

Opening the Door

a mother's journey to understanding and beyond...

Shelley Argent OAM

This is a book for anyone interested in how families react
when a loved one discloses they are gay or lesbian.

e: pflagbris@hotmail.com

m: 0409 363 335

p: 07 3017 1739

www.pflagbrisbane.org.au

Foreword

'Coming out' is a complex and confusing time. At every turn so many of us are scared of being rejected by the people we love. As humans, family is our source of strength. My parents not only accept me for being gay, but advocated my equitable participation in society. This enabled me to be confident in the face of adversity. The acceptance of my parents empowered me to succeed in conservative workplaces, live in provincial Australia and maintain a stable long-term relationship. Acceptance has kept the family close. I realise I enjoy something very beautiful, and a gift many other LGBT ¹ people can't even imagine.

I have seen Mum lift the self-esteem of friends and strangers. Mum has been gallant, brave, dedicated and a source of strength. Mum has taken on injustice at every turn and hasn't tolerated apathy. Mum is deserving of the public recognition given and as you will realize as you read these pages- Mum is an exceptional lady.

You have loved me unconditionally and defended my freedom, Mum. This has given me something very special....thank you.

Love, James

¹ Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender

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To my readers

This isn't a very long book. I see it as a guide and a starting point for understanding the sensitive issues surrounding families coming to terms with a gay son or lesbian daughter.

Chances are you're reading this because you've just learned that your son or daughter is gay or lesbian. I've written this to help get the message out that to have a lesbian daughter or gay son is okay. And, being part of a peer support group for parents struggling with these issues, I am quite aware of the emotions and fears parents have to deal with.

Let me say up front that to have a gay son or lesbian daughter is not a stigma. As a parent you have done nothing wrong. Your child has done nothing wrong and your love for them should not be conditional on their sexual orientation.

How sexual diversity is seen by our mostly heterosexual society is irrelevant to our sons and daughters when they acknowledge themselves as homosexual. What the rest of the world thinks cannot change their sexual orientation; it's part of their essential nature. What does matter to them, though, is the reaction of their family and friends.

The most common results of negative reactions from family - if they don't have outside emotional support - is self-loathing, depression, suicidal tendencies, homelessness or the breakdown of the family unit. It's the support of family and friends when they first 'come out' that makes the biggest difference to our gay and lesbian sons

and daughters. Our response as their parents can make all the difference to keeping the family united and our son or daughter feeling a worthy person.

And who's to say what's 'normal'? Over the years I have met parents with more than one child identifying as gay or lesbian. I once met a father who had five children and three were gay. A bisexual young man told me that he had seventeen cousins. Ten identified as gay, lesbian or bisexual and one transgender. He thought it was great that in his family the heterosexual cousins were in the minority.

I once met a retired Anglican bishop who had two gay sons. For many years one son lived in another State with his partner, only visiting family on rare occasions and letting family think his partner was just his flat mate. The other son suffered years of stress and fear about telling family. At around forty years of age he decided he really wanted to be honest with his parents. He contacted PFLAG for support and information that would assist their understanding. PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) is a voluntary peer support group for parents and others coming to terms with the disclosure by a loved one that they are homosexual. Fortunately, his parents being true Christians had very few issues of concern. They felt more saddened that he had been fearful about their reaction.

However, another Anglican bishop in the same region had his child 'come out' around the same time and it was a very different story. There was little acceptance or understanding. The lesson that I took from both families is that it doesn't matter who or what you are, there are no guarantees about how people will react.

I would never claim to be an expert on this topic, but I have talked with possibly thousands of parents over the years and almost as many lesbians and gays about the effects and emotions of disclosing sexual orientation.

My son's friends often jokingly say I am possibly 'more gay' than them. And our home was once called 'Gay Central' because I am so immersed in the gay community and their issues. This book is about my personal journey and the efforts I have made as a

mother to make a better world for my son and others like him. If I've done that, I'm happy.

As a parent don't expect that you will always have the right answers or expect that you will always ask the correct questions. But keep talking to your child and let them know you want to understand. Homosexuality isn't an issue that most of us have considered in relation to our children. As mother's in hospital after giving birth and we have our first nurse of him or her we wonder will they be handsome, prime minister, rich, some may even wonder if they will be an axe murderer, but we never wonder if they will be gay or lesbian. Or at least I didn't. But the more you try to understand, the quicker you will and the more your son or daughter will appreciate you, even if you get it wrong at times.

He doesn't look gay.....

Many parents tell me their son or daughter doesn't look gay. What does a gay person look like? The sensible answer is that they look like you and me. Some say you can always 'pick them'. Realistically, it's the minority that are easily identified. All sorts of people 'come out' at and they do it at all ages; they can be married or single, it doesn't matter.

Sexual diversity doesn't discriminate. Ministers of religion 'come out'; professionals 'come out'; work colleagues 'come out'; truck drivers 'come out'; neighbours 'come out'; people from all races and cultures 'come out'. Even homophobes 'come out'. Research shows that many become homophobic in the belief that if they say nasty and negative things about gays and lesbians, their self questioning and doubts about their own sexual orientation will disappear.

I even know people, who have 'come out' in their seventies, which not surprisingly is a huge shock to the adult sons and daughters and grandchildren. One man I know lived in a country town and with the usual societal pressures he married. He

is proud of the fact that he never cheated on his wife. And when his wife was sick he tenderly cared for her until she passed away. But then he felt it was time for him to live his life honestly. His family initially had concerns, but soon came around to accepting his revelation. The good thing for this man is he met a very nice man in a similar age group, which debunks the myth that a gay or lesbian person will be lonely in old age.

So it's my belief that it's never wise to assume that you know who is or isn't gay or lesbian. If you could pick a gay or lesbian person by their looks, there would be no such thing as 'living in the closet'.

Statistically, one in five families has a loved one who is gay or lesbian - whether the family know it or not. As a passionate believer in basic human rights, my goal is to see a world where those who are sexually diverse are seen as okay and acceptable and the whole issue of sexuality is seen as a non-issue. My hope is that in this future world, the issues of depression, suicide, homelessness and family breakdown due to sexual orientation no longer exist.

Over the years I have met so many parents who will not go to bookshops or libraries seeking information because they fear they are outing themselves. If you have been like this my message to you is don't let this fear put you off. Get information from the internet, find books to read, find people to talk to. Even if you have to get bookshops to order books in for you, don't be embarrassed. They don't care that you have a gay child - for all you know they may be gay or lesbian themselves.

Of course not everyone will agree with my beliefs or how I have dealt with these issues in my family. All I can say is that my strategies worked well for us. This book is written to help explain the common emotions and reactions parents experience – and to offer some practical wisdom for working through them. It is only a guide and you must decide for yourself what information to take from my experiences, because you know your family and its dynamics. To help give a broader picture of this very common experience, the book also tells some stories about the reactions of other parents I have met along the way; about their struggles on the path to acceptance.

Knowledge about homosexuality really helps us to understand and – hopefully – accept our loved ones for who and what they are.

Surely that's a good thing?

Allow me to introduce myself...

My name is Shelley. I live in a sleepy Brisbane suburb with my husband. We have two adult sons who make us proud and happy to be their parents. In 1995, our eldest son James disclosed to us that he was gay, setting our whole family on a sometimes painful, but ultimately rewarding journey of discovery.

Building a home, a family, a life...

In the mid 1960s, many girls my age were wondering what career path they wanted to take. It was a fairly limited choice by today's standards – secretary, nurse or teacher. But I always considered my career would be as a wife and mother. That was all I ever wanted - a loving husband, two children and a nice home. And fortunately, at the age of 25 along came Don. He was quiet, tall with dark curly hair and caring eyes, and someone I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. Don was in the last semester of his Commerce degree when we met. We only knew each other four months and we were married. That was almost 35 years ago.

Just married

Together we renovated the family home we had bought from Don's father. It was great fun. Don and I worked side by side. I learned to tile, paint, glaze windows, hang

wallpaper and lay vinyl. Then we moved out into the garden and began cementing the driveway, paths and garden edges.

I was more than happy to spend all of our money getting our house in order, because once the house was finished our main goal was to start our family. I knew what I wanted and I had a plan.

Life, of course, doesn't always go according to schedule. When we began trying to get pregnant it wasn't as easy as we had imagined. After several months of trying without success, I went for tests and was told I was fine. The news was not so good for Don. We were told we had a one in a million chance of conceiving. It was suggested that perhaps we should adopt. This came as a terrible blow to me. I couldn't imagine not having children; not being pregnant with our child.

Then suddenly I was.

I took my mother to the doctors one day and while there I mentioned I was 'late'. He said I should have a pregnancy test, which I reluctantly did, thinking it was a waste of time. After the test I was walking down the hallway towards my doctor's surgery and despondently asked, "Well am I or aren't I?" I, of course, was expecting to hear, "No". But what he said was, "Yes, you are." I was so excited I remember racing into his room, grabbing his telephone and ringing Don to tell him the news. I think everyone in the waiting room knew I was pregnant. I was on a seven month high.

I thoroughly enjoyed being pregnant. I was living my dream – husband, home and family on the way. I had everything ready for the baby by the time I was six months pregnant. The room was decorated with Raggedy Andy and Raggedy Ann wallpaper. The cot was so filled with stuffed toys that people used to tease me about where the baby would fit.

Don always joked that even though we had been married nearly three years, he only got used to being engaged when James, our first born, came home from the hospital. We were twice blessed when our second son Glenn came along nearly three

years later. Our family was now complete and I was as happy as I can ever remember being.

In our early years of marriage Don was busy making a successful career in the business world. I loved being a stay at home mum with the boys. It wasn't always easy, but I really believe it was worthwhile. I never saw it as a sacrifice – I still don't.

Mother and sons

I am a great believer in working to be the best parent you can. As a parent you are creating and moulding the next generation. I have always believed that the recipe for good parenting is the three C's: communication, consistency and caring. Children don't always appreciate these qualities at the time, but they do later and they have stood me in good stead with my sons.

I have always wanted my children to have the best possible chances in life that I could give them and to be the best they can be. Not necessarily the most successful career, fame or fortune, but happy with their life and in themselves. Happiness, fulfilment and security are my three wishes for my sons.

I believe it's very important for parents to be supportive and encouraging of their children. If we as parents don't support and encourage our children, who will? Especially, when there are tough times or difficult issues to be dealt with. I have learned over the years that our children need our unconditional love. And never more than when they disclose they are gay or lesbian.

Behind the picket fence...

When James was 10 I discovered that he had been molested over a period of a couple of years. I was devastated. I thought I had never left the boys alone for any length of time with this person, or anyone else who was not a family member. I had never had a fear that my children would get sick and be taken from me; my fear was molestation and I was always alert to ensure it never happened. I learnt the very painful lesson that even though

you may try, you can't control the universe. Sometimes it doesn't matter how much you try to prevent things from happening, they still do.

Enough of this story, except to say the molester went to jail. I then began to be concerned about the idea that children who have been molested may be sexualised into the 'wrong' orientation.

When James was about 11 or 12 I began to suspect he may be gay. On the surface it was silly stereotypical things like how he sat on the kitchen stool when he was talking on the telephone. I used to think, 'Don't sit like I do, sit like your father does.'

James doesn't fit the stereotypical image of a gay man. He has always been 'blokey'. He loves sport, always followed his father around helping him in the yard and spent as much time with him as he could. He'd rather go camping and trekking than fashion shopping. I have seen James go out in a t-shirt that was inside out and back to front, which is hardly the stereotypical gay male.

So when I began suspecting he was gay, I thought it must have happened because of the molestation. I was a typical parent looking for a reason or someone to blame. Now I realise that it's just not true that being molested as a child will make you gay or lesbian. What I learned after many years of research and reading is that molestation often awakens a child to their sexuality earlier than usual. This is what happened to James and this is what I recognised.

I talked to his father and very close friends about my suspicions, but everyone thought I was being dramatic and silly. But I wasn't convinced, so I decide to make sure our home was what I called 'gay friendly'. In my presence there were no derogatory comments about gays and definitely no 'poofter' jokes. If someone talked about homosexuality, I always made sure there were positive comments included in the discussion. I did this because if he was in fact gay, I didn't want him to feel it was a shameful thing, or that there was something wrong with him, or that his family wouldn't understand.

But when James hit puberty, he suddenly had a great social life. He had discovered girls – or so it seemed. The phone constantly rang with girls wanting James to go to parties or on social outings with them. I remember one day James was invited to a birthday party, eleven girls and him. He had a great time. And his mates were so envious.

James only ever had one date with a girl. It was the shortest date in history. The plan was to take the bus to her house and they would then go into the city to see a movie. But James realised once they got into the city that this just wasn't for him. So he turned the girl around got back on the bus delivered her home and was back in our house within about two hours. When we asked him about the speed of the date and what happened, he just said, "She wasn't for me," and left it at that. No further discussion was had about the subject.

University daze

Through their primary school years, my career was my sons. I was very involved with their sports. I was the mother who brought the oranges and washed the jerseys, I was the mum who drove carloads of boys to the weekly games.

I also got involved with the P & C and became the Minister for Everything at the local primary school. They were great years and I made many lifelong friends from this period in my life.

But as the boys entered high school it was time to take a step back. I didn't think it healthy for them or me to be so involved. So I set my sights on a university degree. I was tired of being 'just a volunteer' and having my opinion or work overlooked when it suited the professionals I was working with. So I decided it was time I got a piece of paper that said I knew what I was talking about. I didn't want to go into the workforce, I was very happy being a volunteer, but I wanted my work valued. I was extremely lucky because I discovered a Social Science degree which was very human rights based, plus I didn't need

Year 12 qualifications. And as luck would have it I managed to be accepted for this course with my first application to enrol.

Then reality hit. I quickly realised being admitted to the course was the easy part; now I had to do it. Completing a degree is hard work – even more so when you haven't been in school for 30 years and out of the workforce for 16 years. And during those years there had been a major revolution in technology – PCs and word processing and the internet were a completely foreign landscape to me. I didn't even know how to turn on a computer – now that was scary. And as for research skills, well, I had none.

