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A PUBLICATION OF COLAGE (CHILDREN OF LESBIANS AND GAYS EVERYWHERE)



JUST FOR US

FOCUS ON SPIRITUALITY & RELIGION IN OUR LIVES

SPRING 2002

FOR PEOPLE WITH LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL AND TRANSGENDER PARENTS



A.J.'S STORY

A young person's journey to find a church that fills both spiritual and social needs

When I became a Christian in 1994, my life was turned upside down. I lived a more fruitful and abundant life, in that I had more joy, my soul was finally at peace, and now for the first time, I felt safe. When adversity came, it did not seem as daunting, and surely not as stressful. When my two moms met, it just completed our family. My mom had been praying for a mate that would love her for her, and me for me, not knowing the master plan God had in mind. Theresa, my stepmother, was at the same time praying for a woman and child, knowing her sexuality. Unbeknownst

to any of us, we were all looking for the same thing. I can truly say that it was of divine appointment (meant by God) for our family's construction.

As a family who was obviously different, and living in Houston, Texas, we did not know how to go about finding a church that was GLBT-affirming and one that would also suit our needs. To my amazement, we found our solace at Maranatha Fellowship Metropolitan Community Church, a local fellowship of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (UFMCC). UFMCC was founded by Troy Perry in 1968, addressing the needs of GLBT individuals around the country and the world. Each denomination is different, often reflecting the background of the persons or pastor in the church. Maranatha is a charismatic church, and has helped me grow in various forms of my spiritual walk. It has helped

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DIFFERENCES

by Eliza Torlyn

I look at my life of 23 years as though it were made up of three different lives. One third is still developing, it is now and includes the time I've lived on my own, outside of my family home. Before this, there was high school and junior high in my father's home where I lived with his influences and under his guidance. However, for my elementary school years I lived with my mom. Those are the years I remember as being filled with excitement, freedom, and embarrassment. I was always excusing my mother to other people for her quirky ways. She was the most unusual person in my life.

My mother worked odd jobs like gardening, hauling dump loads, writing poetry, and many other things she found that followed her interests. She had female lovers in our suburban, middle-American home. However, one of her greatest differences from other kids' moms were her beliefs in the Goddess and her spiritual connection with the

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Eliza (left), with her mother Lilith

GROWING UP IN THE MORMON CHURCH

By Sara

My name is Sara and I was raised by my biological mother and her partner of 20 years. I am from Houston, Texas and I am now living in Utah where I attend college. I was raised in the Mormon Church. My moms took me to church every Sunday and made sure that God and religion played a big role in my life. And it did. Unfortunately, being gay and being a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints can be a huge challenge. My brother and I never talked about our home life with anyone but each other. We came from a very loving, gentle, fun-filled family. However, we could not let people (anyone) know that we came from such a "special" family. That was really hard at school, in Girl/Boy scouts, and especially at church. It was either denial (on our part) or just that we wanted to protect our parents, but we never shared our family secret. Now it is much more common, and we are both older, but we have come from a very confusing place.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints is a Christian church and it believes in the King James version of the Holy Bible and The Book of Mormon

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LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

Dear Readers,

Happy Spring! As we relax into warmer days

and longer nights, I hope you enjoy this issue of *Just For Us*. Religion and spirituality are an integral part of many of our lives. These pages contain many different explorations of how religion and spirituality have intersected with our concepts of family, influenced our beliefs about right and wrong, and acted as either a barrier or a lifesaver throughout our lives. I know I have found the theme of this issue personally relevant. This Spring I prepare to complete my conversion to Judaism, the culmination of a spiritual journey of many years.

We are very sorry that it has been a while since you last received an issue of *Just For Us*. Like so many not-for-profit organizations, COLAGE's budget and therefore programs have been hurt by the recession and by the events of Sept.

11. In these tough financial times, COLAGE has been forced to make some difficult decisions regarding our services, including our newsletter circulation policy. For many years, COLAGE has sent *Just For Us* to families regardless of their giving history. Except in cases of financial hardship, we can no longer continue this practice.

The enclosed letter describes how you can continue to receive *Just For Us* by making a modest yearly contribution. We hope that you will be able to contribute whatever you can afford to support not only this one-of-a-kind publication, but all of the vital services of COLAGE by and for people with gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender parents.

This Spring brings several exciting and positive developments for COLAGE as well. The newest addition to the COLAGE staff is the fabulous Beth Teper. Many of you already know Beth from her seven years of service on COLAGE's Board of Directors/Steering Committee. Please welcome her into her new role as Program Associate. (See p.

15 for more on Beth.)

Lastly, I have some wonderful personal news to share: my partner Rachel and I are expecting our own little bundle of joy on August 2! So far I have had a smooth and healthy pregnancy, in no small part due to the amazing support and love we have received from you, the COLAGE community. Thank you! Please keep sending it our way as we move into the new territory of parenthood. While I am away on parental leave mid-July to mid-November, an interim executive director will serve in my place.

I hope the various viewpoints and spiritual journeys conveyed in this issue of *Just For Us* provide as much food for thought for you as they have for me. Please feel free to contact COLAGE with your thoughts and impressions.

With wishes for good health, happiness, peace, and justice for all,

Felicia Park-Rogers
Executive Director

Deepest thanks from *Just for Us* to the following people for all their help on this issue.

Claire Knight Danielle Silber Meema Spadola Beth Teper Katie Breslin

FAMILY WEEK 2002

The ever-popular Family Week is back! Join hundreds of people in lgbt families for socializing and support. This is a life-changing experience for everyone that participates.

Register now to attend Family Week in Saugatuck, MI July 6-13, 2002 and in Provincetown, MA August 3-10, 2002. COLAGE will organize recreational and support activities for kids ages 9-12 and 13 and older during both weeks.

If you are interested in volunteering on the planning committee or during the week, please contact Felicia, ext 101 or director@colage.org. For registration forms go to www.familypride.org. You must pre-register!



One of the 9-12 year old discussion groups at Family Week 2001 in Provincetown

COLAGE

(Children Of Lesbians And Gays Everywhere) is a nonprofit organization providing support, education, and advocacy for people of all ages of LGBT parents.

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SPEAK OUT

In COLAGE's two on-line discussion groups, people with gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender parents are discussing the challenging issues that affect their lives. Here are some recent insights from people on the 14 and over list, addressing our struggles in reconciling our religious and spiritual beliefs with our parents' sexual orientations:

My suggestion is, believe what your heart tells you to believe. God loves us all, no matter what, that's what I believe. And the people who preach against homosexuals, they are just scared of people who are different. And trying to use God against us. Here is a scripture that I have on my signature, because it's such a good one, "Jesus said, 'By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.'" (John 13:35) - Nikki, 15, Wisconsin

I did struggle with this at one point, but then I realized that spirituality comes from me and not a religion. I totally believe in God, and I feel that I am incredibly spiritual. I don't go to church, and I have no religious affiliation. I was watching the movie "Stigmata", a really awesome movie...and toward the end they say these lines and it really represents exactly how I feel about God and spirituality. "The kingdom of god is inside you and all around

you. Not in mansions of brick or stone. Split a piece of wood and I am there. Lift a stone and you will find me." (Gospel of Thomas, sayings 3 and 77) - Diane, 17, New Jersey

I completely understand the feeling of a lack of spirituality. I used to belong to the United Methodist Church and the lady that I went to church with used to pray for God's forgiveness for my mother. At the age of five you really don't understand that your family is any different. About seven years ago, I took a look back on religion and that memory popped into my mind. I realized what that meant and it disturbed me so much that I decided to adopt an atheist lifestyle. Then my mom began to attend a church. It wasn't Unitarian, but it adopted many of the same philosophies, among those love and acceptance for every being. It was actually a really great experience for me and somewhat allowed me to renew my faith in a higher power. I don't exactly believe in God per se, but I do believe that there is an entity that has some say in one's life. - Lexi, 20, Virginia

For more information or to join the Kids of LGBTs Listservs for people under 14 and over, go to <http://www.colage.org/> and click on "email lists".

Want to share your opinion on this topic? Got a suggestion for a future SpeakOUT question? Contact *Just for Us* Coordinator Rosanne Johnson via email at jfu@colage.org!

CHAPTER UPDATE

These are exciting times for the Seattle/Puget Sound COLAGE chapter. Robert Raketty joined the program in October and has since worked hard to revitalize it. He comes to COLAGE with lots of social service experience working with youth.

In January he hosted a COLAGE open house that was a huge success and brought many new families to COLAGE. They had door prizes, pizza and lots of fun. Robert has been doing outreach at community events and at meetings. The youth have also done panels to talk about their families. As a result the group continues to grow. He is also working with like-minded organizations to do media education about gay families and there are plans to form a coalition. Already, COLAGE has been featured in the Seattle Gay News and the Capital Hill Times.



The group is planning lots of fun activities in the coming months. They plan to go bowling, roller-skating and to the local water park (once the weather improves). Recently they went to a Seattle Men's Chorus concert and have plans to do it again soon.

To get involved with the Seattle/Puget Sound-ers, call Robert at 206-444-8780 or email him at robert@stonewallrecovery.org.

