

by Rodger Larson and Andy Simon

When I hear the phrase "pro-family" my mind automatically thinks "Anti-gay." I recently met Ann and Bill Shepherd and their daughter, Susie, a group of people who changed my thinking. The Shepherds are certainly "pro-family," and they are definitely "pro-gay." Susie is a lesbian, and Ann and Bill have been active in Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (P/FLAG) for the last twelve years.

As I approached the Shepherd's house I could see Ann through a window sitting in a breakfast nook that seemed to have become an office. She waved a greeting to me and met me at the door. She introduced her husband Bill and called Susie, who was visiting, in to join us. I had come at a bad time — in the middle of the fourth quarter of an important football game on TV. Bill turned off the volume on the set but left the picture on, and strategically positioned himself so he could glance at the screen to check the score from time to time. Ann sat on an antique couch and pulled out some sewing. Susie sat on the floor and played with the dog. And so in a setting familiar to families throughout America, our interview began.

The Shepherds are not a typical middle-American family, nor are they unique. Ann and Bill have been married for forty-two years, and are the parents of five daughters. Bill is a lawyer in Portland and Ann has worked as a reporter in Bend and McMinnville. They live in a comfortable house in the Southwest hills.

During Christmas vacation of 1971, their daughter Susie came home from college with some important news: she told them that she was a lesbian. Their initial reaction was to show Susie their love and support. Bill said his first thought was, "Well, after all, she's still my Susie," but he also admitted that he didn't quite believe her at first. Ann said it was all right with her, but she didn't want to get too close to the situation. The news troubled them. They didn't know what, if anything, they should do about it. They felt isolated and alone. They found few people with whom they could discuss their "problem" and none who had any knowledge or experience to share. They thought they were the only people facing this situation.

The feelings the Shepherds were describing are, of course, the feelings gay people commonly experience as they go through the process of coming out. I asked Ann and Bill whether they were feeling they had to come out just as Susie had. They agreed — their own struggle helped them to understand Susie's more fully and to appreciate her courage. They shared some of the same fears: would people reject them? Would people lose respect for them? Would people understand?

I asked Ann and Bill if they had known lesbians or gay men prior to the time Susie came out to them, and whether that was why their first response was so supportive. They both laughed. Their previous experience with the issue of homosexuality was anything but positive. Ann had a relative who was deeply closeted and was rejected by her family when she tried to come out. Bill had known of two army officers who were humiliated and discharged when they were discovered to be homosexual. These stories caused them