After all those years of caring for my sons and helping them with their homework, it was very humbling to find myself sitting on the other side of that relationship. If it hadn't been for my younger son Glenn I wouldn't have lasted a semester, let alone complete the degree. I owe my success to him. His patience and perseverance were my saving grace - sitting with me for hours, helping me find what I needed on the internet, and teaching me to use the computer. He was the best teacher I ever had.

And it was during this time that James 'came out'.

'Coming out'...

It was in the August school holidays; he was studying for his Year 12 exams and I was in my last year of university. His father and brother were in New Zealand on a skiing holiday, so it was just the two of us.

I was sitting on a stool in the kitchen when he came in and breezily said "Hey Mum, I have something to tell you." I said, "Oh yeah, what is it?" And he said those two little words, "I'm gay."

To be honest I was stunned and just said, "Oh!" What else can you say until you've digested that statement?

It turned out to be a very difficult week for both of us.

James...

In the school holiday, before James' 'coming out' Don and I had taken the boys to Western Australia on a driving holiday. Every year it was our goal to take them travelling because we saw this as part of their education and a great opportunity to be together without distractions.

While we were travelling James became ill with what appeared to be a stomach bug. He was pale and couldn't keep food down. Thinking it was just the usual sort of stomach virus that would clear up in a couple of days, we continued with our holiday.

But then he came to me one afternoon and painfully confessed he thought he was a paedophile. I asked him why and he sort of mumbled something that didn't make a lot of sense. I realise now that this was like a pre 'coming out' for him. He was obviously going through the self-loathing and fear of what being gay might mean. And while it sent alarm bells ringing, I just tried to console him and let him know that I had faith in him. And he knew he had our support.

On our return from Western Australia, he was due to stay with friends in the country who had small children. So I said, "I am so sure you aren't a paedophile that I want you to still go and stay on the farm. I'll call you the day after you get there and see if you want to come home. If you say yes, I'll get you home and get you the help you need so you won't be a paedophile." Of course, when I called he told me he was fine, which I knew would be the case.

The August school holidays were a few months later, by which time he'd worked through his feelings enough to 'come out' to me.

One of his friends called me after they went on a Schoolies trip to celebrate finishing high school. He wanted to tell me what a "stud" James was. This boy was so impressed with James and his technique with girls. I was smiling to myself, thinking, "If only he knew!" Later that day when James came home I told him about the conversation. He just laughed and said, "Mum, it would be an entirely different story if I was put into a room full of boys; then I'd be quiet. But I don't care about what the girls think of me like he does."

Me...

I cried for months about James being gay. It was a terrible time for me – and for his father. I was just beside myself with fear about what would happen to him, and of course with fear comes exaggerated concerns – always expecting to hear the worst.

I remember he went out a couple of times in his father's car, which was high powered, and I was quite fearful that he may do something silly while driving and hurt

himself. With so much going on in his head I feared he may not be concentrating properly while he was behind the wheel - even though he was quite a good driver.

I was also fearful that he would be bullied at school, because he had told a couple of friends and I was afraid that they may spread the news about him.

I was fearful about him getting AIDS because that's what I thought automatically happened to gay men. I was so concerned that some predator was just waiting to infect him.

I was fearful about him going out and thugs would realise he was gay and would bash him.

I was fearful that when he went clubbing he may try to pick up straight guys and then be beaten up. I didn't know about gay clubs and gay social scenes and support groups at this time.

I quickly realised there's a big difference between thinking you have a gay child and knowing that you do. I just couldn't believe as a mother that the most wanted baby in the world would have to face these things. I thought, "How could God do this to him?"

His Dad...

While Don was away I kept the news to myself. The day he came home I waited until we had gone to bed. Not surprisingly, he cried and I cried. There was some tension in the house for a while because all of this was uncharted water to us. As a family, we all had to get used to the knowledge that James was gay. It was difficult for all of us for a while, but things eventually eased to a degree.

However, Don and I began to disagree about what was best for James. I thought he should be allowed to move out, but being a student he couldn't really afford to do this. I wanted to subsidise him. I was trying to make his life easier, not more difficult. Don said he wasn't paying his son to move out. James and I were at loggerheads and I was concerned our relationship may be destroyed if he remained in the family home.

A few months later the four of us were out to dinner and by this time I'd had enough. I don't know what made me do it, but I said, "James, Dad and I have been talking and we think it's time you moved out, if you want and we'll subsidise you." Don was silent and I knew I'd have to deal with what I'd done, but James was ecstatic and within a month or two he moved out. It was the best thing for him.

He blossomed and our relationship strengthened; he rang me often, came home for dinner, he told me about his social life and even his love life. He became very open with me and, as Don freely admits now, it was the best thing that ever happened for James. He was just being a selfish dad. He didn't want to lose his son.

Over time Don became very comfortable with James' friends, but it took about three years before he actually told his own friends or family. One Christmas we were having some of his friends over. James and his partner Michael would be there as well, so this was crunch time.

I made it very clear that we didn't want anyone embarrassed or James and Michael pretending they weren't a couple. I was told later by the friends that initially they thought Don was going to tell them someone had died, so it was a huge relief to find out that James was just gay.

One of the main problems for Don was me starting to become outspoken in the community and being interviewed by newspapers and radio. He was always telling me that he was concerned about the repercussions for James, but understandably, I think he was just as concerned about himself and how his work colleagues would react when they found out. But again, fear and our own imagination were worse than the reality. Nobody cared; they were very supportive and praised him and me for speaking out.

I remember I was interviewed by a Sunday paper and I naturally went home and told Don. He was horrified. It was so bad that I got them to not run the story. But after that I learnt my lesson, which was to only tell him the day before it was printed and then it was too late to do anything and he just had to accept it. I always made sure I never

mentioned James' name or his occupation, which protected him to a certain degree.

James never had any real issue with me being interviewed.

I am pleased to say that Don is now my greatest supporter. He's my sounding board and proof reader for my speeches and at times comes along with me for moral support. And on days when I'm feeling tired and talk about going bush, he tells me I can't, I have too much to do and the gay community needs me. So how is that for a turnaround?

Initially Don, like many parents was concerned about how others would judge him. And he freely admits he was a bit of a homophobe, but he knows having a gay son has opened his mind and made him less judgemental of others. It doesn't make him love James' any less. His love isn't conditional.

His brother...

Glenn, our younger son, was great. People often fear how siblings will react when they learn they have a gay brother or sister. But we thought he needed to know; we don't live in a house that has secrets.

I was very proud of Glenn. When told he just said to James that he couldn't live his life as a lie and that was it. Glenn also became very friendly with James' friends and when he turned 18 he invited James' friends to his birthday party. They all came in giving him kisses and hugs and a pair of earrings that Glenn wore quite often. (Glenn's pierced ears are another story.) Glenn also began going to the gay bars and clubs with them and Don and I both started to think that we had two gay sons.

But after a while Glenn began to go less and less to the gay clubs. One day I broached the subject about why he had stopped. Had something happened? He looked at me as if I was silly and said, "Mum, I think I only need to go to the gay clubs with James for so long to let him see I accept him and his friends."

Did I mention I'm immensely proud of both my boys?

The only time Glenn has a problem is when I have been interviewed and the paper or magazine reads, "One, of her sons is gay." Glenn has asked me to state that it's my elder son, because he says the girls ask if it's him and it's killing his love life.

It is very important to never allow your gay son or lesbian daughter to have snide comments or be teased about their sexual orientation by their siblings. They should not be seen as a source of humour and their siblings should be respectful of them and the issues they are dealing with.

Extended family...

The first person outside our immediate family we told was my brother and his wife. They were very supportive, they told their girls pretty much straight away and were always there for me.

I must admit I was slow to tell my mother. I saw Mum as a person quick to judge and lay blame and I just didn't feel ready for this for quite awhile. I used to tell James, "I don't care who you tell, but please don't tell her until I am ready." James knew why I was hesitant, but constantly dropped hints to her.

One day, at the time of Mardi Gras, she informed me that she was taping the parade for James. I just said, "Oh, yes," and she continued on about how if you had a gay child you would still love him or her and she wouldn't care if she had a gay grandchild. Finally I said, "Are you trying to tell me James is gay?" and she fumbled a little. Then I said, "Look Mum, I've known for a year. I bought him his ticket for Mardi Gras." That day was one of the rare occasions I felt she actually listened to what I had to say. But I learned later that she blamed Don for being away too much with work which is a common belief for some.

To his grandfather it was a total non-issue.

The only people who had an issue were one set of friends. They wanted to continue the friendship, but I just couldn't. If they couldn't accept my son, I couldn't accept them.

All for one and one for all...

As a family unit we have always been supportive of each other. And of course the same applied with James' sexuality. We have always worked on the theory (especially when James developed a relationship) that if we were invited somewhere as a family and his partner was not included, none of us went and we let them know why. We aren't a family that believes in double standards. We see it as an insult to James if his partner is excluded, especially if we know that if he was straight, bringing a partner wouldn't be an issue.

It was also a conscious decision of ours to tell people beforehand that James is gay. We felt that if someone was going to get the brunt of rejection, it was better if it was us, rather than have James experience the hurt. We found that often people didn't have a negative reaction. For some, it was a shock and they needed to digest the news, but then they were fine. It also gave us an opportunity to normalise it for them.

I once had someone tell me that they saw our family as similar to the Brady Bunch. I laughed and pointed out that the actor who played the dad in the show was gay, so perhaps we were similar.

James' friends and partner are always welcome in our home; we love it when they come to visit. James is presently living overseas, but his friends still visit, making us feel he is not so far away. We feel truly blessed that they want to come and spend time with us.

Lessons learnt - the good, the bad and the ugly...

So that's the story of my son's 'coming out' and how our family reacted to it. Each family's story is different, but there are some things I've learnt over the years from doing peer support that we can all share and benefit from. Read on and see if you can find yourself in the following pages.

What does "I'm gay" mean?

When your son tells you he is gay, it does not mean he needs to play more sport and he'll grow out of it. When your daughter tells you she is lesbian, it does not mean she doesn't know how to 'pretty herself up' so that men are attracted to her.

When your son tells you he is gay, it does not mean he wants to be a girl. And when your daughter tells you she is lesbian, it does not mean she wants to be a boy. A man wanting to be a woman (and vice versa) is called a transgender or transsexual. A man wanting to dress as a woman (or a woman wanting to dress as a man) is known as a cross-dresser and they are often heterosexual.

When your son tells you he is gay, it does not mean he has a passing fancy for men, but he's still attracted to women. The same goes for women. If your daughter tells you she is lesbian, it also does not mean she has a crush on a woman, but she's still attracted to men. People who experience physical attraction to both genders are bisexual.

And, perhaps most importantly, when your son tells you he is gay, it does not mean he is a pervert or a molester of children. That's called paedophilia and that is morally and legally unacceptable anywhere or at any time. End of discussion.

Regardless of whether you have a gay son or lesbian daughter, sexual orientation has nothing to do with morality.

When your son tells you he is gay or your daughter says she is lesbian, it means they have been through some intense self-examination and acknowledged that they feel sexual attraction towards their own gender, but not towards the opposite sex. You learning to cope with this knowledge is nowhere near as difficult as the process they've been through to discover and acknowledge this about themselves.

Homophobia

Homophobia is an irrational aversion to homosexuality and homosexuals – often stemming from ignorance. In the late nineteenth century, psychiatrists were striving to be considered serious medical specialists and they decided if they could develop theories to understand the criminal mind it would give their field credibility. In their misguided logic, they formed the opinion that homosexuals were criminals and deviants and most certainly not to be trusted.

I'd like to point out that this was a time when masturbation was considered a problem that would lead to insanity and the cure was to have a Christian person sit by the bed. If that didn't work their hands were tied to the side of the bed with a type of cage over the body and if both of these methods failed, very hot water was poured over the genitals. We would now quickly realise who was insane or ignorant in this scenario. I read this cure in a medical book written by Dr. Kellogg in 1893. It should be pointed out that this particular doctor also had a questionable sexual orientation and I think he was probably looking for answers. He was just born 100 years too early.

Misconceptions linger even today. My mother one day even suggested to me that a gay person had designed her friend's new apartment. I was genuinely curious as to how

she came to this conclusion, so I had to ask why?

She said, "Because of all of the tiles in the bathroom."

I said, "What does that have to do with anything?" and she replied,

"For their orgies. They can slide around in the oil easier."

I was incensed and we had strong words about her assumptions and vivid imagination. The only thing that makes me feel a little better is when I tell this story, most people fall about laughing at the ridiculousness of the assumption.

Homosexuality is not a mental illness or deviance and therefore it can't be cured or changed. It was removed from Australian and US medical lists in 1983 and the World Health Organisation in 1990. I am so pleased my son was born into a more informed time. I would hate to be living in the time where the main attempted 'cure' was electric shock therapy and aversion treatment, which of course didn't work but had a horrendous psychological effect on the person.

Today there are still people attempting to cure homosexuality, but these cures have more negative effects especially when the feelings of homosexuality return and the person struggles with their sexual urges. In our support group we have a person who is very religious and went to the US with his wife, just to be cured. But on his return he announced nothing had changed. His family unit broke down and he has been ostracised by his family, but he just couldn't pretend any longer.

Another of our parents took her son to the doctor for counselling when he 'came out'. But the doctor quickly pointed out that it wasn't her son that needed counselling. She was the one in need of help to come to terms with her son's orientation.

Dealing with it

It doesn't matter if parents suspect – to have confirmation from your child as I did can still be heartbreaking. For me, I realised very quickly that there's a difference between thinking you have a gay son and knowing, because when you know, you then have to deal with it and the issues that come along with the knowledge.

As parents, we need to be aware that our emotions at this time can - and generally do - swing wildly; often between anger and tears. Regardless of how strong we are trying to be, or whether our response is making the situation worse for the family and the child who has disclosed – we're still only human. We need time to digest the news.

Shock

This is the usual first response and the time when reactions are unpredictable. When your child says, "Mum, Dad, I have something to tell you," the last thing you expect to hear is that they're gay.

I heard the story of one young man racing into the kitchen as his parents were eating dinner. He blurted out the news that he was gay and then ran out of the front door, got into a waiting car and drove to Sydney. I always imagine the forks being held near the parents' mouths and getting no further. To compound the drama he then phoned his sister from the car and told her that she needed to go to Mum and Dad because he had told them his news.

