

A mother's story

We got the coming-out letter on a Monday in 1994, and we were at a PFLAG meeting by Wednesday," reveals fast-acting mom Linda Werts, whose son, Joel Corcoran, is now a board member of Basic Rights Oregon.

Still, she admits some confusion and nervousness at first. "I had a cigarette in each hand," she recalls with a laugh.

Her first meeting was a revelation. "I was stunned that everyone looked so normal. I was dismayed that everyone was laughing and having a good time. Not only that, they didn't mind if I went outside and had a cry."

But Werts learned she wasn't alone. "I could see we'd be all right and we'd get through this." In fact, at that first meeting

Werts admits she already started scouting attractive young men for her son to date! "Once No on 13 was over, it got easier," she says, referring to the divisive 1994 ballot measure campaign. "But it was about a year before I felt comfortable enough to talk to people outside family and PFLAG."

We often forget our families go through their own coming-out process, too. Werts remembers the first person she told about her son was her dental hygienist.

The woman had been making some homophobic remarks, so the avenging mom says: "I bit her to get her attention, and then I told her. She looked at me like I was dog shit on her shoe."

But Werts spoke to the dentist and office manager, and on her next visit the hygienist kept her mouth shut. "That was a big leap into education and outreach and the only time I've ever had to get irate," she says.

Now, Werts keeps busy running the PFLAG lending library and making herself available at each meeting to talk to newcomers. "I think about the people who were there for me, the ones who had told their stories 100 times and told it once more for me."

She's noticed that kids are coming out at a much younger age now and that the group doesn't seem to be needed as often to give educational talks. "Things have gotten so much more open with *Will & Grace* and so on that there isn't as much demand. We used to go to

[Oregon Health Sciences University] and talk to med students, but now they have their own gay and lesbian employee association," Werts says.

And, yes, one of her favorite activities is marching in the Pride parade. "Every year when we get that first round of applause we all cry because we see hundreds of faces, and I always wonder: 'Where's your mom? I hope she's marching in a parade somewhere.'"

Werts also makes the point that she'd love to see every gay person in the area come to a PFLAG meeting at least once a year. Besides, she's still seeking Mr. Right for her son!

—Oriana Green



PFLAG mom extraordinaire Linda Werts is also in charge of the group's extensive lending library

A coming-out story

Cris Fain is a lesbian who found exactly what she needed at PFLAG. "I was raised in the Church of Christ, a Southern Baptist Church, all my life. My sexual identity was suppressed because God didn't like gay people. Same-sex behavior was 'outside of God,'" Fain begins.

Her cheeks flush as she holds back tears. The pain of her coming out is still fresh.

"I had had crushes on friends, but I never acted on them," Fain sighs. "I even got married. I had two children. Then I met someone worth coming out for."

Fain, 33, notes she always had been close to her mother. "I thought we could talk about anything."

Still, it was hard to come out to her. "I virtually came out of the closet. I sent Mom an e-mail. I told her I had something important to tell her."

But her mom responded, explaining she had something important to say, too. "Mom typed, 'I got permanent makeup done!'" Fain responded, "I'm gay."

Fain's mother went on to ask: "How could you do that to me? How could you do this to your children?"

Then came the religious ammunition. "God didn't make you that way!"

These assaults were followed by a volley of biblical verses. "Mom must have had some idea

that I was gay, because she was so prepared to do battle. And I couldn't defend."

Before she signed off, Fain told her mom, "I'll be here in Oregon waiting for you." And that's the last time she heard from her mother and the last time her kids, ages 2 and 4, heard from their grandmother.

"They had an extremely close relationship with their grandmother before. My partner said, 'Welcome to the biggest minority you will ever be in.'"

Fain needed help to shoulder the pain of rejection. She wanted to find a support group of women with small children.

"I needed a niche," she recalls. "I needed family. I had lost my family, and I had lost every friend I ever had."

Nine months ago, she went to a PFLAG meeting. "I got a fabulous reception," she recalls.

It turned out to be the organization's annual business meeting, but it worked for Fain. "It blew me over. The acceptance. The support."

Now a board member, Fain helps promote the group. "I work to market the organization to people who need it," she says. —Heron

The Portland PARENTS, FAMILIES AND FRIENDS OF LESBIANS AND GAYS Holiday Party is 7 to 9:30 p.m. Dec. 11 in Collins Hall at First United Methodist Church, 1838 S.W. Jefferson St. For more information call 503-232-7676. Visit www.pflag.org to find a chapter in your area.

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