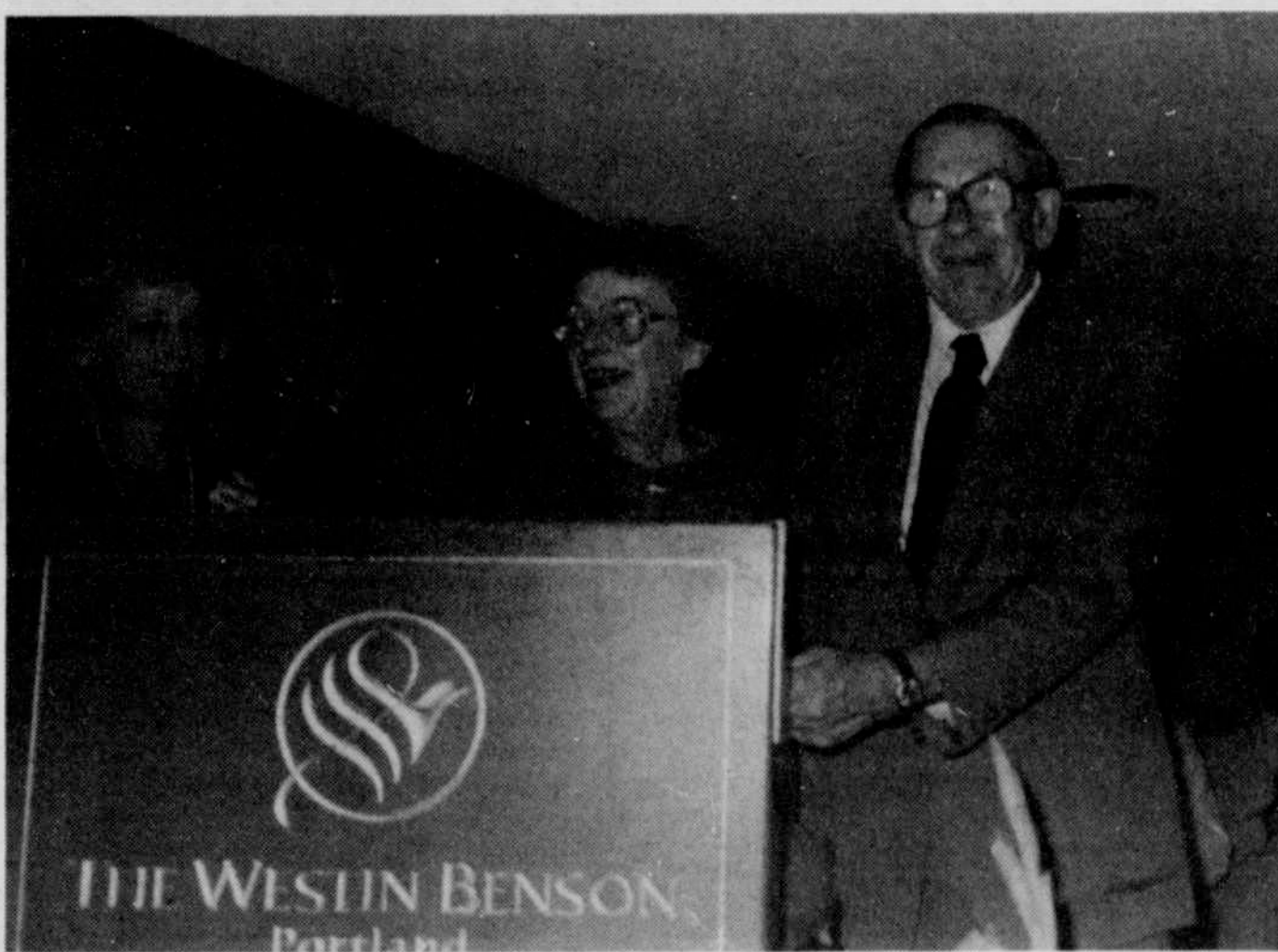
some concern about Susie's welfare, but their very first reaction was to be there for their daughter whom they loved, and who was trying hard to be honest about who she was. "Honesty was always an important value in our family," Susie said. Her parents agreed.

Ann and Bill needed more information about homosexuality and they needed people to talk to. With Susie's help they found some useful information in books, but finding people to discuss their "problem" with was much more difficult. But then an unfortunate situation turned out to be a blessing in disguise. A friend who had a prominent position at their church went public about having a gay daughter. The friend had agreed to testify at the state legislature in support of a gay rights bill. Some members of the church disapproved and the friend's position was threatened. Ann and Bill knew they had to help. They came to their friend's aid and helped save her position. In the process, the Shepherds became politicized, and they

circulated handbook. When Copeland heard about Ann and Bill's idea about contacting other parents of gays he encouraged them enthusiastically. And so during Gay Pride Day in 1976, the Shepherds staffed a sign-up table. They got enough names to begin to plan a first meeting.

The group was small at first. Four couples constituted a big meeting. They met in people's homes and were very casual, mostly socializing and discussing common problems.

Ann, Bill and Susie had done a lot of coming out since Susie's first announcement. In 1977 they came out even further — on television. All three of them appeared on the Town Hall program. I asked whether that had seemed a risky thing to do. They said that by that time it wasn't. Bill's law partners knew Susie well, and were completely supportive; Susie was out at work and was accepted with no problem; Ann didn't have to worry about losing a job. All their friends knew already.



made their first contact with other parents of gays.

