Marge Work: speaking out for your kids

Every time I have said something about my son being gay, someone has come up and said, "You know, I have a gay son and I've never been able to talk about it."

BY ANNDEE HOCHMAN

•Profile

Often, Marge Work is the third to know. A parent will call on the phone, or approach her quietly after a meeting. It's usually a mother. The voice will be a little low, the manner tentative:

"I just found out my son is gay."

"My daughter is a lesbian."

"I've never told anyone before."

Marge Work understands. Her son, Paul Mowry, is gay. She's spent the last seven years learning how to tell people, her voice less tentative each time. Shortly after Mowry came out, curiosity led Work to Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) groups in St. Louis, where she lived at the time. In hospital corridors, she would talk to mothers who learned that their sons were gay at the same time they learned that the men were dying of AIDS.

Now Work is president of Portland's PFLAG chapter. She conducts workshops to help parents talk more freely with their lesbian daughters and gay sons. She marches in Portland's Lesbian and Gay Pride parade. Her one regret is that Mowry lives 3,000 miles away. It would be wonderful, she says, to march together.

"My son came out in 1980, after his freshman year at New York University, and I didn't have any problem with his being gay. I had concerns . . . I mean, some fears. Just the week before he came home, some crazy nut had gone in and shot up a gay bar in New York City, and shot somebody, and I thought, 'Aughhh . . . somebody's going to hurt my wonderful son.' The other thing I was concerned about was if he suffered any, through high school and stuff, not being out; had he had any discrimination. And he said no; no, he hadn't. He had just been dealing with his sexuality, and going away to school he was able to really think about it more, and he decided that he was gay. And I felt better that he hadn't been hurt.

"At that time Paul was uncertain about whether he might go into the ministry. His father and his grandfather were Presbyterian ministers. And Presbyterians do not ordain gays. So I knew this, and I thought, 'Oh dear, how am I going to tell him that he can't . . . .' It took me a while — most of the summer, in fact — to be able to get up the courage to express my fears.

"Well, it wasn't until the following fall that I brought that subject up — asking first if he was still considering going into the ministry. He was in the school of film at NYU. He said: well, maybe; he hadn't really made a decision. So then I told him, and he said, 'Well, that's all right. If I do decide to go into the ministry, I'll just go into a denomination that ordains gays.' It was so easy; he had no problem. It was me! I was projecting.

"That's pretty basic. We project a lot of our fears, a lot of our ideas that it's going to be tough, onto our kids, when it really isn't, for them.

"I've been doing a lot of thinking since 1980. And parents come out just like gays do, of course, and parents are out in different degrees. I finally am totally out. Now, I always was comfortable with my son's sexuality, but I was not comfortable with how I should talk to people about it. It was a private thing. I don't go around saying, 'I've got four kids, and did you know my daughter is a heterosexual?' The point is, it's a private thing. And yet, if it affects a relationship. . . . You know, I really wanted to tell some people so that they could know Paul in his fullest. This was after Paul said, 'You can tell anybody you want to.'

"A lot of parents think, 'If we just find out [whether homosexuality is genetically determined], then we don't have to feel guilty; we don't have to feel it's something *we did*, and then it will make it easier for society to accept.' That may be true. However, I'm concerned with parents and their kids right now. Instead of really being concerned about what this sociologist or that sexual psychologist or statistician says about this, why don't we just ask our kids how they feel. And when they knew. And how they know. And what their feelings are about their sexuality.

"I wanted to know more. My son had brought me the book *Now That You Know*, and I read it and I found out there was a group for parents. And I thought, 'Well, that would be neat.' I was in Chicago at the time, in Evanston. I was very active in the Presbyterian Church and was on the social-action committee. One of the young men on the committee said there was going to be a meeting on the issue of homosexuality and the church, and that the representative from the Parents of Gays group was going to be there.

"I went to that meeting. So here I am, surrounded by all these clergy who I know from all these various things, and I have not talked. And I know what the Presbyterian Church's stand is. And the more I thought about it, the more annoyed I was getting with the Presbyterian Church that they would not ordain my son if he wanted to be, because he was better than most of them. We were sitting there, about 40 of us, and the first thing that this woman said was, 'How many of you in this room have a gay child?' Well, I nearly died. And I thought, 'Was that question really necessary? Do I have to answer that?' That, I think, was the hardest thing of all of these years. Nothing was as hard as that decision. And I raised my hand. And that, I think, set the course for where I went from there. But I'll tell you: my body heat was going up into my face. You know how you get when you get real hot; my heart was ringing in my ears, and I was just looking straight ahead and I raised my hand and put it down again, and I thought, 'Aighhhh!'

"It wasn't fear so much as . . . I was still feeling so hurt that *he* would be hurt. And I was angry. I mean, I was *angry*. These weren't close friends of mine. They were part of the clergy. They were part of the church that was saying, 'Your son is not good enough to be ordained in this church.' So I was transferring my anger to some of these perfectly nice people who probably didn't feel that way. In fact, the chairman of the committee that I was on was sitting right behind me. And when the meeting was over, he leaned forward and said, 'Bless you, Marge, and your son, Paul.' It was so dear. I mean, it was such a sweet thing. He was saying, 'Hey, I'm with you and it's OK.'

"I almost cried; I was so near to tears anyway because of the combination of hurt and anger — and feeling this was an invasion of my privacy somehow. I thought, 'Why did I raise my hand?' But I had to, you know. I thought, 'I can't not acknowledge this.' When she said that, my hand went up to my shoulder. Through the years, as I tell other people, maybe it goes up a little bit higher. And now, I hold it up high and say, 'Yoo hoo, here I am. Hey there, any of you have gay kids? Oh, are you lucky!' It's gone up and up and up."

