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## Voices on Coming Out: Role Models that Mattered

by StaciAnne Visco

To declare oneself gay today is still a risk — a large risk. It could mean losing a job, a relationship with a parent or friend. It means facing ridicule, ignorance and fear. It requires a lot of courage and strength. Sometimes the hardest obstacle faced comes not from others, but from within — from not wanting to be "different," not wanting to risk losing everything.

National Coming Out Week is a time to celebrate being gay and to embrace the courage of those who are. Sometimes coming out means to parents, sometimes to workers. But the first coming out is still the most important — to oneself.

Sometimes the hardest part is realizing that it is okay to be gay, lesbian or bisexual. Or knowing whom to turn to when questioning. Let's face it, not many friends can sit down and openly discuss, "I think I'm gay..." It takes a very special and strong friendship to do that.

Coming out to oneself may take only moments (remember that first crush?) or it may take years to overcome the fears — *what does this mean to me; do I dare pursue this?* Some will deny it and never look their desires in the face. Others will decide right away, "This is who I am; this is what I believe; and I'm willing to fight for it." Somewhere in the middle is "normal."

I've had the privilege of working with and knowing some wonderful gay and lesbian youth and adults in my life, people that will always be inside of me.

I think back to my middle school English teacher, Cleland Selby. While not out at that time, he was a very special man — very understanding and accepting of a twelve-year-old who thought that her world was going to end every day. He was ridiculed for different ideas by the faculty and loathed by many students. But he was a man that I came to know and love as a second father. He eventually had to leave the school system.

Cleland came out to me after I graduated from college. He was not the first to come out to me, but he likely was the first friend I knew who was gay. He was divorced from his wife and had two children — one still speaking to him, the other not. A few years ago, he flew to San Francisco with his partner Stefan for a union ceremony. Until his recent departure for Key West, he took an active role in gay and lesbian rights issues, writing commentaries for newspapers, doing interviews, and working with groups. He is a man of courage and strength whom I will always have inside.

I think of my college priest — a man that most everybody on campus loved. He was always there, involved in everything from student activities to personal lives. He started a ministry from nothing on a campus where apathy was pervasive. He also did the Dignity masses.

Somewhere along the way, rumors started that he was gay. Who cared? This man had more love and compassion than imaginable. He always had time for people — whether it was 2 a.m., church-related or personal, Catholic or not.

Was he gay? I never asked. Whether he was just being a friend to the community or being a

part of it, I didn't need to know. All I cared about was that this was a wonderful, caring man.

I think of Cherie Tartt, Burlington's premiere drag queen. Performing shows to raise money for various charities in the area and now taping her own show with Yolanda, she's one of a kind. In her other persona, Steve West, she's also a coworker and friend.

I can still hear the voice of a customer years ago. "I can't believe they let him work back in the children's section," she said with a tone of disgust. I wanted to give her a piece of my mind, but Steve just quietly stayed and helped, saying more with his simple actions than anything else.

It takes a lot to be a drag queen in this town. As progressive as Burlington may be, in many ways it is still quite conservative. Cherie enjoys what she does and does it well. The smiles she brings while on stage doing Tartt Talk or singing her heart out (and obviously part of her memory too — what was the next line???) are worth it all. Does it matter if he's gay or does drag? No. Steve is just Steve.

Craig Mitchell, creator of "The Orange Factory" and DJ extraordinaire, is another. The first time I saw his one-man autobiographical play, I was reduced to tears. Imagine being gay at a Catholic college. Imagine being father to a child that the mother never lets you see. Imagine the courage it takes to stand up in front of a group of total stranger and say all this.

Should it have mattered? No. Unfortunately for that little child, it did. But Craig is a pillar of our community for a variety of reasons. His talents and his gifts to the community speak loudly for themselves. Craig will always have my respect and admiration for just being who he is.

I think of the people I've met while volunteering at Outright, the fights they've waged in their schools for equality, the strides they've taken for their community. Out, young, and proud, these are the people who will be leading the fight for gay and lesbian rights in the years to come. They've faced being outcasts; they've fought with their parents; they've fought with school boards and fought with each other. They're strong, sometimes angry, sometimes confused, but always proud and always themselves.

I don't even know Matt Stiekney, but I wish I did. It takes a rather brazen kind of courage to stand up at the age of fifteen in the Burlington school system and say, "I am gay and a drag queen. Learn to deal with it." Whether Matt's gay or not, a drag queen or not — it shouldn't matter. But it does. Classes should be able to continue without disruption. A dress makes no noise, so it's not Matt that's being disruptive; it's the people around who are reacting. Try sending *them* to counseling, to mediators. Unfortunately, it's Matt that will end up being punished, when it's Matt that should be applauded for being bold enough to be honest.

This National Coming Out Week, think for a moment. Statistics say that one person in ten is gay or lesbian. It could be you, your friend, your mother, your father, your neighbor, your teacher.

Does it matter? No. A friend is a friend, no matter what sexuality they are. Perhaps one day people will be able to stand tall and freely say, "Me, I am me." And that person could be gay, lesbian, straight, transsexual, bisexual, asexual. It just doesn't matter. ▼

## "Vermont Sugar Maple Queens" A Hit in P-town

PROVINCETOWN MA -- On August 22, the Vermont Sugar Maple Queens made their historic debut in the Provincetown "Carnival '96" parade. This was the first time any outside state group has appeared in the parade, the theme of which was "Myths and Legends."

The Baroness Von Grau of Essex and her beloved sleazy sister, the (recently singled) Mindy Moore, led twelve of their friends down Commercial Street amidst loud cheers and applause. By special invitation, the Smart Sisters of Westford also made an appearance in the parade.

The Baroness was chauffeured in her vintage limo convertible by her dear friend Christine Fairmont, of the Montreal Royal Fairmont family.

Christine's dashing handsome husband, Raoul Deroucher of the Winnipeg Deroucher family, rode with them. The Baroness's pet teddy bear, Gaylord, also made his first appearance in the parade.

The lovely wardrobes, gowns and jewelry were coordinated and designed by Fluffy Benedict, who spent many agonizing hours (seconds) arranging the ensembles. Also, she would like to thank her private coiffure and cosmetologist Boyles Castlegate of the Pittsburgh Passarello School of Dress and Cosmetology for his time assisting in makeup and hair styles.

The Baroness is already making plans for next summer's carnival parade and hopes that her dear friends will be back again at her summer villa, "Coastal Acres," on beautiful Shankpainter Pond. ▼