A father told me about how his son disclosed his sexuality to him as he was driving around a large roundabout. I have visions of this man on full lock similar to Chevy Chase in *Family Vacation* just constantly driving in circles until the shock passed.

I also had a woman in her mid-thirties relate the story of her 'coming out'. She said, "Mum, I have to tell you that I have a brain tumour." Her mother was obviously distraught and then her daughter said, "It's alright Mum, I'm not really dying; I'm just lesbian."

It is easy to see that these are not the ideal ways to be told that your child is gay or lesbian. But because it is so stressful for the young person, sometimes the only way they can tell is to just blurt it out. I often have calls from young people asking, "What's

the best way to tell Mum and Dad I'm gay?" There is no 'right' way, but I advise never to tell at family celebrations, or when there is a lot of stress in the house. For some reason many young people feel the need to disclose on significant birthdays, or at New Year. They see it as a beginning. One mother told me that as she proudly watched her son unwrap his 18th birthday present he announced that he was gay. She said she felt inwardly devastated, but what can you do or say on his day of celebration?

Depending on family dynamics and geography, sometimes a letter, phone call or face-to-face is better. There is also the issue of telling parents together or separately. Regardless of how we are told, as parents we need to know:

- it's okay to feel shock when they break the news
- it's okay to cry - some parents cry for months, I know I did
- it's okay to feel homosexuality isn't the norm for us, but we need to understand that it is for our son or daughter
- it isn't unreasonable to have fears about HIV, discrimination and ostracism, but we do need to be aware that often our fears are worse than the reality, especially now with legislative changes and better safe sex education
- acceptance can take time

Sometimes young people expect us to accept their sexuality immediately and be as excited as they are with their acceptance of self. However, this is where your child needs to be patient and tolerant, because for most parents this is not possible. If you really want to learn and understand what they're going through, you will, but it takes time.

Our young people need to realise it took them a long time to accept their orientation and come to self acceptance and that their parents need to do the same.

Who is this stranger?

Don't be surprised if initially your child feels like a stranger to you. This usually happens because the child isn't fitting into the mould we as parents planned for them.

Many parents feel hurt that they were the last to know. Others are shocked because they think they should know everything about their sons and daughters and they suddenly realise they don't. Well here's some news, most parents face this when their children move from childhood to maturity – regardless of whether they're gay, straight or anything in between.

It's not a choice

Homosexuality is not a choice or fashion trend. I have never met a person who really *chose* their orientation. Did you choose yours? I didn't. However, I have met many people who *choose* to live their lives honestly.

There are no more lesbians and gays today than there were 50 years ago. The difference is that now many feel less inhibited to 'come out'.

It's not about sex...

For quite a while after James 'came out' all I could see when he stood in front of me was a mass of sexual orientation. I have discovered over the years that this is common to many parents. This reaction eventually fades, but to me, as an accepting parent who was already aware of the possibility that he was gay, I found these emotions very unsettling.

'Coming out' is not about what your child does in bed. It isn't about sex at all. When your child 'comes out' it means they have enough respect for themselves and care enough about you to want to be honest about who they are.

When you tell people your son is gay or your daughter is lesbian, it shows your honesty and the strength of your relationship with your child. It stops the questions about when are they getting married? Do they have a girlfriend yet? Aren't they a bit slow? And people trying to set them up on blind dates. You've told them your son or daughter

lives an alternative, but perfectly acceptable lifestyle and the things they've been asking you are just not relevant to their life.

When you tell people your son is gay or your daughter is lesbian you can be honest; you can begin to talk about what they're doing. There is no more secrecy or lies. There's no more worrying about what you told them last time. There's no more feeling uncomfortable because you're only telling half truths.

As a heterosexual we are letting the world know we are straight all of the time. We wear wedding rings and engagement rings. We can have photos of our partner on our desk without fear of criticism or judgement. We can kiss our partner hello and goodbye without insult from passers-by or friends. We can hold hands as we walk along the street or in a restaurant without feeling we are being judged or glared at by strangers. All of this tells the world in a clear manner we are heterosexual, but it doesn't say what we do in bed. And by telling friends and family your child is gay or lesbian it doesn't say what they do in bed either.

It's not about you

When your son or daughter 'came out', did you suddenly become overly concerned about yourself? Did you start thinking, "I won't have grandchildren", or "I always wanted a lovely wedding for my daughter", or "What will I tell my friends?"

For a while, parents can forget that it isn't about them. It's their son or daughter who really has to deal with this, live this life and suffer the discrimination that it throws at them. Remember, this isn't something they have chosen. All they have chosen is to be open with you and live their life honestly. This is something you can see with hindsight, but at the beginning this can be very difficult. It takes time, and as you move towards acceptance you'll begin to realise the issues your child is facing.

Some fathers suffer bruised egos - feeling less of a man because they have a gay son. Or they suffer guilt, thinking they let their child down by not spending enough time with them - which of course isn't true. We need to constantly remind ourselves

that the sexual orientation of our children bears no relationship to our parenting skills. We can be the best or worst parent on the planet, it makes no difference. The sad part for fathers is that they rarely seek support or information to help them understand, which isn't always healthy for all involved.

If you're a father in this situation – or you know someone who is – understand that there is plenty of information and peer support out there. You just have to reach out for it. Many mums and dads feel guilt that they weren't more supportive or didn't handle things better. However, when your child 'comes out', it's a shock and not something you expect, so don't be too hard on yourself.

Fear

Sometimes parents are fearful about what will happen to their son or daughter when they move out of home. They fear there's some mysterious world that will swallow up their child. The fears are even greater when you know they face discrimination and inequality as well as the usual leaving home challenges.

But we need to have faith in our parenting and our children. We also need to let them know there are safety nets; that we are always there for them. If we want to provide parental support, care and guidance, our gay sons and lesbian daughters need to know they can always come home and discuss their problems. This does not just mean emotional or relationship issues. Gay and lesbians face discrimination on a daily basis – socially, professionally, under the law and in the community. One of the most valuable things you can give to your gay or lesbian child is the knowledge that you are there for them. We need to ensure that we don't transfer our fears for them, onto them. They don't need to be more afraid.

Shame

This is very common, so please don't feel bad. As one parent said one day in a meeting, "We all have our ideas about lesbians and gays, but when we learn our son or daughter

is one, we often realise we are wrong.” And, of course we know or believe that most of our friends and relatives have similar thoughts. How do you break the news to them that your child is ‘one of those’? We don’t want to be judged as bad parents, and we don’t want people thinking badly of our child.

I would love a dollar for every time a parent asked me, “How can I tell people?” We often worry too much about what others think. Personally, I say who cares? My first allegiance is to my children and husband, not the neighbours or relatives and friends. I believe if people really are your friends, they will be supportive of your stance with your child. And as far as the neighbours go, they are either your friends, who support you or you’re not close enough to care what they think.

To tell or not to tell

A common question parents ask when they are still struggling with the idea of their child being gay or lesbian is, “Why should we tell people he's gay? We don't tell people our children are straight.” This is true, but it's an assumption they're straight and accepting your child's homosexuality is all about honesty. It is about you being as honest as they've been with you.

If you choose not to tell friends you have a gay child that's fine. But if you don't talk about it because you care what people will think when they find out, then that's not so fine. This means you still carry shame or some similar emotion and you haven't worked through all of your feelings yet.

If you genuinely don't care what people think when they find out that's fine; but why keep it a secret? Why not just tell people when they ask about partners and marriage?

But never expect your son or daughter to keep the secret just to make you or others feel more comfortable. Our children have done nothing wrong; sexuality is like eye colour, nobody chooses, we just have to accept what we're given.

Blame

Blame is a very common reaction. As a parent we look for reasons as to why our child is gay or lesbian. We need reasons which explain why this has happened. It isn't uncommon to blame yourself. We can always find a reason. Was it because he was sickly as a child and we were overprotective? Was it because she preferred to play sport than dress-ups? Some blame their child's friends. Others blame each other.

I once had parents come to me seeking assistance. As they sat down at my table the mother pointed her finger at her husband and said, "It's his fault; he was never there." Not surprisingly, the man immediately burst into tears.

Of course it was no one's fault. It doesn't matter if you're the best or the worst parent, it makes no difference to whether your child is gay or not. Children are born gay, not made that way by their environment.

Blame is essentially a useless exercise. It doesn't solve anything and it doesn't change the facts. Your child is homosexual. How they became that way doesn't really matter. Sexual orientation is an essential part of a person's nature. You can't just change it because you don't like the idea of it. It is like breathing or sleeping – it just is.

Instead of wasting time and energy with blame, you can really make a difference by supporting and accepting your child unconditionally.

Guilt

There are two types of guilt with this issue. Sometimes parents feel guilty because they should have seen it coming and stopped it. It's a common belief. They haven't yet learned that you can't 'stop' someone's sexual orientation.

Other parents hear their child's story about their struggle for self-acceptance, or the bullying they endured alone, and feel guilty that they weren't there to help their child. Many young people don't open up to parents during this period because they are

scared that Mum or Dad's reaction will make things worse. For the young person this is not a time for them to risk rejection by family.

In much the same way as blame achieves nothing, so too with guilt. The only thing guilt does is make you feel miserable. You can't change what has been done – and even if you could, it wouldn't make any difference. Your child will still be homosexual regardless of anything you did or didn't do in the past. What makes a difference is how you can help and support your child from here on in. Put blame and guilt aside and focus on the here and now.

Grief

For many it really is like their much-loved child has died and a stranger is standing in front of them. For others, they are grieving the loss of their expectations – the marriage and children. In one sense this is selfish because the young person may also be feeling the loss of these opportunities. Many parents forget this.

We also need to understand that it isn't about us and our losses. Even if they were straight, these might not have been our child's goals anyway. But if it is your child's wish to have a family, it is still possible. A lesbian couple can still have a baby, perhaps not conceived in the traditional way, but there are many options today. Also, the majority of Australian States and Territories allow surrogacy for same-sex couples, meaning it is possible for a gay couple to have a child.

Grief is a process that only time can heal. Talking about your feelings can be very helpful – sometimes they echo around in your head until they become overwhelming, but by sharing them you make it easier to let them go. And that is the key. You can grieve over your disappointments, but the longer you focus on what you don't have, the more you will miss of what you do have. Think about the fact that your child wanted you to know this about them; that they cared enough about you to tell

you; that they care enough about your opinion to fear your rejection – that you can be there to support them and make a real difference to their future.

Anger

The typical anger response is, “How dare they do this to us? We have been good parents!” I once had a parent call me who was very upset. After a little conversation she said, “Our son is adopted and we sent him to good schools and this is how he repays us.” I wondered for a few minutes if they had actually done this man any favours. Their love was conditional and they felt that he owed them because they adopted him. The statement was made in anger and ignorance. They still hadn’t come to terms with the fact that sexual orientation is not a choice. It was not something their son had thoughtlessly decided to do. His sexual orientation is just part of who he is, and by choosing to disclose this to his parents, he was just being honest with them.

Sometimes we respond with anger because we suddenly realise we can’t control everything. In particular, we can’t decide who or what our child will become as they grow into adulthood. Some things just are the way they are and nothing a parent can do will ever change that.

I also hear parents say, “This is all I need. Don’t they think I have enough to deal with?” or “What about me? Don’t they care how I feel about this?” It’s as if their child has deliberately done this for attention or selfish spiteful reasons just to upset Mum or Dad. This could not be further from the truth.

It takes a lot of courage for a child to expose themselves to the kind of family rejection that ‘coming out’ can bring. Your child hasn’t been living in a vacuum. They know the way many people think about homosexuality – and they probably have a fair idea about your views on the subject. This is not the kind of emotional trauma they would initiate just for fun. Being honest with themselves about their sexual nature has

been a long a painful process for your child. If they didn't care about what you thought, why would they bother to 'come out' and be honest with you?

Denial

This can be a very dangerous stage for a parent if you remain in it too long. The longer you stay in denial, the harder it is to accept the reality of your child's life. Families need to work together to bring each other through any denial that exists.

It isn't uncommon for parents to say, "He just needs to come to his senses," or, "She is just depressed." This is especially common when the person disclosing is/or was married.

Denial can be a kind of comfort zone for you. You hang on to the hope or belief that your child is just confused, too young to know or just experimenting and all they need is an opposite sex partner and they will be fine.

You can push the information to the back of your mind, hoping it will just sort itself out as your son or daughter becomes an adult or as their situation changes. But this doesn't happen; pretending it's not true doesn't make it any less real for your child.

Parents who deny the reality are often worse off emotionally than those who deal with the issue at the beginning. Why? Because - regardless of the feelings you may be experiencing, your child is gay or lesbian, whether you want to acknowledge it or not. And by denying it, you are saying to your child, "I don't want to know who you truly are and I don't want to be part of your real life." This can never be a good thing.

But he's so popular with girls...

Their son's relationship with girls is a common topic amongst parents I speak with when their son first 'comes out'. They are confused about how he can be gay when he's so friendly with the girls. They usually either assume he's friendly because he's attracted to

them in a romantic or sexual way. And then the penny drops. Put simply, it's just that there is no sexual chemistry between them and so it's easy to be friends.

Some do have heterosexual relationships. Sometimes it's just following what their friends are doing; for others it can be trying to make 'those other feelings' go away. There are no guidelines with this for parents to understand.

Many women enjoy having gay male friends. They not only have friendship, they also get a man's perspective on the world without the sexual tension and uncertainty that can be a part of heterosexual male-female friendships. The same can apply to heterosexual men with lesbian friends.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch...

Another concern at this time is that while you are trying to deal with your own swinging emotions, you're also trying to be supportive for your child. Simultaneously, your child is probably terrified of rejection and is looking for added reassurance that their family still love and accept them.

I remember James at this time. There was quite a bit of tension in the household and James was probably more stressed than anyone. One, because he knew there was no going back and secondly, he was busy studying for Year 12 exams.

He was always ringing help lines for advice and we were concerned about who was on the other end of the line. Was this person credible? Later we realised this was all pretty normal stuff, but at the time it's difficult for everyone.