Marge Work is waving her right arm in the air. She is dressed like an exclamation point: fire-red sweater, matching earrings, a scoop of silvery hair over her forehead. She talks in italics edged with laughter. Every now and then, she calls for affirmation from her mother, Edna Stormont, who sits across the room.

Photo by Anndee Hochman

"Paul is a splendid young man . . . isn't he, Grandma?"

"Oh . . . the best," Stormont answers.

Marge Work is unequivocal. She loves all her kids. If Paul weren't gay, he wouldn't be Paul. It is that simple.

"Like I said, I was never uncomfortable with Paul being gay. He said he was not afraid; he was careful where he went . . . and that it didn't bother him about not being able to be ordained in the Presbyterian Church. And he was happy. And that was really all that mattered. So the whole process for me was coming to be comfortable with how I would talk about it or bring it up. At first, even if I heard a bad gay joke, I found it difficult . . . I wouldn't laugh. I'd say, 'I don't think that's funny,' but I didn't say why.

"I decided I wanted to put my activism to work, you know, and I tried to find out what was going on in the AIDS project. Nobody seemed to know, so I called the medical editor of the *Chicago Tribune*. I called [a clinic that he recommended] and it turned out that I was the only parent who had surfaced so far, you know. So I went through the training to be a support person — here they call it PALs — and I had as a friend a person with AIDS. The man was 50; I was with him for 10 months before he died.

"When I worked at the Baha'i National Center [near Chicago], it helped me in the coming-out process because this was an environment where we didn't talk about sexual things, anyway. And they would say, 'How was your weekend?' and I'd say, 'Well, I was taking a training on death and dying to work with terminally ill people.' At first, I didn't say 'AIDS.' I said, 'Well, I'd like to work in a hospice eventually' — which I would.

"Finally, just like that day when I was asked, 'Are there any parents of gays in this room?' I thought, 'I'm not really being square about this.' So the next time they asked, I said, 'Yes, I'm going to be working with people who have AIDS.' And somebody said, 'Why?' And I said, very calmly, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, 'Because one of my sons is gay, and anything that affects the gay community as deeply as the AIDS epidemic does is something that I want to give my support to.' There was absolute silence. But little by little, at lunch that day, a couple of people came up to me and said, 'You know, I'd like to talk to you more about that, Marge. I have a cousin who's gay . . . .' Little by little, we all began *talking* about it. It was just fantastic.

"And every time that I have said something about my son being gay, this has been the response. Someone has come up later and said, 'You know, I have a gay son, and I've never been able to talk about it. . . .' My theory is that we all need to talk about it. I mean, this is a gradual process. I'd call it a journey. But I think that those of us who are out, if we do not declare ourselves when the opportunity presents itself, add to the conspiracy of silence.

"Some parents have a really tough time. The parents group is a safe place for parents to come at whatever stage they are. Yes, it is a group where people who are having problems with it can talk in safety, and they're entitled to their feelings. However, there are a lot of us who are to the point where we don't have a problem with our child's sexuality; we want to be helpful, and we want to know how we can take the next step into making gay rights happen.

"While I'm an activist, I don't want to give the idea that I think everybody has to be out. I like to think of it as a journey. And a journey implies that there's motion. You're not standing still. In a journey, you're going from one spot to another. And I think that our coming out is that way. Maybe our steps are really slow. But if each step that we take is of good quality, it makes a difference. I think that every time we speak out against a gay joke, every time we speak out against injustice and discrimination against our kids, we are affirming our children. And that is important. I think that we need to do that in whatever way we can.

"I know some parents have said that if they had their choice, they would rather have their child straight. I don't feel that way. I really mean that. My son is terrific. I feel sorry for people who don't have a son like I do. You know, parents say, 'What did I do wrong?' Well, I don't think we're responsible for everything our kids do. We do set up a certain environment when they're growing up. But I still don't claim credit for all of my kids' successes, and I certainly don't claim credit for all their failures. But if that were true, *if* I believed that, yes, I am responsible, I wouldn't say, 'What did I do wrong?' I would say, 'What did I do *right* to have a son like Paul?'

"Being part of the parents group, being active, helps me feel close [to Paul]. I miss him terribly — he's in New York, I'm here. It's a long way away. We don't see each other that often. But that is a way we keep in very special touch, because he knows I'm doing everything I can. I think all children like to think their parents will be there, not only to fight their cause but also for their friends. And so, I'm doing it for his friends, too."

When Mowry and Work were interviewed for a recent book, Beyond Acceptance: Parents of Lesbians and Gays Talk About Their Experiences, *the authors said they would use the quotes but change the names. In a pre-publication letter, Mowry asked the authors not to shield his identity, or his mother's. Work beams when she reads it:*

> There was a time in our lives when perhaps we might not have felt comfortable having our names used in reference to our experience with gayness. Now, however, we would feel uncomfortable sharing our experiences under a pseudonym. We are proud of who we are: Paul as a gay person and Marge as the mother of a gay person. We deal with others openly and honestly in sharing our personal experiences with being gay and loving someone gay.
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> Unfortunately, we understand all too well why it is necessary for many people to guard their identities when it involves reference to personal gay issues and experiences. This is all the more reason why those of us who are 'out' should take every opportunity available to re-affirm to others: I am here. I have a name. I am a real person.

"A parent would not be doing their child a service by publicly pushing being out if their son or daughter was not totally comfortable, but I think that what we can do if our child is not totally comfortable is work with him or her, because, obviously, there's more to it. Why aren't they comfortable; what is it? If they're not comfortable, period, with their sexuality, then see what you can do in the way of getting counseling, or what you can do to help. Or if it's other issues, sit down together and say, 'How can we work this out? How can I help you to reach the point where you're totally comfortable with who you are; the point where you are able to celebrate yourself?' And then say to them, 'Because I celebrate you.'" •