

A Family and Friend's Guide to Sexual Orientation

Bob Powers



More praise for

A Family and Friend's Guide to Sexual Orientation

"This book is a delightful and poignant eye-opener and a much needed, frank discussion about the barriers many face before fully accepting gay and lesbian family members and friends. By talking to people about their attitudes toward gays and lesbians, Powers and Ellis pull out universal lessons about life, coping, understanding, compassion and acceptance. One day we won't need a book to remind us to 'keep an open mind and value diversity. Powers and Ellis have made an important contribution in moving us to a more accepting, less judgmental future."

—Julianne Malveaux
Economist/Columnist
Pacific Radio

"A Family and Friend's Guide will win over people's hearts and minds. Powers and Ellis present the lives of real people from a wide range of backgrounds, and give us a powerful look at the impact of sexual orientation on our families."

—Helen Zia
Contributing Editor, MS. Magazine

"Like panels of the AIDS Memorial Quilt, the personal histories described in A Family and Friend's Guide will soften hard hearts and open closed minds. In describing the experiences of a broad cross-section of the American public, Powers and Ellis' book offers effective tools and strategies for helping us all to fulfill our God-given responsibilities to nurture more caring relationships and embrace a new, more inclusive society."

—Anthony Turney
Executive Director
The NAMES Project

"Absolutely enlightening! This guide is a must for anyone trying to understand sexual orientation."

—V. Keith Meinhold
United States Navy

*"**A Family and Friend's Guide** helps us understand the diverse issues related to sexual orientation. Out of this understanding, we become more open and accepting, leading to a newfound experience of joy and beauty."*

—Elizabeth Anne Parent, Ph.D.
Department Chair, School of Ethnic Studies
San Francisco State University



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**BOB POWERS
ALAN ELLIS**



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*This book is dedicated to our respective friends,
Paul Edward Johnson and Eric Bean,
who have enriched our lives,
and to Courtney Powers,
whose youthful wisdom is
a lesson in acceptance
for all people.*

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1

Getting Started

The Road from the Closet Door to the Magic Line

THE HETEROSEXUAL CLOSET

While many of us are well aware of the proverbial closet door with which gays, lesbians, and bisexuals have contended, few people are conscious of the impact those closets have on heterosexuals and fewer still know that heterosexuals—families and friends of sexual minorities—face a heterosexual closet door.

- **Closet:** a perceived place of hiding (one's sexual orientation or the sexual orientation of a loved one).

This closet contains the same dark emotions—fear, terror, dread—that initially crippled and ultimately led lesbians and gays to fling their closet doors open in a quest for self-acceptance. For most heterosexuals, the closet is terrifying.

When I told my mom I was gay, I realized that while that step was one step on my journey of self-acceptance, for my mom, it was one step into her own private hell—her closet. How can I possibly tell anybody, she asked? [I'm so ashamed.]

Family and friends, upon learning that a loved one is gay, lesbian or bisexual, are immediately thrown into a process of “coming out” as a parent, a child, a spouse, a friend—similar to the process gone through by any sexual minority.

- **Coming Out:** the act of telling another person about your sexual orientation.

It's not unlike the process that anybody faces when they are hiding—whether it be an addiction, a sick family member, or an abundant inheritance. Hiding takes its toll! And, heterosexuals need to learn how to fling open their closet doors. They too need to “come out”—to go through the steps of self-acceptance. Yet, when it comes to sexual orientation, most families have adopted a U.S. Military-like policy of “DON'T ASK, DON'T TELL.” In other words, “I won't ask if you're gay and I don't want you to tell me if you are.” This approach has a disastrous effect on family life for it completely destroys any chance of an intimate family relationship.

IN THE CLOSET: OUR TOP TEN FEARS

So why do so many families fall victim to such a situation that decreases the possibility of family intimacy? The answer lies in fear. A DON'T ASK, DON'T TELL family develops out of our fears. Here are ten fears that keep families closeted.

1) Fear of personal shame.