This is a time when parents have many unanswered questions and fears about a sexual orientation they know very little about. Many of us don't understand our own orientation properly, so how can we understand somebody else's? How often do we hear of parents giving children books to read about sex and then saying, "If you have any questions, just come and ask"? And you know they are praying that the child never does.

We need to take into account that homosexuality is a culture that parents and children generally don't live in together. So for many of us, we cannot imagine the difficulties our young people have to deal with and often on their own.

Interestingly, I know a lesbian mum who told me that her children were straight and she found it difficult to comprehend because she didn't know what to do with her 'straight kids', the same as we don't know what to do with our 'gay kids'. I got to know this woman quite well over the years and I think she's a wonderful parent who has excelled with her children. They are well grounded and have a great respect for her.

Jesus didn't discriminate

I remember the first call I ever received for support. It was from a young man, 18-years old, who was from a Greek Orthodox family in a regional town. His brother was gay and so was he. The problem was his grandmother was on a plane bringing his 'chosen' wife to Australia for him to marry. The boy was panicking because the following Sunday, which was Easter Sunday, the priest was to give his blessing.

This young man was threatening to tell the family about his homosexuality in front of the priest and the young woman. I suggested he inform his family before the Sunday and most certainly not in front of the priest. I also suggested if he was in fear of his personal safety, that perhaps he should telephone his parents and let them know that he didn't want to go ahead with the arranged marriage. His other option was what too many people still do and that is to marry and live their lives a lie.

I sometimes feel sorry for families with strong religious beliefs. Many feel compelled to leave their church at a time they most need support and comfort. Instead, they get rejection and judgement. At other times I find it hard not to be angry at parents when they use their religious beliefs as an excuse to reject their child. After all, for Christians the simplest commandment Jesus gave was to love one another - "do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Would you really want to be rejected by your family because of something you have no choice in?

And when people tell me that it's easier for me to accept my son because I'm not part of a church, I quickly point out that perhaps I'm more Christian than they are because I do accept my son.

I once had a wonderful Catholic priest from a middle class parish tell me that if a parent is struggling between religion and acceptance of their child, the parent should stand with their child and move towards acceptance. I have to tell you, I nearly stood and clapped when I heard this.

Religion has a lot to answer for when it comes to acceptance of sexual diversity. It isolates people and destroys families. The Bible once condoned slavery, ownership of women and incest as a norm, which of course is now seen as outdated and no longer acceptable. Quoting the Bible as a reason to reject your homosexual son or daughter is just an excuse.

My God is a loving God and doesn't judge us on things over which we have no control. I also believe He doesn't make mistakes and my son is definitely not a mistake.

Double standards

Another common issue is sleepovers. Are you uncomfortable with your lesbian or gay child having their partner sleep over? If you are, ask yourself would you mind if they were straight? Do your straight children's partners sleep over? If you say to one their partner can sleep over, but not the other, you have not accepted your homosexual child.

Some parents say they won't allow it because there are young children in the house. If their straight siblings have partners staying the night, why not their gay sibling? What message are you sending the younger children about their gay or lesbian sibling? What message are you sending about the conditional nature of your love and parenting?

Another big issue for some parents coming to terms with their child being gay or lesbian is entering the bedroom when they visit the couple at their own home. I always smile to myself about this. They are very hesitant because when they see the bed they visualise orgies and perverted sexual activity happening on it. I then ask them if they

have the same concerns about their straight children's bed. I suggest that for all they know their straight children and their partners may be more active and adventurous than their gay son or lesbian daughter. Think about your assumptions, tone down the vivid imagination and try and keep things in perspective.

Are you repulsed by seeing your child show affection to their partner, even if this is just a hug or a kiss? If you see your straight child give their partner a hug, touch each other as they pass or hold hands as they sit on the lounge and watch TV, do you even notice?

Personally, I like to see my son and his partner show affection. My husband and I during our life together have shown affection to each other and the boys as a normal part of our life. And to me it's only natural that they do the same with their partners.

Finding understanding and acceptance

I have discovered that we all have our own excuses not to accept, and of course these are not in our power to change. Some parents say, "If I was younger I would be more understanding", assuming they would be more tolerant of these things if they were younger.

Others say, "If I was older, I would be more understanding," assuming older parents take more things in their stride. But age has nothing do with acceptance.

It doesn't matter if the excuse is religion, relatives who don't understand and will make their lives difficult, work mates not understanding or friends who they believe will judge them harshly. These are all excuses to not accept and not be honest about our son or daughter.

If the truth be told, much of it is shame and hurt pride that is a huge factor in our reluctance to accept our son or daughters' sexual diversity. It is our own homophobia.

Many of us struggle with the outdated beliefs that homosexuality means paedophilia, lack of morals, and disease. We struggle with the thought that our son or daughter will end up in a depraved lifestyle. But when we educate ourselves we soon

learn that this isn't necessarily so. Our children don't lose the moral code and family values that we taught them as they grew up.

Over my many years working in the gay community I have met some of the most generous-in-spirit people you could hope to find. Unfortunately, many have little to do with their own families because of a lack of understanding.

I also find that so many are very appreciative of what I do and the support that other PFLAG members show to them. This can be with our presence at a gay community event or hearing me/us on the radio defending them or encouraging acceptance and understanding. Sometimes I can be at an event, feeling quite bored, or feeling that I could be spending my time better on other things and then someone comes and thanks me for being there, or tells me how they heard me speak somewhere and it gave them the confidence to 'come out' to family and how they were accepting of their news. This makes it all feel worthwhile and I know that caring enough to understand and reach out is never a waste of time.

There are thousands of stories about families coming to terms with gay and lesbian loved ones – all unique, and yet somehow the same. I have covered many of the common responses to 'coming out' here, but if you want to read more stories, you'll find them towards the end of this book.

Of course, you can always come along to a PFLAG meeting and share your own story with the rest of us...

Country views

These days there are many support forums and services for gay and lesbian men and women in city areas. In country areas, though, the situation is not so good.

In general, understanding and tolerance of sexual difference is lower in smaller, more remote communities. For people in rural areas there are often very few resources or professionals to provide real support. For many, being homosexual is even more isolating than the sparsely populated region is for heterosexual men and women.

This is a serious concern for us all. Young people are very hesitant to 'come out' because they fear their disclosure won't be treated as confidential and are worried about homophobic responses. Often there is no community worker in the town aware of where or how to access resources and support. This problem of isolation and fear is directly linked to the high suicide rate amongst homosexuals living in country areas. It is also why so many gays and lesbians leave home and move to the cities. It isn't because they want to, it's because they have to.

A few years ago two PFLAG parents and I drove to Toowoomba and on to Charleville in outback Queensland to do some radio interviews with the hope of reaching out to those in the local areas. We felt it was very important to let families know they weren't alone. We didn't get many people contacting us by phone, but our website proved to be very popular at that time. The internet is a safe and confidential way to access information as long as you stay with the credible sites.

A few years ago I had a call from a parent in Central Queensland. Her son had 'come out' and she was concerned about family reactions. The mother was going to be in Brisbane and so we made a time to meet. I learnt from this meeting to never judge a book by its cover.

I was watching out for her when I saw a woman across the road standing with a man that I jokingly say looked like a bushranger. I thought, "Oh, no!!" He looked like he'd be a difficult dad to convince that his son had done nothing wrong. But to my amazement, even though he seemed a rough and tough individual, he was a very nice man who was extremely supportive of his son and I could quickly tell this young man had no fear of rejection by family.

The problem was that the parents were concerned that they may one day reject their son, because they heard parents do this and they wanted to avoid this happening in their family. So we had a very pleasant chat about several issues that concerned them and put them at ease. These parents are great role models and I wish there were more open minded people like these with unconditional love for their children - whether they live in the city or country.

Karma...

One day PFLAG received a call from a country mother named Lucille who was seeking information and support because of her gay son, then living in Melbourne. She was most concerned about him because he wanted to go back to the bush to run his property and with him being gay she was fearful of what might happen to him given the local ignorance and homophobic sentiment.

After Lucille had gone loaded with books and information I worried because I felt we hadn't been able to help her as much as she needed. So for about a year I pondered what we could do to help the other Lucille's in rural and regional areas of Australia.

It came to me that we could put together an information pack, which would provide information to professionals who come into contact with lesbian and gay youth and their families. I decided the pack had to be comprehensive so it contained information and referrals for everyone involved. There were 45,000 pieces of information that needed to be collated into 5,000 packs.

At the time I was putting the pack together Big Brother was on TV and there was a 'gay guy' housemate who everyone was interested in. People were always asking me if I was watching. Most of the time I wasn't, but towards the end I did become interested. One night, who should be on the TV but Lucille! Her son David was the 'gay guy'. I was so excited for her and him. Obviously things hadn't gone as badly as she feared.

Then out of the blue I received a call from a production company. David nominated PFLAG Brisbane as his charity of choice in a TV competition and, fortunately for us, his general knowledge was amazing and he won. PFLAG was \$20,000 better able to spread the word about understanding and acceptance.

It was wonderful to me that the person who put me on the path to developing resources for rural and regional areas was the one to make us his charity of choice. He knew nothing of our project at the time. I guess, even though we felt our help was inadequate, what we gave his mum must have made some difference to both of them.

So my message to those living or working in regional areas is that there are plenty of resources and support out there for you. The internet and the telephone are your link to the wider world. The important thing is, don't feel you are alone and without hope. It may not be easy, but there are ways to live your life honestly and safely.

So, what happens to your child without your support?

No one gets away unhurt when families can't accept difference in loved ones. Lack of acceptance can and does cause real psychological damage, which for many has a devastating effect. I see way too many victims of this - suffering depression and self-destructive behaviour. It undermines the whole family structure.

I believe that if young people can 'come out' earlier to family and be accepted we can significantly reduce youth homelessness, depression and suicide. Behind every statistic is someone's son or daughter. Credible research shows that one in five homeless youth are on the streets because of fear of being 'outed' to parents or parents are aware and have rejected the child completely. There is also an invisible group of homeless youth. They are the ones sleeping on couches in homes where parents are accepting or with friends who are flatting.

And then there is the problem of youth suicide because of the fear of being 'outed', or because they've been rejected by the family after they have 'come out'. The most common age is between 15 and 23. I could never imagine feeling so bad about myself that suicide is the only option. But this is what happens. We often don't realise that it isn't only us that has negative views of homosexuality. Young people who are becoming aware of their homosexual identity can have grave fears about themselves. They often believe the stereotyping and negative views and just don't want to be like that. So for many, suicide *seems to be* the best option.

As a mother I say to you, please don't let your child become a statistic. Do whatever you can to understand what being homosexual really means to your child living in Australia today. Our sons and daughters need all of the support and encouragement we can give.

Self-loathing

My son isn't alone with his early fears that he was an abhorrent sexual predator because of his attraction to men. Some parts of mainstream society tell young people that being gay or lesbian means they are bad; they are deviants; they have no morals; they are second-rate. Young people often become confused and afraid. They don't want to be all these evil bad things, but if they're gay, then they must be - or they'll eventually end up like that. Right? All too frequently it sends young people into a frenzy of fear. Many contemplate or succeed with suicide; many run away from home before telling their family, because they are fearful of rejection, and still more slip into clinical depression. Others do drugs and alcohol to hide their fear and pain.

This is often happening during high school years when most people start to become aware of their sexual feelings. For some, their grades drop. Others try to keep under parental radar and work extremely hard to not be noticed as 'different' by their peers. As parents we often have no idea the stress our kids are under. We put unusual behaviour down to puberty, or they're 'just being teenagers'.

Self-loathing due to our sexual orientation is something that heterosexuals rarely experience. But many homosexuals carry it with them most of their lives. It's not a healthy way to live.

As a gay male once said to me, "I wonder every morning as I leave the front gate what will I strike today?" Will it be someone shouting some derogatory comment at him as he walks down the street or will it be a snide remark from a co-worker? These are concerns heterosexuals rarely, if ever, encounter in relation to sexual orientation. How

often do you hear someone yell, "bloody straight"? But you do hear, "bloody poofter" and it isn't meant as a compliment.

As parents, we can minimise the impact of this by being proud of our lesbian daughters and gay sons. This can be done by including their partners and friends in family gatherings, talking openly and positively about them to friends and family. Initially it can be daunting, but with practice you'll soon not even realise you're doing it.

As a parent, it is often easier to minimise the impact of self-loathing on our children if they 'come out' to us early. Even though it can seem more difficult for us to hear, it's better in the long-term. I have found that many homosexuals who keep it a secret until their late 20's and 30's suffer long-term serious issues related to stress and depression, which comes from feeling the need to keep the secret. This can have a lasting impact on their self-esteem.

Our sons and daughters need to know we don't consider them disappointments or secondary to their siblings. They need to know they can come to us for support and be true to themselves with us .

We can do this by letting them know we love them and getting as much information as possible to understand their life. Talk to their friends about their lives and take a general interest in what they do. It's also very helpful to never look shocked or be judgemental when they are just talking generally to you.

If you have a lesbian daughter, never suggest lipstick or wearing a dress. This generally makes them feel that Mum just doesn't get it. And never tell your son or daughter that it's such a waste that they're gay or lesbian. This is not a positive comment from a parent who is supposedly supportive. Be positive about their achievements and don't forget they are more than just their sexual orientation. Not all discussions need to be centred around this topic.

We need to understand that telling us, their parent, is one of the hardest things our sons and daughters will ever have to do. For our child, our opinion matters.

Bullying

This is something that many of us have to contend with for a variety of reasons, but when it's because of sexual orientation, it often just adds to the person's own self-loathing. And then there are the 'poofter' jokes that are so common. On top of that, your child may be worrying about how you're going to take their 'coming out' and kids at school are teasing them or worse. Imagine how bad your child might be feeling.

Some young people haven't yet woken to their sexual identity and are unaware of their orientation. Children seem to be able to pick difference very easily. I once had a fellow tell me that he couldn't understand why the kids in the playground called him 'poofter' and bullied him. Then a few years out of school he realised he was gay. He was amazed that his classmates knew when he didn't. Others will put up with terrible bullying and not say anything because they are fearful of what family will say if they find out they're gay or lesbian.