Meet new COLAGE Seattle/Puget Sound Coordinator, Robert Raketty

COLAGE AND COLAGERS IN THE MEDIA

In February and March 2002, COLAGE and COLAGERS were seen in and heard on these and other media outlets, helping to increase public understanding and to lead toward changes in unjust and discriminatory laws and policies regarding our families:

Time Magazine Newsweek And Baby
Talk of the Nation, National Public Radio
CNN Radio MSNBC La Presse, Quebec, Canada
Orlando Sentinel, FL Court TV
Fox News, Kansas City, MO New York Post
Twist Magazine Radio America

The opinions expressed in *Just for Us* are those of its contributors and do not necessarily reflect the position of COLAGE.

LEE DUBIN SCHOLARSHIP WINNERS

The Lee Dubin Scholarship fund was created to acknowledge and support daughters and sons of lgbt parents in their efforts to combat homophobia and advocate for lgbt families. Each year, COLAGE and Family Pride Coalition award scholarships to college students who demonstrate their ability in and commitment to affecting change in the community.

ANDREA GIBBS

Raised in a very liberal household, Andrea Gibbs attributes her drive toward political activism to her two lesbian moms. Andrea is the fulltime volunteer caretaker of Camp Sister Spirit, which was co-founded by one of her mothers. Located in Mississippi, Camp Sister Spirit is the only feminist education retreat center in the South. As the Educational Program Coordinator of the camp, Andrea facilitates educational programs on issues including racism, paganism, religious oppression, feminist issues, homophobia and human rights. A senior at the University of Southern Mississippi, Andrea hopes to graduate in 2002 with a major in criminal justice and minors in Spanish and Women's Studies. Her goal is to work towards a Masters degree in Adult Education, and to eventually to work within state prisons and with the economically disadvantaged. Among her many accomplishments, Andrea was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Law from the City University of New York to honor her work in civil rights.



JORDAN MASON

Throughout high school, Jordan strove to make an impact on the LGBTQ community in his hometown of Charlottesville, Virginia. He has two lesbian moms and a gay dad. He feels that being raised by lesbian moms has strongly influenced his feelings about diversity and gay rights. Although identifying as heterosexual, Jordan feels very much a part of the LGBTQ community, to which he is grateful for its support and acceptance throughout his life. Among many of his accomplishments during high school, Jordan served as a panelist in a workshop about the need for equal rights for the gay community called "Why Should Straight People Care?" at a regional conference called Empowering Voices for Equal Rights. Jordan plans to continue upholding his commitment to the LGBTQ community in college. He is currently a freshman at the University of Virginia, where he plans to major in Government and International Affairs and minor in Asian Studies.

MZIMA SCADENG

The daughter of a lesbian mom, Mzima Scadeng was very involved with COLAGE in her last two years of high school. She has been a panelist representing COLAGE, co-facilitated the COLAGE workshop at the OHMY! (Overcoming Homophobia Meeting for Youth) Conference, and created and co-facilitated a COLAGE group that offers activities and support for Bay Area teenagers with LGBTQ parents. She believes that prejudice is based in ignorance, and that education is the best solution to closed-mindedness. While speaking out against peers with opposing beliefs is challenging for her, Mzima feels obligated to speak out against homophobia when she sees it in her peers. "I feel that as a straight person, I am in a safer position to defend gay rights. With the statistics of one in ten people being gay, I am assured that each time I challenge the use



of the word 'faggot', I am being a friend to someone present but unknown." A graduate of Saint Mary's College High in Berkeley, she is currently a freshman at American University in Washington, D.C.

TARA SCHERNER DE LA FUENTE

As the daughter of lesbian moms, Tara feels that she is a representative of other children raised by GLBT parents. For a brief period, Tara attended Calvary Chapel Bible College in Austria. Although she found it difficult to express her liberal beliefs to a Christian community, she felt obligated to make them known. Tara says, "If the only reason I spent a portion of my life being a Christian was to be able to influence a group of Christian leaders in this small way, then it was well spent. I think my boldness is a part of who I am because of who my parents are. I am proud of my parents for knowing who they are and sharing themselves and their love with me and with the people in their lives." Tara volunteered for several years at a no-kill animal shelter in Seal Beach, CA and publishes a zine of her own writing. She feels strongly about AIDS-related causes, and participated in the California AIDS Ride 4, riding her bicycle from San Francisco to Los Angeles and raising nearly \$3000. She recently graduated from Emerson College, with a major in Writing, Literature and Publishing and a minor in Sign Language.



ARIEL PEARSON-TOTINO

Socially aware and politically active, Ariel attributes her strong sense of herself and her community to her lesbian mom who surrounded her with positive women role models. In high school she proved to be a good leader and an asset to her team playing on the Berkeley High Junior Varsity girls softball team, then as umpire for the Albany Berkeley Girls Softball League, extending her job there to help coach a team in the younger girls division of the league. As a member of her high school Gay/Straight Alliance Ariel helped create anti-homophobia workshops for both teachers and peers. She continued to challenge herself by taking college classes in the American Sign Language Department at Vista when she was a sophomore at Berkeley High School. She is currently a freshman at California State University Northridge, where she intends to major in Deaf Studies: Communication Sciences. "I want to concentrate on becoming an interpreter in a theatrical or musical environment." Ariel hopes to one day interpret on stage at Gay Pride in San Francisco.



Profiles by Katie Breslin, COLAGE volunteer

Next year's scholarship applications will be available in January, 2003. Future leaders in all areas of study encouraged to apply!

DADDY & PAPA

a new documentary film by
JOHNNY SYMONS

Reviewed by the Toronto COLAGE Chapter

video review

What if your most controversial act turned out to be the most traditional thing in the world? Through the stories of four different families, "Daddy & Papa" delves into some of the particular challenges facing gay men who decide to become dads.

The Toronto Chapter of COLAGE, led by Sandi Parker and Shari Zernentsch, recently had a video night, featuring popcorn, specially designed color-in movie review sheets, and the video, "Daddy & Papa". Here's Sandi's report:

Our group watched the movie last night. We had 18 people: kids, grades 1 - 9, and some parents, including one person with a gay father. The parents seemed to be more into it than the kids, but they were all quiet and watched it the entire way through.

I asked three questions - 1) "What did you like about the movie?", 2) "What did you not like about the movie?", and 3) "Rate the movie out of 5 stars" (I had them colour the stars).

Overall, our group gave "Daddy & Papa" a "thumbs up": They gave the movie an average of 3.75 stars. Some of their compliments:

"It showed that gay men could have kids too."

"It was funny."



"It was informative and very educational showcasing the relationship between gay men and their adopted children."

"I liked to see that there were people that didn't care if everyone knew about their parents."

"I liked all the baby and kid scenes."

Some of the younger people were less enthusiastic:

"It was sort of boring."

"This movie has no action. I think this movie is more for adults not kids because they think some parts are funny but I don't think they are."

I think a film highlighting gay fathers is much needed and I think the film makers did a good job with the issues that they targeted. The film portrayed a good selection of gay fathers, although I found that divorced dads (from hetero marriages) were left out of the picture. The film included important issues such as adoption laws, issues of race, religion, common stereotypes of gay dads and the perception of gay fathers within the GLBT community.

It was an emotional journey, especially the story

from the single dad with the two boys... a few of the adults (including myself) were brought to tears. It was also frustrating to hear about the laws that prohibit gay adoption, especially when it is so apparent how many kids in the U.S. need loving homes.

The film is appropriate for most ages (except for the odd profanity), although I feel that it would be better received by an older crowd.

It was fun to do a film screening. I think it would have been nice to have a discussion without the parents there, but we ran out of time. Maybe at the next meeting.

For more information about "Daddy & Papa", including when the film will be on television and how you can get a copy, visit www.daddyandpapa.com. ■



SPAWN TALK

by Abigail Garner

Faith, Wisdom & Conditional Acceptance



I never really liked going to church. Right before I started junior high, I told my mom I didn't want to go at all anymore. Mom told me that "the rule in our family" (as if it had been carved in stone centuries back) was that I was required to attend confirmation class and then make that decision. Since at the end of eighth grade I would be mature enough to join the church, she told me, I would also be mature enough to not join if I chose to.

Eighth grade -- and confirmation classes -- finally came to an end. I honored my part of the agreement, and after seven years of Sunday school and two years of confirmation classes, I made my educated decision to leave the church. It was not the first time -- nor the last time -- that raising a free-thinking, authority-challenging daughter would backfire on my parents.

You could say I rejected my church before my church had the chance to reject me. In confirmation class, the teachers ignored the "fag" jokes and diverted any conversations that veered toward open dialogue about homosexuality. It was bad enough facing homophobia in school. Why did I have to keep my guard up at church too?

I resented members of the congregation who seemed to accept my father as long as he maintained his role as Benign Homosexual. You know: the gay guy who puts on a tie and leaves his partner at home and "you wouldn't be able to tell by looking".

My father put up with the church's conditional acceptance for more than ten years longer than I did. I recently asked him why he stayed so long. He said that until he discovered his new church (where he is fully accepted as an openly gay man), he didn't know it could be any different. Being treated as "less than" had simply been part of my father's life for as long as he could remember.