Our culture and many of its institutions send negative messages about homosexuality, and, as a result, many gays and heterosexuals experience shame about either being gay or having a relative or friend who is gay. These feelings of shame come from our having internalized these negative messages.

2) Fear of public embarrassment or social ostracism.

In light of the negative stereotypes and the shame that have been associated with homosexuality, gays and heterosexuals alike fear public ridicule or ostracism when one's homosexuality or that of a loved one is revealed.

3) Fear of being labeled as “not normal.”

In many ways this fear is the result of the personal shame and public embarrassment that lead us to feel that we do not “fit in.” Many people tend to seek others' approval, which leads them to act in conforming ways so as to appear “normal.” The fear of being labeled as “not normal” is very real.

4) Fear of discussing unpleasant or sexual topics within the family.

Many families have difficulty communicating about serious matters and avoid discussion of all topics that create discomfort. Often, sexuality is one such topic. The hiding or ignoring of significant aspects of family members' lives, however, often leads to a complete breakdown in family communication.

5) Fear of loss of family and friends.

One of the most predominate fears many people experience is that

talking about sexual orientation will lead family and friends to disown or abandon them. This fear of loss will cause many people to remain closeted.

6) Fear of confusion about one's own sexuality.

Any deviation from perceived norms can lead one to experience confusion about his or her own sexuality. This can be disturbing. Because of our culture's conflicting messages about sexuality, it is not surprising that all of us, at some time or another, find ourselves confused about our sexuality—it is part of normal psychological development.

7) Fear of violence.

Every day there are numerous attacks on gays and lesbians simply because of their sexual orientation. In some cases, these attacks are extended to heterosexuals who support and love gay people. Such attacks are often the result of another person's insecurities and confusion about his or her own sexuality. Whatever the cause, however, this is a fear that families face in coming out on this issue.

8) Fear of being "hit upon."

During the DON'T ASK, DON'T TELL military hearings, many soldiers expressed fear that, *if gays were allowed into the military* (they are already there in large numbers), they would be subject to sexual advances and morale would suffer. For most gays and lesbians, making a sexual advance towards a heterosexual is akin to going to a hardware store to buy a loaf of bread.

9) Fear of economic or job discrimination.

This fear can create tremendous challenges for gays and straights alike to come out at work about their own sexual orientation or that of a loved one. Discrimination occurs (as you will read in Lisa Busjahn's story) and the fear of losing one's job often means that coming out at work is one of the last stages in most people's road to acceptance. In several of the life histories, you will see how coming out at work actually led to greater security and financial success.

10) Fear of AIDS.

Because of misinformation about AIDS and the association of AIDS with the gay community, some people fear that contact with gays puts them at risk for contracting the disease. This is simply inaccurate. Unless one engages in intimate sexual contact, sharing needles, or some other activity that results in blood-to-blood contact, there is no possibility of contracting the disease. It is not transmitted through casual contact. The virus does not discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation—it hasn't a clue as to whether you are gay or straight.

The preceding ten fears represent some of the more obvious fears that keep people in the closet. Ultimately, we all have the opportunity to both acknowledge and face these fears and then to make choices that will help us move towards greater acceptance and a DO ASK, DO TELL family environment.

THE CHOICES GAY AND STRAIGHT PEOPLE FACE

In a DON'T ASK, DON'T TELL household, the gay or lesbian family member has no choice but to:

- 1) Force the issue out into the open.**
- 2) Distance him/herself from the family.**
- 3) Hide her/his true self.**

Few children have the tools to effectively force the issue. So, most kids distance themselves from their family—often moving or running away to places where they can live openly. Others remain and keep their life hidden from their family members. Any of these alternatives can create huge rifts in family relationships. Forcing the issue often results in blow ups; distancing and hiding contribute to building a closet of self-hate and low self-worth. All three options result in a loss of intimacy among family members. So when family members question if the closet has any effect on heterosexuals, they can know that the answer is a *resounding* YES. The closet contributes to and ensures the destruction of intimate, loving family relationships.

