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When a marriage breaks up after one spouse comes out of the closet, separation and divorce become more complicated. Many unique issues accompany the dissolution of mixed-orientation marriages. Sexual minority spouses face the challenge of coming out, while straight spouses often feel left behind or forgotten.

Amity Pierce Buxton, director of the Straight Spouse Network support group, researched the experiences of thousands of people for her book, *The Other Side of the Closet*. She says the sources commonly experienced sexual rejection, crisis of identity, social isolation, family disruption, a sense of betrayal and deception as well as feelings of grief, loss and powerlessness.

After 17 years of marriage, Annie French's husband, John, told her he is gay. At first, she experienced shock, devastation and confusion.

She was "sad and scared that I was 43 years old and my life course had been irrevocably changed." She was angry with John for not figuring it out sooner, angry with herself for not seeing it sooner and worried about how his revelation would affect their two young sons.

"At times, I felt dead inside—nothing left," French recalls. "Other times, I felt a pain that was almost worse than losing a loved one to death."

Overcoming her own prejudices against gay men and lesbians was one significant challenge French faced; explaining the sensitive situation to the children was another. The couple knew right away that they were going to get a divorce, but they also needed time to work out logistics, such as finances.

At first, while they received counseling, the parents told their kids they simply were having relationship problems. Their divorce was final two years later, and French believes the experience ultimately helped the boys become stronger and more tolerant of others.

At John's recommendation, she began to attend meetings of the Straight Spouse Network's Portland chapter. There, she found a place where people understood how she felt,

WHAT ABOUT THE SPOUSES?

Accepting one's sexual identity sometimes leaves a husband or wife at a loss

by Timothy Krause



The Straight Spouse Network participates in the Millennium March on Washington in 2000

and she has continued to be involved with the organization because she hopes sharing her experience will help others.

Today, the divorced couple live a couple of miles away from each other in Milwaukie and attend their children's activities together. John visits for holidays and birthdays, and the two meet occasionally to catch up on each other's lives. Although they no longer follow a common path, French says in many ways they have become closer.

"I grew a tremendous amount as a person

when John and I were together—including his coming out, the separation and divorce," she reveals. "In fact, I am certain I would not be as happy as I am today if I had not had to weather the storm with him."

Buxton suggests straight spouses such as French "represent the untold chapter of gay liberation—the unintended devastation experienced by straight spouses and families when gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender spouses break out of their closets." From her California office, she works with contacts in each state and eight foreign countries to provide confidential personal support and resource information in a mission of reaching out, healing and building bridges.

Peer spouses validate feelings, answer questions and offer the opportunity to make connections. "In other words," Buxton says, "a listening ear, strong shoulders to bear their pain and a box of Kleenex ready to absorb their tears."

Gil Gunderson of Portland first joined the network in 1996, and he since has been designated coordinator of its local presence. Breaking the sense of isolation is usually the first step in a straight spouse's recovery process, so he and two others take turns facilitating Wednesday night meetings.

People also want to find out what others have done to heal. Eventually, most learn how best to let each other move on.

"Probably the most difficult thing for the straight spouse is that they become involved in whether or not the other-than-straight spouse is in the closet," Gunderson says. "Very few people disclose, and if they choose not to disclose their orientation, then the straight spouse is kind of pulled into it. In many cases, they've got no one to talk to. They can't tell their friends. They can't tell their family. So, we provide a confidential and open forum for them to talk things out."

Conrad Bozlee of Salem has experienced firsthand what Gunderson describes. The 50-year-old joined the network's Portland chapter in 1997 when, after 10 years of marriage

including three stepchildren and two grandchildren, his wife, Joyce, told him she is a lesbian.

Shortly after her disclosure, Bozlee shared his feelings with an online support group. He wrote: "We have a choice as to how to use the tremendous energy involved in dealing with this situation. We can either use it to harm one another, destroy one another's spirits, or we can use it to support one another. The result of the first choice would be to tear one another apart. The result of the second is to remain friends, become the people that we can become. We are attempting to follow the second course."

The couple agreed to divorce but remained together until Joyce's youngest child completed school. Meanwhile, with Bozlee's help, she prepared to support herself by going back to school. They finally parted in 2001.

"Early on, the hardest thing for me was that Joyce had not come out to anybody but me and a couple online friends," Bozlee says. "When we went to family events, my heart would be clogged with emotion. I was in a closet with a secret I could not share. I was sad, and nobody could know why."

Slowly, Joyce began to reveal her newfound orientation to family and friends. Once she was out, Bozlee's initial tension was relieved.

"Her coming out was a totally unselfish act of kindness," he says. "She could see I was suffering. Our relationship was not working, and she knew I was blaming myself. I thought, 'If I were just a better husband, a better father, a better lover, a better provider, a better some-

thing, I might somehow touch that special place in her heart that would make it all work.' She came out to free me."

Joyce's bravery and integrity were one reason why Bozlee has stood by her side all this time.

"If anything, this has made me know that love is more than sex or sexual orientation," he explains. "It is about intimacy and the sharing of the spirit." □

For more information about the STRAIGHT SPOUSE NETWORK visit the Internet site www.ssnetwork.org or call Gil Gunderson at 503-780-9708. Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays also offers the resource document *Opening the Straight Spouse's Closet*, which can be downloaded from www.pflag.org.

TIMOTHY KRAUSE is a free-lance writer in Portland.

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—Annie French

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