Ironically, it was my father who had taught me that being gay was not a measure of anyone's worthiness and that discrimination of any kind should not be tolerated. His voice was probably playing in my head as I sat uncomfortably in confirmation class, as I observed my father in church be only part of who he really is, and finally, when I gave myself permission to walk away from the congregation. Dad didn't encourage me to leave, but his wisdom definitely influenced my decision. Looking back on it now, I still feel that it was the right choice for me. Partial inclusion isn't really inclusion.

It just took my dad a while longer to have faith in his own wisdom. ■

Abigail Garner, 29, lives in Minneapolis. Her commentary, "Don't 'Protect' Me, Give Me Your Respect" was published in Newsweek in February. To view that and other pieces about GLBT family issues, visit her website, www.FamiliesLikeMine.com.

MAKE CHANGE HAPPEN

Youth Allies Speak Up at Social Action Conference

Ruby Cymrot-Wu, Benjie Achtenberg, Emma Buchbinder, Julia Becker, and Annie Downs form the teen leadership program of Congregation Sha'ar Zahav in San Francisco. Each of them has at least one lesbian parent.

This February, accompanied by their rabbi and youth group leader, the Sha'ar Zahav youth group traveled to the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism in Washington, DC to attend a L'Taken Seminar, an intensive four-day conference for high school students focused on Jewish values and social justice. There the teens studied local and international issues and learned how to lobby. On Monday, the Sha'ar Zahav group met with representatives of Bay Area Congresspeople Feinstein, Pelosi, Boxer, Lee and Lantos.

Looking over the list of educational workshop topics on current social and

political current events, the Sha'ar Zahav teens saw that there was to be no workshop on LGBT issues. They were told that there was no time and no presenters available this year.

"That was really not acceptable to us," Ruby recalled. "We told them, this is our lives, we need it to be represented this weekend. We will be your LGBT workshop."

They only had about 15 minutes to give an impromptu presentation, but they made quite an impact. Both Ruby and Benjie talked about their personal experiences with both homophobia and heterosexism before the assembled crowd of about 350 high school students and their chaperones. "It was unbelievable, it was great," said Ruby. "People came up afterwards and asked questions. It was pretty freaky! I had never

spoken about that kind of stuff to that many people before. When it ended, we were all emotionally exhausted. It was just so amazing for all of us to just come out and say, 'This is who we are, you can accept it or not.'"

The literal meaning of the Hebrew term *L'Taken* is "to fix or repair". Congratulations to the Sha'ar Zahav youth for jumping in and doing just that by speaking up for all of our families! ■



From left to right: Rabbi Camille Angel, Emma Buchbinder, Ruby Cymrot-Wu, Annie Downs, Benjie Achtenberg, Caryn Aviv in front of the capitol.

RESOURCES

FINDING AN ACCEPTING AND AFFIRMING FAITH COMMUNITY

Within most of the major faith traditions, there are now liberal branches that are more accepting of glbt people. Some congregations even minister directly to the glbt community. If this sounds like what you're looking for, here are just a few select links to get you started. Most are national; all can help direct you to local resources.

Metropolitan Community Churches founded in 1968 specifically to meet the spiritual needs of Christian glbt people. "All are welcome in MCC....We experience our communities of faith as places of healing and hope, places of reconciliation with family, with self-esteem, and with individual spirituality." www.ufmcc.com

Unitarian Universalists - UUs "affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person." A liberal, non-creedal religion, UU embraces not only glbt people but people of diverse backgrounds and belief systems. www.uua.org

Dignity/USA - "We worship openly with other GLBT and supportive Catholics, socialize, share personal and spiritual concerns, and work together on educational and justice issues." www.dignityusa.org

American Baptists Concerned provide support, education, and advocacy for lgbt Baptists, families, friends, churches, and clergy. "We seek to be a ray of hope [for those who] have been caused much pain because of the misbelief that someone cannot be both Christian and gay." www.rainbowbaptists.org

Affirmation: Gay and Lesbian Mormons "serves the needs of gays, lesbians, bisexual LDS and their supportive family and friends through social and educational activities." www.affirmation.org

World Congress of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Jews - "Our vision is an environment where LGBT Jews worldwide can enjoy free and fulfilling lives." Their website contains links to affirming congregations worldwide. www.wcgljo.org

Al-Fatiha Foundation's goals include "providing a safe space and a forum for LGBTQ Muslims...as well as their families, friends, partners, and allies...to address issues of common concern, share individual experiences, and institutional resources" and "supporting LGBTQ Muslims in reconciling their sexual orientation or gender identity with Islam." www.al-fatih.net

Buddhism, which is generally neutral on sexual orientation issues, is growing in popularity among glbt people and allies. **Boston's Buddha Buddies** www.buddhabuddies.org has 6 satellite groups, including one in Provincetown.

Lutherans Concerned: www.lcna.org

More Light Presbyterians - Presbyterian Church (USA): www.mlp.org

Integrity - Episcopalian: www.integrityusa.org

Friends for Lesbian and Gay Concerns - (a.k.a. Quakers): www.quaker.org/flgc



WHAT YOU CAN DO by Rosanne Johnson

Exploring & Expanding Your Own Spirituality

Every human being is born with an inherently spiritual nature. Most people express this nature and reflect upon life's deeper questions from within their belief traditions or faiths. However, because of doctrine, custom, prejudice, or all of the above, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people have often been targeted by and excluded from faith communities. For many lgbt people, and for those who love and support them, the very word "religion" is linked to memories or fears of persecution and condemnation. As a result, many of us struggle to find or create a spiritual path that allows us to be true to ourselves.

Drawing upon the wisdom of COLAGERS from across the country, including the youth who participated in the spirituality workshop at Provincetown Family Week in 2001, *Just For Us* offers advice and resources designed especially for COLAGERS who experience internal and/or external conflict in their spiritual practice.

Hit the Books

We learn it from the pulpit, the TV, the classroom, our families and friends -- our knowledge of faiths and their beliefs about homosexuality comes from what we are taught by others. But nothing can replace the experience of studying, reflecting on, and coming to your own understanding of what the holy books, scriptures, and canons hold. Lots of other informative books are also out there to help answer your questions about spirituality, with perspectives from conservative to radical to everything in between.

Finding Your Religion: When the Faith You Grew Up with Has Lost Its Meaning - an invaluable resource, demystifying the process of why and how people gravitate towards and away from faith traditions throughout their lives. Especially relevant for those of us whose support of our parents puts us at odds with our faiths. Scotty M c L e n n a n ; HarperSanFrancisco, 1999.

Cassell's Encyclopedia of Queer Myth, Symbol and Spirit - a breathtaking

Involve Your Family & Friends

When you're ready, there are several very good reasons to talk to your family and/or friends while you explore your spirituality. Parents can feel hurt and confused by a child's rejection or embrace of the family faith. Open communication will help them understand what you're seeking. Initiating conversations about your spiritual journey may also open the door for friends and family to share their own insights with you.

Be a Guest

If you're curious about other faiths, practices, denominations, or congregations, check them out in person. You can find information and referrals on the Internet or even in the phone book, though the best method is through word of mouth from someone you trust. Most places of worship are pleased to share their services with guests and will respect your visiting/questioning status.

* The Family Week Youth Panel cautions: beware of "cults", or extreme groups, that take advantage of your vulnerability and create an unhealthy dependence.

Create Change from Within

Perhaps you yourself are comfortable with your current spiritual practice, but the congregation has not yet openly welcomed lgbt families. Some people find that an excellent way to fight oppression and invisibility is to stand up and do something about it. If your church/temple, youth group, or religious school are disapproving of - or simply silent about - lgbt families, you might want

collection of deities, symbols, persons and events associated with the glbt experience, plus a great overview of the roles glbt people have played in major belief traditions, art, and literature throughout history. Randy P. Conner, David Hatfield Sparks, and Mariya Sparks; Cassell, 1997

Free Your Mind: the Book for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual Youth - and their Allies - a terrific book in general, and the three chapters on spirituality, including one on how clergy can become glbt allies, are particularly insightful. Ellen Bass and Kate Kaufman; HarperPerennial, 1996

to let them know you're there. Speak to your faith leaders and peers about your family and answer their questions. Your place of worship might be full of potential allies.

Responding Respectfully

You may be challenged by those who seek to deny you and your family the right to express your spirituality. Confrontations with people who use religion to attack gay people and allies can be frustrating and disheartening, particularly when you're still wrestling with spirituality and sexual orientation issues yourself. You have the option to excuse yourself from any unwanted debate. "I respect your right to your beliefs. Please respect my right to believe otherwise," is an example of a brief and dignified response to charged remarks about sex, sin, and h-e-double-hockey-sticks.

Expand Your Understanding

Not everyone practices the same faith throughout their entire lives. Many people experiment with and follow different traditions at different times. Nor do you have to practice an "established" religion - or any religion - in order to live a peaceful and ethical life. Many people cultivate their own unique and meaningful connection to the divine, nature, and their fellow human beings.