Peter's parents were ready to celebrate their fiftieth wedding anniversary. Peter's family operated in a DON'T ASK, DON'T TELL environment. They all *knew* that Peter was gay but...Peter's siblings met to plan a surprise anniversary celebration for their parents. Peter was not invited to the planning session. During the session they became worried that Peter might bring a lover. "What would people say?" one of the sisters asked, and they all concluded that it would be unfair to the parents to force them to deal with this issue on such a wonderful occasion as their fiftieth wedding anniversary. So, they canceled the celebration.

Variations of this scenario occur in every DON'T ASK, DON'T TELL family. Straight people face choices too. Families and friends have three basic choices they can make when it comes to the issue of a loved one's sexual orientation.

- 1) **They can fight it.**
- 2) **They can accept it.**
- 3) **They can prepare for it.**

Fighting and accepting are reactionary. Preparing for the possibility that someone in their family might be gay is visionary. Let's look at each of these options.

Denial is probably the most common form of fighting it. "Oh, John isn't gay, why, he dated Sally just last week." Or, "It's just a phase, she'll be through it in no time." Sometimes the denial is strong—"There's *never* been a homosexual in this family and I can guarantee you there never will be, not so long as I'm alive." Sometimes the fight is life-threatening.

Timmy lived in New Orleans. One afternoon, his parents took him to one of the city's finest restaurants. He was enjoying the lighthearted conversation when his father abruptly changed the subject and asked, "Are you a homosexual?"

Until then he had always lied to his parents about his homosexuality. He was tired of lying. He loved his parents and wanted desperately to include them in his life. He had wondered if maybe it was possible to tell them the truth. He concluded he had to tell them. So he did. He told them the truth.

"Yes, I am gay," he said in response to his father's query. With that pronouncement, his father began to pound on the table; his mother screamed. He felt as if he were in a dream. Before he was able to collect his thoughts, his parents had stood up and stormed out of the restaurant. He sat alone in silence, with dozens of disapproving strangers and the bill. He went home and cried.

Two days later, his doorbell rang. He opened the door to face his mother and father along with every other adult member of his family. Among them was a stranger. He started to welcome them when the stranger grabbed him and pinned him down. The stranger thrust forward at him with a hypodermic needle and injected him with something. Timmy lost consciousness. Three days later he woke in a drugged trance in what appeared to be a hospital room. Standing over him was a wildly ranting preacher demanding the devil leave the body and soul of this young man. Behind the preacher he could make out the outlines of each member of his family.

As he told this story, Timmy seemed nervous and forlorn. He said, "I'm telling you this because I'm afraid. You see, this happened several years ago and shortly after, I moved several thousand miles away. No one in my family has ever mentioned it and I have not seen my parents since." And then he added, "Tomorrow they are coming to visit me and I'm afraid they'll kidnap me again."

Timmy's story illustrates the extent to which some families fight rather than accept the sexual orientation of a loved one. While Timmy's story may not be common, unfortunately, it is not rare. Many families, out of ignorance, are conned into believing that sexual orientation is a choice that can be changed. Compare Timmy's story with the acceptance exhibited in the next story.

Carol first came to San Francisco in the late seventies, at the peak of the feminist movement. She was seventeen and a budding activist. With her best friend, Ruth, both of whom considered themselves heterosexuals, Carol became involved in fighting the anti-gay Briggs Initiative. "Since Ruth and I were both attracted to men we often said if we were men we'd want to be gay men," she says laughing. "Frankly, it never dawned on either of us that we might be lesbians." Over time, Carol received numerous letters from various family members living in Los Angeles concerned about her activities. Her mom constantly asked, "Are you a lesbian?" "No," replied Carol, "I'm not a lesbian." Her grandfather wrote, saying, "If any woman comes up to you, you just pull back, punch her in the face, then turn around and run like hell."