What is worse, these young people are very often unprotected. Teachers and administrators tell them to play football and toughen up, or say, "Well what do you expect if you're going to act this way?" It isn't uncommon for teachers and administrators to ignore the bullying because it's easier to do nothing, or they're fearful they will be abused themselves for protecting the young lesbian or gay person.

I am a firm believer that every child has the right to be safe at school and receive an equal education. This is not an unreasonable belief in twenty-first century Australia. If your child is being bullied at school, speak up. Talk to the teacher and the school principal. If you get no results from that, take it higher – talk to the State or Federal Education department or the Equal Rights Commissioner – talk to your State MP or the relevant local or Federal Minister. Better still, talk to the Minister's Press Secretary. Or arrive at school with a lawyer.

I also don't hold with the idea that bullying is part of life, or it just toughens you up. The education system needs to actively work to stamp out homophobic behaviours with programs and policies that are enforced, not left languishing on the shelf gathering dust in the Principal's office. Again this is something we as parents can encourage or insist upon.

Bullying can and does cause long term damage to people. In school children it causes depression, truancy and suicide. There is nothing positive that comes from bullying, so don't stand for it.

Moving forward

Once you've come through the initial emotional turmoil of your child 'coming out' it's begins to get easier to see a way forward. By reaching out to your child and by trying to understand their life – its joys and its challenges – you can strengthen the relationships within your family and move on to happier times.

But how do I start the discussion?

Communication is the key to resolving any human relationship issue. We have to both talk and listen to each other. So often parents say that their child doesn't want to talk to them about the issues they are facing. Some are uncomfortable discussing personal issues with their child – or they feel they're being intrusive by asking.

Funnily enough, the young people I deal with often say they would like to talk, but think their parents don't want to know. Others just don't know how to begin the conversation with Mum or Dad. No matter how difficult, embarrassing or uncomfortable the discussion may be for you, if you truly want to understand and come to terms with your child's daily reality, you have to talk to one another. Having said that, you should be aware that your son or daughter is very likely to be feeling hypersensitive due to their fear of rejection.

Let me share some tips for starting the conversation with your child.

Where and when

- Be as calm as possible
- Make it a time when the house is quiet and you can concentrate on the discussion
- Or find a neutral space outside of the home
- Be honest and say, “I don’t understand, but I want to”
- Make sure your conversation isn’t interpreted as an inquisition
- Explain that honest discussion will help you to be comfortable and you want to be supportive
- Sometimes one on one discussions are better than having a group discussion even if the same questions are asked by others in the family

Conversation starters

- How long have you known?
- Were you aware when you were younger that you felt different?
- Have you told friends?
- Have you had anyone turn against you since ‘coming out’?
- Do you have a partner? If so, for how long?
- When can I meet him/her?
- What was your main concern about us finding out?
- Has ‘coming out’ been as difficult as you anticipated?
- What has been good for you about ‘coming out’?
- What do you want me to know about your sexual orientation?
- How can I best support you?
- Do you need support from lesbian or gay support groups?
- Is it ok for me to tell family or friends?
- Would you like help to tell family and friends?
- Do you feel happier for being honest and telling us?

- How do you see your life as a lesbian or gay person?
- Has 'coming out' changed things like your career path, life goals etc?
- Do you feel honest about your life now that you can be honest about your sexuality? If not; why not?
- What do you see as the biggest difficulties of being homosexual?

I suggest when having this conversation, don't make negative comments. Listen to what they have to say. As a parent you may be feeling negative, but it's best not to pass these feelings on to them. Remember, this conversation is about you understanding your child better, not an opportunity to make them feel worse. Plus, if you do, they won't talk to you about their concerns.

If all else fails, a hug and reassurance for your child that you love them will go a long way to keeping the bond strong between you.

Take your gay child's new life seriously...

As with most things in life, the first step to showing your child you accept their new life and want to be part of it is always the hardest. But, as life keeps proving to me, once you're over the initial hurdle, it gets much easier from then on in.

When relationships end

It's always important for us as parents to remember that our gay child's relationship is as serious and important to them as our straight child's relationships. So often, parents are more sympathetic towards their straight child if they suffer a broken heart, than they are if it happens to their gay child.

It can come from double standards, or believing that same sex relationships don't matter or aren't as important as a straight relationship, they don't last (which isn't true), or don't know how to respond. Sometimes it's the hope that their child will now 'go straight'. And then there are parents who, because they're struggling with their own understanding, just don't get the significance of what's happened.

We need to be there ready to listen, give the extra hug or pass them the tissues when they cry. Whatever you would say to a straight child, you can say to your gay son or lesbian daughter at a time like this. Be sympathetic and call them to offer support, not necessarily advice.

Meeting the partner

When your child introduces their partner to you always aim to be as pleasant and accepting as possible. Take the time to get to know them before making a judgement. Remember, the person you love thinks this newcomer to the family is special. You can at least take the time to find out why. If you're concerned about the first meeting, pick neutral territory such as a coffee shop or restaurant. This gives you the opportunity to leave if the meeting isn't going well. It also provides more topics of conversation if the conversation stalls. There is always the menu, the decor, others in the restaurant to make comment about to keep a line of banter alive.

Also encourage the new person to talk about themselves; don't feel you're prying. Make them understand you're interested in getting to know them. Most times people are happy to talk about themselves.

At family gatherings don't make your gay son or lesbian daughter pretend their relationship is just one of friendship, while straight siblings can be open about their partner.

I once had a parent wonder why, after inviting her son and his partner to Christmas lunch, they left offended. She had bought or made gifts for everyone, but gave the partner of her gay son a card and thought she had done well. I asked her why she didn't give him a gift like the others. She replied that she didn't think that she needed to because she didn't see the relationship between her son and his partner as equivalent to his siblings and their partners.

It amazes me when people do these things and then wonder why their children distance themselves. It's all about equality and acceptance and seeing them and their relationships as serious and relevant as anyone else's.

Gay relationships can and do succeed at least as much as any heterosexual couples in today's world. It's a myth to believe that homosexual relationships won't last. I know several gay couples who have been together for 20, 30 and 40 years. They just disappear into suburbia the same as straight couples and get on with life.

Meeting friends

Ask to meet your child's everyday friends and try to get to know them. This again shows you're being supportive and want to be part of your child's life – even if it is very different from your own. Invite them to dinner, ask what they like to eat, perhaps they're vegetarian. This interest in being accommodating of their likes and dislikes shows you care enough to show respect. Or again, if you don't feel confident having them in your home, arrange to meet them at their favourite coffee shop.

I once had a parent complain that even though they often invited their gay son and his partner to dinner, most times they made excuses to opt out. I asked where they suggested meeting and was told the local RSL Club, because they considered the food to be good.

I just laughed and pointed out that most gay men wouldn't feel comfortable in that environment. I suggested next time they ask the couple to choose where to eat. Fortunately, they did this and it worked well. So now there isn't a problem, plus because the men feel acknowledged and given choices they are more inclined to come home for family dinners.

Offering to go to some of the gay-friendly coffee shops in your city or town is an easy way of getting to know where your child likes to go – where they feel comfortable and accepted. Doing this type of thing desensitises you and helps to eliminate fears about what gays and lesbians are like (usually not so different to most people). Some may be a little

'out there' in clothes or manner, but we need to understand they all have families, some who support them, others who don't. The more you can be accepting of your son or daughter and their friends, the more your child will appreciate your efforts and the sooner you will move towards the most important thing your child needs and that's acceptance.

Acceptance will give your child confidence and minimise many of the negative effects of coming to terms with being gay or lesbian. In the early days, these negatives are depression, risky behaviours, alcohol and drug abuse and attempting or succeeding at suicide.

As parents we need to understand that for most children, our acceptance is the most important thing they need - and their greatest fear is that we will reject them. We need to make the move into their world. It isn't always about making them stay in our world. After all, the aim of good parenting is to see your child grow up and make their own life in the world. Isn't it?

Support for parents

As many would know, it's very difficult to find someone you know that has a child that is gay and willing to talk about it. I had a tennis friend who was probably the first outsider I could talk to about James. She had a brother who had AIDS in South Africa. She also thought her daughter may be lesbian, but at the time the child was only about 8 or 9 years of age. The conversation wasn't a great comfort, but at least I knew another person who had a gay relative.

When I was at university I did one of my placements at the Family Planning Clinic. While there I attended a seminar where a woman called Gai gave a presentation. Gai is an out and proud lesbian and I soon had her answering the questions I hadn't been able to ask anyone else. Being able to talk openly and ask questions of someone living openly with their homosexuality was a priceless experience for me.

One thing I did learn was that it's important to be able to laugh; to take a step back from the issues and challenges of being gay or lesbian and keep life in perspective.

At university there was another mature-aged student - Daryl. Initially, but silently while going through my angry stage, I absolutely loathed Daryl. The poor guy had done nothing and said nothing to cause my anger; it was just that he was gay. Fortunately, I came to realise he was very nice and we became friends and I was always asking him questions and he patiently answered them for me.

My relationship with Daryl resulted in another of life's ironies. When he

completed his degree, Daryl got work at the Family Planning Council in the educational area; teaching children and youth about reproduction and sexuality. And me? Being the straight one, of course I went to the AIDS Council as a volunteer to help educate gay males on safe sex practices. I'm sure God was sitting up there laughing.

PFLAG

I take great satisfaction when I look at what I've helped build with PFLAG. Families in Queensland now have a strong network of people and information to turn to for help. As our credibility has grown over the last 10 years so has the number of parents attending meetings. At the beginning, if just a couple of parents attended, we considered it a success. Now we worry that there won't be enough chairs. For parents attending their first meeting I guess it's a little like attending your first AA meeting. The first time is always the hardest. And for some it's the first time that they are actually admitting to themselves and others that their child is gay or lesbian.

One day a parent came into the meeting crying. I thought perhaps she'd had something terrible happen to her on the way. But no, it was the actual stepping into the room with other parents who were all in a similar boat and her finally admitting to herself that her daughter was lesbian.

We have had parents who just sit and cry and others just keep passing tissues. Some just want to sit quietly and listen to others tell their stories. With some you can see the pain really runs deep and I always encourage others to talk to them during the coffee break. I often call these parents a day or two after the meeting to see how they are coping and if the meeting was helpful and just have a good chat to them about how they're feeling.

Another thing that I find amazing is the number of people who cut our advertisement out of the Saturday paper, but then carry it around for a year or two before they have the courage to call. I just can't imagine the turmoil and fear they must be experiencing. If you need help, or you know someone who needs help, please don't

wait. Don't put yourself and your loved ones through unnecessary trauma. Pick up the phone and get some support. There are other parents just like you, helping each other through this difficult time.

The meetings used to be held monthly, but I changed them to bi-monthly, which is more successful. At times I literally have to turn off the lights and keep slowly herding people towards the door so I can lock up and go home. Some people find it overwhelming to be able to talk freely and without the fear of being judged and so they want to keep conversations going. Talking is the best way to dispel misconceptions and prejudice – and the PFLAG meetings are a great place to start.

At one meeting a parent shared her disappointment about her son being gay, because he could no longer have contact with his nieces and nephews. We were very quick to point out that gay men are not paedophiles. That dubious honour belongs to the heterosexual male population. Often times the perpetrator is the child's father, Mum's partner, a relative or family friend. Statistically, a child is safer with a gay male that is a stranger to them, than their father or stepfather which is a sad indictment of our community.

Speaking up

I've found that often when acceptance is beginning, it is also the time many parents begin to feel anger instead of shame when they hear others making homophobic comments. Many parents sit quietly seething, not sure how to react or what to say, but I always tell them to say "I have gay friends and family and I don't like what you're saying." This statement isn't outing your loved one, but it's letting the speaker know they are offending you and someone you care about. Most times the person will apologise or just halt that particular line of conversation. It's often at this point some parents want to become more actively involved in the campaign for gay rights or become more concerned about equality.

A few years ago my husband received an invitation to the AFL Grand Final in Melbourne. I went with him as 'excess baggage' (my description, not his), with the intention of going shopping and eating alone while he was out socialising. But when the men knew that I was also in Melbourne they invited me to dinner as well, which was very nice.

As we were sitting in a very upmarket restaurant eating dinner one man announced that he had a 'poofter' coming to stay at his house for a few days. A few derogatory comments were made and my poor husband just knew what was coming. I could feel myself rising from the chair and I made the, "I have gay friends and family..." announcement. The man just looked at me and stopped and another continued. I again stated a little more loudly and further out of my chair, "I have gay friends and family..." Finally they ceased and said that they thought I was joking.

My husband then told them that our son is gay. They both apologised. The first man then went on to say that he knew the man well, he was bringing his partner and he often stayed at his house. The second man also commended me for my bravery in speaking out. I don't think either man will have such a conversation again. I realised people just say things because they can.

Another night I went with my husband to collect his prize at the local golf club. One of the men was wearing a bright pink shirt. As he went to collect the prize his mates were teasing him and sang out, "Tell them what you were called today," and he very quickly yelled, "What are ya, a poofter?" and then made a couple of other comments himself. Again my husband cringed, knowing this guy wouldn't get off so easily. So as we were leaving I very nicely and with my best smile walked up to him (he thought I was going to congratulate him), leaned closely to his ear and said, "I have a poofter son and he's more of a man than you'll ever be," and politely walked off. I loved watching his jaw drop. Again, I hope he'll be more careful in future about what he says in public.

I really believe that if more people spoke up or let it be known that this type of comment or conversation is not appropriate, the world would be a better place for our

sons and daughters. I always think how lesbians and gays must feel when they hear snide comments and jokes made about them. And worse still, when those listening laugh or condone the comments by their silence. This sort of conversation sends the message that to be gay is bad, and 'less than' a heterosexual man or woman. It trivialises homosexuals as second-rate human beings. And then people wonder why depression and the suicide rate are so high.

If given the opportunity, I point out to people making such comments that they have no idea how often they are insulting people standing right in front of them. Most of the time people tell the homophobic jokes or make homophobic comments because they can and no one stops them. They assume a homophobic heterosexual audience. But when challenged most are cowards and back down.