The next time the state legislature held hearings on a gay rights bill, Ann's friend recruited Ann to testify as a parent of a lesbian. Soon after, she was asked to serve on Governor Straub's task force on gay and lesbian rights. While she was on the task force, she read a lot of books. She and Bill were becoming quite knowledgeable about homosexuality and they were meeting more homosexuals, too. They were no longer feeling isolated, but as they met more gay people they kept thinking, "If there are this many gay people, there must be at least as many parents of gay people. Where are they? How can we get in touch with them?"

At about the same time, Larry Copeland was organizing the Portland Town Council to work for gay and lesbian rights legislation. He contacted Susie and asked her to volunteer for one of several projects he had in mind. She agreed to help write a legislative guide to gay rights which has since become a widely

What did they have to lose?

Coming out on television seemed to be as out as they could be, but there was one last step that forever closed the closet door behind them. A reporter from the *Oregon Journal* called and asked for an interview. They agreed, and were interviewed and photographed. They watched for the story but it didn't appear. They had all but forgotten about it when on Gay Pride Day 1977 the story hit the streets, not a little feature article on the back pages, but a front page, four-column spread complete with banner headlines and a large photo of all three of the Shepherds. They were not just out, they were celebrities.

The small group of parents of lesbians and gays that Ann and Bill and their friends got together continued to grow. Soon they had outgrown living rooms and began meeting in various churches, at Old Wives' Tales Restaurant and finally in a meeting room at the Justice Center. Similar groups were forming in other cities and a network of local

organizations calling itself Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays emerged. In 1981 the first International P/FLAG convention was held in Los Angeles.

Currently, when the Portland P/FLAG meets — which is on the fourth Wednesday of each month at 7:30 p.m. — 40 to 50 people show up. Ann, who is the group's secretary, says she sends out more than 150 newsletters per issue. The meetings are more formal than they used to be, often including a speaker or a panel discussion. However, the purpose remains pretty much the same: to provide a place where people who are close to lesbians and gay men can meet one another to share mutual concerns, information and support. Many gay people attend the meetings, some with their parents, some without. For some, especially gays who have been rejected by their own parents, P/FLAG serves as an adopted family.

In addition to regular meetings, P/FLAG maintains Parents' Hotlines that serves Portland, Salem, and Vancouver, Washington. The Hotline provides parent-to-parent conversations, information about professional services and programs, and recommends literature for parents who want to read up on the subject of homosexuality. Also, P/FLAG can provide professional qualified speakers to groups who want to sponsor programs about gay issues. And if all that weren't enough, P/FLAG also sponsors Windfire, a group for young lesbians and gays.

How active do Ann and Bill remain in all this? Well, Bill is the organization's president and Ann is the secretary and editor of the newsletter. In fact, they recently received some well-deserved recognition when they were named this year's recipients of the Right to Privacy PAC's Lucille Hart Award "for being the long-term parents and friends of Oregon's Gay and Lesbian Community."

This year was a milestone for Portland's P/FLAG. On September 20th they hosted a very successful sixth annual international convention. More than 250 people from all over the United States and from other countries attended. There were speakers, panels and workshops on subjects ranging from AIDS to religion. One attendee described the convention: "I can't recall ever having been in a setting of such supportive, loving, and caring persons in my life."

Those words "supportive, loving, caring" may describe P/FLAG in general, but they certainly describe three of the organization's most active members. Ann, Bill, and Susie Shepherd. They had invited me into their home and had offered me just a glimpse of their commitment and energy. I was impressed. The football game ended long before the interview, Susie went off for the evening, and Ann was still sewing and chatting with unflagging enthusiasm. As I left, I thought about another phrase, "family values," that the Right has pre-empted to mean "anti-gay." I reflected on how absurd that usage is — the family values I saw at work in the Shepherd household, appreciation and respect for all members of the family, are surely the best there are.

P/FLAG can be reached at the following numbers: in Portland, 244-3225; in Salem, 362-5280; in Vancouver, WA (206) 573-5472.