

# views: Acceptance and Exposure

**A**manda, my lover's 14-year-old niece, knows Darryl and I are a gay couple.

I'm sure she's known ever since I met her at my first family function five years ago, when she was just 9 years old. And over the years, I've seen her at dozens more family events, always with Darryl, always with us as a couple.

But it wasn't until she attended a party at our home recently that it got talked about in an open, matter-of-fact way in front of her. Darryl and I weren't even the ones talking about it—the other guests were. And the best part is how matter-of-factly it was being said.

Darryl's family has never been particularly happy he is gay. His family is mostly conservative, both socially and politically, and until the past few years, his being gay was a point of tension. The fact he had a lover—and wanted to bring me to family events, like Amanda's dance recital or his sibling's birthday parties or Mother's Day dinner—has, in the past, been cause for high drama in the family.

It took three years before I got invited over for the family Christmas. That was the first time I was "officially" introduced to someone in the family — Amanda's father, as a matter of fact — and Darryl's mother introduced me as "Darryl's friend."

Since my first family encounters — where Amanda's mother (Darryl's sister) wouldn't say hello to me — things have improved exponentially. Now, Darryl's mother always gives me a hug and kiss, and I think she genuinely likes me — though I know she still wishes I really was just Darryl's friend rather than his lover. Now at family get-togethers, Amanda's mother and I often sit next to each other so we can talk, and she, too, gives me hugs and kisses when saying hello and goodbye.

Though I wouldn't have believed it a few years ago, I am truly, astonishingly, a full-fledged member of the family now.

But despite the spectacular improvement, there remains an uncomfortable weirdness about talking about it. At Thanksgiving, when Darryl introduced me to his brother's new girlfriend by saying I was his "lover," Darryl's

## mubarak dahir

mother scrunched up her face and later reprimanded him.

"Why did you have to say it that way?" she scolded. "Why can't you say partner?"

At least she has graduated from referring to me as Darryl's "friend."

And a few months ago, when Amanda's mother asked Darryl what he was doing for his birthday, he mentioned we were going to dinner with Paul and Josh—Darryl's best friend and the guy's lover.

"I don't want to hear about the gay stuff," Darryl's sister told him, and hung up the phone.

But if there is a tangible awkwardness in speaking

struggled with whether or not to do it. He was torn between his love for his niece, and his disdain for Catholicism.

Eventually, his love for Amanda won out. He agreed to do it, but only after having a heart-to-heart with his niece, beseeching her to question and not just follow blindly.

As far as I know, though, Darryl's never had the chance to have a private discussion with Amanda about his being gay. The closest he got was last year, when he heard her describe something she disliked as being "so gay." He told her that a lot of people important to him were gay, and that the phrase was hurtful.

That's why I was happy to have Amanda at our Martin Luther King party. The crowd was mixed with both our gay and straight friends. But it wasn't the exposure to more gay people that I think was most important for Amanda. It was the exposure to a lot of straight people who talked freely, without hesitating or flinching or making a funny face, about their gay friends.

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about gay things with the adults in Darryl's family, there's an even greater oddness in the lack of talking about it with Amanda and her 12-year-old brother, Michael.

I do not know what Amanda's been told by her mother or grandmother—Darryl's sister and mother—about us. I don't know if she's been told anything at all. It's possible she's just been left to figure it out on her own. But there is no doubt she knows we are gay.

Darryl and his niece are very close. When she was confirmed in the Catholic Church a couple years ago, she asked Darryl to be her sponsor. Darryl—who left the Church more than a decade ago over many issues, but particularly its anti-gay policies and rhetoric—

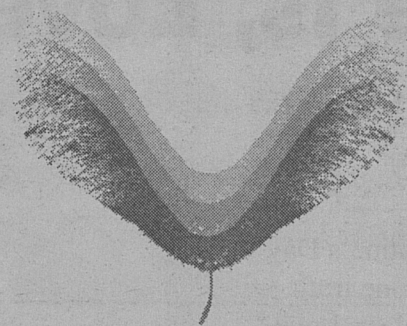
Our straight friends were asking about gay friends' lovers and boyfriends in a matter-of-fact way I'm not sure Amanda has yet seen.

Amanda's mother wasn't at the party, but her grandmother was—Darryl's mother—and I noticed every time someone in the crowd used the word "gay," she—like me—would watch Amanda for some kind of reaction.

It was impossible to read Amanda's thoughts.

At the end of the party, Amanda gave me the customary hug and kiss goodbye. I couldn't be sure she'd actually had a good time at the party. But I hope it was one that she will remember for a long time. ■

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