Spirituality is a complex, deeply personal, lifelong journey. Some people find joy in sharing their spiritual lives with a community, while others prefer a solitary path. There are those who are comfortable in discussing their inner lives and those who treasure their privacy. Don't rush...you have your whole life to discover what works for you. In the meantime, know that as a COLAGER, on your journey, you will always be in very good company. ■

RESOURCES FURTHER READING

What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality - one of a number of thought-provoking books that traverse the territory of re-interpreting some of those ever-popular Bible passages condemning homosexuality. Daniel A. Helminiak, Ph.D.; Alamo Square Press, 1995

Religion - generously decorated with color photos, this book for young people is an objective introduction to the world's major faith traditions. Suggested ages: 8 and up. Myrtle Langley; Dorling Kindersley, 2000

Conservative religions present a particular dilemma for people with gay, lesbian, bisexual, and/or transgender parents. Confronted by their faith's unequivocal rejection of homosexuality, a COLAGER may be forced to radically alter their belief system, their family relationships, their social group - in short, their entire lives. On these pages, *Just For Us* is pleased to share with you two stories contributed by COLAGERS whose experiences with religion have changed their lives in ways they had never imagined possible.

IN MY EYES by Cortni

If you were to look into my eyes, you would be able to see the pain that has made a permanent home there. Through my years I have blamed this pain on many things but it all comes back to one thing, religion.

My young life was saturated by fundamentalist conservative Christianity; every pore of me not only believed in what it taught but also knew it to be the only way to live. I attended a fundamentalist conservative Christian school. It was a bubble, and inside the bubble's membrane we were protected from all the evils of the world. My loving teachers taught me how Christ played a role in all things; every subject had a part that tied it in to Christ, even math. I was happy, I was innocent and the bubble was complete, I thrived inside it. I believed everything I had been taught blindly as only a child can. Everything was black and white to me, there were no gray areas, and no exceptions -- you did what was right and if you didn't you went to hell.

Within the bubble I was taught that to be gay was against nature and God himself. It was a sin, and a horrible one, and that's why gays burned in hell. I didn't know any gay people. Little did I know that I was being brought up by one.

One fateful evening I was sitting on my mother's bed and me and my little sister were complaining about my mother's friend that we had been spending a lot of time with. Out of nowhere my little sister, not realizing the weight of her words, said, "it's not like she's your boyfriend!" I sat there in a stunned silence that seemed to last forever -- what if she WAS! What if my mother was GAY! I convinced myself, thinking that was stupid, then I was drawn back to reality when I heard my mother's words: "Well, she is." With those 3 words I lost my sense of what was what. *My Mother was GAY*. Then the weight of it hit me; I was being raised in sin.

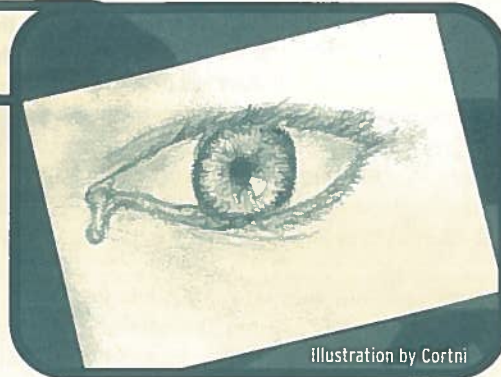
Not long after we were thrown out of our church for good, and me and my sister were thrown out of the church-affiliated school. The people I had trusted, the people I felt loved me, the people who

had taught me all I knew had taken their sharp needle and punctured the bubble, and with the rush of air, I was thrust out. Then they quickly constructed a new bubble, a new safehold, but this one's membrane did not allow me to pass through. I called my friends only to be hung up on. I waved to them when they passed my house only for them to look at the ground and cross the street. I was not only invisible and mute to them but I was also infected with evil. I knew I was going to hell holding my mother's hand. I had infected the bubble and it had defended itself against me the only way it knew how.

My faith had been crushed. How could people who preached that all people were created equal and that everyone was loved and known by God toss me and my family out as if we were no more than plague-infested evil abominations? I felt abandoned and betrayed by everyone, my mother, and even God himself. The only thing I knew for certain is that I HAD to keep quiet or I would lose more than I had already lost. I couldn't hurt my mother even though it was her words that hurt me more than anything. I honestly just wanted to die, for I had lost everything. All that was left was my beating heart and I might well lose that also. But I stayed alive, all the time hoping to wake up; it was all a BAD dream. But I never woke up. This was my life.

I have become accustomed to this world outside the bubble, but it hasn't been easy. Only in the past year I have truly accepted my mother for who she is. The people at my new church and on the Internet support group COLAGE have helped me greatly to do this. I am grateful beyond words that I have a support system of friends in and out of church. But I find most of my comforts in a large network of people who know where I am coming from, who listen, but whom I have never met.

My new church has embraced my family with wide-open arms. They have always been open to the gay community and are the home to many gay couples, families, and individuals at all stages of openness and out-ness. I feel lucky to be a part of this church and I love the people in it for they honestly have a love for me and my family which bonds us



together, and helps me accept my family as it is. They are a place for support, a loving set of arms, not a bubble.

I no longer hate my mother. Even though I might never be able to forgive her for the pain she caused me, I can see why she did the things she did and I feel sorrow for her that she had to go through all the pain that she did. I feel sorry for those who abandoned me because the faith they believed in caused them to see me as a spawn of evil. They believe so blindly in the bubble that they are missing out on life.

I am grateful I left the bubble, if I hadn't I would have never experienced the beauty of the world around me. The enlightenment of others' beliefs and customs that help humans better understand themselves would have been lost to me. I would have never felt truly complete.

I doubt that I will ever regain my blind faith that I had as a young child, but I am starting to once again take to heart the teachings I learn within my church community. I will continue to grow in my faith even if it does not fit neatly into one denomination or even one culture. I will continue to take a little bit from every culture and religion to shape what I believe in. No one will ever again spoon-feed me my faith. It is my own journey now.

Years from now, if you look into my eyes, you will still see pain, for it has a permanent place there. That's not the only thing you will see though, you also will see joy. Joy because I finally have a sense, no matter how small, of peace in my life.

I no longer need a bubble. ■

Cortni, 16, is a frequent contributor to the kids-of-gays-14 email discussion list.



Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere

Support and activism by and for people with lesbian, gay, bisexual & transgender parents.

Dear Friends,

Many of you have been receiving *Just For Us* for many years, some of you from its inception in 1990. In that time you've watched the publication grow and change. Once a xeroxed and stapled 'zine-like publication that was only a couple of pages long, today *Just For Us* is a 16-page publication with sections for young kids, older kids, and second generation folks. There are in-depth examinations of the issues that are on COLAGERS' minds from the unique perspective of people with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender parents. In recent issues, we've tackled race, religion, family break-ups, and schools.

Whether you're a kid, a youth, a young adult, a parent, or an interested ally, *Just For Us* regularly brings views and perspectives about growing up in LGBT families that challenge, inspire, and resonate; these writings and ideas cannot be found anywhere else in the world. *There is no other publication that brings these voices and resources together in one place.*

We know that not just COLAGERS read *Just For Us*, many parents and allies rely on *Just For Us* (JFU) for the window it provides into the experiences of people with lgbt parents and families. JFU helps all of us as we strive to build community and break isolation regarding our families.

We are proud of this publication, and proud that COLAGE is able to provide such a unique and valuable forum to more than 2,000 households and organizations across the United States and around the world.

During our recent information gathering from COLAGE constituents as part of the COLAGE Strategic Plan, COLAGE heard loud and clear from you that JFU is a valuable resource upon which your whole family relies. You see it as a cornerstone of COLAGE's services and if anything, you want more, not less of it. We would like to be able to do just that. To do so, we need your help.

This publication is the product of countless hours of hard work by the COLAGE staff, volunteers, writers, artists, designer, and printer. COLAGER Rosanne Johnson, our volunteer editor for nearly two years, spends many late nights soliciting and editing material for *Just For Us*, and she is in large part responsible for the increased breadth and depth of content that you've come to expect in the last years from *Just For Us*. But even with hundreds of hours donated by talented volunteers like Rosanne, *Just For Us* costs nearly \$15,000 to produce and mail annually.

In order to produce JFU, COLAGE depends on the contributions of you, our members and friends. However, most people receiving JFU today have not contributed to COLAGE in over a year -- some for many years or not at all. Soon, COLAGE will no longer be able to afford to send JFU to non-contributors, except in cases of financial hardship.

COLAGE is pleased to announce that we have received a generous \$10,000 challenge grant from the Gill Foundation.* This means that any gift you give now will be doubled dollar for dollar. That's right, your contribution of \$50 automatically doubles and becomes a gift of \$100! This is the perfect time for you to support COLAGE, ensure that you continue to receive JFU, and make your donation go twice as far to make the continued productions of JFU and other COLAGE programs possible.

* This challenge grant applies to new gifts (anyone that hasn't given in the last 12 months). For donors that have given in the last 12 months, any increase in your previous donation will be matched. For example, if you gave \$50 in September, and send a gift of \$75 today, the Gill Foundation will send COLAGE \$25. This brings the total of your donation to \$100!