A few years later, Carol moved to Columbus, Ohio, to attend graduate school. She was as surprised as anyone to find herself attracted to a woman and after some time came to accept that she was a lesbian. She called her friend Ruth, who accepted her completely. She then wrote her mom. "You were right all along," she penned—assuming that her mother would easily accept her newly declared sexual orientation. It was several years later, in the midst of an argument, that she learned differently. Her mom yelled at her. "How dare you be judgmental when you're living the kind of deviant, bizarre lifestyle you live," she said. Carol was shaken.

As fate would have it, her mom's best friend of ten years announced that she too was a lesbian. "My mom stuck by her friend Vicki. They're still best friends today. My mom was even in her wedding to another woman, if you can imagine that. She's learned a lot. She's changed," Carol said.

Nothing depicts that change more than Carol's last visit to see her mom and Duane, her mom's longtime boyfriend. They sat Carol down and her mom said, "Honey, we're so proud of you" (Carol had been selected to speak at an international health care conference). Duane added, "We know, with your studies and all, you don't have much money." Her mom continued, "We gave both of your sisters money for their weddings and since you won't have a wedding..." She caught herself and quickly added, "unless, of course, you want to. Anyway, we want to give you the same money we gave to each of your sisters, to use for your trip to Spain or however you like. We love you," she concluded.

As you read through this book, you will see more stories of people who have come to acceptance through gay friends, then applied that acceptance to family members.

Finally, some families have prepared themselves for the possibility that a member of their family may be gay.

Dexter is a young, black man with five brothers. The middle child, he was eighteen when his mother said to him, "Honey, I had a dream about you. In the dream you were having relationships with men. I mentioned this to your dad and we think that you may be gay." She paused and added, "And, that's okay with us. We love you and will do whatever we can to support you." Dexter went into a state of shock. With his head reeling, he blurted out, "I'm not gay." His mom responded, "That's okay, we just want you to know that if you are gay, we'll be there for you."

Dexter did know he was gay, but he just couldn't bring himself to tell his family. He was simply too scared. A few days later Dexter was in the family room watching an episode of the Phil Donahue show that featured a panel of gays and lesbians talking about the film "Paris is Burning" (which is about gay men). During the show, Dexter's father walked into the room. Flushed with embarrassment (as if he had been caught in a lie) Dexter reached for the remote control to switch channels when the mother of one of the panelists said, "My son is gay; I love him and his being gay simply doesn't matter." At that, Dexter's father said, in a voice strong and proud, "That's right!" It took a moment before Dexter realized that his father wanted him to hear what he had just said. Dexter turned to look at him, but his father was already gone. "I sat and cried, not because I was gay, but because I was lying to the two people I love more than anyone else in the world and because, at the same time, I was happy that my being gay was okay with my dad."

Shortly afterwards, he told his family he was gay. They told him they loved him. "My brothers used to stand up to the kids that would make homophobic comments," he said. "They were ready and willing to fight for me. I can hardly believe how accepting my family has been. I'm twenty-two now and feel nothing but love for all of them and know, without a doubt, that they love me."

MY FAMILY—IN OR OUT OF THE CLOSET?

At this point you may wish to examine where you are as a family or as a friend. How honest do you feel you are with other family members? Are there things you would like to discuss but feel you cannot bring up because it would be uncomfortable? What might be the costs associated with your

denying yourself the opportunity to discuss these issues. Could your family have a sane and healthy discussion about sexual orientation—including an honest appraisal of the fears and concerns each has about the topic? With these questions in mind we would now like to take you through the four stages of acceptance.

THE STAGES OF ACCEPTANCE

Just as the experience of the closet is similar for all, regardless of their sexual orientation, so are the stages of acceptance. It doesn't matter if you're gay, straight, bisexual or transgender, nor does it matter if you're talking about accepting yourself for who you are or accepting others for who they are—you will go through a similar process. That process begins with admitting to yourself; then admitting to others, first privately and then publicly; and finally, it includes taking action. Let's examine these four stages of acceptance.

1) Admit to Yourself.