The comments that especially annoy me are the ones about dropping the soap, or needing to stand with your back against the wall if a gay man is in the room. Very often I let it be known that, "You aren't that good looking. I wouldn't want to jump your bones, so why would a gay man?" A little hurt pride is a great leveller.

I also point out that straight men are very rarely in danger of gay men. Gay men don't go bashing straight men.

Generalities about homosexuals are as inaccurate as generalities about any segment of society. Gay and lesbian personalities and temperaments are as diverse as anyone else's, regardless of culture or race or sexual orientation.

Gay rights

The world is changing slowly regarding gay rights. In 2009 some countries are still jailing and hanging homosexuals. In the progressive countries same sex marriage and civil unions are a reality. This is great.

It shows the world that our children are no longer considered second rate and by legally recognising their relationships it gives them respect, security and protections under the law they've never had before. Officially recognising same sex relationships also ensures the same legal responsibilities as their heterosexual counterparts if the relationship fails or legal issues arise.

Australia is lagging a little regarding gay rights and relationship recognition, but at least same sex couples can live and work relatively easily in the community. Anti - discrimination laws are in the workplace, economic discriminations were removed and same sex couples and their children have been nationally recognised as family units since 2008. The problem is that the States and Territories of Australia all have different laws which cause confusion for couples and families when they move interstate.

Lobby groups are constantly working for equality. One day it will come, but at the moment as a parent of a gay male I get angry to see one son discriminated against just because of his sexual orientation and my other son provided every benefit just because he's heterosexual. I love both my sons equally and I get angry when government actively discriminates between them.

However, I never give up hope that one day soon things will change.

The long and winding road

I remember on the day I went for my interview to become a volunteer at the Queensland AIDS Council. I was in the shower deciding if I should wear a 'flanno' shirt and jeans or just be me – nice, heterosexual, middle-class, 'normal'. I decided I should just be myself and they wouldn't judge me. After all, they were about acceptance of difference, anti-discrimination and a fair go for all, right?

I arrived in a white linen dress with navy stripe, navy and white shoes and matching hand bag. The interview went along quite well I thought, until the end when it was suggested that perhaps I wouldn't fit in. Frankly, I was stunned. When I asked why I had a mimed square drawn around my face. I was the stereotypical middle class female. In some respects I was the 'enemy'; the antithesis of everything gay men were about.

I of course took offence and asked did that mean 'fat and fifty?' It was quickly explained that I might 'see things' that were unacceptable to me. When I asked, "Like what?" I was told, "Men kissing when greeting others." The assumption being that a stereotypical middle-class woman would not understand gay relationships. I just laughed and said, "I'm in their territory, so what if they kiss?"

I was begrudgingly given a job on Reception.

Early days at QAC

For the first few weeks people walked around me pointing and whispering, "Who's that?" But I am what I am and everyone soon got used to me. I became 'one of them', as some of the guys started telling visitors. I was proud of this acceptance. I felt I'd earned my stripes – both through my degree and my personal journey with my family.

I wasn't there very long when they realised I wasn't very good on the telephone system. Another stereotype shattered. And so I was asked to catalogue the library. I jumped at this and it was a great learning experience. The whole task took six months of

hard work and concentration, but from then on I was really part of the team. About a year later it was decided that they no longer needed a library and so I got to dismantle all of my work, and send the boxes off to other libraries or to be archived. Such is life. Good to know God hasn't lost his sense of humour.

I began doing their courses. I did the HIV course, Emotional Support Program, Beats Outreach and several safe sex courses. I eventually knew more about gay sex issues than many gay men, which was great for my personal situation. It meant I could talk to my son about all of the concerns I had - and I could do it from an informed position. There were even times that I knew I was giving him extra information – knowledge he didn't already have.

I even made a point of talking about "what I had learned today" when he had friends or prospective partners at home. I always held the belief that by sharing this knowledge as broadly as I could I was helping to keep my son safe.

As I got more involved at the AIDS Council I was asked to work on some educational campaigns. One campaign was the Piss Easy Project. This was about recognising gonorrhoea and how to prevent contracting it. The campaign took its name from the fact that if you had gonorrhoea, you didn't urinate without pain.

As part of the campaign, I was asked to go on radio and talk about "pissing easy". Initially I was appalled. I said I was happy to discuss gonorrhoea, but did I have to use the term "piss". I was told yes, because men would relate to the term better than if I said urinated.

Another of my voluntary jobs was taking calls on the sexual health line. We received calls from all over Queensland. It was during this time that I learned that there are many men who profess to be heterosexual, but are regularly having sex with other men. Men would call asking questions, while disclosing they are married with children. Initially I would ask if they were seeking information to 'come out' to their wives. But no, most had no intention of telling her - nor were they concerned she may find out.

Kinsey believed that 10% of the population had at some time had homosexual sex. After being on this Help Line, it wouldn't surprise me at all because most of the calls were from 'straight' men or men about to 'come out'. My personal theory is that one in twenty live 'out and proud', which I call living their lives honestly. Another one in twenty quietly has homosexual sex when given the opportunity. There were times after taking calls when I felt like I needed a shower and spared a thought for the many women who have no idea about the secret lives of the men in their life.

Graduating to PFLAG

After about a year or so of volunteering at Queensland AIDS Council I began to look for other challenges. I remembered back to when I was first interviewed to become a volunteer at the AIDS Council. I was asked what I would like to do and I told them I wanted to organise a parents' support group. I was told they didn't do that type of thing. I quietly thought to myself, "You may not now, but don't be too sure about the future."

I spoke to the AIDS Council Education Officer about my idea of starting a group for parents with gay and lesbian children. His very practical advice was to do some research and put a case together. So I did.

I found a woman who organised a group called PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays). Her name was Coralie and she got very excited when I asked her how I could go about setting up a group. She told me I didn't need to set one up - I could have PFLAG.

PFLAG I learned originated in the US in the 1970's after the Stonewall Human Rights March. A group of parents with lesbian daughters and gay sons saw the need and so PFLAG began. It's an organisation that is 100% voluntary, with the primary goal being a peer support group for parents struggling to come to terms with their young people's sexual orientation. Presently, there are about 300 groups operating worldwide in about 12 countries. PFLAG groups come and go like any voluntary organisation because they rely on the energy of members. Groups are easily found on the internet along with information

and support for families. Even if there isn't a local group in your area, you can easily find support information on other PFLAG websites.

Coralie was a lovely and energetic woman who had been running PFLAG for many years. She was tired and feeling burnt out, but didn't want to abandon what she had begun in PFLAG without finding someone equally passionate to take over. I was just worried that I may not come up to her standard,

I saw an opportunity to promote PFLAG from an unofficial community support group to something more permanent, supported by the AIDS Council. This would make it easier to raise the group's profile among the gay and lesbian community, as well as ensure it lasted beyond the efforts of just one person. It also meant the group could call on the knowledge and support of the AIDS Council staff and volunteers to ensure the best professional help and advice was available to people in need.

Time proved me right. The AIDS Council has been very supportive over the years.

At the time, PFLAG needed revitalising, which meant a lot of work. In the beginning I used to sit and dream about where I would like PFLAG to be in 10 years time. But daydreaming and wishing don't make things happen, so I got busy...

Setting PFLAG goals

With PFLAG, as with any group that is trying to make a difference, you need goals to work toward. So, each year we set goals. Of course these lead to extra work, but it really works – we achieve so much. It also gives people hope and the sense that we aren't just spinning wheels or wasting our time. We really are making a difference.

Our goals have included making information more accessible to regional and rural families and professions; addressing homophobia in the workplace; actively lobbying Government in the lead up to a Federal election, and organising a national conference. We have initiated a PFLAG pack for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, which has been done in collaboration with the Aboriginal community. We have

also had information translated into 17 different languages and published on the website. This we believe is invaluable for parents internationally, not just here in Australia.

I have found in some ways that my efforts keep me out of the shops and off of the streets. As you would imagine, I spend a lot of time on the computer.

Real estate blues (or, why it's important to have a sense of humour)

For the first official year that I was organising PFLAG I would get the occasional phone call from concerned parents seeking advice. I made a point of keeping names, addresses and phone numbers. Then when I got enough parents I decided to have my first PFLAG meeting.

Queensland Positive People, which is a support group for those with HIV, offered me their premises for our meetings, which was an old house on a very busy street with no close parking. But I wasn't complaining. At least I had a venue for the parents. They gave me the keys to the building, which was great, but forgot to tell me that they had one of the locks changed just prior to the meeting and of course I didn't have the right keys.

So, about 12 parents sat in the back yard under a tree having our meeting, with no coffee or toilet facilities. But the numbers at the meetings continued to grow and we soon outgrew the venue. We then had the meetings at the AIDS Council offices, which was much easier.

At the time, my office was down the other end of the hall quite a distance from the rest of the staff. A couple of years later the AIDS Council moved and I went along with them. My office due to lack of space was now in the photocopying room, which could be noisy when taking phone calls, but in reality was great. I certainly wasn't isolated any more. I was never lonely because someone was always in the room and I soon learned to work with distractions going on around me.

But again, the first meeting on these premises wasn't without incident. It was a Saturday afternoon and there were a few homeless Indigenous men enjoying the quiet and the cool of the shaded car park, minding their own business. I came along, went to switch off the alarms just inside the office door and right beside where they were sitting. But instead I set the alarms off. I have never seen people disappear so fast. The problem was the office manager hadn't programmed my password into the alarm.

Then the AIDS Council bought its own building and I again moved with them. Now I have a 'real' office, but still have issues with alarms. You may have realised that the thing I enjoy least about being involved with PFLAG is the locking and unlocking of the buildings. Building security and I just don't work well together.

Working at the AIDS Council gave me such an insight into the gay lifestyle, as well as some of Brisbane's lesser known places. I have done tours of the 'bath houses' which was very interesting. One night, I went to one of these venues with Michael, my son's partner at the time. It was a night they closed the venue to let the volunteers see what was on offer. As a mother it was quite an eye opener. But it was a good opportunity because I know they aren't to be feared and safe sex practices are definitely encouraged. These are places that not all gay men visit, but they are a safe option for a man looking for sex without the relationship.

Another of my unusual tasks as a volunteer was to deliver safe sex brochures to the gay venues around the city. Again this was a legitimate way to be at the venues and just see what they were like. This was done during the day when very few people were around. I, of course, told management I was on the premises and they were fine about me being there, but I used to get some funny looks from the patrons as I wandered in with my plastic shopping bag heading straight for the toilets. It wasn't unusual for men to walk up to me and ask if I was lost. And they would walk away looking a little puzzled when I told them what I was doing. I just didn't look like I belonged.

Cheesecloth, bells and misconceptions

I guess I just don't fit the image. This applies not only to the lesbian and gay community, but with the parents as well.

I recall one day I was standing outside a coffee shop where I'd arranged to meet a dad in need of some peer support. As I waited, I watched an agitated man keep running inside and then back out. Finally I asked him his name and was he waiting for me? He looked stunned and told me he was looking for me, but was expecting a woman with a shaved head and a razor blade in the ear. What can you do but laugh?

I have learned over the years that people have an expectation about the sort of person that would be so accepting of their gay son and an advocate for gay rights. I've had people tell me that they were concerned about meeting me because they were unsure of what I would be like. I once had someone tell me they deliberately brought someone along with them for moral support because of the type I may have been. Others have told me they thought I would be the 'cheesecloth and bells' type. Personally, I see myself as an everyday person, relatively conservative style of dress and just like any other mother.

Sometimes I get angry and think that it's assumed that you have to be alternative to be supportive of your children. So over the years I have learned that when I meet politicians and others in power positions, I wear my pearls and diamonds because I am not what they're expecting. I look like I belong in their comfort zone, so they relate to me better. Like I say, things aren't always what they seem and the time to assume is never.

Developing resources

When I first wanted to improve my understanding of my son's sexuality and lifestyle, I found information very difficult to find. Worse still, was when I went to the AIDS Council they didn't have any resources providing this information for parents either. All round, it was difficult to buy books designed to help parents gain an understanding of

their children's sexual diversity. They either weren't written, weren't published or weren't available in Australia.

I slowly began to get resources from the internet and it felt like I was cutting down whole forests of trees I had so much information. So as my confidence grew I began writing information booklets to assist people seeking help and support. This was particularly daunting to me, because just a few years earlier I wouldn't have felt comfortable writing a simple business letter.

My first attempt was a brochure and I felt very proud to think I had written it and had 1,000 copies printed. These took months to distribute to interested groups. A few years later they were being printed in batches of 5,000 and only lasting 12 months.

But it didn't stop there. I needed a resource that gave insight and information for families; addressing their feelings and emotions about a loved one 'coming out'. I also felt it was important that parents understood what was happening with their sons and daughters. I felt it most important that parents support, accept and understand their homosexual children. So I began to write a booklet. The first booklet called, *It really is OK*, which was about twenty pages took me months of searching for information, improving my poor writing skills and getting it proof read. Again I had 1,000 printed.

As with many things, over time I noticed that the more you do, the more you see there is still to do. So I began to add to the booklet. First it was just about homosexuality. Then I expanded it to information for parents of transgender and bisexual children. I added information for heterosexuals whose partners 'come out' as gay or lesbian. Plus, tips on how to talk to the children about Mum or Dad's sexuality issues.

Finally, I came to the conclusion that heterosexuality should also be included. I did this because it's also a sexual orientation. The advantage with this one is that parents very rarely cry if a young person discloses they are straight. And young people don't feel there is something wrong when they want to date the opposite sex. I wrote this

section to make people think about what we take for granted. Parents never say, “Are you sure you’re straight? Perhaps it's just a phase?” It is just assumed that our children are straight. I tell people heterosexuality is just the common variety of orientations.

Pride Fair Day and March – PFLAG grows

I had only been busy with PFLAG a few months when I was asked if I was going to Pride Fair. I had no idea what Pride Fair was or what to expect. I was told I would need a banner so I had someone quickly make a banner. I then attached it to two broom handles and off I went with James, my son, and his dog Jeanne on one side and me on the other carrying the banner through the streets of Brisbane. It was an exciting day for being out and proud.

For a few years after that, PFLAG stayed very small. Now, several years on, parents are happy to march and be seen as proud parents of gay children. PFLAG has its own stall, at Pride Fair, which is always busy with young people wanting to say thank you for our support, or seeking information for their parents.