Dear COLAGE,

I feel what you are doing is wonderful, as a proud son of a gay parent I understand the rejection and social pressure that some of us live with. PLEASE do not ever stop what you are doing!!!!

PLEASE DO NOT STOP THIS!!!! I am grateful for what you are doing.

"Our children are the future, to forsake them is to forget ourselves". I will send as much as I can, and I will always support this.

Sincerely,
Charles (Chuck) Pitre

If you look at the label on the back page of your edition of *Just For Us* you will see a date and an amount in the upper right corner which represent the date and amount of your last contribution to COLAGE. *If there is no date or amount, that means we don't have record of a contribution from you.* Please take a look. If you believe the information there is incorrect, please contact us.

Your donation of \$35, \$50, \$100 or more not only makes *Just For Us* possible, it supports the transformative work of COLAGE. Life for people with lgbt parents is very different from how it was in 1990 when COLAGE was founded. Today our families are more visible than ever, and kids with LGBT parents have more support than we've ever had before. This has not happened accidentally. It is due to the intense commitment of countless people across the country who have worked tirelessly to educate and advocate on behalf of us and our families.

I began to accept my mother, not as a lesbian, but as a woman whom I loved very much. And with love, there are obligations. You do not hurt the ones you love and you're supposed to advocate for them when it's necessary. I learned to challenge society's ignorance and support my mother in being the beautiful, intelligent, woman-loving, caring, quiet, construction-working lesbian that she is.

Finally, I am not afraid to share that my mother is a fabulous lesbian. She is out of the closet and I am right beside her.

~ Tina Fakhrid-Deen, from "Out of the Closet", Just For Us, Fall 2001

COLAGE's recent accomplishments are many. They include blocking anti-gay adoption legislation in Arkansas; stories in scores of media outlets including Time Magazine, Twist (a popular teen magazine), and appearances on MSNBC, NPR's Talk of the Nation, and CNN radio; developing teen leaders who have spoken on dozens of educational panels; and serving nearly 200,000 non-duplicated visitors in the last year on our award-winning website.

However, there is still much to be done. Kids in school still suffer the choice between the damage of the closet or the cruel taunts and harassment by peers and teachers at school. Kids still face losing access to beloved parents in the face of homophobic court rulings, not to mention the egregious inequities of a legal system that doesn't recognize our family structures. And as we see so clearly in this issue of *Just For Us*, many COLAGERS often find rejection and pain in the places they need it most—their houses of worship.

Your support of COLAGE supports our work to make a world which is safe, just, and celebratory for all families. **And if you give today your donation will be doubled through the generous support of the Gill Foundation.** Please don't delay. COLAGE won't be able to continue sending *Just For Us* to you unless we hear from you, so grab the donation envelope enclosed for your convenience and mail it back today.*

Thank you for your support now and throughout the years. Together we are succeeding in our mission to develop, engage, and organize COLAGERS and our families to make a better world for us and the generations growing up after us.

Yours in gratitude and with great respect,

Felicia Park-Rogers
 Felicia Park-Rogers
 Executive Director

P.S. COLAGE has a strong policy of making our resources available to everyone regardless of ability to pay. If it is impossible for you to make a contribution at this point in time, just make a note on the envelope, send it back to us, and you will continue to receive *Just For Us*.

P.P.S. Consider a monthly pledge of \$10, \$15, or \$20 using your credit card or debit card. *The Gill Foundation will match your entire pledge dollar for dollar*, and you'll have the satisfaction of knowing that that for a few cents a day you are contributing to the only non-profit organization in the world that is run by and for people with LGBT parents and families.

* COLAGE values your privacy. The information requested in the donation envelope is merely to help us serve you better. We do not trade, sell, or share our database or mailing list information. Your information is safe with us.

THE BEGINNING

by Denise Connett

about who Christ was, and about the readings I had studied. I shared my discovery that homosexuality was not compatible with walking

In the spring of 1990, I was a young woman in San Francisco. I was working at the service center of the Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Center there. I was willing to do anything in the middle of the month. At that time, I was with no family and no financial support. I was a woman who sounded beautiful but I only had a service "Conse-

I knew I had attended parents' school, we said "Son of God" read the brief e themselves hatred of people who were yelling that hell. The beat sev because Gay/Lesb minded, pain in m experienc me for w

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remission of sin. One had to believe in Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. That's where faith comes in. The faith to let go of what is secure and easy and reach for something better despite



Thank you for your support. Your generosity makes our critical work possible.

Your gift will directly benefit our work to make the world more supportive, safe, and celebratory for our families.

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THE BEGINNING by Denise Connett

In the spring of 1996, I, a 26 year old, bisexual woman, daughter of a gay father, moved to San Francisco. After 3 years in Boston, committed to the service of furthering the voice of children with gay parents, I had accepted the position of associate director of COLAGE. Deep in my soul, there was a rumbling, an apprehension. I was not willing to face that I was not wholeheartedly committed to the move I was making. Within 4 months, I resigned from the position.

At that point in my life, I was completely lost, with no rock to hold onto for strength. Far from family and friends, struggling to stay afloat financially and spiritually, I heard a voice one night as I walked to my apartment. I heard a woman singing praises to God with, what sounded to me at that moment, the most beautiful voice on the earth. I stepped into the entry way of the church to listen to her sing. The ushers tried to get me to enter the sanctuary, but I only wanted to hear her sing and then I was leaving. I would never sit in the same worship service with what I perceived to be "Conservative" Christians.

I knew little about Christianity. My family had attended the Episcopal Church regularly until my parents had divorced when I was nine. In Sunday school, we had learned about Moses. In a prayer, we said we believed Jesus Christ was the only Son of God. In a college mythology class, I had read the first 4 chapters of Genesis. However, my brief encounters with those who identified themselves as Christian had formed a strong hatred of Christians within me. These were the people who protested during Gay Pride Parades, yelling that my family and I were going to burn in hell. They were the teens that had harassed and beat several teens in one Boston High School because they had tried to start a Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual group. They were small minded, bigoted and responsible for so much pain in my family and friends' lives. Neither my experiences nor my limited knowledge prepared me for what God was about to do in my life.

The singing stopped and I continued standing as the minister came up to the front. I remember the teaching was on faith - something I was in desperate need of at that moment. Jesus was sent to the earth "to redeem them that were under the law", and His blood was shed for the remission of sin. One had to believe in Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. That's where faith comes in. The faith to let go of what is secure and easy and reach for something better despite

the appearance of danger. I did not embrace Christianity after that message, but my interest was piqued. Nothing I had heard resembled the stale teachings I remembered from Sunday school. What he had said made sense. I began to attend services on a regular basis.

It took 6 months of attending services, studying the Bible, beginning to pray some, and watching my life continue to unravel before I confessed Jesus Christ as my savior, really believing in my heart that this was my only chance of salvation. I still would not sit in the sanctuary. Fellowship in a community of believers is a large piece of the Christian walk. I was encouraged to spend time with other Christian women. I still held within me a deep hatred of Christians, and one of my biggest fears was that I would become like them. I did not look like them, in my sleeveless tops and crew cut. I did not act like them, going to alternative films on Saturday nights and still dating a lot. I did not speak like them, as I questioned what I saw them doing and what they said they believed. And most days, I did not want to spend time with them. In honesty, I am certain that there were many days they did not want me around either. The few women I could connect with, I was attracted to in a physical way, which was not something most people wanted to acknowledge was a real issue in my life. I was in the process of having years of poor choices, habits and conditioning broken.

God was challenging me to look closely at what I thought love was and how I lived in it. I was grateful that God loved us so deeply that he sent His only Son to die for me. That was love. Love was not about sex or whom I was attracted to. Love was not about me trying to change who I was to fit someone else's expectations. And love was definitely not about trying to get people to do what I wanted. I was barely tolerating my brothers and sisters in Christ, let alone truly loving them. My heart had been damaged over the years and I was and am still learning what love is and that it never fails.

Walking by faith in Christ Jesus produces change. Relationships with the people around me have had to change and evolve. One of those relationships is with my father. I lived with my father and his partner for 5 years through high school. We were always very close and he had had a great impact on the woman I had become at 26. As I embraced Christianity, I could sense his apprehension. I told my dad about the conflicts I had with the people in the congregation I had joined. I talked with him

about who Christ was, and about the readings I had studied. I shared my discovery that homosexuality was not compatible with walking after Christ. He challenged some of what I was learning. He voiced his concern that I would become one of those small-minded, bigoted people. He questioned why he would want to embrace a faith that thought he was an abomination before God.

My heart ached as I heard his pain and fear in that one statement. My father was walking on one path through life and for many years I had walked right behind him on that path. Now, I had chosen a different way with the free will God had given me. However, we are still father and daughter, and that bond is there until we die. "There are, it may be, so many kinds of voices in the world, and none is without signification."¹ I am to honor my mother and father whether I agree with how they have chosen to live or not. I love my father very much and I believe that we have a very honest relationship. I talked candidly to my dad about writing this article. His response was that he was glad this was my path and not his, but he would be thinking of me.