Admitting to yourself that a loved one is lesbian, gay or bisexual is the first stage on the path to acceptance. For many, especially those who have lived years in denial, this is a huge breakthrough. This breakthrough is often, initially, accompanied by confusion and uncertainty, but it is also the beginning of self-acceptance and empowerment. You'll see this breakthrough in most of the stories in this guide.

2) Admit to Others Privately.

Admitting to others privately is the second stage of acceptance. This step usually involves telling close friends and loved ones. This stage, like many others, is often filled with fear. But it is also an act that leads to an improved sense of self-worth and awareness that being who one is, rather than what others think one should be, is the foundation of feeling empowered.

3) Admit to Others Publicly.

Admitting to others publicly is the third stage of acceptance. In this stage, you begin to "out yourself" at work and in other public areas. For those concerned with their financial livelihood, coming out at work can be a terrifying step. At the same time, coming out publicly begins to give people a sense of the power of accepting themselves, a power you'll see depicted in all the stories in this guide.

4) Take Action.

Taking action is the fourth stage of acceptance. Coming out is not something one does one time only. It's actually a process of coming

out over and over again. The more one “comes out” and takes action, the more one experiences self-acceptance as well as acceptance of others. You’ll find a detailed list of actions you can take when you read “101 Steps on the Road to Acceptance” in Chapter 5.

You’ll see each of these stages in most of the stories of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgenders and heterosexuals in this book—from the eighteen-year-old daughter of one of the authors who “comes out” to her boyfriend about having a gay father, to the southern, Latino, religious heterosexual dad who “comes out” as the father of a gay man in his hometown newspaper.

A Family and Friend’s Guide will help you understand the process of coming out and ease you along this path to self acceptance.

THE MAGIC LINE

The early stages of the road to acceptance are riddled with dark emotions like fear, dread and terror. At some point along this road, you will cross a line where no longer do you fear telling people that you’re gay or that you have a lesbian daughter, a bisexual spouse or a transgender friend. At that point, which we call the “magic line,” you will experience joy, love, peace and serenity. You will realize how courageous, loving and compassionate you are and you’ll experience a sense of pride and, perhaps, a kind of beautiful sadness or amusement for all the time it took you to get where you are. Finally, you will experience gratitude that you are there now. Your path has been irrevocably changed, and you will never look at another person with the same fear that you once experienced. Crossing the magic line will fill you with power and self-love.

As you read the stories in this book you’ll see the magic line crossed over and over again. Whether the storyteller is gay, lesbian, straight, bisexual or transgender makes no difference. Accepting ourselves and others as we are is powerful and loving. The more you can learn about the lesbian, gay and bisexual community, the faster this road to acceptance will be. So, let’s become familiar with this community.

GETTING FAMILIAR WITH THE LESBIAN, GAY, AND BISEXUAL COMMUNITY

Many gays and lesbians will tell you that they possess “gaydar,” an intuitive ability to spot other gays and lesbians. Few heterosexuals claim this ability. So, how do you know if someone is gay? Frankly, you can’t

know unless they tell you or provide a clear signal. The lesbian, gay and bisexual community signal you in many ways.

Many gays, lesbians and bisexuals make it easy for you. They speak openly of their sexual identity and generally are quite willing to help you know more about them and the community. Others will do anything to cover up their sexual orientation, and it is almost impossible to get to know this group. A third and fairly large group will talk about their sexual orientation only if asked. If not asked, they generally remain mute (which requires considerable conscious effort and energy). However, this group often display signs or send signals that are intended to open the door to those who will ask. Understanding these signs and signals requires you to know more about the community.

To begin, the symbol of gay pride is the rainbow flag. This red, orange, yellow, green, blue and lavender striped flag symbolizes the diversity in the gay community. It flies from rooftops and is displayed on bumper stickers, lapel pins, and often in the office. (The next time you take a road trip, look for rainbow flags on car bumpers—you'll be surprised by how many you see).

When you see a rainbow flag you can safely assume that whoever is displaying the flag is gay or lesbian or a friend or relative of a gay person. Acknowledging that you recognize the flag is an excellent way to start conversation.

