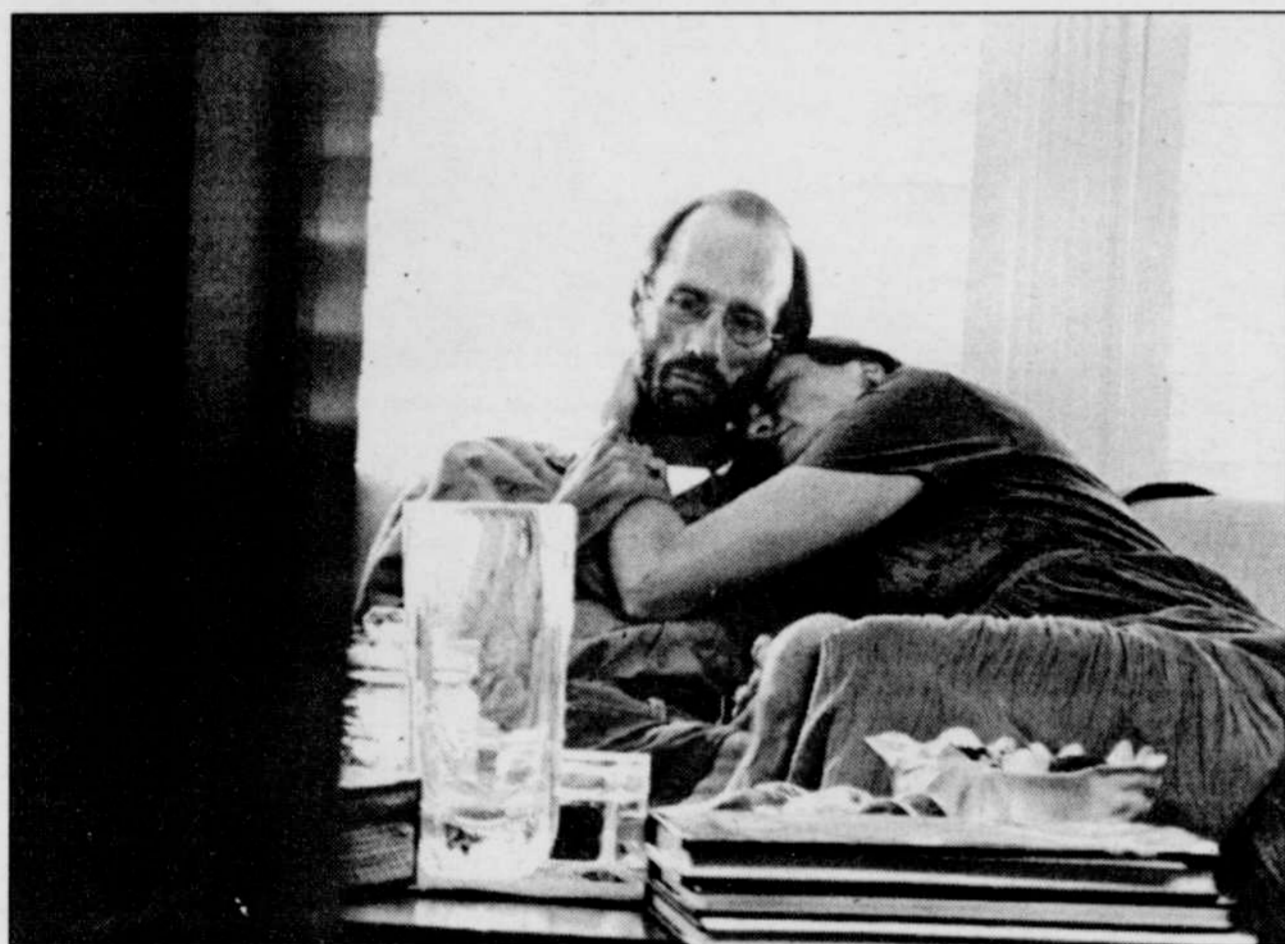


FILM

Force of change

A young documentary filmmaker cuts to the heart of the turmoil when faith and homosexuality collide

BY CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN



Mormon, married and gay: The Smiths are one of film's finest examples of the intersection of faith, homosexuality and personal definitions of family

Initially, it wasn't filmmaker Tasha Oldham's plan to make a documentary about the Smith family. But when Steve Smith, a married Mormon gay man with AIDS, and his spouse, Kim, also HIV-positive, decided to a) remain married and b) adhere to their faith, Oldham's circuitous quest to document a subject that would highlight the diversity and gray areas of Mormonism got the better of her.

The fascinating result is *The Smith Family*, which kicks off the 15th season of PBS's P.O.V. documentary series June 25.

"I was doing a documentary about the diverse lives of Mormon women," Oldham explains in an interview with *Just Out*. "I grew up in Salt Lake, and when I moved to Los Angeles, people were very fascinated with the idea that I was Mormon, and they often had a lot of misconceptions and stereotypes about who Mormons were, particularly in regard to their women."