God has a plan and a purpose for each of us. I am grateful for what I have learned and continue to learn on the path God has laid out before me. This is simply one small piece and only the beginning of my life in Christ.■

¹ Holy Bible, Bilingual Edition, King James Version: Galatians 4:5 & Romans 4:25

² Holy Bible, Bilingual Edition, King James Version: I Corinthians 14:10

Denise Connett, 33, still lives in San Francisco. She has worked closely with Sword of Fire, Armour of Light, Inc., a Bay Area-based ministry, and is currently a member of Nuevo Pacto, a bi-lingual ministry in South San Francisco, California. For further information about Sword of Fire, call (866) 265-9332. For further information about Nuevo Pacto, call (415) 585-9670.



Earth. While other kids went to church every Sunday, Mom took my brother and I to drum circles for every new and full moon each month. There we chanted and sang songs to the beating of drums, around a fire, outdoors, in a natural environment. It was a calming and relaxed experience for me, but I always wondered whether my mom really meditated when everyone closed their eyes in silence. As a child, I couldn't understand what "meditation" actually was, or how the dull quiet fulfilled those crazy grownups. At other times my mom would take us to the lake to go swimming. While my brother and I played on the shore, building sand castles and having splashing wars, my mother would float on her back around the deeper part of the lake singing at the top of her lungs..."Oh mother water, Oh mother water amen." When she sang this silly song over and over again, I'd look around frantically hoping that none of the normal families heard her or recognized that I was related to her.

Whenever my mom made a mistake or would otherwise be inclined to say something like "Oh God!" she'd exclaim "Oh Goddess!" instead. If any of my friends were there when she said this, I would instantly flush red and explain that she was a little different from most people and to ignore such differences.

All those embarrassing moments and unlikely experiences, which were once so dreaded by me, I now embrace and treasure as the unusual background of my life, which has given me such insight into the actual world around me. It is not often, in this day and age, that children are encouraged to find a solid connection with the earth and all the riches that she provides for us. Today, in America we are very concerned with material wants and needs. I think it is easy for us to look at food as coming from a grocery store, roads as being paths for cars, and houses with running water, electricity at the flip of a switch and walls for warmth as the only kind of home to have. Although I did not understand that my mother followed a pagan belief system while I was a child, the experiences that her way of life gave, allowed me to develop a wholesome, respectful view of this Earth and all the riches and comforts we are provided as a human species on a lush world. Now as a young adult, I consider the processing that all food, clothes, and basic comforts that I require have been through as they have come from the Earth to me. In many ways, my mother's differences, which I used to fear, I now understand and allow me to tread on this planet lightly and to love all of the remarkable opportunities I am afforded here. ■

Eliza Torlyn is 23 years old. She has a BA in Fine Art from the University of California at Santa Cruz. Now, her time is spent making glass art in Taos, New Mexico with her fiancé, two dogs, and a cat.

(another Testament of Christ). The official position is that homosexuality is a sin and is morally wrong. However, the leaders of the church have pushed (within the last 2 years) towards a "Love thy neighbor" kind of thing. They say that while they strongly disagree with the practice of homosexuality, that they encourage their members to "love the sinner and not the sin". I have found that while growing up, I have always struggled with the fact that I was born "in sin", that I was raised by "sinners" and that (according to the church) if I want to be with my family forever that they will have to repent while here on earth in order for all of us to be together in the after life. I also have seen many times from first hand experience that most people in the Mormon church are very closed-minded and extremely hateful towards gays. Even in a church setting there have been rude comments made and it just broke my heart every single time!

I am no longer a practicing Mormon, but my brother is and is currently serving a mission for the church in Brazil. I am tired of fighting with people and I don't think it is healthy for a person to put themselves in a situation where they are constantly feeling attacked and uncomfortable. I am sure that there are good Mormons who are tolerant and really do "love their neighbors", but I have become overwhelmed by the ones who don't.

I think that God and even Jesus, love all, no matter what and I believe that no matter what we do here on earth that we can be happy and live with our families forever. I am on my own spiritual path now and I find that I am much more peaceful about life when it is peaceful with me. ■

Sara is 20 years old and is from Houston, Texas. She lives in Utah where she attends college. She is currently pursuing a degree in History with a political science emphasis. She loves to write, dance, and to take lots of pictures and arrange scrapbooks.

A.J.'s Story continued from page 1

me cling to the everlasting arms (representative of the arms of Christ), even though I am not GLBT.

I have been very happy here, but the only downfall in many small MCC churches is that there is not an overabundance of youth. At Maranatha for example, the most kids that were my age that were present every Sunday were three. So, a friend invited me to his church one Sunday at Second Baptist Church and I really enjoyed it. The only downfall was that they weren't as spiritually set as I was, and they believed that my parents' relationship was wrong. But I chose to chew the hay, and spit out the sticks, as we say down here in Texas. In doing so, I just seemed to ignore the problems and do my own thing. I have gotten extremely involved with the church and am not ready to leave. Yet within my soul, I feel this calling to venture back to my roots, as everyone does. So, in my absence from Maranatha, I still serve on Sundays there and worship there occasionally, but I do still attend Second Baptist regularly. Even though I am not at my old church, I still have huge ties there. Though I am torn at the moment, I have benefited from the spiritual aspects of both churches, although I went to one for only social growth, and to find teens that are like me.

I would say to all those COLAGERS out there who are struggling with their identity or that of their parents or any spiritual idea, to find a church or home base that is affirming to your specific aspects, and one that has the same type of mind as yourself. Because if you don't, then you will find yourself stuck like I presently am, and being in a rut in your spiritual life is very hard to undo. ■

A.J. Costa is a junior at Mayde Creek High School, in Houston, Texas. He is actively involved with his Theatre program, and is an officer of his Spanish Club.

SPRING
2002

COLAGE KIDS CLUB

FUN PAGES

for kids with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender parents

About my Synagogue and Bar Mitzvah

BY AVI SILBER

This past October I had my Jewish "entering into adulthood" celebration. I was the first boy in my synagogue to have a Bar Mitzvah. Many right-wing fundamentalists would not want my family to be able to enjoy this kind of holiday because they think that the Bible, (or the Torah in Judaism) says that homosexuality is wrong. Unfortunately, this prejudice prevents many COLAGERS from being able to practice their religion or from finding their spirituality. This also happened to my family. I have two gay moms and two gay dads. When I was very little, we left the first synagogue we belonged to because the rabbi was anti-gay and we did not want me to be Bar Mitzvahed by him.

My family was very lucky to find a

synagogue called Bet Mischechah, which is a special synagogue for Gay families. Bet Mischechah itself means "House of Family." My synagogue is a mixture of reconstructionism and reform Judaism, which means we interpret the Torah in many different ways. My synagogue makes a point not to discriminate or look down on women, other races, other religions, gay people or anyone else, even if there are laws in the Torah that seem to suggest that. Therefore, my Bar Mitzvah was not only about my becoming an adult, but it was like a diverse reunion with family and friends who were gay, straight, Black, Asian Hispanic, White, Middle Eastern and of all different religions.

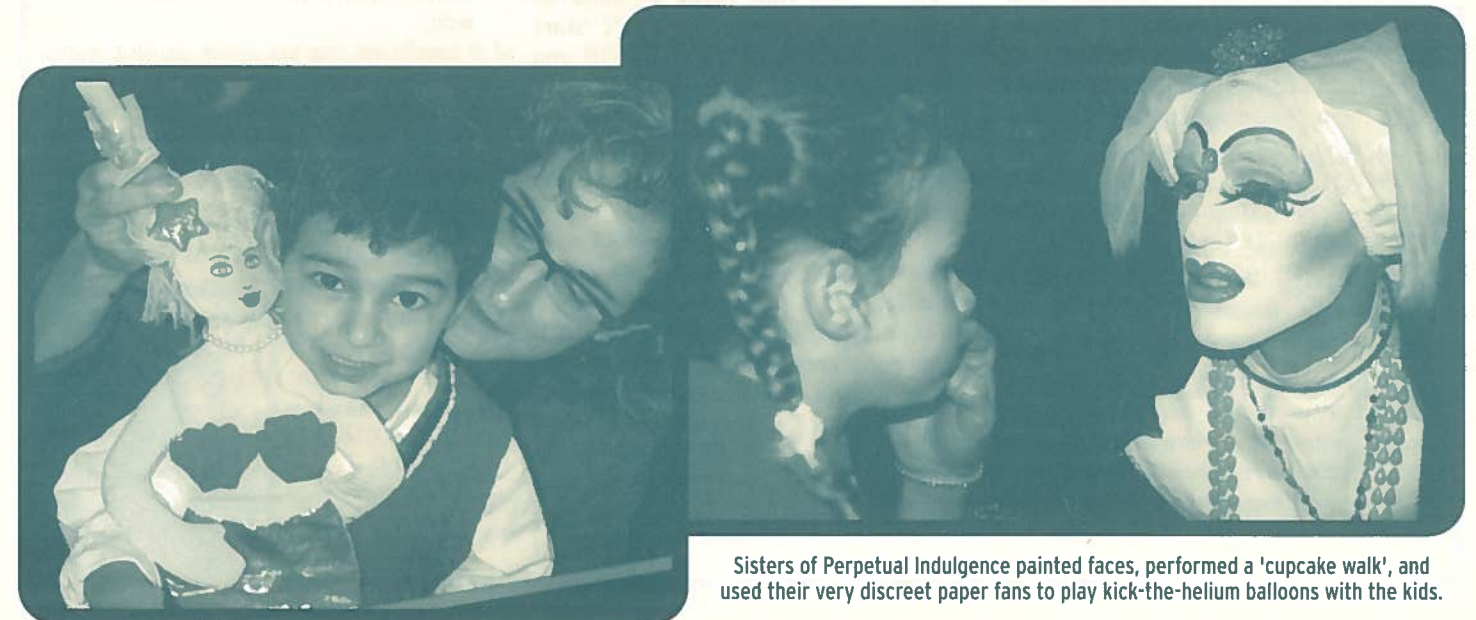
To me, religion means many things. For one, it means being in a

community of people who you can relate and talk to about things. Second, to me religion is a way of understanding why things happen, and what happens after life. Most importantly, I believe that both religion and spirituality are two things that one can only figure out for one's self. The only problem is that some homophobic people take the Bible too literally and they don't understand that religion is just a guideline to life but that spirituality can only come from one's self.

