

Companion Pieces

Those who know them are always struck by the love and affection between Joan Todd and her son Grey, and their obvious respect for each other. Many, if not all, of Joan's gay and lesbian friends wish they had parents like her. Although it is relatively common for gay men or lesbians to write about their families, or for straight parents to write about their gay children, it is unusual for both parent and child to write about each other in the same space. These companion pieces were written independently, at the request of OITM, and neither Joan nor Grey saw the other's article until they'd finished their own. — Sage Russell

A Mother's Story

Joan Todd

"My son's gay, and he's OK!" proclaimed the sign being carried by the man next to me. Watching the festivities last summer with my two California based sons, I had impulsively jumped off the spectator wall and joined the PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) contingent in San Francisco's Gay Pride Parade. Waving back to the crowd, whose cheers unmistakably swelled when our group passed by, my gesture, at first timid, became less and less reserved. I was owning my share of the pride that that parade is all about. I was in a new and definitely good place.

It had taken ten years to get there.

Summoned to the living room on that spring evening in 1981, I realized with suddenness and certainty that my son was about to tell me he was gay. The thought had never before occurred to me, but I knew its truth. It made sense of bewildering situations in his adolescence. Handsome, intelligent, athletic and talented, his pattern had nonetheless been

one of sports mastered and dropped, interests begun and left, friends made and lost. I had sensed his aloneness; until then, I had not known its source.

I don't remember exactly what he said that day. I do remember a tumble of reactions: Denial (it's just a phase that he'll grow out of); Guilt (what did I do wrong?); Shame (what will people say?); Anger (why is he choosing to do this?); Fear (he'll be in such danger!); Selfishness (what about our grandchildren?); and — oh yes — Sadness (my dear, dear son - you are going to miss so much.)

That day and those reactions were the beginning of a long journey. Hoping on the one hand that the less acknowledged, the more likely "the situation" would go away, I was driven, on the other, to fix it. I wanted to make the world right again for this person I loved so much. And I wanted to make it right again for me.

My fix-it strategy was to become as informed as possible. Surely there was a book, an article, a TV show, a lecture, a pamphlet or somebody who could tell me what was "wrong" and what to do about it. I began by reading and then rereading the book he gave me, *Now That You Know*, by Betty Fairchild and Nancy Hayward (may every gay child's parent have a copy!). I haunted libraries, hovered over the TV, sought the confidences and imposed on the patience of the few acquaintances who I knew or suspected were gay.

Turned so inward, I didn't do one important thing which might have shortened the way. I did not engage my son in my process. Acting but not feeling "normal," I did motherly things like go to his plays, express concern about his college grades, entertain the friends he brought home (always glad when they included women, and feigning not to notice behavior that might be construed as gay.) But I didn't

share with him my questions, my anxieties, my grief, my confusion. I was not sure enough of my own place to be able to hear the answers and feel the feeling that might have helped us both. It was a painful time.

It was also a time of growth. I don't recall there being much family communication about the subject, but I was nevertheless absorbing a fundamental lesson from two sources there. One was the response of his younger brother and sister to their brother's being gay. Instinctively ready to protect them, I was surprised to have my anxiety allayed by their assimilating the fact with seemingly little effort, no apparent element of vulnerability, and even explicit expressions of support. The other source was my mother, living next door, whose unremitting, unconditional love for her grandson provided an essential strength in that crucial period of adjustment. The lesson was clear: this person whom I loved so much hadn't changed. I had just been given a new understanding of who he was.

The adage that there's no such thing as a coincidence came to be proven. Five years had passed since my son had first come out to me. I had needed that much time to accept the reality, stop blaming myself, redirect my anger away from him to a bigoted world, and become secure enough to offer my active support in whatever way might be asked by him. I was ready when the request came.

It wasn't centered on gay issues. While I had been struggling with those, my son had been struggling with the problem of his substance abuse. In February of 1986, I got a phone call. "Mom, what are the 12 steps?" He knew I knew, and drawing on the experience, strength and hope that I and countless others could offer, he began to recover. Our common recovery program continues to be a strong

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