The 30-year-old practicing Mormon, who supervises scripts for films and television, says she also "wanted to cover...homosexuality within the faith, because it was kind of a hot topic that wasn't being discussed." Although she wanted to research lesbians, she explains that "one of the criteria was I wanted the women to be active in the church, and they kept leaving the church, so that didn't quite pan out."

She then turned to women who had married gay or questioning men. "I met a woman named Allison Donn, and, as sort of a flip, off-the-wall comment, I said she was this amazing woman. And she said: 'You wanna meet someone amazing? You gotta meet Kim Smith.'"

In 1999, Kim Smith was living with her own HIV-positive status and her husband's rapidly progressing illness while coping with the labyrinthine medical system, the turmoil of their situation and raising two teen-age boys. Simultaneously, she was trying to keep their highly unorthodox family circumstances in good standing with what many people would consider a highly orthodox religion.

Steve and Kim had both been raised in the Mormon faith and had been happily married for

nine years when Steve revealed he'd been sexually abused as an adolescent, a traumatic incident to which he initially attributed his sexual encounters with men throughout their marriage.

As Oldham's interviews with the couple indicate, there were inklings of marital stress long before Steve came clean. The couple were active in the church and seemed to be happily raising their kids, and we're shown extensive video footage from earlier in the marriage of Steve enthusiastically participating in myriad activities with his sons.

Meanwhile, their physical relationship (what Kim calls "the fireworks department") was always troubled. So much so, in fact, that Kim confesses part of her was relieved to find out Steve was gay; she finally realized the problem wasn't that she was unattractive.

There's a stark contrast, indeed, between those idyllic Smith home videos and Oldham's recent interviews with Kim and the very ill Steve, their sons and some extended family. Though Steve characterizes his actions as "unclean" and expresses immense guilt over infecting Kim, he finally does accept his sexual orientation as something separate from his molestation.

Kim is also eventually supportive of Steve (and even of Salt Lake's gay community), despite the couple's many conflicts and the grueling stages of denial and acceptance. However, Kim's family seems only grudgingly supportive; her father admits he "would've liked to hit him upside the head with a shovel," and the Smiths' eldest son is equivocal and elusive.

The most potentially controversial aspect of the story—and what really makes the Smiths utterly fascinating—is that, feelings and realizations aside, Kim and Steve stay in what both admit is a sexually unfulfilling marriage because they feel that is what's needed to keep their family together. It is also what Steve must do

to remain an active church member.

During one devastating interview session, he confides, "As hard as it is to have poor health and to deal with the pain and discomfort, it does not come close to the difficulty I had and the pain I felt in having to reconcile my homosexuality with my religion." It's only through a personal favor from a connected friend that Steve is allowed to remain an active Mormon.

"Most often," Oldham says, "gays who come out don't want to leave, but they're almost forced out because the two lifestyles just don't serve one another. In Mormonism...it's not a passive thing. You're not just going to church. You're really involved in community service...and all of a sudden, the calls stop coming."

She doesn't necessarily attribute this problem to just her religion, however. "Homosexuals, just in general, are not being treated fairly by any religion. I certainly don't think it's unique to Mormonism."

Oldham's goal, she insists, was not to depict the Smiths as pawns in the great Mormonism vs. Homosexuality debate. "The film doesn't bash Mormonism, and it also doesn't put it up on this pedestal," she says. "I...wanted the Smiths to tell their own story. I didn't want it to be Tasha Oldham's view on the family.... I didn't want it to be about this fight between the Mormon church and homosexuality, which it could've been."

The most important and thought-provoking issue arising from the many seeming contradictions of *The Smith Family* is the reclamation by dissidents—gay and questioning, like Steve Smith, or straight and questioning, like Kim Smith and Oldham herself—of the religion that seems to reject them. "I grew up incredibly sheltered," Oldham shares, "and I thought homosexuality was wrong, too, because that's what I was taught."

Life experience has taught her something else. "I moved out to L.A., and the most incredible human beings I've met [are] gay—the most accepting and nonjudgmental—and I thought, 'This just could not be wrong.' I know that with every fiber of my being, and that's why I have my own issues with the church."

But the filmmaker doesn't believe these issues need to continue to be mutually exclusive. "I don't believe in throwing out the baby with the bath water. Because I don't agree on every single thing the church teaches doesn't mean I can't be a Mormon."

She believes changes will come, but not without a change of heart on the part of the Mormon population. "The family thought they were the only family going through this because at the time, 11 years ago, they didn't know about Family Fellowship, they didn't know about Affirmation," two gay Mormon support groups. "That's really why Kim wanted this, so that

people would be discussing it."

That's why Oldham wanted it, too. "That would be my goal—for people to become more open-minded and more tolerant. I mean, I know the church is not going to change their standpoint on Mormon doctrine, and I would never have the delusion of grandeur that that would ever occur...it was more for the people to change their viewpoints, and I think that's where the force of change is going to come." ■

THE SMITH FAMILY airs at 10 p.m. June 25 on OPB.

CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN is a Portland free-lance writer.



Filmmaker Tasha Oldham believes change comes from people, not church doctrine

PHOTO BY JON MOBERG

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