

PFLAG of Greater Providence

March/ April 2002

Upcoming Meetings
Please Mark Your Calendar
Tuesdays, April 2 and May 7
Regular Meetings, 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. at The Providence Center

Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, Inc.

is a support, education and advocacy organization.

Founded in 1981 by 25 parents, PFLAG now services approximately 70,000 members and speaks for thousands of others. PFLAG affiliates are located in more than 450 communities in this country and overseas.

PFLAG is a tax-exempt, non-profit organization that is not affiliated with any political or religious institution.

Mission Statement

PFLAG of Greater Providence, an affiliate of National PFLAG, is dedicated:

to supporting parents on their journey to understanding and acceptance of their gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender children;

to helping the children -- of whatever age -- to understand and come out into loving relationships with their families;

to educating an ill-informed public about homosexuality, and

to the attainment of full civil rights for all.

Our Meetings are held on the **first Tuesday**
of each month from 6:30—8:30 p.m.
At The Providence Center, 520 Hope Street
(off Doyle Avenue), Providence.

PFLAG is a welcoming place for parents and friends of lesbians and gays, but we are much more than that. Gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender people are also encouraged to attend our meetings. Gays come with or without their family members, and parents and friends come with or without their gay loved ones. Confidentiality is assured.

PFLAG IS FOR YOU.

Chapter President: Myra Shays

Editor: Carol-Anne Villanova

For further information or directions:

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**RECORD ATTENDANCE HEARS JANUARY 8
TALK ON TRANSGENDER**

Our own Gwen Howard had us scrambling to find chairs for the overflow crowd that attended our January 8 meeting to hear her speak on the meaning of transgender, and what is involved in transitioning to one's true gender. She began by giving some definitions: "transgender" is an umbrella term to define someone whose sense of himself or herself is outside of the polarity of the person's perceived gender. Labels like "intersexed", "transsexual", transvestite", cross-dresser", and others are frustratingly inadequate and occasionally offensive, and often overlap. (Some newborns have "ambiguous genitalia", and are assigned a gender by parents and by doctors, who perform surgery to have the child conform to that gender.)

Many people grow up with a sense of maleness or femaleness that conflicts with their apparent gender. Gwen says that all her life (as Gregory) she felt female, though her outward appearance was male. But still she was attracted to women and was married over twenty years ago to Patricia Falcon. Pat, her spouse, says she was aware of this "disconnect" between her spouse's appearance and identity, and that they were both more comfortable when Greg started to transition to Gwen: taking psychological counseling and hormones; wearing the hairstyle and clothing typical of a woman; doing many legal necessities such as changing passport and driver's license; and simply living life as a woman.

For a tense period of time Gwen's life was bifurcated, because she was hired as a woman for an office job but lived with Pat in an apartment that had been rented to them as husband and wife. She had to change clothes and appearance twice a day, between home and office, to hide her true gender from their landlord and conceal her old identity from her place of employment.

Gwen, who holds M.Div. and MSW degrees, says that both Pat's and her families have been supportive of her transition. Mary, Gwen's mother, recalls the harassment and abuse Gwen (then Greg) suffered as a teenager, and is relieved and happy for her.

Gwen advises not to ask a transgender person "Have you had reassignment surgery?" -- "It's like saying 'What do your genitals look like?' -- an offensive question."

When asked why the transgendered belong within the mission of PFLAG, Gwen replied that, like gays, they attract the hatred of homophobes, who consider women inferior: they believe that lesbians and F to M people are usurping maleness; that M to F people have defected from the superior gender; and that gay men "feminize" other men by mating with them.

Our chapter thanks Gwen for her mind-expanding presentation. She's a good friend, a courageous activist, and a credit to our chapter and her gender.

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News From All Over...

Utah

An unsuccessful five-year court battle to keep Gay/Straight Alliances out of Salt Lake City public schools ended last November with the State of Utah forced to pay the legal expenses of that city's School Board -- about \$250,000. "I hope the government's wasted effort and money will deter other school districts from undertaking these harmful and ultimately futile attempts to ban these clubs," said the ACLU attorney who represented the proponents of the Gay/Straight Alliances.