Another symbol is the pink triangle. The triangle represents the patch that gay men were forced to wear in Nazi concentration camps during World War II (lesbians were forced to wear a black triangle). This symbol has deep meaning to gays and lesbians around the world because it depicts the extreme oppression sexual minorities have faced. This symbol is worn today not only as a reminder of that oppression but as a statement that all oppression and hatred must end.

There are many other symbols. At some workplaces, many employees (gay and straight alike) post "Safe Place" stickers in visible spots in their offices. These stickers display the pink triangle in a green circle and communicate that this is a safe place to talk. The new DO ASK, DO TELL stickers, available from most bookstores or by calling 1-800 DO ASK DO, in effect, say the same thing. Ask your openly gay and lesbian relatives and friends about these and other symbols. It's another excellent way to open up dialogue in this area.

The gay and lesbian community sponsors a number of celebrations and rituals. For example, most sexual minorities celebrate "Gay Pride Day," usually held in the latter half of June. The week-long celebration culminates in Gay Pride parades and marches around the world in places from Sydney, Australia, to Boise, Idaho. For sexual minorities, it is a time to celebrate,

not just their sexual orientation, but their courage at coming out despite the oppression they have experienced. These marches draw thousands of people in small towns across the continent and hundreds of thousands in major cities throughout the world. Gay Pride Day honors the Stonewall riots, which occurred in New York City in 1969. On June 25 of that year, sexual minorities (mostly drag queens and lesbians) fought off a police raid of a local bar in Greenwich Village. This rebellion brought people of all sexual orientations together. In honor of the twenty-fifth anniversary of Stonewall, over one million people marched down New York's Fifth Avenue in June of 1994. Also celebrated at the same time were the Gay Games—an event of Olympian proportion (the event at which Greg Louganis “came out” as a gay man). Over 22,000 athletes from around the world participated in these games.

There are hundreds of events like Australia's gay Mardi Gras that attract hundreds of thousands of people annually. These events create sizable business opportunities, as well as a wonderful celebration of freedom and liberation.

Gays and lesbians stay well connected to these and other events through their networks of gay newspapers (there is one or more in most cities around the world) and organizations. There are thousands of social, cultural, political and support groups like gay and lesbian choruses, gay returned Peace Corps volunteers, gay teachers groups, gay police associations and so on. These groups exist in our largest cities and smallest towns. In areas where sexual minorities worry about their safety, these groups often do not use the words “gay” or “lesbian” in their titles, substituting instead terms related to the community such as “pride,” “triangle,” “lambda” and so forth.

Additionally, there are hundreds of religious and spiritual groups which attend to the spiritual needs of lesbians and gays—groups such as Dignity (Catholic) and Affirmation (Mormons). There are also local and regional business groups like the Lesbian and Gay Network of the American Society of Training and Development (ASTD), and San Francisco's Golden Gate Business Association (see chapter 6 for a complete listing of these organizations).

Family and friends can attain vital information and insight on how to connect with family members by contacting the Gay Community Center or PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) nearest you. You can find these organizations listed in chapter 6, Using Resources.

HOW THIS GUIDE WORKS

A Family and Friend's Guide to Sexual Orientation provides you with the knowledge, actions and resources you need to cross the magic line and find courageous acceptance of your gay family members, friends, and yourself.

So far in chapter 1 you have been introduced to the heterosexual closet faced by family and friends of gay and bisexual people, the choices that both gays and heterosexuals have in relating to sexual orientation issues, the stages of acceptance and "the magic line." In addition, you have become familiar with the symbols and celebrations of the lesbian, gay and bisexual community. This information is designed to prepare you for a deeper journey into the lives and experiences of people who have come to accept varying sexual orientations.

In chapter 2 you will read two sets of family stories (including the stories of a gay father, his heterosexual wife and teenage daughter) and several family and friends stories. As you read these stories you will gain a better understanding of the road to acceptance and the "coming out" process of family and friends. In chapter 3 you will discover the diverse community of sexual minorities, when you read the stories of eleven gay, bisexual and transgender persons. You'll learn more about the process of "coming out" and self-acceptance.

