

No Closet Space

Anna Quindlen

It was 20 years ago next month that an elementary-school teacher named Jeanne Manford made history. She walked down a street in New York City carrying the sort of poster paper her students sometimes used for projects, except that printed on it were these words:

PARENTS of Gays UNITE in SUPPORT for our CHILDREN.

At her side during the Gay Pride March was her son, Morty, her golden boy, the one a teacher once told her would be a senator someday. When he was in high school he said he wanted to see a psychologist, and the psychologist called the Manfords in and told them that the golden boy was gay. But it never changed his mother's mind about his glow.

Morty's story, and his mother's too, are contained in a new oral history of the gay rights struggle, *Making History*, by Eric Marcus. The cheering thing about the book is how far we have come since the days when newspaper editors felt free to use "homo" in headlines.

The distressing thing is how far we have to go, not in the world alone, where homophobia remains one of the last acceptable bigotries, but in our homes, where our children learn that the world is composed exclusively of love and sex between men and women. Even when Dad and Mom have gay friends and raised consciousness, there is too often a silence that surrounds other

ways of life and love. And silence begets distance.

Distance between parent and child is one of the saddest things in *Making History*: the parents who try to commit their gay children to mental hospitals, the ones who erect a gravestone and send an obituary to the paper when they discover their daughter is a lesbian, or simply the ones who were told nothing because their children considered the truth untellable.

Greg Brock, a newspaperman, describes how he came out to his parents the day before he was to appear on Oprah's show. Thirty-five years old and the man had never spoken to his mother and father of his central reality. "I was about to destroy my dad's life," he recalled.

Is this really what we want, to obsess about ear infections and reading readiness and then discover many years too late that we were either unaware or unaccepting of who our children were? To keen, "What will I tell my friends?" when our kids try to talk about their lives?

In the same borough in which Morty Manford grew up and his mother taught, a Queens school board has rejected a curriculum that encourages respect for all families, including those headed by lesbian and gay parents. Consider that decision, not in terms of gay rights, but in terms of the children.

Given statistical estimates, the Board is telling 1 out of 10 kids that the life they will eventually lead is not part of the human program. Among their students are surely boys and girls who will discover they are

gay and who, from their earliest years will have learned that there is something wrong with that, and therefore with them. Learned it from classmates, from teachers. Worst of all, from their own mothers and fathers.

Actually, it's probably the mothers and fathers who need that curriculum most. All parents should be aware that when they mock or curse gay people, they may be mocking or cursing their own child.

All parents should know that when they consider this subject unspeakable, they may be forever alienating their own child and causing them all enormous pain. Paulette Goodman, president of the Federation of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, likens it to her experience as a Jew in occupied Paris. "I know what it's like to be in the closet," she recalled "I know all too well."

Jeanne Manford didn't want a closet. Her Morty was the same golden boy after she found out he was gay as he was before. She was with him at the Gay Pride March and with him in the gay rights movement.

And she was with him when he died a little more than a week ago of AIDS, almost 20 years to the day after she wrote her unconditional love on poster paper for all the world to see. She does not reproach herself. She loved and accepted her child the way he was. In a perfect world, this would be the definition of "parent" in the dictionary. The point is not what you'll tell your friends at the bridge table. It is what you'll tell yourself at the end. ▼

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