-From PFLAG of Cape Cod, Brewster

Utah

PFLAG billboards went to the Olympics! "Someone You Know and Love is Gay," read signs on major highways leading to the sports venues of the 2002 Olympics. The local PFLAG chapter had launched a fund-raising effort to pay for the billboards, realizing that they had a golden opportunity to reach visitors from all over the world, as well as state legislators convening for the new session. The chapter's publicity chairman, a long-time community activist who calls himself a "recovering homophobe", has no gay relatives but appreciates the challenges of those who have.

-From National PFLAG Weekly Alert

Pennsylvania

The Titusville public school system will pay gay teenager Timothy Dahle \$312,000 to settle his claims that school officials failed to stop classmates from harassing him. The federal court settlement is the first of its

kind in the state, according to the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN). It was reached just a week before the case was to go to trial in January. Dahle's attorney said, "Nobody pays \$312,000 unless they got caught doing something very wrong. I hope this sends a message to all schools that if you turn a deaf ear and blind eye to the kind of harassment this student endured for five years, you're going to be in for an expensive lesson." There have been five or six "gay harassment" suits nationwide in the last six years. School districts that did not settle all lost in court.

-From Williamstown (MA) PFLAG News

A JOURNEY OUT OF SILENCE

By Les Norman

When our son Nick came out to us, it seemed to falsify all those years of raising a son to take his place in the world. Were those twenty-five years a complete fantasy, just play-acting on the stage of life? We told Nick we loved him no matter what, but I felt ashamed -- not for him, but for myself and for the whole family.

We all felt that we needed to keep this awful secret hidden -- even from one another. That was the hardest thing. Nick went back to Minneapolis, but my wife and I couldn't find a way to communicate with each other about what was going on inside us. We each had to deal in our own way with our own stereotypes, our own fears, our own glimmerings of understanding. If only I had had someone in whom I could confide.

My minister? Hardly. At our men's group meetings, when there had been "jokes" about "queers" and "pansies", he had joined in the laughter, just as I used to do. My therapist? I did speak to him about my sorrow. He sympathized and said that Nick was suffering from a kind of arrested development. That did nothing to help. A support group? Are you kidding? *Do real men have support groups?* Not men of my generation, not then. I felt terribly alone, the only man in the world who bore this burden.

There was one resource, though it took me months to realize it was there. The big corporation I worked for had instituted a program of Valuing Diversity. I was a member of a group that met monthly to discuss such issues as gender and race, and how we could eliminate prejudice and its consequences. It struck me that what I was trying to deal with was another example of prejudice governing our actions, and I hesitantly brought up my situation. My words brought expressions of sympathy -- nothing else. However, after the meeting a woman told me privately that she is a lesbian, and that she thought PFLAG could help me. But I wasn't yet ready to go to a PFLAG meeting.

One Sunday I heard a minister preach on the gospel call to welcome people of all sexual orientations. Following the service we heard speakers from the local Gay and Lesbian Alliance. One of them talked about his son, and how he had wrestled with accepting him. *He told my story!* I was no longer alone.

Strengthened by this, I began to explore what it meant to be a Christian and fully welcoming of gays and lesbians. By then I was attending theological school part-time, while still working in the computer field. In a term paper I wrote of my struggle and the professor wrote back, encouraging me in my work of discovery, and offering her help. This was the first entry point, and it led to many others. I began to feel my way into a whole hidden world of people struggling to make a place for themselves in church and society while the only voices they heard were those of condemnation and bigotry.

Eventually I did go to a PFLAG meeting and discovered that there were indeed many other parents who had suffered as I had, but who were now on the journey beyond acceptance. And then, at one meeting, I had an epiphany. It suddenly came to me that the problem was not my son's gayness: the problem was that society would not accept him for who he was. I was a straight father who fit all the norms of the world I lived in. If I had felt alone, how must my son have felt, and may still feel? *It was society that needed to be changed*, not my son. I was no longer alone and I resolved to be silent no longer, for it is silence that kills the spirit; it is silence that is death to accepting the diversity of our own humanity.