Avi Silber, 14, lives in Maryland.



On March 10, 2002, 626 people joined the San Francisco Bay Area chapter of COLAGE in celebrating the Gala Opening of the San Francisco Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Community Center - the brand-spanking-new home of our multi-cultural, inter-generational community!



Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence painted faces, performed a 'cupcake walk', and used their very discreet paper fans to play kick-the-helium balloons with the kids.



THE OLIVIA FILES

OLIVIA'S GUIDE TO CONSTRUCTIVE DEBATE

Have you ever wanted to say something, to voice your opinion, but didn't? Maybe you thought that you might lose a friend, or get picked on. But while it's not a good idea to say something that will hurt people, voicing your opinion is a good idea. You'd be surprised. Sometimes people just don't understand something, or are afraid of something. If you explain it to them, they may stop being scared or hateful. And you shouldn't stop at objecting to the school lunch. You can argue bigger things, too. Like gay rights, animal cruelty, you name it. Some schools even have Debate Clubs, exactly for the purpose of arguing.

Every argument is different. Sometimes my mom and I argue over stupid little things, sometimes over huge matters. There are as many ways of arguing as there are arguments. Here are some all-purpose debating tactics.

1 First off, before you go into a full-fledged fight, make sure whatever you're debating about makes sense. Learn how to tell the difference between a fight over chicken bones and a fight over gay rights. Keep that tactic in mind all through the argument. Don't start saying things you will regret (if you manage that, contact me and tell me how to do it, because I sure can't). Getting carried away won't do any good. Staying cool, collected, and calm, on the other hand, will.

2 - Secondly, borrow the Boy Scout motto, "Be Prepared". No need to adopt their policies, just that motto. If you don't know the facts on your side, then you have a very good chance of sounding like an absolute idiot. Don't worry if you do, at first. Even people in the Senate sound stupid sometimes. But people will usually listen to hard

down facts. I mean, who would you listen more to, the class dunce or the dictionary? It's also a good idea if you can prove your facts. Once you tell them a fact or two that you can confirm, the argument may be already won.

3 Remember that you don't HAVE to win. It's okay to agree to disagree. That doesn't mean you've given up on your cause. You've just given up on the argument.

Argumentatively,
Olivia Woods

COLAGEr Olivia
Woods, 11,
lives in New
Hampshire.



2nd Gen. 2 Generation

A SPECIAL SECTION FOR QUEER AND QUESTIONING KIDS OF LGBT PARENTS

DATELINE DAN

By Dan Cherubin



"We're not unaware; we're just ambivalent. ... We are, for better or worse, the future." - Lisa Schiffman, *Generation J*.

Happy 2002! The theme of this *Just For Us* is spirituality, and I'd like to talk about being a Second Generation queer man and Fifth Generation American Jew. I should explain, for those that may not know, a little something about American Judaism. We don't all wear skullcaps all the time, and we don't all keep kosher in our diets. (I love bacon, myself.) I, myself, am heavily tattooed, which is something considered very unclean in Jewish law. But Judaism has different sects, from the most fundamental to the incredibly secular. I was raised a Reform Jew, a religion that accepts and encourages pluralism, even us tattooed SG fellows.

The Principles of Reform Judaism say:

"We are an inclusive community, opening doors to Jewish life to people of all ages, to varied kinds of families, to all regardless of their sexual orientation, to those who have converted to Judaism, and to all individuals and families, including the intermarried, who strive to create a Jewish home."

In Reform Judaism, women and gays are allowed to be rabbis, though there are members within this sect that aren't entirely accepting. On the other hand, other sects of Judaism (Orthodox, Conservative, Hasidic) are not nearly so accommodating.

So, what is a Jew, and for that matter, a queer Jew with queer parents? I can't answer for everyone, but for me, it's being able to understand that we were put here to help the world. That learning as much as you can about everything is tantamount to learning more about God. It's also about the rich culture and history that is part of Judaism. It's knowing that we as a people were enslaved and massacred, exiled and shunned for our beliefs. I still face Anti-Semitism here in 21st century New York City, the place with the world's largest number of self-identified Jews. It's something I grew up with, always being part of "the other." It hasn't changed much.

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AJ TURPEN TALKS TO JUST FOR US

AJ Turpen, 25, lives and goes to college in San Francisco. He and his partner, Ina, will be getting married later this year; both AJ and Ina identify as transgender. A few years ago, AJ, who was brought up as a conservative Christian, became active in and converted to Reform Judaism. *Just For Us* talked to AJ about his evolving spirituality in light of being transgender and having a gay parent.

JFU: I grew up in Spokane Washington, where first of all, it wasn't ok to be gay or lesbian. It just wasn't even a concept that even entered my brain, that you could be an FTM (female to male transgender). But I also grew up in a very homophobic family, who taught me from a very young age that it was not okay to be gay. In reference to men, because my dad is gay.

JFU: When did you find out that your dad was gay?

AJ: When I was 12.

JFU: And by 12 you had already picked up that message from your family?

AJ: Yeah. Well, I was raised in a right-wing, Christian family so not only did I get that message at home, but you get that message at church, too.

JFU: What churches were you were raised in?

AJ: There were many of them. When I was very small, it was Pentecostal. And then, we changed churches and went to a Grace Brethren. And then the last two churches were both non-denominational churches, but very conservative. I would categorize the whole bunch of them as fundamentalist, as far as values go.

AJ: My mom always talked highly of my dad. I grew up thinking that it was basically my fault my dad wasn't in our lives, because she said that he left because he wasn't ready to be a father. So as a kid, I internalized that - "well, if



AJ in his neighborhood in San Francisco

I hadn't been here, maybe he'd still be around", not knowing that he was gay. It didn't make sense to me at that age, so I started questioning my mom, and that's when she decided to tell me the truth, because I was asking.

JFU: Between 12 and 18, why didn't you see him?

AJ: Well, I hated him when I found out that he was gay. But I couldn't have told you why I was so angry with him. I think somewhere, deep inside of me, I questioned my own sexuality, and didn't want to have to deal with it. I could never have admitted it, being involved with the church, where they believe that if you are gay you are going to hell. And when I was involved in the church I believed that too.

JFU: Did you believe your father was going to hell?

AJ: Oh, yeah. As a kid, I thought it was my job to save him, someday. Which is so sick and twisted, I think now.

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My family is quite varied on religion. My mom has said recently that she doesn't believe in God, though she still observes some of the bigger Jewish Holidays. My other mom was raised Roman Catholic.

But just as I don't prescribe to all of the things my parents believe in when it comes to glbt politics, so I don't really mesh when it comes to being Jewish. I've actually gotten more spiritual in recent years. I joined a local synagogue, which I attend fairly regularly. And yes, I do believe in God.

On September 11th, I saw the entire horror unfold from my office roof. I lost around 25 people in that tragedy, some close, some not. For the next few days, I was stuck in my neighborhood with limited contact to the rest of the city and the world. I was terrified, angry, crazed, exhausted. I prayed a lot. Then I thought what could I do, as a Jew, as a gay man, as the son of dykes, as a New Yorker, to help. I went to the local synagogues and churches. I donated supplies. I helped start a candlelight vigil in the local park. I made sure all my neighbors had everything they needed. I put up some lost tourists for a few days. I didn't judge. I just learned and acted.

Would I have done all of this if I wasn't Jewish? Probably. But I'd like to think there was something there, something that's always been there in me, making my actions part of a greater good.

The ultimate honor of a Jew is to be called a mensch. Basically, it means being a smart, solid upright kind of guy. When I'm called that, I know I've made the right decisions about being who I am, bacon-eating and all. ■

Dan Cherubin lives in New York City with a fat cat and a leaky bathroom. He started Second Generation years ago to find others out there and, as usual, to make a difference.

Reflection Connection

"This is my simple religion. There is no need for temples; no need for complicated philosophy. Our own brain, our own heart is our temple; the philosophy is kindness."

The Dalai Lama

The 14th Dalai Lama (b. 1935), the spiritual head of Tibetan Buddhism, lives in exile in India. A revered figure worldwide, he was awarded the 1989 Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of his nonviolent campaign to end Chinese domination of Tibet.