In chapter 4 you will look, specifically, at two important areas of life, work and spirituality. In this chapter you will read the stories of five heterosexuals and four gay individuals who speak directly to the impact that sexual orientation has had on their lives at work or in religious and spiritual settings. These stories will help you move further along your own road to acceptance.

The heartfelt stories in chapters 2, 3, and 4 will help prepare you to take action and, in chapter 5, you will find a list of 101 steps that you can take to become more accepting. You will also find lists of invaluable resources to help you on this journey. In all of the above, especially in reading the moving biographies, you'll be asked to open your hearts and your minds. If you do, we assure you that the time you spend with this guide will have a high payoff. You will develop skills to become more accepting and empowered.



2

Gaining Acceptance

Stories of Families and Friends

What impact does someone's being gay have on families and friends? You will find out in this chapter as you read the stories of one gay man, a lesbian and eight heterosexuals. Through understanding their courageous stories you will take a giant step towards acceptance.

We have chosen life stories as the primary means to help you along the road to acceptance because we believe that as you read these stories you will find a part of yourself in each one. The experiences that these individuals—whether gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or heterosexual—describe are those of people like you and me, who tell how their own sexual orientation or that of a loved one has helped them in their life's journey. In connecting to their joys, their challenges, their successes and their pain, we believe you will come to feel similarly about the role varying sexual orientations can play in helping us all to heal the wounded areas of our lives. Our sexual orientation is, for all of us, an important aspect of who we are—and we all have many facets to our beings. In these stories you will find joy and beauty and, as in life, you will also find some challenges and even experiences and descriptions that may make you uneasy or uncomfortable. We are aware that the open discussion of some of the issues and experiences described may make it appear to some readers that the experiences are unique to gays and lesbians (or those who support them). In reality, the difficult and painful experiences that are included are all too common in our society, and the difference here is not their occurrence in our storytellers' lives but in the open discussion of them. In an effort to be true to the philosophy of a DO ASK, DO TELL book we have not attempted to "sanitize" our storytellers' lives. We strongly believe that the open discussion of the important experiences of one's life is critical to one's journey along the road to acceptance.

In this chapter you'll begin and end by reading two sets of family stories.

The first is the story of Courtney Powers, an eighteen-year-old heterosexual and the daughter of Bob Powers, one of the authors of this guide. You'll then read the wife and mother's story (Terri Powers), followed by the author's story (Bob Powers). In reading, you'll discover the path of acceptance along which each of these individuals moved. You'll read Courtney's hilarious and touching tale of telling her boyfriend that her Dad is gay. You'll see how Terri overcame her anger and, as a heterosexual, became outspoken about rights and freedoms for gay people. You'll read of the author's progression from shame to self-acceptance and love.

Following these stories, you will read about Vince Patton, a high ranking military officer who is heterosexual and African American. Vince tells of growing up in the Black Bottom section of Detroit and the impact that "Homer the Homo Man" had on his life and successful military career. Vince's story is followed by stories of three family members—Lexie Johnson, Art Moreno and Mick Miller. Lexie, the daughter of a football coach, describes her relationship and friendship with her gay cousin. Art tells of his religious upbringing and his condemnation and ultimate and public acceptance of his gay son. And, Mick Miller tells his moving story of love for his gay brother.

Janice Mirikitani, president of Glide Foundation, speaks of her "extended family"—of gay street kids and the impact that these children have had on her life. To conclude this section, Wendy and Rabbi David Horowitz talk of their lives as lesbian daughter and straight dad. In these remarkable stories you will see the terrifying impact closets have on gays and heterosexuals *alike*. Yet, you'll also discover the joy, peace and love that each of these family members and friends found as they moved along the path of acceptance and crossed "the magic line."

