



Family Voices XVIII: LGBT Grandparents

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Here's the next post in my [Family Voices](#) series. This phase of the series is in partnership with [Stonewall Communities](#), an organization dedicated to creating residential, educational, social and supportive opportunities among older LGBT people.

Sandy and Deb have been together for 26 years. They each offer their answers to the interview questions, and talk about their widespread family, interacting with schools, and the differences between parenting and grandparenting.

After you read their interview, go read the lengthy Web exclusive by [Newsweek](#) on LGBT seniors. It is an excellent piece (with a video bonus), and a worthy acknowledgment of the 30th anniversary of SAGE (Services and Advocacy for GLBT Elders), the nation's oldest senior network. "Gay seniors confront unique challenges," the article reports. "They're twice as likely as straights to live alone, and 10 times less likely to have a caretaker should they fall ill." At the same time, there are signs of progress: When SAGE holds its national conference next month, it will be sponsored for the first time by the powerful, 40-million member AARP (American Association of Retired Persons).

Tell us a little about your family. Who is in your immediate family? Do you live together, nearby, far apart? Did you have to come out to them, or has your orientation/identity always been a part of their lives? Anything else you'd like to share about yourselves?

(Sandy) – I am the bio mom and live with my partner of 26 years (married for three years). Our daughter lives in Pepperell with her husband and our granddaughter, who is nine. Our son lives in Roslindale with his girlfriend, planning to be married next summer. Our children have always known who we are, and their father has been very much part of their lives. The kids have not had a lot of relatives active in their lives, as both of our families live far away. My dad, sister and her husband live in New Mexico and my brother lives in Thailand with his wife. Deb's folks live on the Cape; her sister lives in Seattle and brother in Maine.

(Deb) – Our kids knew I was a lesbian before Sandy and I became partners. They were surprised when the two of us became a couple, but not by my being a lesbian. I am very out to my family, and the kids and grandchild were considered family members from the start.

How is being a grandparent different from being a parent?

(Sandy) – I'm not sure being a lesbian grandparent is much different than a straight one. A grandparent gets to be the "fun" person in the grandchild's life and not worry overly much about discipline! Obviously rudeness, irresponsibility, etc. are discouraged and corrected, but in general we do a lot of fun stuff like museums, trips, bookstore sprees and more. We also have more free money now than we did when raising our children, and can do more expensive things.

An example: when our kids were little we went to Ruggles Mine in NH to do some rockhounding. We had a great time and they remember it fondly. We came home the same day. When we took our granddaughter this summer, we stayed in a hotel in Concord so she got to swim and enjoy the jacuzzi in the suite. To summarize, I think we are free to just have more fun than we could as parents!

(Deb) – One big difference for me is that I was there as family from the moment of our granddaughter's birth. There has never been any question that I am Grandma Deb, whereas with our children, we had to determine what our relationship was to be. It's much easier and smoother.

What has been the most challenging thing you've faced as an LGBT parent? What about as a grandparent? How did you handle these challenges?

(Sandy) – The hardest thing was knowing that the kids were taking a lot of crap at school about it, and actually we didn't know until they were adults just how bad it had been. They got in a lot of fights defending us and really had a hard time. At that time we didn't really know many other lesbian parents and felt pretty isolated and powerless to help. We tried family therapy, which was a total disaster!! It did ease up when they got to 7th grade up. In terms of grandparenting, it's obviously easier in that our granddaughter's schoolmates don't see us and she isn't a target for them. She did have one incident in class when some kid said that two women couldn't be married and she got up and said, "Yes they can, because I was in my grandmothers' wedding!"

(Deb) – I agree with all that Sandy said, with an addition. I was the 7th grade science teacher for both our kids. It was very difficult maintaining a separation of roles, especially when I was asked to "talk to" some other teacher at school. We eventually agreed that Sandy would handle all the "parent stuff" at school during that time.

How, if at all, do you think things have changed for LGBT parents today vs. when you started your family or came out to your family?

(Sandy) – I think there is a lot more peer support out there now. There are gay/straight alliances. websites. books, and I also think more parents are out so that it isn't so isolating. However, this is MA and I'm sure the situation is different in other parts of the country.

(Deb) – From what I see at school, there is just a pile more support than there was 20 years ago when our kids where in school. I know this for sure, because I am part of a network of GLBT parents and staff at school. There was no such thing when our kids were in school.

In your view, are there any special resources or advantages that come with being an LGBT grandparent?

(Sandy) – I think the major advantage is to the child in being exposed to other life choices. It's also my experience that many GLBT individuals are in "helping professions" of some kind and most are raising children to have a conscience and to care about others and the world around them.

(Deb) – I think the major advantage is that same as for being a lesbian parent. The child is more exposed to many different points of view, and will have a broader range of possible views of her life. In other words, she gets more than the usual “straight and narrow.”

What advice would you most like to pass on to other LGBT parents? To other LGBT grandparents?

(Sandy) – That’s a hard question since times are so different now. Probably the most important is to be involved in the child’s life and be visible and active starting from a young age so you aren’t a novelty to other kids and their families.

(Deb) – Don’t apologize for who you are, and don’t make it a big thing, either. Just be whoever you are as a whole person, stay involved in your kids’ lives. Your kids are dependent on you and you, like any parent, have to somewhat put yourself on the back burner in terms of getting what you want when you want, whether financially, or in terms of being really militant . . . it’s kids first.

Why did you choose to become involved with Stonewall Communities?

(Sandy) – We were interested in the senior housing, but unfortunately we can’t afford to buy in at this time.

(Deb) – Yeah, definitely interested, but it’s just not affordable for us.

How else, if at all, are you involved in your community or in LGBT activism/politics?

(Sandy) – At this point I’m not really involved except to keep up through reading with what’s going on. We used to do the AIDS walk and Pride, but I can’t walk very far with arthritis and am pretty tired when I get home from work. I’m 66 and need to work another few years to get a decent pension.

(Deb) – I am active in a GLBT group at work and through union work as well.

Please share a favorite memory of being a parent or grandparent.

(Sandy) – Wow – too many to pare down to one!

(Deb) – Ditto . . . it’s a hoot when it isn’t hard.