Mardi Gras

Mardi Gras to me is a time that my gay son can really celebrate who he is. He explained to me one day that, “Straights celebrate 364 days of the year. This is our one day to celebrate who we are.” And so I love that I can be part of his one day.

My first Mardi Gras was so exciting and Sydney was buzzing. A few of the PFLAG mothers and I went down to support our sons and march with the other PFLAG parents from around Australia. It's great fun and everyone marches proudly, holding the signs of the cities and towns that have PFLAG support groups. I think sometimes we look the most boring of all of the groups, us in our white T-shirts and white caps with PFLAG stamped on the front. But we get the loudest cheers and most kisses and hugs from spectators as we march along.

One year as I was marching and waving, my eternity ring flew off my hand and into the crowd. I was beside myself looking in amongst the feet of the crowd for the ring. Suddenly, somebody shouted, "There it is!" and to my surprise and joy it had bounced back into the middle of the road. I was so relieved I thought it was a message from above letting me know He approves of what I do.

My husband has marched with me twice now, which is wonderful and shows our son that he is truly accepted. Don will openly admit that he was a homophobe 'pre-James 'coming out'. But like many other parents, when it's your child, it quickly shakes up your long held misguided beliefs and you realise that your child isn't the deviant or pervert you may have thought 'those people' were. When it's your child it's entirely different and, as most freely admit, having a gay son or lesbian daughter makes you more broad-minded, less judgmental of difference in others and, ultimately, a better person. Of course, coming to this conclusion is a painful process and it takes time.

I enjoy the conversations with the other PFLAGgers. It helps me to find out what other groups are doing to support new parents, what the different State and Territory governments are doing regarding equality issues. As an advocate for equality, Mardi Gras always inspires me to keep working and striving and forging ahead.

Mardi Gras in Sydney began a few years after the Stonewall Human Rights march in the US. The first Sydney Mardi Gras in 1978 consisted of three hundred marchers who only moved 100 meters down Oxford Street before there was a fracas with police. One hundred were arrested and from this their names were printed in the paper and they lost their jobs and homes. Thirty years later it's one of the largest night time parades in the world and is a great financial bonus for Sydney.

In 2008 the 30th anniversary parade had marcher numbers capped at 10,000. The parade was 4km long and took two hours to complete in front of nearly 500,000 spectators. To me this is the best sign that lesbians and gays are no longer the social outcasts that people once thought. Mardi Gras is now truly a celebration and no longer a demonstration.

It also gives me the opportunity to watch the same sex couples feel proud about who they are and be free to hold hands or walk with arms around each other down the street. To me it's something heterosexuals take for granted and it's a choice we have. We don't risk abuse or assault if we hold our partner's hand or kiss them good bye on any given day, but lesbian and gay couples do. I always smile at people when they say they don't mind if someone is gay or lesbian, but why do they have to flaunt it? I ask, "Is flaunting kissing your partner hello or goodbye? Is it holding hands? Is it having your loved one's photo on your desk? Is it making announcements in newspapers? If so, heterosexuals do this all of the time and we need to ask ourselves why is it right for one group and not another? It seems to me that in a world of so much war and violence, to love, respect and care for another person is never a bad thing – regardless of their gender.

We've come so far...

It was only recently, when I was asked to talk about how far the PFLAG group I organise had come in the last 10 years, that I stopped and did a mental recount. For a while I thought this would be difficult to recall, but then I remembered my hopes for the group 10 years ago when I began.

When I first started lobbying and regenerating PFLAG, James used to say, "Sure Mum, whatever you want," as if it was just a hobby and not very important. He always said "Don't do more than you want." Over the years I have been amazed at what I've achieved by pushing for change. If you are passionate about your belief and you just won't go away, bureaucrats and politicians learn to stop and listen. Of course, the more people that do this, the sooner real changes happen.

Glenn, my straight son, has been patient over the years, but he's learned not to ask me what I've been up to because he'll hear about gay rights, parents in crisis or some article or resource I am busy writing. So I try not to talk too much to him about all of this because I don't want to make him frightened to talk to me.

PFLAG parents and members are beginning to feel they can speak up and make their voices heard about the debate for equal rights for their children. We now have many parents who are very comfortable with their gay and lesbian children and are comfortable speaking out or attending the occasional rally.

One of my role models is Rosa Parkes. She is the black American woman who unwittingly began the Black Rights Movement in the US when she refused to move to the back (segregated) section of the bus where there were no seats left. She'd had a long day and was tired and just couldn't see the sense in standing when a seat was available.

When I feel disheartened I remind myself that she was one person; and look at what has been achieved since that one action.

Democracy in action

I wished for the opportunity to speak with politicians about rights and equality, which I've done many times since that day. I have written letters and met with politicians about the need for equality, the age of consent for homosexuals, known adoptions, marriage, and civil unions for same sex couples and removal of economic discrimination by the Federal Government.

In the early part of 2006 the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission held an inquiry into economic discrimination against same sex couples. This inquiry gave the gay community hope. I was asked to speak and the Commissioner later described me as "a mother from the suburbs". This investigation was held during the period that John Howard was Prime Minister. He failed to act on the recommendations, but within a year of Kevin Rudd coming to power the legislative changes passed through Federal Parliament - a huge step forward.

I spoke as a parent of two sons - one straight and the other gay. I told of my anger at having to watch one son be actively and deliberately discriminated against by our own Government, while my other son - the straight one - is able to take his rights

for granted just because he is of the more acceptable sexual orientation. This makes me really angry – and when I get angry, I do something about it.

I am a great believer in standing beside our lesbian daughters and gay sons on issues like this – not behind them wringing our hands wondering what we can do or believing we can do nothing because we are just one person or a minority group. Many PFLAG members now support the fight and work in a variety of ways to gain equal rights for their children.

Media training – the hard way

Another goal of mine was to get into the media where I could talk to the general community about the need for understanding of our sons and daughters; to let other parents hear that it was okay to have a gay son or lesbian daughter; that there was no need to feel shame, blame or guilt. And, of course, to inform the general community that to be gay is okay – to bring the discussion out of the closet, so to speak.

Of course, initially it was quite daunting being on radio and speaking to an unseen audience. But now I just pretend that I'm sitting at my kitchen table having a coffee and a chat with the person interviewing me. I take no notice of the surroundings and just look at the person asking the questions. I don't know if Hugh Jackman knows this trick. All I can say is it works for me.

Equal rights, affirmative action and making a change

I will always consider myself a newcomer to the world of activism. It isn't something I did in my younger days. I would never have dared stand with banners in front of Parliament House or give speeches with microphones on footpaths drawing attention to discrimination. I would have been too afraid of being arrested. But in 2003, the State Government removed funding from the Queensland AIDS Council.

When I received the call about the rally I phoned my husband told him what I was doing and that he should be prepared to bail me out. Fortunately this didn't happen, but I felt I needed to stand with the gay community about the injustices that were occurring. My belief overrode any fears I had.

Another time I demonstrated outside the Minister for Health's local office about the same issue. Inside was my niece, who worked for him and she wasn't happy to have her banner carrying aunt outside causing her stress.

I also demonstrated outside a Catholic college because they had a speaker from the USA who was telling the audience he could cure homosexuality and those who chose not to be cured were dreadful people. This to me was very dangerous propaganda, which causes great stress and it isn't uncommon for people to suicide after trying these 'cures' and then failing. Homosexuality is not a choice, fad or phase. It is a natural sexual orientation or variant that can't be altered. It is not an illness to be 'cured'. Trying to 'cure' homosexuality is like trying to 'cure' the colour of your skin.

You can make a difference

I can't stress enough how much of a difference parents can make by standing up to be counted about their gay or lesbian child's rights. I find it very difficult to get people to speak to community groups or the media. Most are way too shy or nervous and insist that I don't understand because I'm just so good at it, or that I know what I'm talking about, whereas they don't. They don't understand that at the beginning I was no better or less nervous than them.

I'm not a natural when it comes to meeting politicians and public speaking. It's been a journey over the last decade. It's been very difficult, many hours of research, writing and rewriting of speeches and practicing giving the speeches, which can be quite nerve wracking.

Everything I do is a learning curve in this arena and I find the first time I do something it can be terrifying, but it makes it easier next time until eventually you succeed. Furthermore, what has carried me through the public speaking nerves is my passion for change and a better world for my son and others like him. I don't think of it as public speaking. I think of it as human rights campaigning. I really believe if we, the parents, don't speak up and speak out, nothing will ever change.

Parents can do a lot. Just by speaking out and being heard lets the community know that gay and lesbian people have not necessarily had traumatic childhoods, or bad parents; that homosexuality is not a choice or a product of the environment you grow up in.

We need to show the world we aren't ashamed of our children. And our children should be free to be themselves; free from fear of being vilified, discriminated against or ostracised, just because someone doesn't feel comfortable with their natural sexual orientation.

So I am happy to be the voice. I often laugh, however, when people still ask me if my son James is married or has a girlfriend. I think, "Where have you been for the last ten years? Obviously not within hearing distance of me!"

In 2007 when there was a lot of lobbying going on before the Federal election, I made several trips to Canberra with others from the gay and lesbian community, talking to politicians about ending economic discrimination for same sex couples. As I often say, I was

only there for the credibility factor. Everyone I travelled with understood Government policy, which I didn't, and they lived and understood the consequences of constant discrimination, which I, again, didn't. I just knew what I was told and read. But again I learned so much from this opportunity.

So on my many trips I would make sure my diamonds were sparkling and my pearls in place. I always dressed conservatively and looked very middle-class. And I always spoke from a parent's perspective- about how heartbreaking it is too see my much-loved son being actively discriminated against by a Government who is happy to take his taxes, benefit from his education and work skills, but give very little in return.

I also made a point of comparing my two sons, both equally loved. But the younger son automatically receives benefits and incentives from the Government, not because he is better or more worthy, but because he is straight. How is this fair?

It's very difficult to argue with an articulate, assertive, middle-aged, middle-class mother who passionately believes that Australia is not treating her son fairly.

But it seemed that the politicians related to me because I was at least in their comfort zone. They would often talk directly to me instead of the others I was with, which didn't seem right. Sometimes the meetings were longer and more cordial and we had more success in getting our messages across.

I remember the day I met Philip Ruddock, who was the Attorney-General at the time. He was not my favourite politician. I thought he was arrogant and considered himself superior to most situations, not only to lesbians and gays. When the meeting was closing I suggested that when he and the Government was drawing up legislation to improve the rights of same sex couples, he do so as if one of his children were gay or lesbian. He told me that there was nothing wrong with his children; they were okay and married with children.

Besides letting him know there was nothing wrong with my son either, I also pointed out that many families with children break down because one or both partners 'come out'. I enjoyed watching the shiver go up his spine. I was so angry during and immediately after the meeting that my face ached for about three days from clenching my jaws so tight.

Another time I was asked to speak to a human rights group, wanting a Bill of Rights introduced into Australia. So again I gave my speech about being the mother of a gay man and how painful it is to watch the discrimination he encountered and how we needed this Bill of Rights they were proposing.

Next morning I was called by the leader of the group and thanked for my input. I told him I was happy to be involved, but said I felt like I was speaking to the converted. He very quickly let me know that someone on their committee didn't want lesbians and gays included in this rights package until they heard me speak. It gave them an entirely new slant on equality for all. I was stunned. It seemed like social justice was only for the chosen in some people's view. I find bigotry in the most unexpected places.

2020 Summit

I remember I had just landed in Sydney to go and march at Mardi Gras. They announced over the plane's intercom that we could now switch on our mobile phones. Usually I didn't do that straight away, but this particular day I did. It was like a sixth sense because as I switched it on, it rang. It was Rodney Croome, a gay rights activist from Tasmania who I hold in very high esteem. He was asking me if I would mind if he nominated me for Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's 2020 Summit. The Summit, as most would recall, was supposed to be Australia's 1,000 brightest people coming together to discuss and recommend the changes we needed to make for Australia's future. We were to represent all Australians' vision for the future and come up with the strategy for how we would get there.

I must say, I was honoured that he would consider me worthy, but sceptical that I would be chosen. But his faith in me was right and I was chosen. At first it was quite a shock. In many ways I still thought of myself as that middle-class Brisbane mum who was just standing up for the rights of her child and others like him. However, the more I thought about it, the more daunted I became. I felt I had a huge responsibility to the gay community to get this right and I didn't want to let them down.

I found the whole experience a real roller coaster of emotions. Sometimes I would feel I was making headway and then in another way I wasn't making any progress at all. I think what was advantageous to being there was that I had access to politicians that I would never normally meet. All I had to do at this Summit was walk up to them and they were happy to speak with me. I was able to ask them directly about Government policy on gay rights issues and quash unfounded rumours. This was very helpful and more than anything gave us hope in the struggle against economic discrimination.

Another great outcome was being approached by the Commissioner for Sex Discrimination Elizabeth Broderick to host a morning tea for her in Brisbane with lesbians in long-term same sex relationships and those who had children. This proved to be very helpful to her, giving an insight into the struggles and legal discrimination these women live with on a daily basis. In Queensland at present, a non-biological parent in a same sex relationship has no rights or legal input with their partner's child. Legally they can't take the child to a doctor and be told what is wrong with or receive information from the child's school. Children can also be removed from the family group if the biological parent dies, becomes incapacitated or is unable to speak for themselves.

One mother relayed the story about taking her 14-year old step-daughter for a vaccination. The woman had a letter of permission from the biological mother, but the nurse still refused. In frustration, the woman took the girl to a gay friendly doctor and the girl received her vaccination from him, rather than the local service biological parents and their children could use.

Another woman recounted the story of her partner being wheeled down to surgery for removal of a brain tumour. Her employer called to ask when the reports she was working on would be finalised. She was not allowed compassionate leave and didn't receive any reassurance that someone else would complete the reports while she cared for her partner. In a previous instance, when another woman in the office had her husband in hospital with a heart attack, this woman was given all the time necessary to care for him and others in the office completed her work schedule. This was a clear example of double standards.