LEARNING FROM LIFE STORIES

After reading each person's story we strongly recommend that you take time to *write* your thoughts and reactions to their life history. At which points in their lives do you see them passing through the various stages of acceptance, and what occurred as they did so? Record your emotional reactions—were there parts of the story to which you felt a strong connection or that seemed especially relevant? Were there moments when you felt uncomfortable, ill at ease, or possibly confused? We encourage you to explore those feelings, as they are often key to proceeding along the road to acceptance.

Courtney Elizabeth Powers

I believe all Americans who believe in freedom, tolerance and human rights have a responsibility to oppose bigotry and prejudice based on sexual orientation.

—Coretta Scott King

My name is Courtney Elizabeth Powers. I'm eighteen years of age, and I live in Saratoga, California. I was born at Alta Bates hospital in Berkeley, California. My parents are Bob and Terri Powers.

Since then, like many other parents, mine have divorced. The reason they divorced wasn't because either of them was unfaithful, or that they fought too much, or had financial difficulties. The reason was my dad is gay.

I don't really remember how I found out my dad was gay; it seems that I have known it my whole life. I think I was about four years old when my dad told me he was gay. He said that when he told me I understood the main point (people loving people of the same sex) he was trying to get across. He wanted to tell me when I was young because he didn't want me to grow up and hate him for being gay, or hate anyone for that matter. Well, I'm not prejudiced and I'm glad he told me when he did. I might have hated him if he hadn't told me—not for being gay but for not telling me the truth.

Since I was four, I spent every summer with my dad and his boyfriend (lover), Alan. This last summer was the first time I didn't go. I remember weekdays in New York at my dad's and Alan's apartment and weekends in New Jersey. Eventually, we spent every day in New Jersey.

I don't remember the first time I met Alan, but I do remember how badly my dad wanted me to like him. I think it took a little time for me to get used to Alan because I remember one time my dad asked me if I liked Alan. I said, "Yes, I like Alan, but I came here to see you."

I accepted Alan into my life rather quickly. I admired him. "He's funny, talented, and brilliant," I thought. We got along great. As far as

I was concerned, he was part of the family, like another dad or something.

When I was about eight, my dad enrolled me in horseback riding lessons to keep me busy during the day, while he worked. I rode every year and I still love riding.

When I was little, I remember being afraid to tell any of my friends that my dad was gay. It wasn't because I was ashamed—I wasn't. It was because I didn't want my friends to dislike me because my dad was gay. I didn't want them to tease me and hurt my feelings. I knew little kids could be cruel and, I wanted everyone to like me, so I generally never said a word. When I talked about my dad, I would only say that he lives in New Jersey and has his own business. I would refer to Alan as his roommate. I wouldn't say anything else about him.

As I got older the subject seemed to come up more often; I was still afraid how people might react. I remember the summer before eighth grade; I was thirteen. I leased a horse at Silver Bit and Spur, a horse farm in central New Jersey. I was sitting in the office talking with one of the owners. She asked about my family.

"Is your mom remarried?" she inquired.

"No, but she is seeing someone," I replied.

"What about your dad, he's not remarried, is he?" she asked.

I said, "No."

She proceeded to ask questions about my parents' divorce, like how old I was when they parted, did I remember it, and so on. Then, she asked, "Do you know why your parents divorced?" I thought to myself, "Well, of course I know why," but I answered the question by saying, "Not really. I guess they just didn't get along." I felt so stupid. But, I didn't want her to look down on me. I knew she knew I was lying.

During the next couple years I told many people. Each summer, I leased the same horse at the farm. I had developed several close friends and we rode together daily. I remember one particular day I had invited a couple of them to spend the night with me at my dad's house. I thought it would be a little strange if they came over and saw Alan living there with my dad, especially when they shared the same bedroom. So I decided I had to tell them. I told my friend Yve first. I was surprised as she didn't care at all. Next I told Andrea who said the same thing—"I don't care." I was further surprised when they came over; they instantly loved my dad and Alan. I was so relieved. Soon, everyone at Silver Bit knew and not one person said anything bad. Occasionally, they would ask questions as they were curious about it. The experience amazed me!

After that summer, I came home and began my sophomore year in