NEA Board Adopts Plan To Make Schools Safer

NEA Acts To Make Schools Safe and Hospitable for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered Students and Education Employees

Washington, D.C.- Following several months of study by a broad-based task force, the Board of Directors of the National Education Association (NEA) today approved a set of recommendations to clarify NEA policies and enhance NEA programs designed to help foster an environment of respect and safety in America's public schools. NEA President Bob Chase hailed the action as a positive step toward extending protection to all students and education employees.

NEA has a longstanding civil rights agenda and a longstanding respect agenda," Chase said. "It's about building on simple civil rights enforcement to create an environment in schools where everyone in the community - students, teachers, education support professionals, and parents - respect each other. Ultimately, when we respect each other, schools will be safe and hospitable for all."

The Board referred to the Executive Committee a set of recommendations that would continue and expand NEA efforts to provide students, education employees, and the general public with accurate, objective, and up-to-date information regarding the needs of, and problems confronting, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered students. Consistent with current practices, any such information would be nonjudgmental in terms of sexual orientation/gender identification, it would be age-appropriate and relevant to subject matter in schools, and it would be provided in accordance with local school district policies developed by teachers, parents, and others in the school community.

In addition, the Board referred to the Resolutions Committee and Legislative Committee proposed changes that will clarify that NEA policies regarding nondiscrimination extend to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered students and education employees.

"It is clear that, in too many places, students and education employees who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered face a hostile environment," Chase said. "For students, a safe, hospitable environment means the right to learn. For education employees, it means the right to work. For all it means the right to be free from harassment, bullying, and insensitivity.

"Education is the key to understanding and respect, and education is our best weapon against fear and discrimination," Chase said. "That's why we will begin our efforts with discussing these issues with our members throughout the country."

WHY MEET?

Once we have gained the support that makes us comfortable with the idea of having gay children, *why keep coming to the monthly PFLAG meetings?*

Here are some answers we've heard.

- "For the drama," said one PFLAG mother. Every meeting reveals a new story, one that is unique but can cast a new perspective on our own. And so we learn.
- "To be there for others," said a father. If you are comfortable with yourself and your situation, then we need you to come and listen to those who are not. If you once needed PFLAG, now we need you to share how you made your journey. New families come nearly every month. We need you to be a welcoming presence for them, a guide to resources, to be someone who genuinely cares about other families in their struggle.
- "To get clued in" to what is happening, locally and nationwide, that can affect you and your loved ones. New legislative protections and threats are on the horizon, and you can influence them. Media, too, count. It was public reaction from folks like PFLAGers, who knew and cared, that forced "Dr."

Laura Schlessinger's anti-gay rhetoric into the TV programming ghetto.

- "To support our hard-working activists." If you haven't come for a while, please come to a meeting and let us welcome you back.

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THOSE KANSAS HOMOPHOBES BUTT IN -- AGAIN!

For the second time, a small church group from Kansas came to New Hampshire to conduct an anti-gay picket, this time over recognition of a lesbian couple as "class sweethearts" in the Dover High School yearbook. They waved signs reading "Fags Die, God Laughs," and "Fags Doom Dover." A large group of local residents gathered at the school to demonstrate their opposition to the protest.

These are the same Kansas homophobes, led by anti-gay preacher Fred Phelps, who turned up in November, 2000 to oppose Phillips Exeter Academy's policy allowing homosexuals to be dorm parents. Then, many students and faculty members wearing rainbow pins demonstrated against the Kansans.

And a few years ago that Kansas group went to Provincetown High School to protest their diversity training. Fortunately, in all these cases, local people rallied against the picketers, resulting in a more unified support of GLBT issues than if the Kansans had not come.

NATIONAL CONFERENCE SET FOR SEPTEMBER

The next National Conference of all PFLAG chapters is scheduled for September 27 through 29 in Columbus, Ohio. The theme is "Family Voices for Equality." You still qualify for the early bird registration fee. You can register at www.pflag.org, or call our chapter number for a registration form.

Join Us! Become a Member of PFLAG/Greater Providence!

- Student/Limited Income \$15
- Household \$30
- Individual \$25
- Newsletter only \$10
- Add'l Contribution \$_____

Send checks payable to PFLAG/Greater Providence to: PFLAG, c/o Apt. 212, 500 Angell Street, Providence, RI 02906

Name (s): _____

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