How would you describe your philosophy?

JFU: *It's a big responsibility.*

AJ: Yes. But that's your goal as a Christian, to save those who aren't going to make it there. When I was 15, I had the opportunity to see my dad, and I didn't have any interest. I was an angry teenager. But then after that my life took another turn. I was looking for a family connection when I started writing my dad. I met him for the first time when I was 18.

JFU: *Where were you in your coming out process when you contacted your dad?*

AJ: I was becoming more aware of it, but I wasn't out to any of my friends. I was still involved in my church. I was always battling internally with feeling gay, or feeling queer, in some aspect. After I met my dad, I visited him in San Francisco. The visit gave me a different picture of what it meant to be gay from the picture I had been given as a kid. So I sort of came flying out of the closet as a lesbian in Spokane, which didn't go over well. I lost all my friends. At the same time, though, there was this underground gay youth group there. I started going there, so I gained this whole new world of community and family, which was really great.

JFU: *So, how did you get from where you were, in terms of religion, to where you are now?*

AJ: When I came out as a lesbian, I really tried hard to maintain a relationship with God in that environment, but being raised fundamentally in Christian values, which I wholeheartedly believed in, I couldn't find a way to mesh them. It didn't work for me. I tried going to the Metropolitan Community Church, and I just couldn't, at that point, adjust my values to make it work. Being taught to read the bible in Christianity literally, I had a really hard time interpreting the scriptures differently.

JFU: *Is that what you felt you were being asked to do?*

AJ: Yeah. I mean, I was young. And I was losing all these relationships. People I had babysat their kids for years, suddenly wouldn't let me see their kids anymore because I was - who knows what they thought. All of a sudden I was being judged by all these people. I went through this period of, "I don't want to believe in the same God you do." So I went for a period of about five years, of no religion. I was like, "I've had enough of this, it's not for me."

But I really struggled with wanting some sort of spirituality, or some sort of relationship with God, during that period. I tried for a really long time and eventually, I think the pain of what people were doing to me in that environment just -- it wasn't worth it anymore, to fight for that relationship with God. And I did intense Bible studies to figure out

how I could make it work. I looked up verses word by word, to try and find a way.

JFU: *Why do you think it wasn't working for you?*

AJ: I think Christianity was still based in this painful time for me. And I was pretty pissed off at God, and religion in general, for how I'd been treated. Then also during that period I came out as transgender, so I was involved with another aspect of who I was. I think spirituality takes focus, and I was completely preoccupied with something else.

I think one of the things that helps Judaism work for me is that it's also very different. I needed something different from Christianity. Because of the experiences I went through, I needed a way to communicate with God, that had nothing to do with the way I used to do it.

JFU: *So how did you come into Judaism?*

AJ: Well, I met Ina, and she was raised Jewish. But we related on a similar spiritual level. She had reconnected in college to the religious aspects of Judaism, on her own. And so, I started going to temple with her, and I found a way that I could communicate with God again. And that's how I came into Judaism - suddenly I had a form where I could pray, again, and build that relationship.

JFU: *How is Congregation Sha'ar Zahav different for you?*

AJ: It's a progressive Reform synagogue. It's very liberal. It's a gay temple, or a queer-friendly temple, so it is the equivalent to what MCC is in Christianity.

One thing I like about Judaism, that is a bit different from Christianity, is it's very social action-oriented. That's one of the things I love about Judaism - they stress what's called *tikkun olam*, repairing the world. That came very natural for me, to work that into my spirituality. There's some of that in Christianity, but it's not stressed to the same importance as it is in Judaism, I find.

At this particular synagogue, I could be exactly who I am. That was a big difference for me. I could be "AJ" and "he", identify as transgender, and pray. Those things had never happened for me before. That I could be exactly who I am, and have a relationship with God. And so that was the biggest thing that made it different for me, going there.

I think it's different for many born Jews for many different reasons. A lot of queer Jews feel like it wasn't ok to be queer in their homes. In fact, many Jewish people aren't ok with that. But Sha'ar Zahav is sort of like this safe place to do that. ■

Interviewed by Rosanne Johnson

COLAGE NOTES

BOARD UPDATE



Meredith Fenton, Board Chair

Greetings! I hope that 2002 has been a year filled with joy and blessings for you and your families. I am writing to introduce myself as the new Chair of the COLAGE Board of Directors. I am the 26 year old second generation daughter of a lesbian mother originally from

Peoria, Illinois but now living in San Francisco. I am pleased to be serving COLAGE and the board in this capacity and welcome your input and questions.

In early March, the Board of Directors met for our bi-annual in person board meeting here in the Bay Area. In addition to welcoming the new board members, we had a full agenda. One of the most exciting parts of this meeting was our Strategic Planning work which culminates a full year of gathering input and assessment from you, our members, in order to create an exciting, but we hope realistic plan for the next 3-5 years for COLAGE. We plan to publish the plan in the next issue of *Just For Us*.

I want to thank each of you who participated in this crucial process for redefining the future of COLAGE. We had 348 individuals lend their voice to the plan through surveys, interviews, and focus groups. We would love to continue to hear the voices of COLAGERS and families - if you have any questions for the board or comments please email us at feedback@colage.org.

In the upcoming weeks and months the board will be working on finalizing the Strategic Planning report and setting a timeline to accomplish our goals, adopting a new and improved mission statement for COLAGE, planning for the 2002 Family Weeks in Michigan and Massachusetts, and development and implementation of an agency Anti-Racism plan. I am happy to be chairing these and many other crucial initiatives for an organization that is so important to me.

Sincerely,
Meredith Fenton

WELCOME BETH TEPER!

Beth joined the COLAGE staff as our new Program Associate in October. She brings to COLAGE not only her passion for supporting youth and adults

with lgbt parents, but also a strong background in and passion for education, advocacy, community building, grassroots action, and empowerment, acquired over her many years of working towards social and environmental justice.



Beth Teper, New Program Associate

Beth's varied professional and volunteer work has enabled her to learn and work alongside children, youth, and adults of varying gender and sexual orientations, diverse economic, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, differing physical abilities, and spoken languages. Her non-profit experience includes leading outdoor adventures and wilderness expeditions; managing a youth-cultivated urban organic garden; public speaking; and community organizing.

A Bay Area native, Beth was ten when her mother came out as a lesbian. She graduated from Brandeis University in 1991. For the past seven years, she has served on the COLAGE Steering Committee and as the Chair of the Board of Directors, cultivating COLAGE's steady and careful growth.

We are proud to have such a talented, experienced, and committed COLAGER join our staff. Please feel free to be in touch with Beth! Her extension is 103 and email is Beth@colage.org.

NEW LEADERS STEP UP TO THE PLATE

COLAGE is thrilled to announce five new members of our Board of Directors. The 13-member COLAGE board -- three of whom are 18 or younger -- is



Some of COLAGE's board & staff: Felicia, Kate, Diane, Laurie, David, Loree, Meredith, Beth, Miye

diverse in age, geographic representation, economic background, race, gender, sexuality, and family constellation. They bring tremendous skill, experience, and commitment to making the world a safe, just, and celebratory place for all families.

In March, Christian Harris and Miye Goishi were re-elected to their positions as Secretary and Treasurer respectively. Meredith Fenton was elected to serve as the new Chair. Please join us in welcoming:

Laurie Cicotello, 31, of Lanai City, HI. Laurie is the daughter of a transgender parent. She has been speaking and writing on TG family issues nationally and internationally for ten years. Laurie is currently teaching high school.

Kate Kovalanka, 30, of Takoma Park, MD. Kate led groups and activities for COLAGERS in Boston for many years. She continues to lead kids' groups while pursuing a master's degree in family therapy, working toward a doctorate in family studies. Kate is the daughter of a lesbian mother.

Orson Morrison, 29, of Napa, CA. Orson, born and raised in Toronto, Canada, has a straight mom and a gay dad. Orson discovered COLAGE while doing research on adult sons of gay men. He is pursuing his doctoral degree in Clinical Psychology. He also facilitates the COLAGE San Francisco Middle School Group.

Diane Paulson, 17, of Oak Ridge, NJ. Diane has been on the Youth Family Week planning committee and has led activities and workshops at Family Weeks in Saugatuck and Provincetown. She has two wonderful moms, and an awesome father. Currently a senior in high school, Diane volunteers her time tutoring, teaching, and mentoring kids.

Danielle Naparsteck Silber, 18, of Bethesda, MD/St. Louis, MO. Danielle has two mothers and two fathers, all of whom are split up, but who each retain strong ties with Danielle. Danielle has been very active organizing events in her high school GSA. She has also been a national spokesperson for the rights of lgbt families.

WHAT'S HAPPENING

Looking for news about what's happening regarding people in lgbt-headed households? Subscribe to COLAGE NetNews for regular updates, action alerts and all the current news from the office and around the world. We keep you up to date on legal cases, social phenomena, and COLAGE programs like the scholarship and Family Week. We promise not to flood your in-box! It's easy to subscribe -- Just go to: <http://www.colage.org/online-resources.html>.