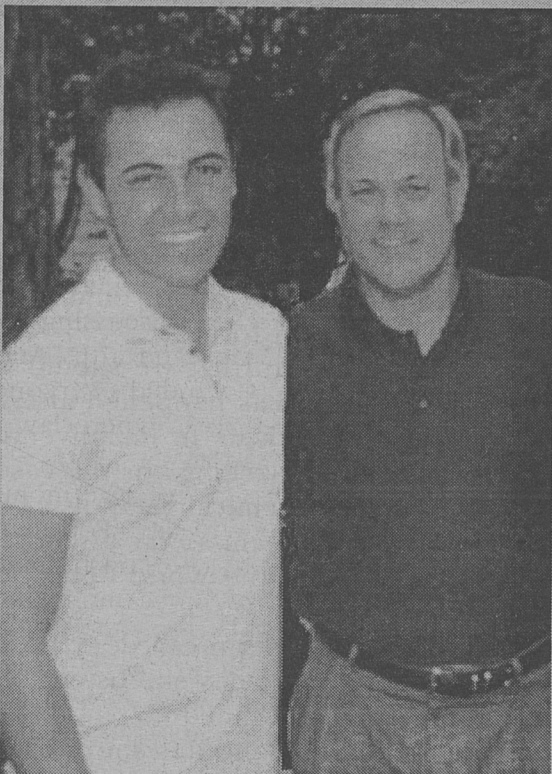
If we ever adopt a public father figure I hope it's someone like Jeff Ellis. Jeff likes to pretend he's a simple country bumpkin. He calls himself "Jeffro," after the dim-witted character in the old Beverly Hillbillies TV show (Jethro).

But there's nothing simple or dim-witted about "Jeffro." He is one of the most thoughtful voices on the issue of parents with gay children.

What makes Jeff all the more compelling is how violently he reacted to his son coming out. "I couldn't have a gay son," he recalled. "I was in the construction business for God's sakes!"

No way was Jeff going to have one of "those" kinds of sons. So off he shipped him to psychologists and homophobic clergy, off he went looking for girls to set him up with. And off he went into a bottomless well of shame and secrecy.

Jeff climbed out of the well like all wells were meant to be climbed out of – with blood, sweat and tears. By lifting himself off his fear and onto love he got some footing. By letting go of expectations he could reach for acceptance. Bit by bit he did this until he was out of the hole he had flung himself into.



"At every gay gathering we go to, the thing that haunts me the most is the way my wife and I are stared at simply because we're there to support our son. Our being there with Adam often causes gay folks more pain because they long so desperately for their parents to do the same." – Jeff Ellis

Today Jeff is the kind of father a lot of us long for. He once compared our human rights struggle to African-Americans in this way: "I have no magic answer why God created some of His children gay. I do know that He does not withhold His love from them any more than He did His black children, even though some of His white children thought He should."

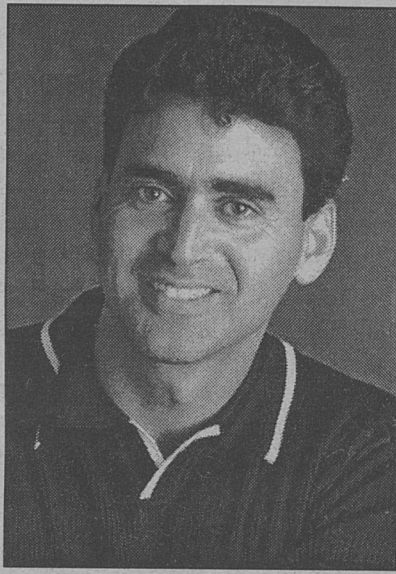
And here's what he said about attending gay functions and fundraisers: "At every gay gathering we go to, the thing that haunts me the most is the way my wife and I are stared at simply because we're there to support our son. Our being there with Adam often causes gay folks more pain because they long so desperately for their parents to do the same."

He made these remarks in a website he and his wife Patti launched to help parents deal with their children's orientation ([www.familyacceptance.com](http://www.familyacceptance.com)).

When I helped edit the website I thought, "How could such beautiful sentiments come out of a man who calls himself 'Jeffro?'"

It's a mystery. I tell him that all the time.

As Jeff gets invited to speak to more groups he may just emerge as the public father figure so many of us crave. A figure that would give our own fathers some way of reaching out to us. A figure who will love us when our real fathers will not.



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