Not everyone is as passionate and active as I am about these issues. But as a parent, if you take every opportunity that's presented to you to talk about the issues your child faces, to dispel the myths about homosexuality, and to challenge people's assumptions, you will make a difference. From little things big things grow.

Recognition and honours

Receiving my Order of Australia Medal (OAM) was a real honour. I'll never forget the day I received the letter informing me that I was a candidate for the award in the Australia Day Honours for 2006.

I called Don, very excited thinking he had nominated me. But he kept saying he didn't know what I was talking about. Eventually, he cracked and said it was "friends". Then I had to push him to find out which friends. To me it was very humbling that they had thought enough of me to go to such effort. They were just as excited as me when I phoned to let them know the news.

I was supposed to keep it a secret until it was announced, which was hard, but I did. I was concerned that they might change their mind - how embarrassing would that have been? But Don did tell a few; he was very proud of me. But I was on tenterhooks until I got the letter confirming the honour.

People can really keep secrets. A few parents from PFLAG had got together and submitted the application, which I'm told was very involved. They'd had to go to Don for information that only he could give. I have always known that he has a mind that compartmentalises things. I say he opens drawers in his brain, tucks the information inside and then closes it tightly and forgets about it until it needs to be reopened. He never gave me any clues.

To be recognised and honoured by the Government of your country is one thing. What the OAM taught me, though, is that an Australia Day award is not just a national award – it's recognition by the people you have worked with and helped. That they would think of

me, let alone go to the effort to prepare a nomination, told me that I had made a real difference to real people's lives. What better reward or achievement is there than that?

Of course, it didn't stop me challenging political decisions coming out of Canberra. When then Prime Minister John Howard altered Territorial legislation making it illegal for them to recognise any form of same sex relationship I was incensed to say the least. I wrote to the Governor-General who supposedly gave me the award, and to Mr Howard offering to return the medal. I had received it for "my efforts in encouraging understanding and acceptance of those living in the gay community." I felt I had clearly failed to do this at all when the Federal Government had taken this stance.

Mr Howard totally ignored my letter and I received a mumbling piece of weasel words from the Governor-General's office.

I once received a letter from Mr Howard's office telling me not to write any more letters to the Prime Minister. Apparently I should address my complaints to Philip Ruddock instead. I thought, "I don't have a campaign going. I'm not harassing him. They are genuine letters from a concerned citizen and parent." So I continued to write to the Prime Minister *and* to Philip Ruddock. I saw this as democracy in action.

In 2008, I was shortlisted for a national human rights medal which again was a great honour. It was recognition of not only the work I had done over the years, but of the work that remains to be done, and not necessarily by me.

The true value of these honours is the recognition and attention they bring to the causes I believe in so passionately. They help open doors that are otherwise firmly closed. The awards give credibility to these causes. People can no longer dismiss me as a lone crack-pot. I'm part of a growing legitimate community view that deserves to be heard. This, more than the personal honour and vindication, is the true value of these awards.

My thoughts after so many years

After so many years of talking with parents it's easy to become impatient and lose empathy. I sometimes need to remind myself that they are just starting on their journey to understanding. The wonderful thing to me is that my tiredness is okay. Why? Because when I'm ready to hang up my rainbow flags and step back from PFLAG I know there are others who care enough to keep it going.

By helping other families in crisis, PFLAG volunteers and support groups continue to dispel the myths about homosexuality. Through understanding we develop acceptance (I hate the word tolerance) and I have great hopes for the future for our gay sons and lesbian daughters.

But a better, brighter future won't happen without hard work or the courage and perseverance of parents willing to stand up for their children – to support them and defend them and argue for their equal rights.

Our world is changing all the time, but while inequality exists under the law and ignorance and bigotry live in our community, we still have a job to do. So if you have a loved one who is gay or lesbian, I ask you to think about what you can do for them. How can you make the world a more understanding and accepting place for them?

You don't have to stand on a soap box or protest with a loud hailer. All you need to do is not be afraid. Tell people you don't appreciate crass humour at the expense of the gay community. Tell your family and friends you have a gay child who you love very much. Dispel

the myths when you hear them. Offer your support to others. You'll be amazed what you can achieve.

Parents need to come quickly to the conclusion that it isn't about how having a gay son or lesbian daughter is affecting them. It's about what the child is going through and what the child needs from you as their parent.

Don't assume your son or daughter must lead a terrible life being bullied, being sneered at, being called names or telling them they must accept these abuses as part of being homosexual. Don't ask them to hide who they are. Instead ask, "How can I help and support you?" Try to understand what's happening with your son or daughter. We need to ensure our children know we don't think of them as second rate or love them any less than their siblings.

Imagine how a child feels when their parent tells them that what they do is abhorrent and they just can't accept it. This must be soul destroying for the child. They have struggled enough with coming to terms with their sexual orientation, then plucked up enough courage to tell Mum and Dad and it must seem like a huge slap in the face. This is when I remind people that being lesbian or gay is not a choice. I ask the question, "Who would choose to see your parents look at you with disgust or horror when you've just told them something so private about yourself?" Telling someone you're gay or lesbian is not telling someone what you do in bed, it's telling them about what you are and who you are. It's telling you that they respect and care enough about you to want to be honest with you.

I understand people are in shock and they say and do things they wouldn't normally do or say, but I think if you do react in this way, an apology for ignorance should be given sooner rather than later. Parents need to quickly seek information and support to understand what is happening while supporting their son or daughter in their turmoil.

Some parents tell me they just can't agree with 'this'; they have their morals and they taught their children morals. We need to understand that homosexuality is not about morality.

Ultimately, coming to terms with your child being gay or lesbian is about deciding what kind of a parent you want to be. Surely as a good parent we aim to raise our children to be true to themselves and to stand up for what they believe in and to appreciate the gift of a loving

Opening the Door

My thoughts after so many years

family? Our children may not have had a choice with their sexual orientation, but we can choose to support them and love them in whatever way they need.

So many stories...

I find it interesting how parents can shake their head in wonder at other parents' reactions, but see their own situation as very different. I have one parent in the group who always says that no one cares more than you that you have a gay or lesbian child. And it's true. Sometimes our own expectations, fears and prejudices can cloud our view of reality – and what our child actually needs.

Dan

In 2001 I was in hospital having major surgery and one night the phone rang. It was a lovely young man named Murray. He told me he had called my mobile phone, which I had deliberately left at home. My husband answered and told him I wouldn't mind if he called me in hospital.

Murray was so concerned he called me immediately, explaining that Dan, his dad, was Catholic and an ex-police officer and having huge problems with Murray's sexual orientation. I talked to him for a while and told him his parents were very welcome to call me, but might like to wait a few days until I was at home.

But no, they were so distraught they called me the next day, and so for about an hour while holding my stitches I talked to them, trying to calm them and to get them a little closer to understanding their son.

The road to acceptance and feeling comfortable with their son's sexual orientation was

quite a long process for them. When they first began coming to meetings they shed many tears. Dan suffered depression and at one stage was in hospital with heart problems. But over time they have come to full acceptance of Murray. Dan will now go and give talks to young people still coming to terms with being gay or lesbian and he gives them hope.

Dan freely admits he was a "bloody mongrel" to his son and now sees his son as his hero because he was brave enough to be honest about himself, to his father and the world.

Dan and his family were also extremely religious, which added to their distress. I was told much later that there was a bridge that they crossed twice a day going to and from work and every time they stopped and said a prayer to God about saving their son. They had used the bridge pylon as a place of prayer and not surprisingly, it didn't help in this case.

Frances

I met Frances in early 2000. She was concerned that her 30-year old son Chris had been coerced by his partner Paul into a same sex relationship. Frances was an older mother who used to call help lines at midnight when her husband was asleep. She went to doctors seeking information and reasons as to why her son wasn't really gay.

The only reason Frances called me was because Granny, her 96-year old mother-in-law was sick and she was afraid people would realise Chris was gay at the funeral if he took his partner along.

Fortunately, Granny didn't die at this time which gave Frances time to come to terms with her son being gay. After a while, I gave Frances two tasks. One was to look in the mirror and say, "I have a gay son," which can be very difficult to admit to oneself. And the second was to tell Seymour the family cat. I used the logic that the cat wouldn't judge her or Chris, plus cats don't gossip so the secret would be safe with him.

By the time Granny did pass away, Frances had told most people. But the day before the funeral she called and said "I still have to tell some people about Chris and Paul." I said, "I suggest you call and tell them now, because they'll know tomorrow anyway and then no one will be embarrassed."

The day after the funeral Frances called me to say how nobody cared that she had a gay son. It was such a huge relief and she wondered why she hadn't done it sooner. Now Frances is one of our best volunteers. She marches in parades, stands with me at demonstrations, is on our committee and now has a truly wonderful relationship with her son and his partner.

Margaret

Margaret has a wonderful outgoing personality. She loves lots of jewellery and bright clothes. Margaret is always fun to be around. In her young days she freely admits to loving the nightlife and going to gay clubs and bars. She has and had lots of gay friends.

Margaret's only sister Desley had her daughter Robyn disclose that she was lesbian – and Desley hadn't taken it well. Margaret stood by her niece, berating the mother about how Robyn is still the same girl, her sexuality is only a minor issue and how could her love be conditional?

A year later Shaun, Margaret's only child came out to her. Margaret immediately went into depression. Desley was shocked and angry. Desley wondered why it was alright for her to have a lesbian daughter, but Margaret couldn't cope with a gay son.

I have found this to be a common problem. No one cares if you have a gay son or lesbian daughter, but when it's you then it's different. Margaret also found her feelings confronting. But it didn't take too long for her to come to terms with her son being gay. She is his greatest supporter. She has embraced his sexuality and his friends and now supports them all through the tough times with family and the issues of 'coming out'.

John and Lorraine

In 2005 I got a call from John, a dad who was most concerned about losing his son. His son David had told his mother and father that if they didn't come to PFLAG he wouldn't bother with them anymore. So post-haste they came to visit me at my home. Both John and his wife Lorraine were lovely people. They had known their son was gay for about eighteen years, but

never told anyone. They had other sons and daughters and always asked David to the family gatherings, which he normally didn't bother to attend.

Both parents were confused and didn't understand why their son was upset. It became clear very quickly that even though they thought they were doing the right thing, they just weren't on the same page as their gay son.

Initially, they just didn't seem ready to see that if you just talk about what the grand kids are doing, house renovations and husband and wife conversation, the gay son sitting on his own is soon going to feel invisible and really has no input as far as conversation goes at these visits. Also because they hadn't informed relatives and friends about his sexuality, it was difficult for him to bring a partner to social events.

I used the analogy of ducks and chickens, both groups have white feathers, lay eggs and live on a farm, but they're still different. And in their ignorance, they were treating him the 'duck' like the 'chickens' that made up the rest of the family. The family dynamics just wasn't working properly.

The big breakthrough came for them when one Christmas (after checking with their son who had partially kept the secret of his sexuality) they informed all of their friends and family about David in the annual Christmas letter. From this step there was no going back and the son once again felt part of the family. I always say the best gift we can give our child is acceptance and this is what they did. I was really proud of them it was a huge step forward. However, I always think the day they mailed those cards with letters enclosed their minds must have been in a turmoil.

This family's journey has been long and sometimes hard, but the parents have kept on working to keep their son in the family and after a couple of years attending PFLAG meetings the parents now have 'a handle' on having a gay son. They are now invited to his house, they know his partner and generally they are feeling much more comfortable.

Judy

One morning I got a call from a mother about her son who was gay. She was quite angry and

started to become quite rude. I had tried to be patient and understanding, but after a while I was losing my patience and could no longer condone what she was saying. Finally I said, "Well, my son....!!!" She suddenly stopped me and said, "Aren't you gay?" I said, "No, I'm the mother of a gay male." She began to cry and told me she had given me a false name and we agreed to meet for lunch that day.

After the lunch we separated great friends and she had a new understanding of her gay son. What she had been doing was taking her anger and frustration out on me, believing I was lesbian (the enemy) not realising I was a parent, an ally.

Barbara

I think the scariest parent I ever spoke to was a mother from a regional area. She called saying that she had found information in her son's drawers indicating that he was possibly gay and what should she do? I began to talk about making her house gay friendly and so on. But she stopped me, saying, "No, what do I do?" I asked her what she meant and she went on to say that she didn't want her son gay and if he was he would be thrown out.

Her whole attitude about her son was so sad. This was the only time I have ever cried because of a parent's attitude. I felt so sorry for the boy. I felt his life had taken a very bad course and he had no idea. I felt like giving her my phone number so if she did abandon him at least he had a contact to possibly help him.

Jennifer

Soon after James 'came out' one of my friends was telling me about how she found some gay porn magazines under her son's mattress. When confronted he told her that they were his friend's magazines. He told Jennifer that his friend was too frightened to take them home, so he left them with her son.

My friend was happy with this explanation and was aghast at how a parent wouldn't accept their child just because they were gay. I hadn't told her about James at this time. So I just sat there nodding and making the right sounds.

But a year later I got a very distressed call from her. I asked what the problem was, but she said she couldn't talk about it over the phone. So she came over to my home. I was promised to secrecy. I thought perhaps her husband had had an affair. But no, her son had 'come out' and she was beside herself.

It was entirely different when it was her son. After listening to reasons as to why she couldn't have a gay son I stopped her, reminded her about what she'd said a year ago and let her know that James was also gay. At first she didn't believe me about James.

It took her several years before she ever told the extended family. I think they just realised themselves or found out through rumour. She like many others was fearful of being blamed and of being judged a bad parent. Her husband Kevin stayed a terrible grey colour for several months. He chose to believe - or at least hoped - for several years that it was a phase, but fourteen years on, I think he's come to accept that his son is gay. That's a long time for false hope and not something I recommend.

More information

PFLAG groups

PFLAG groups operate across Australia – you can access information from their websites. Just do an online search for PFLAG. You'll also find additional information on their international sites.

AIDS Councils

You'll find these in all States of Australia. Just ring the office in your State and they will refer you to services and support groups that may be in your area. You don't have to have a person with HIV to access support.

Most importantly, keep looking and searching for information and assistance until your concerns and questions have been addressed.

If in your search you come across homophobic professionals or unhelpful people, don't be put off - your son or daughter is too important.