

Editor's note: Some names have been changed at the sources' request.

For more than 30 years, those involved with Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays have made it their mission to promote the health and well-being of queers and their closest acquaintances.

That kind of support will be available for residents of Clackamas County beginning Jan. 27, when PFLAG's newest chapter holds its first meeting in Oregon City. The group will continue to get together on the fourth Tuesday of each month.

The formation of the chapter is being spearheaded by two mothers of gay children. Marion Hammer first came to PFLAG for support because of problems that her now 41-year-old gay son encountered early in his life.

"During junior high school, Mark struggled and was the victim of insensitivity from teachers and other students," Hammer says. "It was very troubling. I felt I had no one to turn to and very few people to talk to. I had a few gay friends and very supportive faith community who were a great help. A few years later I discovered PFLAG and found other parents who had the same experiences. I was so impressed with the resources, and it was so reassuring that I was not the only parent."

According to Sue, another mother who is organizing the group, there is a "desperate need" in Clackamas County for the resources gathered through PFLAG. Her daughter Mary is a 16-year-old lesbian high school student.

"There's just not a whole lot of resources out here for gay kids and their families and friends—for support, education and, most of all, advocacy," Sue says.

Raven, a 17-year-old Clackamas County lesbian high school student, has found support from family and friends but also has experienced the negative side of being queer. Although her high school has a Gay Straight Alliance, she still feels intense rejection and negativity.

"The truth is, most people don't want [the GSA] to meet," she says. "On the good side, 10 percent of the school population are active members."

They both feel that a PFLAG chapter will be

ALL IN THE FAMILY

Clackamas County mothers form PFLAG chapter

by Tom Stevenson

Mary says she hears a lot of homophobic chatter among peers at her high school. Although she herself has never been a victim of, or actually seen, violence or physical harassment, she knows plenty of others who have not been so fortunate.

"Mostly it's the comments: 'That's so gay' being the main one that I hear," Mary says. "It doesn't have to be an insult, though usually it is meant as one. The way I see it, sometimes it can be a compliment in certain circumstances."

R.E. Szego, the outreach coordinator for Clackamas County Sexual Minority Youth Connection, a queer support group, sees the new PFLAG chapter as a "fantastic resource to offer parents and guardians who are looking for ways to support their kids." Through her work, she hears stories about "high school students being threatened and/or physically and verbally harassed at

schools for being different. One youth I've worked with reported being reprimanded and having his mother called for talking to other students in class about how gays were persecuted in the Holocaust."

Szego sees young people in all stages of the coming-out process as they come to accept their sexuality. Some are open, out and proud, and others are closeted to absolutely everyone.

"Some youth will only meet with me one-on-one and won't come to the group events because they're not ready for others to know about their sexual orientation," Szego says. "Or maybe they don't feel safe coming out in their families and schools, or maybe they're still figuring things out for themselves. Likewise, youth I work with come from varying experiences within their families, from complete intolerance of their gender expression and/or sexual orientation to having parents super-eager to support them."

Mary and Raven have found their parents to be supportive and consider themselves "lucky." They both feel that a PFLAG chapter will be

beneficial to everyone in Clackamas County.

"It makes me sad that I've met and heard about too many youth who are abused, rejected or kicked out to live on the streets by their parents and family only because they are GLBT," Mary says.

Raven adds: "I just recently outed myself to my mother and gave her some info about PFLAG in Portland. Some days it's just too much to make it there. Now that Clackamas County will have [a chapter], it's going to be a lot easier for her to adjust to my sexuality. The GLBT community in Clackamas County is spread out and thin. With a PFLAG here, we can come together more at a safe place."

According to Hammer, local reaction to the formation of a PFLAG chapter has been good.

"We are seeing positive responses by various people, including family therapists and concerned parents who have heard about the chapter beginning and feel the word is getting out," she says. "But I know gay and lesbian youth who don't feel comfortable being out in their schools. Their experiences don't sound much different than my son 25 years ago. That is disappointing."

Sue says that while her daughter feels support at home, other children do not feel the same thing. Mary came out to her family at 14.

"Her dad and I were fine with it from Day One," Sue says. "Even her little brother, who is now 14, didn't have a problem with it. We initially felt a lot of sadness that she has to live in a world that is not always accepting of her sexual orientation, as well as worries about her safety. We now try to channel our feelings into activism to help the rest of the world see sexual orientation as we do—not a choice, but just the way she was born...no different than my left-handedness or her brother's green eyes."



PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS

Marion Hammer struggled early on to accept the fact that her son was gay

Hammer says although she struggled early on to accept the fact that her son was gay ("this was not how I imagined a mainstream child"), she loved him and acknowledged to herself that she had a lot to learn. Through the years her growth has been progressive and steady.

"I think my views are continually changing and hope I can continue to expand my thinking," she says. "I didn't realize the struggles young people encounter, and looking back it helps explain many of my son's difficulties as a young child and adolescent. Children need to be loved and nourished for who they are, just the way they are." ■

PARENTS, FAMILIES AND FRIENDS OF LESBIANS AND GAYS CLACKAMAS COUNTY will meet from 7 to 8:30 p.m. on the fourth Tuesday of the month starting Jan. 27 at Atkinson Memorial Church, 710 Sixth St. in Oregon City.

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